

Subhadra Arjun Gawas

The Biography of a storyteller from Goa, India

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Figure 1: Subhadra Arjun Gawas Singing at the grinding stone © Shubhada Chari

This is the biography of a storyteller, songstress, feminist, healer, house-builder and oral archivist from a village in Goa, India. Subhadra Arjun Gawas has never had a formal education. Left to take care of her older brothers at the age of 5, she took her domestic responsibilities seriously and turned her adverse situation to advantage never giving up on her passion to sing and collect the folksongs from her village right through poverty and hardship; the trials and tribulations of life. At 71 today, Subhadra has no regrets. All she wants to do is pass on her knowledge of building skills and her repertoire of songs to the next generation in order to preserve this rich oral history for posterity.

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Introduction

I was drawn to folk music and dance since childhood. I was always the first girl in the neighbourhood to join in any celebration in the village. Before I knew it, the songs they sang and the dance steps they performed became second nature to me. Of all the many performers, storytellers and resource persons I met, the one that stood out head and shoulders above the crowd was Subhadra Arjun Gawas. At first, my friendship with Subhadra was superficial but when I received the Gomantak Marathi Akademi's A. Ka. Priolkar scholarship to study Goan folklore, and, later, a scholarship by the Government of India to document the Dhalo Festival of folk music and dance in Goa, the association deepened into a more meaningful understanding.

I still remember that night in January in the year 1997. We were in the village of Goteli No. 2. I went as a researcher and an observer of the 5 nights and half a day festival that only women participate in. I was to take pictures, videos and document the festival (the songs, content and dance movements) by taking handwritten notes. The canopy under which the festival was to take place was filled with people. The whole atmosphere was agog with anticipation. The canopy was made with freshly harvested coconut palm leaves. Slim green bamboo poles supported this canopy. The flooring had been freshly plastered with cow dung and straw paste. It was the beginning of the festival and I had landed at the venue early. I tentatively approached some young women standing on the sides, waiting their turn and began asking them questions. They refused to answer my questions, saying that the only person who was an authority on the subject was Subhadra Arjun Gawas and until she arrived, they would not answer any of my questions! The first thing they said was that they would need her consent before they answered my questions. The second thing they said was that once I had spoken with her, I would have no questions left unanswered.

This was the kind of respect Subhadra commanded. In fact, when she left the sacred ground for a few minutes, the entire performance came to a grinding halt. Here was an authority on the subject, I thought then and she proved me right. Subhadra not just knew all the songs and the dance routines; she knew all the rituals associated with the festival. The whole sacred ground lit up when she walked in, in her electric pink sari with the gold border. She had swept up her long dark hair into a tight bun and had encircled it with a wreath of chrysanthemums in a matching magenta pink. It was hard to believe that this woman had been to the forest to collect firewood and fodder twice; had cooked and cleaned; worked in the fields; and, still had the energy to sing and dance all night. Under that beautiful canopy that night, she appeared to me like a forest goddess. What's more, she answered all my questions with clarity and understanding of purpose. If I was attempting to be as objective and scientific as possible in my questionnaire, she responded with as much love in her heart for the subject. Subhadra Arjun Gawas lives in a village neighbouring mine in the sub-district of Sattari and her accessibility makes it easier to carry out my research as well. Ever since that moment, I have been guided by Subhadra to answer all my queries on the social and cultural history of this tiny region in one of India's tiniest states-Goa.

Subhadra is referred to as Tai or, Elder Sister by her peers and contemporaries and Aai or, Mother by her juniors, and her whole life is a lesson in servitude, compatibility, adjustments, compromises and

achievement. Studying her life story, her repertoire of songs, compositions and dance movements as a reflection of the culture she is located in gives enough material to understand a complex cultural and social context.

