

The forgotten art of *kaavi* from Goa, India

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Goa, located on the west coast of India, has made many contributions to art and architecture. One of the least documented components of intangible elements is the architectural art form of *kaavi*, a form of etching rendered on walls of temples and Hindu homes. The material used in the art form is fine red soil, charcoal powder and a natural binding plant extract from the liana creeper. This art defines a sacred space on interiors and exteriors of the walls of a temple or home. As it is rendered on the walls of a temple or home its status and survival is linked with the physical status of the structure itself. No systematic documentation of *kaavi* art has been carried out so far. Considering the intangible elements, does not seem to have any artists who practise *kaavi* art, there is no single community of artists in Goa. The knowledge of how the materials were chosen, the tools fashioned and employed has all been lost¹.

Key words: Goa; India; *Kaavi*; Art Endangered.

Goa's contribution to the world of art and architecture is extensive. The Baroque churches that dot Goa's countryside, beautiful houses that stand on village roads, freshwater springs, vast swathes of rice fields and white sand beaches induce an emotive effect on every visitor who comes to Goa.

The beautiful Catholic-owned houses of Goa are right on the road, their quaint and often comic finials of lions, dogs, porcupines and soldiers on gateposts highly visible. The churches of Old Goa are all in a cluster, their imposing facades and Italianate architecture a reminder of Goa's Christian heritage. The relatively new temples in Ponda are a blend of colour and a mix of Islamic, Hindu and Catholic architectural styles encompass its multi-cultural history.

However, away from the limelight, there is yet another Goan treasure that exists in remote Goan villages. That

treasure is the ancient architectural art of *kaavi*. *Kaavi* is inlay work done on the walls of temples and houses and defines the sacred space in these structures. Goa's hot climate, 90% humidity and 150" of rain in the monsoon are not conducive to painted pictures. To decorate walls and define sacred spaces, Goans had to devise more ingenious materials and methods.

For this, Goans discovered the art of etching or inlay with the cheapest and most widely available materials they had locally. Called *kaavi* art, this is Goa's gift to neighbouring Maharashtra and Karnataka and to the world. In this architectural art, the wall is plastered at first. Then it is cured every four hours with water over two days. A steel bodkin is used to etch a design and then the design scratched out. The cavities are then filled with what the artists call *kaav* which was made up of fine red soil and charcoal and the extract of a milky plant locally called *paal kudi* (or milk sap creeper) or liana for binding.

¹ Most of the theories associated with the intangible aspect of the art form are based on conjecture. One theory is that the soil that was used for the art form was the local red soil taken from a spent termite mound. Another theory is that the red soil used in the art form was brought in by the women from the Lamani community who travelled from Karnataka with small quantities of the soil. This soil was believed to have curative properties ideal for skin ailments. The first theory makes better sense as the soil from the termite mound would have been considered sacred in Goa and therefore appropriate for the use in sacred art. Since there do not seem to be any traditional practitioners, there are two contemporary architects, Ar. Bulund Shukla and Ar. Ketak Nachinolkar based in Goa who have taken it upon themselves to practise the art and postpone its status as extinguished intangible cultural heritage.

