

Towards Understanding Tribal Livelihood through Religion in Goa

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The essay presents a functional analysis of religion among the Scheduled Tribe community of Velips in the State of Goa. The study revisits a primitive tribal settlement which is presently not inhabited by the community for residential purposes. This primitive settlement, popularly known as 'Daando', is sacred to the tribals. Festivals such as the Shigmo demonstrate a collective form of worship at the sacred Daando. Shigmo facilitates to trace earlier tribal settlements and traditional livelihood system of the community. Furthermore, the festival of Shigmo help in rediscovering historical tribal settlements by taking recourse to folk songs sung during the occasion.

[Key words: *Scheduled Tribes, 'Daando', 'Shigmo', 'Gharvai', 'Gharpuris']*

Tribal societies have always found to be unique. It is the features of tribal societies which explains their uniqueness and in turn define their social and cultural identity. Undoubtedly, K. S. Singh has offered a systematic explanation of social and cultural life of the tribals in his project 'People of India' (PoI). Singh has identified 4,635 communities inhabiting the different parts of the country (Sharma 2008: 13). Aspects, generally considered for defining ethnic identity of any tribal community are the type of social organisation, livelihood system, location, language, customs, religion, kinship, etc. Tribal societies have shown persistence of autonomy in terms of their religious system in spite of their close interaction with their non tribal counterparts (Singh 1994: 12). Unlike the non tribal modern societies, the institution of religion significantly facilitates the regulation of livelihood activities of the tribal world.

Owing to some socio historical reasons the tribal population in Goa for long chose to take shelter in the hinterlands, especially, in the hilly ranges of the Western Ghats of India known as the Sahyadris. With the passage of time, leaving their earlier settlements they gradually moved down the slopes in search of new livelihoods. The beginnings of a cultivated and civilised way of life, however, did not in any manner discount the importance of their earlier primitive settlements. These former primitive settlements are the abode of tribal Gods and Goddesses, and regular platforms for celebration of festivals and

rituals. The study functionally explores the celebration of the festival *Shigmo* and thereby aid to trace early livelihood systems and historical settlements of the Velip community.

Objectives of the study

In the backdrop of this discussion, the general aim of the study is to understand the significance of the institution of religion to the tribal society. The paper unfolds an unique orientation of religious behaviour among the Velip community in the collective domain of worship. The collective domain of worship of the community is the place of earlier ancestral settlement. This ancestral settlement exists in the far flung forest areas away from their present settlement. By and large the festivals and all major collective rituals of the community get solemnised at the primitive settlement. The study takes recourse to the earlier settlement through the celebration of *Shigmo* festival. The festival of *Shigmo*, demonstrates an exceptional paradigm of collective worship among the members. The study offers an explanation of how religion initiates collective participation of members and culminates in fostering a sense of social cohesion among the group members. In turn, it facilitates to understand the traditional livelihood system of the community. Folksongs and dances do constitute significant life expressions of collective tribal belief and worship. The dance forms are exemplary and depict the heritage and culture of the ancient Goan society. It is the culture and traditions of the tribals which has been described and idealized as 'Goan culture' (Newman R.S. 2001:20). More importantly; the folk songs sung during the occasion of *Shigmo* unfold the tracing of some historical settlements of the tribal community in different parts of the State.

Field and methods

The present study is based in the tribal hamlet of Baddem in the remote and distant village of Khotigao in the taluka of Canacona in South Goa. The taluka of Canacona is located in the southern district of Goa having a total population of 45172 of which 13657 people are the Scheduled Tribes (Census of India-2011). The village Khotigao lies towards the south east in the taluka of Canacona, situated into the hinterlands of the Western Ghats (Sahyadris). Khotigao is primarily known for abundance of rich bio diversity resources and also a Wild Life Sanctuary (Cotigao Wild Life Sanctuary).

The study primarily is ethnographic in nature. It is an outcome of exhaustive field research conducted among the tribal communities. The researcher has actively participated and developed lived experiences through participant observation in the field. The lived experiences practically were challenging and equally interesting. The participation of the researcher into the festival of *Shigmo* was tough and indeed mesmerizing. In depth interviews with members and focussed discussion with the elders of the community in particular have been used in the study. Tools such as cameras (video and still) and voice recorder are used extensively to capture performances of dances and folk songs.