Besides possessing a rich repertoire of songs, dances and compositions, Subhadra Arjun Gawas also has an in-depth knowledge of the wisdom and meaning of each composition. When she came to her marital home as a child bride, there was no one in the village who knew these songs. She was able to raise a family of five children, look after her parents-in-law, work in the fields, cook and clean and help her husband repair roofs. She went beyond her call of duty doing all of these things when she decided not just to sing but also to teach other young women in the village how to express themselves through song. This helped women subdued into silence until then to find their voices; to express solitude, anguish, resentment, sorrow, anger and frustration through song and dance. These routines also helped women solve their own civic problems, establish a sense of order and hierarchy in village society without the interference from the men. In a patriarchal system such as the one prevalent in Goa, this is a huge achievement.

Through the life history technique, I aimed to achieve clarity on the ways and systems prevalent in Goan society in the study region. I also hoped to get a deeper insight into the oppression faced by women in Goan society, a factor that is shrouded in silence, societal disapproval and social slavery. Gender inequality issues are almost never addressed in Goan society. Yet, through songs and compositions, the rural women of Goa address these issues in often subtle and sometimes obtuse ways. When Subhadra Arjun Gawas says she resented the fact that her brothers were sent to school while she was left cooking and cleaning for the whole household, she is expressing a gender disadvantage that most girls of her generation faced in rural Goa. A study of her life history is in fact a study of a large population of women in rural Goa. The fact that she was able to accompany her husband to work sites, learn how to repair and build roofs is extraordinary. It has also elevated her from being an “ordinary person with extraordinary skills” and therefore given her the ability to observe her sisters in the village; their social positions and cultural location. Subhadra Arjun Gawas’ life history is a mirror image of the life of Goan rural women in a sub-region.

Subhadra Arjun Gawas - the biography of a storyteller

Subhadra Arjun Gawas was born in the village of Gulule in the Sattari taluka (sub-division) of Goa, India. For the period when large families were the norm, her family was considered small. There was her mother, father and her two brothers. Her life, since childhood, has been one of the toughest that I have heard. For her, she says, “Survival was like going up a mountain every morning and ending up at the bottom of the mountain every evening”.



Figure 2: *Going into the forest to collect fodder was part of Subhadra's daily chores* © Rajendra Kerkar

The most momentous event in their lives was when they were all displaced from the village on account of the Anjune dam. Villagers who were familiar with every rock and stone on the forest pathway, every pebble on the river bed, were unceremoniously uprooted and cast away into unfamiliar territory.

It is impossible for her, even today, to compare her mother's village with the infertile land that would soon be their new home in the resettlement village. She still recalls the sight of how the waters rose and submerged her little village and left it without a trace. With the trees and vegetation that got swept away, she felt that the cultural, historical and social values of that time also got washed away in the tide of change. The Goddess Gajalakshmi was once worshipped here as the protectress of the village. "Our Goddess simply disappeared," she recalls. Subhadra can only think of her village of Gulule as a place where she ran around as a child; tending to the goats and calves; looking for wild berries in the forest and a place that disappeared before her very eyes. And, a place that was filled with songs and stories.

Subhadra has an awareness of her surroundings that is rare. Even as a child she says she was acutely aware of the importance of the hills, trees, rivers, lakes, watering holes in the forests where she roamed. When at home, she became aware of the customs, traditions, relationships, and farming practices in the fields.

As she says, "In our village, there were the Upper Gawas, the Lower Gawas, the Middle Gawas families. Then, there were the Raut, Majik, Mhalshekar, Parsekar, Prabhu, Degvekar, Thakur, Usapkar families. We

all lived together as one community. We all tended to our fields, ran our households and took care of our animals. We were the Middle Gawas family! There were four brothers and I, the only sister. Out of the four brothers, two had died a premature death. Our parents could not get over this and left the village in search of better prospects. Our mother took on work in the iron ore mines of Sanguem on the Goa-Karnataka border and our father took to vending fish”.

Their mother would return home every month or two and their father would be constantly on the move. There was no public transport in Goa in those days and almost everyone was on foot. Subhadra was a mere child then and yet she was entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the house, the domestic animals and her two older brothers. A girl in the house, however young, was expected to shoulder all domestic responsibilities. Subhadra understood this very early on and took it in her stride.

