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Special Feature

Goa

Surviving a Troubled Past, Thriving in a Progressive Present

Consider everything you know about the lushly tropical state of Goa. In following our journalist's footsteps there, those stereotypes may have to be discarded. Hinduism Today went to the jewel of the Konkan to ferret out the real Goans, to learn how they live and connect with the Gods, and how strong Hinduism has remained despite centuries of persecution--which began long before the arrival of the Christian missionaries with their Bible-and-sword hegemony. Has an authentic form of the Sanatana Dharma survived? Allow the Goans to speak for themselves.

By Rajiv Malik, Panaji, Goa

It is a land of natural marvels, basking blissfully in the warm sun of West India, where coconut trees sway dreamily in the wind and the very earth mirrors the smiles of its people. It is also a land of devotion, where God's temples are meticulously cared for by local families, festivals are vigorously celebrated and the population's Hindu faith is so ardent that centuries of proselytizing and oppression could not subdue it. Meet Goa, the marvel of West India.

This small, strikingly beautiful region has been ruled by kings and officials of many faiths. In the 3rd century ce, Goa was incorporated into the Mauryan Empire, ruled by the Buddhist emperor Ashoka. Buddhist monks worked tirelessly to spread their religion here. Several rulers followed, many vigorously proselytizing their own religious preferences--the Chutus of Karwar, the Western Kshatrapas, the Abhiras, the Bhojas, the Konkan Mauryas and others. From 765 to 1015, the Jain Silharas of the Rashtrakuta dynasty ruled Goa, sponsoring their faith and building Jain temples. In 1312, Goa came under the Delhi Sultanate, which propagated Islam, only to be taken a few decades later by the might of the Hindu Vijayanagara empire.

In 1498, Muslims conquered Goa again. Soon thereafter, in 1510, the ruling Bijapur kings were defeated by the Portuguese, who established a permanent settlement and aggressively proselytized the Christian faith.

In spite of the chaos imposed by successive rulers of different religions--or perhaps seasoned and strengthened by it--Goans have mostly kept to their roots. Two thirds of the population is Hindu; another 26% is Christian and 6% is Muslim.

Hardship Under the Portuguese

Today Goa is a peaceful state in which religious harmony prevails. But the fanaticism of the Portuguese's first two centuries of rule left visible scars. A nondescript wooden pole alongside a major road, in a populous area, is an awful token of those times. There are no signs to identify it; a tourist might take it for a telephone pole. But this was the hath kata khamba (pole where hands are cut), used to punish those who committed crimes during the Portuguese era. A local historian, Dr. Pramod Pathak, explains that the pole was used to punish neo-converts who were not following their new Christian religion seriously and still lived like Hindus at home.

The first missionaries realized early on that despite the persuasive power of brute force--"conversions were made," wrote contemporary Portuguese chroniclers, with "the cross in one hand, the sword in the other"--it was difficult to wrench Goans from their Hindu beliefs and traditions.

Given the often dishonest or brutal methods used, it is no surprise that new converts did not become enthusiastic Christians. Historians say the early Portuguese played on the strict mentality of the Goans, using their prejudices against them. The Portuguese would plant evidence in people's front yards that they had converted to Christianity, using a cross, or more subtly, spreading crumbs of bread--which no chapati-loving Hindu would eat. Tainted by these signs of alien behavior, those who lived there would be shunned by haughty Hindu neighbors. The sense of caste and purity is keenly upheld in Goa--to a fault. Isolated, the shunned Hindus eventually converted, out of the need to belong to some community.

In 1567, the captain of Rachal Fort in South Goa bragged to his Portuguese king back home, "For nights and nights we went on demolishing, demolishing,

demolishing 280 Hindu temples. Not one remained in the happy lands of our division." Jesuit historian Francisco de Souza jubilantly praised the feat, "It is incredible, the sentiment that the gentile were seized of when they saw their temple burning."

In fact, every demolished temple was soon relocated and rebuilt; the murtis, and in some cases the homa kunda, were heroically rescued and reinstalled. Chandrakant Keni, a leading Goan poet, says that although Goa's Hindus were put to severe tests as conquerors marched over their lands, they had the resilience to convert "temporary setbacks into permanent victories."