Tribal demography of Goa

In the erstwhile Union Territory of Goa, Daman and Diu five communities namely Dhodia, Dubla, Nayaka, Siddi and Varli were notified as Scheduled Tribes in the year 1968. Presently, the people of these communities are found in Daman and Diu. The Government of Goa in the year 2003 declared Gawda, Kunbi, and Velip as Scheduled Tribes in the State. The share of Scheduled Tribe population of Goa to the total Scheduled Tribe population of India is less than 1 per cent.

As per the Census of India 2011, of the total population of 14,58,545 of the State of Goa, as many as 1,49,275 have been enumerated as belonging to the Scheduled Tribes constituting 10.23 per cent of the total population of the State. It is observed that 58.70 per cent of Scheduled Tribe population is rural, while 41.29 per cent is urban. There is a preponderance of Scheduled Tribe population in the district of south Goa. As per the 2011 Census of India, 37.92 per cent of Scheduled Tribe population is found in the district of North Goa, whereas 62.07 per cent is found in the district of South Goa. The following table represents the distribution of Scheduled Tribe population across the talukas in the State:

Table No. 1
Taluka wise distribution of Scheduled Tribe population-2011 (Goa State)

Taluka	Total population	ST population	% of population
Pernem	75747	46	0.06
Bardez	237440	1654	0.69
Tiswadi	177219	18785	10.59
Bicholim	97955	4492	4.58
Sattari	63817	4030	6.31
Ponda	165830	27599	16.64
Mormugao	154561	6870	4.44
Salcete	294464	32562	11.05
Quepem	81193	25290	31.14
Sanguem	65147	14290	21.93
Canacona	45172	13657	30.23

Source: Census of India- 2011 (Goa state)

The taluka of Quepem and Canacona in Table no. 1 indicate fair percentages of Scheduled Tribe population. The following table provides population details of the taluka of Canacona:

Table no. 2
Village wise percentage of ST population in Canacona

Sr. No.	Village/town	Total population	ST population	% of ST population
1	Cola	5382	2977	55.31
2	Agonda	3801	371	9.76
3	Canacona	4547	2013	44.27
4	Gaodongrem	4946	4321	87.86
5	Poigunim	6625	1197	18.06
6	Lolien	4797	154	3.21
7	Cotigao	2640	2418	91.59
8	Canacona (Municipal town)	12434	206	1.65

Source: Census of India- 2011(Goa State)

Table no. 2 indicates a high concentration of Scheduled Tribe population in the villages of Cotigao and Gaodongrim i.e. 91.59 and 87.86 per cent, respectively. Geographically, the village of Kotigao is the largest having an area of 117 sq. kms. It comprises of seven wards, namely; Kuske/ Keri, Yeda/Nadkem, Pansulemal, Avem, Srithal/Avali, Avali and Baddem. One important feature of the population of Kotigao is the absence of Other Backward Caste (OBC) population, and the existence of one Scheduled Caste (SC) person in the total population (Census of India 2011).

Knowing the Velip community

The Scheduled Tribe population in the village of khotigao belongs to the Velip community. This aboriginal community of the Velips is said to belong to the Proto-Australoid race. In fact, the Proto-Australoid group or race is considered to be the second oldest inhabitants of the Indian society (Government of Goa 2004). They originally belonged to the Kunbi/Kulambi community from which they separated several centuries ago (Singh 1993: 201). The Velip community consists of two groups namely, the Velips and the Gaonkars. Thus, one finds families belonging to the Gaonkars and also families belonging to the Velips in the tribal hamlets. However, there are a few exceptions wherein some hamlets may either have the Velips or the Gaonkars as exclusive social categories.

Right from olden times to the modern day, each tribal hamlet of the Velip community continues a practice of entrusting certain individuals

traditional powers to undertake religious and administrative roles. These positions are socially approved by the community. Thus, one can come across the chief Velip taking care of religious duties, while the chief Gaonkar, also called as *Budavant* (the wise man) looks into the administrative aspects of the village commune. Hamlets where the Gaonkars and Velips coexist will have a chief Velip and the *Budavant*. However, in the absence of any one social group, the priestly and administrative roles of the community are shouldered by members of the same group. The community in the olden days did not hire any type of services from the Brahmin priests. However, in modern times one notices a form of Sanskritized change taking place among them. Traditional duties of the tribals have not completely ceased, but most of them continue to operate even to this day.