That was the fate of a girl-child in a Goan village in those days. Her two older brothers were sent to school while she remained unschooled, left alone all day to domestic drudgery. “Of course, I too wanted to go to school like my brothers,” she says. “I even told them so! But they said, ‘*Are you going to become a big lady, a Madam by getting yourself an education? Pay attention to the stove. That is your place.*’ My blood boiled but what could I do about it? I could only sing...”

*The sheaves of millet
The stalks of grain
I beg you, please God
Don't ever make me
A girl-child again.*

In Goa, a girl-child lived on borrowed time at her mother's. She was seen as wealth that had been loaned to this family and then returned to her “rightful owners” when the time was right. If the parents failed in their duty of marrying her off at a tender age, our rural folk believed that she would bring bad luck to the entire household. Not wishing to be branded as the girl who had brought bad luck upon her parents, Subhadra's parents married their daughter off to Arjun Gawas in the nearby village of Keri Ghoteli No. 2 when she turned sixteen.

Once a girl is married off in Goa, she is expected to follow the rules of her marital home, concentrate on her household chores and in general uphold the reputation of her new family. Subhadra was just a child when she was married off and expected to shoulder full responsibility in her new home. As a teenager, she was curious, inquisitive, interested in everything around her. Sometimes, this would get in the way of following her mother-in-law's explicit instructions.

She soon learnt that expressing one's inner feelings or opinions was simply not done. If one had an opinion one kept it to oneself. “You learnt to imprison yourself within yourself,” she says. “But my universe was different. I did not get an education. No, not even the basic Alphabet. Primary school for us was a barefoot

walk in the forest with the calves and the goats. Our teachers were hard work and survival. After they married you off, all that happened was that the work place changed. The work remained the same.”

With a life like that, one would think a person would either carry out their chores mindlessly or, reluctantly but not Subhadra. She put her personality to good use. She used her social skills, her pleasing personality to sit with the village elders and collect their songs and stories about nature, about the earth, about love between rural folk in the village. She learnt how to sing with them. She gleaned songs of love, of hatred, of jealousy, envy, selfishness and generosity. With no formal education to call her own, she understood at a very young age that it was important to preserve this oral history. The only way she knew how to preserve it was to learn the stories and the songs herself. Today, Subhadra is a treasure trove of proverbs, riddles, phrases, wedding songs, grinding songs, songs sung over the kneading trough and lullabies. Defying tradition, when women were forbidden to play a musical instrument, Subhadra learnt how to play several percussion instruments.

As Subhadra got better at it, she realized that the younger generation of women in her village were completely unaware of this genre of folk music. She began to teach anyone who was interested in learning. These songs had, until then, been handed down from mother to daughter or grandmother to granddaughter. Hence, in way, Subhadra has broken the tradition of handing down oral history from one generation to the next by teaching women who are completely unrelated to her. Soon, passing on the songs to others and sharing them with the objective of preserving this tradition became her life’s aim. “This must continue,” she says. “It does not matter who carries it forward. Your daughters and daughters-in-law must know these songs. And then, they in turn must pass it on to their daughters, granddaughters and daughters-in-law. We cannot allow this to die. It is our life-blood.”

After her wedding and her moving into her marital home and village, Subhadra’s life was a tightrope walk. She had to do as she was told and at the same time uphold the reputation of the Middle Gawas maternal family name. She would complete all her chores around the house and then follow her passion. She would go around the village collecting songs. The village where she grew up was at that time, verdant green and forested even though it was less than a kilometre or two from the urbanised village of Keri in Sattari. When you spend your childhood and your early teens in a village like that, you absorb all the nuances of nature that surround you; you imbibe all the cultural and social traditions of your village. “They say you know every leaf that stirs in the wind in your village. When you return, the palm fronds bend low to embrace you.”