Catholicism as it is practiced in Goa has incorporated elements of Hinduism. Early European travelers, like Venetian Pietro Della Valle, who visited Goa in the 1700s, denounced in their travelogues "unchristian" practices in local Catholic churches and shrines. That was, it seemed, the only way conversions could be made, by largely allowing Hindus to retain aspects of their faith. To this day, kumbhas are used for Catholic processions and a Sivalinga stands in front of the Virgin Mary in one of Goa's churches. At one stage, the Vatican tersely censured those "gentile practices" and the proliferation of icons in churches, but eventually it relented. In 1623 Pope Gregory gave sanction for converted brahmins to continue wearing their sacred thread and caste marks. Goan Catholics uphold the Hindu caste system even today.

The Portuguese enforced a colonial stranglehold that would last until December 12, 1961, when the Indian army--despite protests from Portugal and most of the international community--completed a successful three-day operation to rescue what would become India's smallest state. Goa has just 1,429 square miles, slightly less than America's smallest state, Rhode Island.

Today there are as few as 700 Catholic priests in Goa. Many churches are closed except for festivals, and old chapels have fallen into disuse. In contrast, Hindu temples are flourishing. The ubiquitous tulsi plant grows throughout the state, a local symbol marking a Hindu home, happily planted on front gardens everywhere and honored with daily arati by Hindu wives.

Concord has descended on the Goan population. Our guide, Gopal Das, explained

that here "Hindus and Christians respect each other. They join each other's religious festivals as a courtesy. Catholics come to yatras and Hindus drop by processions. Today it is about respecting our neighbors, friends and co-workers, not about dogma."

Exotic Goa, So Familiar

I traveled to Goa with my wife Renu. We were both pleased to visit a place whose name, to us, is synonymous with natural beauty. Language was no barrier; though most Goans speak Konkani, English is widely used, and the locals are quick to smile and offer help. Gopal Das, a local member of the Bharat Sevashram Sangha (see July/August/September 2011 edition of Hinduism Today), generously offered to be our guide. Joining our crew was Vivek Ivan Thayil, a Goa-born photographer.

Goa, with a population of 1.4 million, is one of India's richest states; its per-capita GDP is two and a half times India's average. Tourism is the primary industry; twelve percent of India's foreign tourists arrive here. In the wintertime they come from abroad, mainly Europe, to enjoy the climate; in the summertime, Goa's rainy season, they come from all over India to spend the holidays. State-sponsored publicity campaigns project an image of exotic beaches, colorful nightlife and Las Vegas-style casinos on docked cruise ships.

Coming from North India, I unconsciously brought along a prejudiced idea of this state that is common in our country. The rowdy behavior of many tourists--joined by a small fraction of locals--and the impact of their dollars have linked Goa with drugs, harlotry, liquor and a land mafia. Headlines are made of such fodder; and popular Hindi movies portray Goans as mostly Christian, Westernized in their ways and indulgent in their morals. But this is not the reality of Goa, as experienced by the two-thirds Hindu majority. Neither the print media nor Bollywood movies have ever highlighted the spiritual dimensions of Goa, its ancient Hindu maths (monasteries) and temples.

We first visited Goa's state capital, Panaji, a city of only 65,000. Less famous than the larger cities of Vasco da Gama and Margao, this northern city has a charm of its own. The name means "land that never floods," a definite asset where monsoon rains are heavy and steady every summer. Panaji's terraced hills are dotted with colonial-era, Portuguese-style houses sporting red-tiled roofs and whimsical balconies. Bleach-white churches, fancy villas, cobbled streets and interesting buildings give Panaji a European feel. Yet this is unquestionably India: the people,

the colors and the manners are evidence that foreign influences have never etched below the surface.

In the Skanda Purana, Goa is referred to as the Land of the Gods. A popular story has it that Lord Parashurama, a brahmin hero and an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, bestowed upon a few brahmin families an entire land formerly owned by kshatriyas who had dared to defy him. After defeating his enemies, Parashurama invited brahmins to settle in the vicinity of Gomanchala mountain in the Konkan region, and there perform their religious duties. A dynasty of ten sages brought murtis of their Deities; after weeks of travel, they reached the mountain and established themselves anew. Tradition has preserved the names of some of those pioneers: Adhyapan, Adhyayan, Yajana, Dana and Pratigraha. Lord Parashurama then created eight villages for his new people. When he left Goa, these brahmins became the sole lords of the land, to care for it into eternity. This oft-repeated story empowers modern-day Goans, strengthening their sense of duty and their connection with the land and its traditions.