Ethnographic profile of Baddem hamlet

The hamlet of Baddem in khotigao is a typical tribal settlement occupying a semi hilly topography. The houses in Baddem are constructed on one side of the hill phase. The hamlet consists of forty four houses having a population of 276 persons. The settlement is experiencing a rapid demographic transition in recent years, which is evident from the fact that the number of houses has considerably increased. Of the total of forty four houses, thirty houses have been built in the last ten years, six houses fall in the age group of eleven to twenty years, five houses in the age group of twenty to thirty years and only three houses have an age of thirty and above. Thirty eight houses belong to the Gaonkar families while only six houses are of the Velips. The type of houses in the hamlet reveals adaptation of modern standards by the community. 82 per cent of the houses are constructed with stone packed with mortar, 16 per cent are of mud, while only 2 per cent are of concrete.

The tribals have terraced the hillside for the purpose of house construction. Most of these houses are in close proximity to each other. Adjacent to the houses they have constructed independent cow sheds and dug small dumping sites for the dung used as manure for their fields. The terrain appearing settlement is thickly covered with livelihood supporting small and big trees such as jackfruit, mango, betel nut, coconut and pineapple. Land beyond and above the settlement is occupied with cashew tree plantation owned by the tribal families. Over the hill top there are sites voluntarily chosen by some families for undertaking shifting cultivation. Lower down the settlement are the agricultural fields adjoined by a river canal. The placement of the houses on the hill side allows the tribals to have a closer look on their fields.

The Domain of Religion

At this particular juncture, it is significant to take a look into the orientation of tribal religious behaviour in the private as well as public domain. Religion for the Velip tribe entails the worshipping of totemic symbols even to the present day. In this context it is important to interpret and understand the concepts of '*Gharpuris*', '*Gharvai*' and the '*Daando*'. The *Gharpuris* and the *Gharvai* are sacred totems for the Velips. Hoebel in his definition of totemism

says that the members have a peculiar bond of emotional identity between themselves and the totem. The totem is thus a symbol of tribal unity and keeps the group organised (Kapoor 2013:211-12).

These three central concepts are religious ideologies to the tribals, and each of them warrants a specific religious behaviour. Tribal religious practices undertaken at the personal level i.e. in the house are directed to the *Gharpuris*. One comes across a small wooden log like structure erected in houses which is called as the '*Gharpuris*'. The sacred *Gharpuris* normally appears of a height of one to two feet with octagonal sides with one end of it planted vertically into the floor and the other end projected upwards. The *Gharpuris* is the totem of the house.

Religious practices oriented at the level of the family or a group of families are directed to the *Gharvai*. In fact, families owe their identity to the *Gharvai*. Members belonging to a particular family type have their independent *Gharvai*. The tribals attach more importance to the *Gharvai* than the *Gharpuris*. The '*Gharvai*' is a sacred totem of a group of families. It is a temple like structure, miniature in size which is generally found aside the *Tulsi* (Basil plant). The sum total of religious activities pertaining to the families is initiated at the *Gharvai*. The location of the *Gharvai* and the temple of the clan deity (*Kuldev*) are witnessed at the *Daando*.

'Daando' - The collective domain of worship

By and large, religious practices among the Velip community take place in a collective manner at the *Daando*. Religion, to the tribal means jointly visiting and participating in the occasions at the sacred *Daando*. The tribals get hardly involved in performing prayers or in initiating religious rituals in their houses on a day to day basis. The sacred *Daando* is a place of common religious participation for the people of the community. The clan god *Nirakar*, the *Gharvai* and several other subsidiary Gods (the *Saath Purav*, *Khuti*, *Magil Purav*, *Satai Devi*, *Jalmi*, *Sarkarpurush*, *Vaagro*) are located at the *Daando*. The *Nirakar* is revered by all people of the community keeping aside their individual and family differences. In common parlance, the word '*Daando*' means a perpendicular stick. The place of *Daando* is located into the hills at a distance of eight to nine miles away from the present settlement of the hamlet of Baddem. The place is at a high altitude and appears in complete isolation, and hence popularly called as the '*Daando*'. The villagers have to commute across three hills to approach the *Daando*. It can only be approached by walking for almost two hours through the tedious inclined steep terrain.

The *Daando* is the abode of tribal Gods and Goddesses. At the centre place of the *Daando* is the temple of clan God *Nirakar*. Alongside the temple is the '*Maand*', an open space generally appearing like a courtyard where the men assemble to play various dance forms known as '*Mel*' in the presence of Goddess *Tulsi* (Basil plant). The main *Gharvai* is aligned to the holy *Tulsi* plant. The *Saath Purav*, *Khuti*, *Magil Purav* and other Gods lie in the close

vicinity of the temple. The *Saath Purav* and the *Magil Purav* are considered to protect the God *Nirakar*.