Subhadra still remembers every rock, stone and pebble from her mother’s village. She knows all the stories behind every name of every freshwater spring, pond, lake and sacred grove. She will tell you, for example, why a certain grove is called Jama chi rai or the copper pot grove. That is because, she says, there are three copper pots that hang on an ancient tree in the grove and as they say, these copper pots are for the exclusive use of the *kshetrapal* or, guardian deity who does a circumambulation of the area once a year

during the Shigmo Festival. No one knows who first hung those pots there on the tree and why that particular tree was chosen. No one has ever seen the guardian deity either, but people believe that he watches over everything.



Figures 3 and 4: Subhadra weaves a hanger for the clay pot out of paddy grass © Rajendra Kerkar

Subhadra's eyes light up when she speaks of her village. "There were days when both our parents were away," she recalls, "and the whole village knew we were on our own. Everyone in the village took on the role of our parents! I would have to go to the community well to fetch water and hardly strong enough to carry a pot, I would get drenched to the bone on my way back. Then there was the trip to the forest to

fetch twigs and branches for firewood. We had no money to buy shoes and sharp thorns would hurt my tender feet. After the second trip into the forest for firewood, I would simply stop looking at my bleeding feet. If there was not enough firewood in the house, how would I light the stove and cook a meal? Every day I would look at the bundle and ask myself if that was enough or would I need to make another trip”.

As it so happened, their parents being away and the whole village looking out for the children turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Subhadra learnt how to interact with her neighbours and elders; how to listen to advice and take decisions; how to reject the advice without causing offence; how to belong to the whole village and yet hold your own.

If her neighbours went into the forest to forage for firewood, Subhadra would also tag along. With exposure to stories and songs that the women shared, Subhadra, unlike the other children in the village, became a very mature 5-6-year-old indeed. When most children were romping around the village aimlessly, this little girl was wondering how best to support her family. Her brothers would go to school and she would take care of the house and that is how it was until the brothers passed their 10th grade.

There are many things that Subhadra can teach us but if there’s one thing that one wants to learn from her, it is how to maintain cordial relations with just about everyone in the village. She would finish her chores as quickly as possible, she says, and then run to the neighbours to try and lend them a hand. “That was my school,” she says. “There was always a neighbour who had something to teach me. I learnt how to slash small bushes and clear the forest for planting of millet, *vari* rice, *pakhad* rice and a number of other varieties of grain. It was hard work and I would not be expected to do it, but I would listen and learn about how it was done. How to slash and burn the hillslopes; how to make a makeshift shelter that would be your home for the next two months in the hills; how to complete your tasks before darkness fell.

With her mother never home and often not enough to eat, she was too proud to go to the neighbours and beg for a morsel to eat. She remembers going to bed on a little bit of rice and salt, sometimes a stale *nachni bhakri*; a rough chapati made from the pith of a coconut tree or even a chapati made from grain husk. There were days when even that was not available and she recalls sleeping on her stomach to quell pangs of hunger.

“Your body ached with the strain. Your feet were covered with blisters. Your face wrinkled and withered under the harsh sun. When it rained, your injured fingers would get septic and you would burn with fevers. It was often that there would be no food in the house and yet you stayed with the rest of the village to show solidarity and kinship. And, from this hardship would emerge a song on someone’s dry dust-laden lips. This song would alleviate the pain and the suffering of the day. Some of these songs were the prerogative of the menfolk in my day but I was just a child and when I asked the men to teach me the songs, they would laugh and sing for me. In that indulgence, I crossed the gender barrier! I broke the glass ceiling!”

Ironically, long before Subhadra's own wedding took place, she learnt a song that expressed a widow's grief.