The descendants of these original families are called the Gaud Saraswath Brahmins (GSB). Membership is a mark of distinction, carrying social and religious privileges. Hindu temples in Goa are, almost all of them, private and run by traditional GSB families who allow guests to worship under rules. Access to the innermost areas of the temple is usually restricted to GSB family members. Though they are a small group, comprising only six percent of the population, the Gaud Saraswath Brahmins, considered the original inhabitants of the land, are the de facto leaders of any local religious activity.

In Goa's system, every temple is associated with one of the maths. Goa's two main maths are the Kavale Math (Smarta) and the Partagal Math (Vaishnavite). While the temple administrators are responsible for quotidian matters, spiritual decisions come from the guru of the math that oversees that temple.

Bhaskar Khandeparkar, an architect, shared some history with us: "In olden times, all Saraswaths were members of Kavale Math. In 1540, the Portuguese demolished all our temples located in the old conquest area; even the British did not damage our religion elsewhere in India the way the Portuguese did here in Goa. Our Swamiji [of the Smarta tradition] left for Mumbai and Varanasi. Finally, in 1630, his distant successor returned to Goa; but in the interim, many of our people had come under the influence of dvaita philosophy and started the Partagal Math. These two maths

represent different philosophies, but they work in absolute harmony with each other."

Sri Mangeshi Temple

We drove some thirty kilometers from Panaji to the Ponda region, Goa's Hindu heartland. There, on a hillock near Priol surrounded by green hills, lies a temple dedicated to Lord Mangeshi, a form of Lord Siva. The Deity was brought from the nearby village of Cortalim on May 1, 1560, just before the destruction of its original temple by the Portuguese colonizers, who were ruthless iconoclasts and ardent proselytizers in the early days of their rule.

The new temple began as a simple structure; the current temple complex was only built in 1739, under Maratha rule. In 1764 this area, too, fell under Portuguese control; but by that time, the colonizers had lost their initial zeal, and the Hindu Gods could once again be worshiped in safety. Lord Mangeshi's new home remained untouched and survives intact to the present day.

The Sri Mangeshi Temple is built in typical Goan style, blending Indian and Portuguese influences in unexpected harmony. Its magnificent water tank is believed to be the oldest part of the complex. I was fascinated with the majestic seven-storeyed deepstambha at the entrance, a distinctive architectural feature of most local temples similar to a coastal lighthouse. It seems to serve a purpose similar to a South Indian gopuram (temple entrance tower), its several stories evoking higher realms of existence and the denizens of those planes, devas and Gods who, like us, come to commune at the temple. It is also a landmark, visible from afar, guiding travelers to the temple.

The sabhagriha, main hall, is a spacious room which accommodates over 500 people. Its crystal chandeliers from the nineteenth century contrast strangely with the Chola-style granite pillars, which are considered the most beautiful in the state. From the sabhagriha one reaches the sacred garbhagriha, wherein resides the murti of Lord Mangeshi.

This temple, though large in relation to others in Goa, does not match the architectural magnitude of massive temples elsewhere in India. But somehow the Sri Mangeshi Temple harmoniously finds room for shrines of Parvati, Ganesha,

Nandikeshvar, Gajana, Bhagavati, Mulakeshwar, Virabhadra, Santeri, Lakshminarayana, Suryanarayan, Garud, Kala Bhairav and--a common feature in Goa--the chosen Deity of a few influential families connected to the temple, in this case gramapurusha Deva Sharma of the Kaudanya gotra.

Gopal Das, our guide, explained that Goan Hindus emphasize the importance of their gramadevata (family or local Deity). Every village has a gramadevata, to whom the villagers are passionately devoted. Therefore, each temple is the hub of a particular group of families who worship the same Deity. Each of these local Gods represents one of the greater Gods. "Basically, all Gods here are Siva, Lakshmi, Durga and Kali, in many forms familiar to the locals and under different names." Thus, being away from one's local temple is no impediment to worship.

Though it was a hot summer day and Goa's lovely beaches beckoned, long queues of devout Hindus awaited the afternoon arati. The women's graceful saris outshone the dull Western attire of the men. Most Goan temples have strict dress codes, due to the overwhelming number of tourists. This temple enforces reasonable standards: Western clothing is tolerated, but not informal or revealing pieces. Photography inside the temple is, of course, prohibited.