All the present day settlements of the Velip community are not their ancestral settlements. In fact, every ward or a hamlet in the village has its primitive settlement far away from their present settlement, normally located in the deep forests. Such sacred places in the nearby wards of Kuske and Avali also bear the name of '*Daando*'.

The tribals consider the *Daando* as their earlier place of settlement wherein their primitive men lived and constructed livelihood systems. It is in fact difficult to set a precise date of the settlement of the primitive people into the region. The elders however, firmly believe that their ancestors lived at the sacred *Daando* roughly some three hundred years ago. The primitive men dwelled in such habitats by practicing primitive occupational habits of hunting, food gathering and shifting cultivation. Such primitive practices and habits continue even to this day, though not practiced in the same spirit by the community. The tribals continue to engage in occasional hunting and undertake shifting cultivation in the higher reaches of the mountains.

Eventually, these primitive men came down the slopes in search for a more settled life. Nevertheless, they did not completely settle on the plains but preferred to stay clinging on to the lower reaches of the mountains. The fertile lands below the mountains were gradually used for undertaking settled cultivation.

It is fair enough for anyone visiting the *Daando* today to believe and comment on the existence of a society in the past. The early tribals with the help of the prevailing natural resources constructed a system for living. The age old livelihood system at the *Daando* is depicted through the natural resources existing in the form of a well, huge fruit bearing trees of mango, jackfruit and coconut, and also a land for raising sugarcane plantation. In the nearby forest of the *Daando*, one may witness water resource points of perennial natural springs such as Madiadai also called as Namshibaandh, Bhemapaati and the Daatre. Tribals walking the inclined steep to *Daando* stop for a while and relax at the Namshibaandh.

As one leaves the hamlet of Baddem and starts trekking up towards the *Daando*, one may come across different sets of cultivations done on the hilly slopes. During the first phase of walk one can witness the mountain slopes occupied with cashew plantations. In the subsequent phase, there are betel nut, coconut, banana and pineapple plantations. Of late, it is learnt that the tribal communities have shown a positive inclination in raising cultivation throughout the hilly region. Barren tracts of the mountains are tilled to raise productive plantations nearby the Namshibaandh. It is interesting to note that some of these plantations have been managed collectively by the tribes. Through this communitarian way of cultivation, people have formed groups consisting of families coming together in a common enterprise to take care of the cultivation. The group centred work enables the community to go for an effective division

of labour between the families. As a result of which the burden of irrigating and maintaining the plantations is shared by the entire community, thereby reducing the hardships of frequently climbing the mountains.

Tribals living in such remote areas amidst geographical barriers have always found themselves raising their livelihood by adjusting and relying on the natural resources available around them. The waters of Daatre and Bheemapati served important lifelines for the primitive people at *Daando*. Today, the water of Daatre and Bheemapati emanating from the *Daando* region is the main source of drinking water for the people living at Baddem and other hamlets in Khotigao. The water from Daatre and Bheemapati is tracked down to the settlement at Baddem.

All major religious rituals, festivals, marriage ceremonies, and various other religious acts of the community are undertaken at the *Daando*. Normally, every calendar month of the year is given to the celebration of some religious occasion or festival at the *Daando*. The festivals are generally referred as '*Porobs*' by the tribal community. The men folk visit the *Daando* more frequently than the women folk. However, the collective participation of all men and women takes place only during the festival of *Shigmo*.

During the month of March, the Hindu society in Goa is engaged in the celebration of the festival of *Holi*. The festival of *Holi* is locally called as *Shigmo*. Tribal communities in Kotigao are actively involved in celebrating the local festival of *Shigmo*. At this point of time the tribals are relieved from all forms of agricultural duties. The *Shigmo* festival marks the beginning of cashew production. Almost all tribal families are owners of small and big cashew plantations. The *Shigmo* is a perfect example demonstrating a belief in religion, livelihood and communitarian lifestyle of the tribal people. The *Shigmo* celebration lasts for almost a week time. The *Daando* at Baddem in Khotigao comes alive during the festival time of *Shigmo*.