*Let me tell you all a story
 O listener of stories of heroes and heroines
 For the poor widow of a sipahi, a soldier
 Is no less than the hero, she is a heroine
 Even if she sits on the grinding stone and sings
 Of her lamentation and sorrow
 We can hear her, her neighbours
 We can see her; feel her sadness and her pride
 For she sings of his bravery, how he died fighting
 How people were afraid of him
 His enemies how they were terrified
 And how when he died in the battle
 The king of the kingdom cried out
 "I have a kingdom to rule
 "How will I rule, run and fight without him?
 "Let me love and respect him in death
 "Let me invite his widow to my court
 "Let me honour her with gifts"
 And listener of stories, now you listen
 To what I overheard
 "Go your way, o messengers of the king
 "I bow to no one, I seek no compensation
 "For I am the wife of a brave soldier
 "I know that my king won the battle because of him
 "What use are riches and medals to me now?
 "What use are fantasies and dreams?
 "For the filler of my coffers, my dreams
 "Is no more!
 "When I saw the messengers of the king at my door
 "I was overjoyed to see them
 "Thinking they came bearing good tidings, gifts
 "And news of his home coming
 "But sadness! The news was of the opposite!
 "My husband for me was everything
 "Now I lack for nothing
 "For who wants anything when they have lost everything
 "Go back, O messengers
 "Grovel before your king
 "Tell him I said
 "Today you taste the fruit of his bravery
 "Sweet for you but sour for me
 "As for me, should your kingdom burn to ashes
 "It would not affect me".*

Not only did she learn the words of this mourning song, she also experienced the pain, the anxiety, the disdain that the widow expresses for her king through this song.

“In those days, we were akin to cattle. Getting married and going to another home, they told us, was like a calf being taken from one stable to another. There was nothing to it!” And, the 16-year-old Subhadra was married off to Arjun Gawas from the neighbouring village of Ghoteli No. 2 in Keri, Sattari. “It was an old tradition in those days. If your husband was called Arjun, they simply changed your name on the wedding day to Subhadra, Arjun’s wife from the epic Mahabharata. So, when you get married, it is not your postal address alone that changes, it is also your name, your last name and your identity.”

What did not change for Subhadra, however, was her passion of collecting and preserving stories. She would go about her household tasks, cleaning and cooking, working in the fields and kitchen garden, looking after her parents-in-law and after all of this, find the time to go to the elders in the village and beg them to share their songs and their stories. “A new daughter-in-law is like new chattel. They burden you with tasks just to test you to the hilt. You never had enough to eat and over this, you were supposed to follow all the rules of the house.”

And then, from somewhere a song would come to her lips and she would sing.

*Life must go on
It must go on
Every moment counts
I must be the angel
That only gives and gives
And gets in return
A mother-in-law’s curses
All day the curses
All night the suffering
Night’s suffering
Followed by a handful
Of grain
Last night they gave me
Some prawn curries
With a thump on the back
It is evening, said Ma
Don’t be your clever self
When your uncle visits
tomorrow*

Oviyos are songs sung over the grinding stone, a chore that is given to the daughter-in-law first thing in the morning. Composed and sung in isolation, these are songs of despair, frustration and sad repair. Little did Subhadra realize, when she was collecting the *oviyo*s from the elders in her village that someday she

too would be singing these out loud to herself as a release from her own isolation. Fortunately, there was a silver lining in a supportive husband. She thinks that had it not been for his support, she might never have become a storyteller and a repository of so many songs and stories.



Figure 5: Besides singing at the grinding stone, Subhadra also plays the percussion on an upturned kneading trough using two coconut shell spoons as drumsticks © Rajendra Kerkar

In her evening years, she recalls how she bore five sons and one daughter and today is the proud grandmother to 12 grandchildren. Yet, her only regret is that none of her daughters-in-law or grandchildren have shown any interest in this rich treasure house of oral history. Is Subhadra disappointed? “Yes of course I am disappointed,” she says and then laughs. “But so many people have come to me to learn my songs. That is something to be proud of, isn’t it? I have my own school!”

Despite this bravado, one can see that not being able to get a formal education has been a deep and painful regret for Subhadra. She does not realize what a living treasure she herself is. Her repertoire of songs is awe-inspiring. Her knowledge about medicinal plants and herbs is phenomenal. She also knows all the local names of the trees in the forests around where she lives. She seems to have a cure for every ailment and has the stories of the lakes, tanks, rivers and guardian deities at her fingertips. Subhadra was married when she was only 16 and yet she never fails to remember every rock, stone and pebble in her mother's backyard when she sings.