It was high noon by the time we received darshan of Sri Mangeshi, the main Deity. Though He was far away from where we stood, we could feel the powerful vibrations emanating from the gleaming, beautifully decorated murti.

Blessed by His darshan, feeling uplifted and buoyant, we stepped out of the temple to a festive scene. A big tent, made of woven palm tree leaf fibers and colorfully decorated, shaded hundreds of chairs, where devotees relaxed or waited for the queue to subside before they went for darshan. At one end was a stage, ready for live devotional music and bhajan performances later in the day. Bhajan, kirtan and natak (drama) are popular here, and Goa has produced many famous Indian classical singers, including Bollywood's sister duo, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle.

Under the scorching heat, the huge tent was a welcome gesture of thoughtfulness and compassion. Most temples in Goa are similarly well-run, clean and efficiently organized. They are privately owned and managed, free and independent of any

kind of government aid. Members of the managing committee are elected every three years from the GSB community.

Temples here are managed with a view to serving their supporting families. The Sri Mangeshi temple campus has several blocks of residential quarters allotted to devotees. Preference is given to the members of any GSB family, whose ancestors have owned and managed most of the prominent temples of Goa for ages.

Though we did not have a prior appointment, Maheshwar A.R. Nagarsenkar, Secretary of the Sri Mangeshi Devasthan, was kind enough to grant us an impromptu audience. We were impressed with the modernity of his office, with a fast internet connection and television monitors covering almost every important area of the temple.

"Mangeshi Temple is under the spiritual guidance of Kavale Math," he told us. "It is managed by its twenty-four founding families, known as Mahajanas. There is no government interference here. Only those belonging to Mahajana families can enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temple and perform pujas personally. These twenty-four GSB families have exclusive rights. Outsiders cannot donate for the maintenance and construction of the buildings; their donations are used solely for performing pujas and archanas at the temple. But anybody can come to the temple to have the darshan of the Deities."

Mahesh Mangesh Karande, a senior priest, told us the local government's promotion of tourism has been very good for Hinduism. The increased prosperity has strengthened Goans' pride in their own culture; and the tourists themselves, Indians and foreigners alike, want to visit temples and perhaps receive an archana. "I am very optimistic about our religion. I can tell you that nobody in this world can destroy Hinduism. The need of the hour, for Goa and the world, I think, is to have religions led by tolerant and good people," said the calm priest, whose life is rich with blessings due to his service of Sri Mangeshi Siva.

Ma Durga, the Mediator

Later that day we proceeded to Shantadurga Temple, dedicated to Goddess Durga. In Goa, Shantadurga is She who mediates between Vishnu and Siva. The harbinger of peace, the Goddess is always depicted as having the two Divinities by Her sides.

Though not as old as the Sri Mangeshi Temple, this one has a parallel history: it, too, was built to shelter a Deity that was moved to protect it from the Portuguese.

Beautifully maintained, Shantadurga Temple stands on a patio surrounded by guest apartments. Some of the devotee families I spoke with had come from as far as New Delhi and Mumbai. Two senior British women hesitantly approached the temple and asked if they would be allowed to offer flowers to the Goddess. Rowdy, uncultured tourists were nowhere to be seen. The general atmosphere of the temple, with its pious devotees, meticulously kept surroundings and strict dress code, appears to keep the curious and uncommitted away.

The management's rigorous attention to detail seems neither repressive nor inhibiting. On the contrary, we felt inspired and respectful. We spoke with the secretary of Shri Shantadurga Saunsthan, Rajendra S. Gaitonde explained it is the duty of devotees themselves to ensure that they are dressed gracefully, matching the serene and spiritual atmosphere of a Hindu temple. The elders teach the youth and instill in them a desire to look traditional by wearing appropriate clothing.

GSB members especially are expected to dress impeccably when visiting God, and they oblige. In Goan temples, the supporting families reign.

The local priests, too, are connected to the GSB families. Most are purohitas, or family priests. Rajendra S. Gaitonde explains, "The purohitas here do not get any wages; they earn by performing pujas. Whatever is given to them directly is theirs. We have two main purohitas at Shantadurga Temple. Each one performs pujas for certain GSB families. If a family's purohita is absent, they can approach the other priest. This system has been there for ages." The glorious Chidambaram Temple of Tamil Nadu follows a similar system.