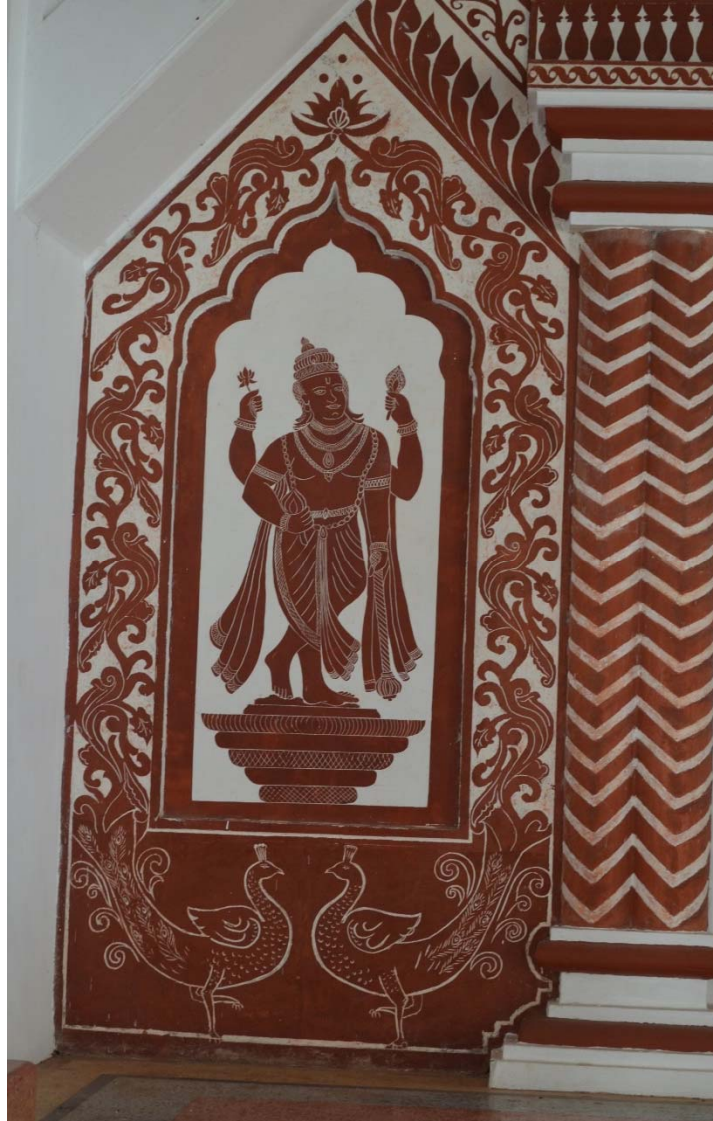


Figure 1 - *Kaavi* motifs from the main Shri Morjai Temple and its subsidiary temples.

Only the areas that are sacred are decorated and defined with *kaavi*. The *kaav* or red soil of Goa provided the most auspicious colour. *Kaavi* may not just be for decoration and delineating sacred space. Oral history points us to another possible purpose of *kaavi*. Citizens of Panaji (formerly Pangim or Panjim), Goa's capital city, recall how *lamani* tribal women would sit in the weekly market and put out tins filled with medicinal red soil for sale. This medicinal red soil was believed to have curative properties for skin ailments. It is possible that traces of the mineral SeO_3 or selenite present in red soil had medicinal value that was understood. Ayurveda also recommends the consumption of small quantities of red soil with tempered *ghee* (clarified butter) for stomach ailments. This puts *kaavi* art in another realm altogether. Is the employment of *kaavi* then a reminder of the medicinal properties of Goa's indigenous red soil, *tambdi maati*,

and an emotive subject of much socio-cultural literary and artistic output?

Kaavi designs are broadly placed in three systems: There are borders running in wave or lotus bud patterns. There are corners of half-open lotus patterns and sometimes animals squeezed into corners. There are figurative art where the figures of *dwarपालas* or temple door guardians were borrowed from the Yakshagana School of drama (1900's) from neighbouring Karnataka. The few Yakshagana figures appear to be from the Badagutitu or Badaguthitu style of Yakshagana. If one compares the Yakshagana figure from the Shri Maruti Temple at Advalpale, Bicholim in Goa to the *raja vesha* or king's costume employed during the performance of the role of the king, in the performance titled *Dashavatara* the *kireeta* or headgear and the mace and sword are very similar. It

is also possible that the *kaavi* artist had worked as backdrop painter or costume designer in Yakshagana theatre and brought back some of this experience with him on his return to Goa.

How did this uniquely Goan art come under the influence of neighbouring Karnataka? If you go to see a *kaavi* art temple in Honavar, Sirsi or Ankola you will see *kaavi* art on the walls of the temple. "The art has come from Goa to us."² Temple priests there believe that families fled Goa for fear of forced conversion in the 16th century. They took their gods and their temple art with them. When things got better, the art travelled back to Goa and that is how certain motifs and the Yakshagana dancer figures from Karnataka became part of the Goa temples. The only difference is that when the figures came to Goa they became minor figures as opposed to main deities adding two extra arms added a touch of divinity to the figure of ordinary mortals. In any case, in the Indian tradition, when actors play divine characters on stage, they are assumed to attain a divine posture and energy. That is the reason why some of the figures have a theatre curtain or half-curtain behind them or on the side. That is also the reason why some of the figures stand with ¾ of their faces exposed on a platform that could serve as a theatrical stage.

The borders and corner motifs in *kaavi* are also very interesting. The half open lotus bud hangs loosely all along the border often dividing the monument into lower and upper halves. Thus, the decorative element in the temple or house also becomes the architectural element that gives relief from monotony. The lotus also represents purity and transcendence. The *kaavi* border often helps give shape and size to the building and allows the builder to taper the top half so that it sits elegantly perched on the lower half. Corners are sometimes finished off with an open lotus flower in *kaavi*. This defines the corner and adds beauty to an otherwise plain wall. It also defines the sacred space over the presiding deity. As in the case of Shri Maruti temple at Advalpale, Bicholim, a rather wild looking lion guards the corner.

The other popular borders are a large ocean wave and a small ocean wave. There are also cursive waves that end in floral sprays. The large and small ocean waves are seen all over the grand Deshprabhu Palace in Pernem with the border running all along the middle of the house walls. Does this mean that the whole

house was considered a sacred space? Perhaps it does because the Pernem Guest House, where meat-eating and alcohol-consuming European guests were entertained, does not have any *kaavi* on the walls. Elsewhere, you see fish and also what could be seen as a graphic illustration of the mother-of-pearl shell with a pearl at the centre.