*The field is high up in the hills
But my soul is still in my mother's village
My poor mother must be so
Worried about me
"My daughter is alone
At her in-law's place", she must think.
Oh, Mother don't you worry
For alone I am not.
I have my mother-in-law beside me.*

Was this Subhadra's way of consoling her mother or was this an effort of consoling herself? "Well, I would let my mother know I was very happy at my in-law's place," she says. "Even if I had to fake a smile. The first year after I got married was easy. Then I got pregnant with my first child when I was not yet 17 and I went through a very difficult time. I did not know anything about pregnancies. Who told us anything in those days?

"I did not even know that a baby is born after nine months!" she laughs. "I was working in the fields when the baby arrived. I went into labour as I was cutting the paddy. It was only when the pain became unbearable that I called out to my mother-in-law. She rushed to get the village mid-wife but even before the mid-wife arrived, my baby boy was on his way out. And there I was, thinking about getting over with it so I could go back to cutting the crop!

What makes Subhadra such an extraordinary person? What inspired her to be such an independent woman given her social and cultural landscape? "I stayed focussed," she says. "I never strayed away from my goals. I sang and collected stories."

"My pregnancies came one year apart. Giving birth, they say, is like being born all over again yourself. And then, after the baby is born, you have to depend on someone else for all your needs. All you were given was some wild *surai* rice and peppercorns. I used to press the pepper on the rice grains to make it palatable. Sometimes, you were given a few drops of coconut oil to help the rice go down your gullet. And, if you were lucky, a little gruel made with fenugreek. After all this, you had to breast feed the new

baby. And the baby was always hungry! In the post-partum period after the baby is born, we were not allowed to touch anything in the house.

“Well, we were not to touch anything in the house but they would still find some tasks for us to do! They gave you the first 12 days to get some rest and then began to list out the things you could do in the yard.” Then one day, Subhadra took it upon herself to stop this cycle of pregnancies. She went to the clinic and got herself operated. For that day and age, it was indeed a very bold step for a woman to take.

“Someone in the village mentioned, in passing, that there was to be a health camp in Bicholim town and that operations would be done free of charge. I gave it a quiet thought and took my decision. Nothing and no one was going to stop me! I took my husband into confidence. He agreed but when my mother-in-law heard, there was an explosion! I had my husband’s support so I did not say a word in my defence. If you have your husband’s support in matters like these, it is worth its weight in gold. After that, life became a lot better”.

Subhadra was fortunate in the choice of her husband. She feels that when you marry a man, you marry his entire family. There are parents-in-law to contend with, sisters-in-law to build relationships with; bridges to be built with your husband’s brothers’ wives and the entire family if not the entire village. Yet, if your husband is supportive, you can walk the tightrope easily. She says the man she was married off to turned out to be the quiet, calm and mature man she had always dreamed of. Even today, she will not take his name out loud. Instead, she will expect you to guess what his name was from this riddle.

*Dig with a plough
Get 12 tons of soil out
And build a temple
With high walls
And decorated pillars
Whose daughter are you?
I’m a Gulule daughter
Whose niece?
Kerkar’s niece
Whose daughter-in-law?
The family from Ghoteli
Open the windows
The chariot brings
The princely Arjun*

Subhadra’s husband was a builder of houses in the village. One day, she decided to help him build. She finished her household chores-the cleaning and cooking, the grinding of the grain, collecting firewood, washing the clothes and working in the fields-and then set out with her husband. “Everyone built their houses from mud and stone in those days,” she says. “In the beginning all I did was fill the mud in pans

and bring the pans to my husband but he saw that I was a quick learner. Soon, I learnt how to build. Oh, I must have helped build more than 50 houses in and around the village! I know how to dig the foundation, choose the right kind of mud, how to build the walls and lay the roof and take care of every detail. It takes close to a month to build a house like that. In my days, only the men would go up a bamboo step ladder and get on the roof but I did it! I did it myself! I proved it to everyone that a woman could build!”