Fortune-Telling Flowers

The Damodar temple in Zambaulim, Goa, houses not Krishna Damodar, as does the famous temple in Vrindavan, but rather Damodar Siva. This is a most unusual temple, for here the ancient art of kaul prasad is practiced by the priests. This powerful form of divination uses flower petals from a sacred tree in the temple

compound to interpret intimations from the Gods. The flowers and petals, scattered in certain ways by the devas as the priest performs special incantations, provide a means of communication between the inner and outer worlds.

Devendra Kenkere, an engineer and real-estate agent, swears by the practice. "This tradition has been here since the time of the grandparents of our grandparents. Sometimes the responses indicate uncertainty, but at other times they are so clear that you can put fifty lakh rupees on it, even if you only own five cents. This is how it works: Forty-eight flowers are arranged around the Sivalingam, and an abhishekam is performed. One has to share with God one's plans and decide which flower represents those plans. If the project receives God's blessings, that flower will not be washed away. Sometimes the flower may not fall for the whole day."

Though kaul prasad is also practiced in other temples, Damodar is famous for its accuracy. There are no set fees, but the experienced priests, who can tell much more than a yes or no answer, receive generous donations for their divinations. "I have many personal experiences that I could share," said Kenkere. "Though I had come to ask a different question, by the falling of the flowers the priest predicted my children's health needed care, which came true within days. A knowledgeable priest can infer a lot from the dropping of the flowers. In our whole family, no decision is taken without consulting God here."

Manjunath Pai Dukle, President of Damodar Temple, shared some of the secrets of kaul prasad divination. "Suppose I have to buy a property; I will come here and put the question before Damodar. If the petal on the right side falls, permission is granted. Every petal or flower has a significance of its own. Reading the flowers is like an encyclopedia, full of details and difficult for the inexperienced to understand. The top flower is called mukut, and adjacent to it is called trikut. For one person the mukut could be good, and for another it might not be good."

Kaul prasad starts at 7:30 in the morning; about twelve abhishekam pujas are conducted every day. This beautiful practice of communicating with God through flowers is so highly regarded that even many Catholics attend it, giving large donations to Lord Damodar.

I was invited to the home of a senior trustee of the Nagesh temple, Venkatesh Naik Gaonkar. Within a few hours I was convinced he is a modern-day Hindu saint, immersed in bhakti most of his waking hours.

"We Saraswaths (meaning GSB families) are disciples of Goddess Sarasvati, the Goddess of knowledge," he began. "Though few Goans are GSB today, we are the stewards of spiritual knowledge. The value of knowledge is immeasurable. For the development of human society, it is the most important ingredient, more important than wealth; for the proper management of society is connected to the intelligence of the people."

According to Venkatesh Naik Gaonkar, it was the leadership of the local maths that enabled Hinduism in Goa to withstand the turbulence of colonial years. "For 450 years the Hindus in Goa were cut off from the mainstream of Hinduism. But that did not make us lesser Hindus. We were able to preserve our culture mainly due the influence of our two maths, Kavale and Partagal. They give us direction. Starting in 1936, the great Goan Masurekar Maharaj led a movement to bring brahmin Christians back to Hinduism. Now, conversion activities by the Christians are almost over, and even the crowds of hippies did not make much of an impact. We are vibrant Hindus. On Mahasivaratri, 250 abhishekams are performed at Nagesh Temple alone, each one sponsored by a pious family."

In most ways Nagesh Temple is similar to those we visited earlier. An exceptional feature is the extraordinary silver craftsmanship. Silver-clad doors and windows with intricate figurines create a rich and beautiful home for God. This is a svayambhu (self manifested) shrine of Siva Shankara Nagesh, known for its miraculous powers. Worship of the Sivalinga goes father back in time than the memory of the community. Legend says a cowherder discovered the spot, alerted by the reverential attitude of his cows near the stone. A second Deity, Lakshmi Narayan (a form of Vishnu), is equally venerated; this is a Siva-Vishnu Temple.

Mahalasa Temple

The Shri Mahalasa Narayani Temple at Mardol, in South Goa, is a Vaishnava sanctuary. The Deity here is Mahalasa Narayani, an aspect of Lord Vishnu portrayed in a female form. Like so many others, this Deity was moved to protect it from the Portuguese; this one originated in the city of Verna.

In front of the temple stands a unique brass oil lamp, 12.5 meters tall, which is lit during festival days like the Navaratri (see photo on page 25). This is believed to be the tallest such lamp in Goa--perhaps even in all of India.