The circular medallion in *kaavi* art is also very interesting. While most *kaavi* is done by the artist or mason with a free hand, this appears to have been done with two bodkins and a string that serve as compass. The circle has been drawn out and then from the central axis emanates a whole range of cobra heads and bodies. One cobra emerges with the next. The most visible part of this arrangement is the spectacles of the cobras. They are so merged that it is sometimes hard to tell how many cobras there are in the design. Snakes feature often in Goan domestic life. We see cobras rendered in clay for being worshipped on Nag Panchami day. We also see them at the foot of *tulsi vrindavans* outside temples and homes. The circle with a lotus or the medallion with the cobras needs further research. It is possible that they represent the yantra or tantric representation of manifestation, infinity and continuity, the circle of life and birth or the cycle of birth and re-birth.

A *kaavi* piece at the Desai House in Lamgaon, Bicholim has Lord Ganesha with a cobra coiled around his waist and fanned by both his wives Riddhi and Siddhi. It is exquisitely executed and is said to be a copy of a similar theme at the Shaniwar Wada in Pune, Maharashtra. The Rane House in Sankhelim has a beautiful rendering of Lord Vishnu reclining in the lap of a seven headed serpent in his Sheshvishnu *avatar*. It is not often that *kaavi* is employed in the rendering of principal deities.

Just like the one at the Deshprabhu House in Pernem, there are other "business houses" or "guest houses" in Goa specifically set apart from the main house. Here, agricultural produce from the farms was sampled by buyers from across borders. These "guest houses" were used as buying houses or trading houses just for the day. To impress buyers, these "houses" were set apart from the main house and were richly and artistically embellished.

² Shivram Adi Pandit, Shri Bomaya Temple, Shirud village, Gokarna, Karnataka in conversation on June 18th, 2017.



Figure 2 - *Kaavi* motifs from the main Shri Morjai Temple and its subsidiary temples.

One such richly embellished “business house” is the one attached to the Boruskar Desai family house in Poinguinnim, South Goa. The door has a small *kaavi* ring over it while the walls have a narration painted over in natural dyes and colour. Here lies the difference between the Goan Hindu and the Goan Catholic house. While the Catholic houses have decorative elements of style on the outside, the Hindu house has both the decorative elements and the narrative on the inside. The difference is in the narrative, the story.

The Boruskar Desai house has several frescos in the “guest house”. There is a narrative in almost all of them. For example, there is a fresco of a landlord reclining on his sofa, larger than life, while he watches a performance by a family of performers. The performing family is small-built both physically and in stature. The man plays a musical instrument while the wife walks the tightrope and the children watch. A serpent shown as present underground, is also present in the fresco, a regular feature in a lot of Goan art. Snakes represent continuity, wealth and protection and are seen in non-*kaavi* renderings as well.

In the basement of the “business house”, there is a low placed window that is not at eye level to prevent passersby to look in. As an extra precaution, there is a *yali* face rendered in *kaavi* on the window to ward off the evil eye. *Kaavi* medallions also decorate the centre of the top of the doors in this “house”.

A mirror image of *kaavi*, the art of *sgraffito*, seen in the churches of Goa, is when the red or black soil is applied to the wall and the design scratched out and filled in with white lime plaster. *Sgraffito* can be seen in the monumental churches at Old Goa and very fine examples of it exist at the Archbishopal Palace and the Chapel of Our Lady of the Mount. It is not just the method but also the motifs employed in this art form that is different. The motifs are Christian and differ in execution and taste from the motifs found in Hindu homes and temples.

There are several examples of both *sgraffito* and frescos in Europe. There are some examples of *sgraffito* in Portugal but the technique employed in the churches of Goa seems to be different from the technique employed in Europe. In Portugal, the colour surface is the base and the design is etched out. There

is no infilling or inlay work. Hence the design is not flush with the wall ground. It is work done in relief. In Portugal, the *sgraffito* appears to be done in black and the relief is in white or lime plaster. In *kaavi* there is no relief. In fact, the *kaavi* work is cured with water on completion and rubbed with a soft fabric to ensure it is flush to the wall ground.

The joy of discovering these art forms is dampened by the sadness of seeing the complete and utter neglect of these renderings on Goa's buildings. The *kaavi* seen at most small temples in Goa is either badly defaced or vandalized. Temples like the Shri Brahmanimaya temples in Bicholim has been demolished. The buying house at the Desai Boruskar House in Borus, Poinguinnim is in a state of collapse. Can it be that the

owners and stake holders of these treasures do not know the value of what they have in their custody? Or that they know the value but have not got the means to develop these assets and enrich their own lives with these works of art?

Goa's architectural art has perhaps taken centuries to evolve and become what it is today. It is also evidence of how sacred art was possible with limited materials available and made to last in Goa's hot, humid and often wet climate. It is only right that we make an attempt to save and protect what remains now. That would be a fitting tribute to those extraordinary men and women who placed their work in the care of the divine and in the trust of future generations.



Figure 3 - *Kaavi* motifs from the main Shri Morjai Temple and its subsidiary temples.

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