Preparations for the *Shigmo* begin almost a week before the festival. The community members during the festival temporarily camp at the *Daando* for nearly seven days to participate in the different activities associated with the *Shigmo*. All members of the community not excluding their cattle leave the hamlet of Baddem and settle at the *Daando* by constructing temporary houses. Men as well women in large number help in the construction of nearly twenty to twenty five houses made out of grass, bamboos, branches and twigs of plants and trees. Normally, each house is occupied by two or three families.

The *Shigmo* is an exhibition of various dance forms performed by the men. Tribal folk dances are to be considered as life style of the community and not merely as an art form (Khedekar 1996). Men participate in the dances in great numbers, while women turn out to become mere spectators. Women engage in the preparation of meals for their families. A special sweet delicacy known as '*Kheer*' is prepared during the festival. A unique feature of the *Shigmo* is the performance of dances accompanied by folk songs. The songs sung during the festival of *Shigmo* are a testimony to the historical placement of

the people at the *Daando*. The folk songs even go beyond to trace and explain tribal Gods and places of historical settlements. The Khutya Velip i.e. the chief priest of the community takes recourse to the some folk sayings which clearly unfolds an understanding of their past. He vibrantly utters lines sung in the form of an invocation popularly called as the '*Naman*', and is joined by the other men in a chorus. The *Naman* is sung in a steady rhythm along with the other men in a slow circular walking movement. The *Naman* is cited as follows:

<i>Ye Aade Maaye khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Ramnatha Devang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Ani Tulshichea BelmaandarKhela rangaita</i>	<i>Tye Devi Maaye khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Gaonkare Maaye khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Zaita Nasang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Meghnatha Devang khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Shiwa Devang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Dhartare Maaye khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Sarkara Prasang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Vishnu Barmeang khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Khutye Devang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Indre Devaang khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Brahmana Konaang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Chuklea Makhleank khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Rodera Devang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Paatala Khaala khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Kadalekara khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Patale Shekaak khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Vonnea Naasaang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Rama Laxmana khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Ghorvoye Maaye khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Paacha Pandvang khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Dervatea Nasang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Ekvisa Kavrang khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Khamya Devang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Jaita Khandlang khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Pella Proshea khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Bhutanatha khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Taala Mrudaang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Ganpati devang khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Payachea Ghagreang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Bhome maaye khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Fulam Kamlank khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Karmala Bhome khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Sorvoye Shirrang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Chandreshwara khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Chartea Goruk khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Paika devang khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Chaddea Devang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Nirankara khela khelaita</i>	<i>Tya Baddeam Angnang khela khelaita</i>
<i>Tya Zolmea devang khela khelaita</i>	<i>Ani Tulshichea BelMaandar khela rangaita</i>

The invocation cited above makes a reference to some prominent Gods, places and to some biotic components of worship. Lord Ramnath, Chandreshwar and Bhutanath referred in the *Naman* are dear to the tribals. The temple of Lord Ramnath is at Verla in the Sanguem taluka while Lord Chandreshwar and Bhutanath are at Gudi Paroda in the taluka of Quepem. The Velips pay regular visits to these places of worship. The members of the community, in particular the elders trace their social origins to some places cited in the invocation. The tribals presumably believe that the oldest and probably the first settlement of the community was at Karmali, i.e. the present day Carambolim in taluka of Tiswadi. Subsequently, the band moved to

Chandreshwar Bhutnath, in the taluka of Quepem. The community then later migrated to a place called as Verla in the Sanguem taluka, and finally resorted at *Daando* before stepping down at Baddem.

Conclusions

The paper offers a brilliant explanation of showing how religion is vital to the tribal masses even to the present day. One can clearly discern how tribal religion continues to act as an important agent of social cohesion among the Velips. The exposition of an extraordinary paradigm of the festival of *Shigmo* presents several important insights. The festival helps in tracing the primitive settlements and in knowing the type of religious belief prevailing among the community. The *Daando* facilitates in understanding the traditional livelihood system of the primitive people. Their communitarian way of life seems to be represented in the collective work undertaken to support their livelihood. It is in fact learnt from the discussion that the present livelihood of the tribals is dependent on the earlier livelihood system cultivated by their primitive men at the *Daando*. A meaningful interpretation of their folk lore indeed helps us to know the tradition, livelihood and the genesis of their social evolution. In the phase of modernity there is a need to rediscover the past through oral traditions existing among them.

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