Another intriguing feature is a temple bell under which vows are taken. According to local lore, the guardians of the temple will remove their blessings and punish anyone who utters a lie under the bell or breaks a vow taken at that sacred spot. This bell was so widely known and respected that even the Portuguese came here to solemnize their deals with locals.

In olden days, the judicial system of this area gravitated around the powers of the Mahalasa bell. Several court documents describe the procedure for administering an oath. The accused bathed in the temple tank and was garlanded with red flowers of a plant locally known as pitkuli. Then, heralded by loud drums, he was taken to the shrine and made to stand below the bell, facing God, where he might declare his innocence in the presence of the judge, advocates and all others concerned, making a solemn oath of truth.

There is no evidence of any real culprit going free after taking this oath. On the contrary, there are widely known cases in which punishment befell those who dared to take a false oath. Legends say some died right after leaving the temple; others got seriously hurt or went mad.

Kavale Math

The next morning, preparing to visit Goa's leading Smarta math, I mused on Goa's connection to the great Adi Shankaracharya, the sage who spoke bravely and influentially of Advaita Vedanta.

Kavale Math was the home of Sannyasin Govinda Bhagavatpada, who initiated Adi Shankaracharya. Shankaracharya's bold words resonated far and wide, but it was at the feet of Govinda Bhagavatpada that he shaped many of his ideas. The founder of the math and Govinda's guru, Shri Gaudapadacharya, was an early and staunch advaitin. He was the most prominent Vedanta scholar of his time, said to be the first to see the eternal truth revealed in Upanishads as strictly monistic, or advaita. Shri Gaudapadacharya wrote the cornerstone treatise Mandukya Karika (also called Gaudapada Karika or Agama Shastra), which ends with this shloka: "Having realized

that state of nonduality, which is very difficult to realize, very profound, birthless, uniform and holy, we pay our obeisance to That, to the best of our abilities."

We arrived at Kavale Math to find the place quiet, serene and peaceful. Shrimat Shivananda Saraswati Swami, the current head of the institution, was traveling, so no events were scheduled.

The math's sprawling campus houses a temple dedicated to Samsthan Aradhyadevata Shri Bhavani Shankar, an aspect of Siva, and is dotted with the samadhi shrines of several saints who lived here over the centuries. I could feel the strong vibrations of these great souls as we went by, the fragrance of flowers and freshly lit incense emanating from the places where their bodies dwell. By tradition, most Hindu holy men are interred rather than cremated, their mortal remains blessing the world.

Kavale Math also runs a Smarta pathashala, a training school of priests.

Ramanavami in Goa

The next morning arrived with an air of festivity: it was Ramanavami, the celebration of Lord Rama's birthday. I was invited to celebrate it at the Shree Samsthan Gokaran Partagal Math. It is one of the 24 monasteries of the dvaita order established by Shri Madhavacharya in the 13th century.

"Our math was founded 550 years ago," explains Anil Pai, a trustee of Partagal Math. "Now we have 33 branches all over India, where we run pathashalas, hospitals and temples. Around 353 years back we started celebrating Ramanavami in a particular way, a pattern we have followed ever since. "

The maths in Goa have friendly, cordial relations. Devotees freely attend festivals of the two main ones, even though Kavale Math is Smarta and Partagal is Vaishnava. "The followers of the two maths intermarry their children, which also brings the institutions together," explains Anil Pai.

Hundreds of small shops line the approach to the math, selling sweets, flowers and religious artifacts, all amid lush green surroundings with a mountainous background. Crossing the threshold of the main gate, I felt transported hundreds of years back in time. This venerable matha, famous since the 16th century for its Ramanavami celebrations, reverberated with Vedic hymns sung by priests. Elegantly dressed devotees were sitting on the staircase leading to the main stage, an improvised (and packed) open-air auditorium.

Soon a clear silence descended, as thousands awaited the speech given by the head of the math, Shri Gokarna Partagal Mathdhis Shripad Wader Shrimad Vidyadhiraj Teertha Swami Maharaj. His words, in the melodious Konkani language, meant little to me; but the crowd listened with rapt attention. Many braved the hot weather under the sun, outside the tents and buildings.