Her forte, however, lies in the *oviyos*, the songs sung at the grinding stone; wedding songs; lullabies; *dhavli maan* or, songs sung over the kneading trough with coconut shell ladles. These are the songs she had collected in her childhood in her mother’s village. The festivals that did not take place in her mother’s village took place at her marital village. She not only began collecting these songs too but also began to look for other women in the village who could sing and perform. She did not know it then but from being a storyteller, Subhadra had become, inadvertently, an oral archivist and a woman who empowers other women!

“When harvesting paddy was considered men’s work, I empowered other women to take it up. I may not be able to hold the sickle today but there are many women in the village who have been enabled by me. I could set a fish trap, manoeuvre a small fishing boat, build a log-bridge over a raging river and weave a basket to keep insects from getting into grain. I could build a bird’s nest to scare away the birds in the fields; build a temporary shelter for cattle in the commons; fashion a broom from the fronds of a palm tree; and be quite adept at making some traditional Goan dishes!” Subhadra knows the local names for a variety of edible fish and also knows what fish to consume for a particular health problem.

It is thanks to the Government of Goa Department of Art & Culture that Subhadra was able to showcase her talent at many official performances organised by the state. Local radio and television channels in Goa have also invited her to sing on air. She has won several awards and accolades. None of this has gone to her head. Her aim has always been to share her talent and teach others in order to preserve her craft for posterity.

Through the West Zone Cultural Festival held in Udaipur, Rajasthan, Subhadra was able to revive the endangered oral tradition of singing on the kneading trough (with the coconut shell ladles used as drumsticks) called the *dhavli maan*. For this, she was awarded the Kala Gaurav award from the Government of Goa in recognition of her work and her inspiration to other performers.

You just have to see Subhadra walk on stage to see her confidence! She will perform before an audience of thousands in the same way that she would sing in her village of fifty. If there is a question from the audience, all she needs is a translation from her native Konkani-Marathi and she will take the question head on and answer it with complete honesty.

I think the secret of her success is that she knows how to change with changing times. She has shouldered the responsibility of running a household at the tender age of 5; in the absence of her parents she has

learnt how to make the whole village respond to her. She has hugged a tree in a dark forest and made it her home for the night. She is not afraid of anything.

“A widow is never invited to a wedding but they invite me to come and sing,” she explains. “Some people disapprove of this but I tell myself... when my husband would have approved of my singing at a wedding, why should I not go? I love the *dhalo* dance festival and so did he. If he was here today, he would have encouraged me.”

Subhadra has five sons and their families that she could live with. Yet she chooses to live on her own. “As long as I can light my own stove, I will not die,” she says, laughing. “Only the firewood knows how it burns when it is put under a pot,” she sighs. “I get breathless now,” Subhadra says, gasping for breath. “I can barely make it to the front courtyard of my own house now. But, if what they say is true, then you have to die to be able to see what Heaven is like!”

A brief reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of using the life history

The advantages that we had, while carrying out this research were several: 1) Close geographical proximity between the author and the subject 2) a commonly spoken language 3) accessibility and approachability between both parties 4) the fact that both researcher and subject are women helped in the sharing of personal information 5) the subject is able to interpret her own life as compared with the life of the researcher 6) both researcher and subject were able to grasp what was expected from them in their own individual personal spaces and they were able to appreciate the disadvantage/advantage they were placed in on account of the accident of birth, marriage, marital status, etc. 7) Both women have grown into adulthood under the tutelage of their husbands. One learned the skills of repairing and building roofs, a male dominated profession; the other learnt the importance of research, a gender-neutral profession otherwise but in this case, used to advantage by carrying out gender-based studies.

The disadvantages, however, were: 1) there is no other data to compare this life history with 2) there is a degree of familiarity and awe expressed towards the subject and this may have, at some stage, coloured judgements and unbiased conclusions 3) the researcher is a married lady while the subject is a widow. This is significant in the Goan cultural context where a married lady enjoys privileges, respect and a higher status in society as compared to a widow. It is difficult to say whether this impaired the answers to the questions in interviews but it would be relevant to mention it in the least.

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