When the speeches were over, the thunderous unison of countless devotees singing "Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram" shook the building. Chanting, clapping and melodious nadasvaram (shrill woodwind) filled the air, and we all felt something special was about to happen. Suddenly, we heard conches blown to their fullest. On the center stage, the head of the math, Shrimad Vidyadhiraj Teertha Swami, placed the "newborn baby"--a murti of Lord Rama--in the cradle while the flames of an elaborate arati danced on stage. The very air erupted with myriad sounds of fervor and devotion, including crackers and fireworks. All rejoiced: Lord Rama had arrived in Goa, favorite land of the Gods, where Hinduism shines bright.

The thrill of Rama's birth celebrations gently subsided as several thousands were served a community meal, some in the open compound and others in the dining halls. A large dedicated team of youth quickly and efficiently served the delicious prasadam.

After dinner, I thought I was ready to retire for the day. I was mistaken. As nadasvarams started blaring, a contagious excitement ran through the crowd of devotees, myself included. With great fanfare, the palanquin procession was beginning, led by Shrimad Vidyadhiraj Teertha Swami. Three huge wooden chariots, about 22 feet high, carried the utsava murtis of Lord Rama and His family. On Lord Rama's chariot the head of the math and a bevy of priests performed an elaborate puja, with flowers abounding. The nadasvaram players were still going strong, but I could also hear Vedic mantras once again being chanted. Thousands watched this unique puja, their hands humbly folded in anjali mudra--or else holding their

cameras and cell phones up high to capture the magic of the moment. A helpful priest quietly obliged by taking one gadget after another, quickly shooting some close-ups of the puja and returning it to its owner.

After the short puja, Shrimad Vidyadhiraj Teertha Swami and a few others emerged from the tiny temple inside the chariot. Waving and blessing the crowd, they seemed to bask in the devout happiness of the thousands present. Then Swamiji reached for a bag and started pulling out large coins, throwing them with full force to be caught by devotees near and far in the crowd. Some of the coins were of common metal, engraved with religious motifs; a few were made of silver. Priests and trustees on the stage hurled apples, bananas and coconuts. Devotees jumped with joy when they got a fruit falling in their hands, or a coin. Those who received these items immediately shared their blessings with others, cutting the fruit and giving away extra coins. I had never seen something like this in my life, anywhere.

As the warm Goa evening progressed, I joined thousands of others in taking a turn pulling Lord Rama's chariot, shouldering one of the long, massive ropes. Made of coconut fibers in the ancient tradition, these were many dozens of meters long. My heart opened by the celebrations, I felt blissful, marveling at sharing in this punya (merit).

Far into the night, devotees continued pouring in, arriving for the next day's festivities. It was going to be an all-night affair, with many foregoing sleep in favor of devotion. The shopkeepers were busy and happy, doing a brisk business and selling more and yet more food. The following morning, we were told, the chariot would be pulled again, covering a much longer distance, powered by the peak crowds that were expected.

Later we had an audience with Shrimad Vidyadhiraj Teertha Swami Maharaj. Majestically seated on his guru pitham, the wise man shared some of his views for readers of Hinduism Today. "Today it is said that our youth do not have faith. We disagree. The youth want to understand Hinduism. If their questions are not properly answered, they will avoid our dharma; but without Hindu dharma, they are bound to problematic lives." He continued, "In our math we emphasize tapas and festival vows. But Hinduism cannot be understood with tapas alone; it cannot be understood by experiencing it superficially. You have to delve deeper and deeper in Hinduism."

Swamiji told me some of the resident brahmacharis and priests love their priestly craft so deeply that they follow a tradition, quite old in Goa, of branding holy symbols on their skin. He sent for some of the young men, and they showed us the chakras and conches that had been etched on their skin, a painful process that also serves as a rite of bravery and a formal initiation. No more than boys, they proudly displayed the sign of their courage, the sacred symbols that made them belong to a holy tradition, symbols that also earned them respect from their peers.

Sand at Last

Surfeited with bliss from our many days at Goa's temples and maths, we finally recalled that we were in the land of beautiful beaches and leisure time. We asked our local guide, Gopal Das Ji, to take us to the ocean; my wife, Renu, felt that we should not leave Goa without having visited a famous beach in the capital of beaches. Along with photographer Vivek Ivan, we were driven straight to Calangute Beach.

It was a Saturday and the weekend spirit was alive. The place was crowded. Loud pop music boomed from the restaurants located on the beach. One could barely walk on the sand without bumping into others. It was a mad, suffocating place. After spending barely fifteen minutes at Calangute Beach, my wife whispered, "Let us move away from this place. We have already seen the real Goa." I could not agree more.