

By Shiv Kumar

Will the centuries-old *zagor* tradition, in which Hindus and Christians jointly celebrate the harvest, be destroyed by commercialisation and communal forces?

Thirty minutes away from the famous Calangute beach, a small hamlet in Siolim, Goa, is struggling to maintain a centuries-old tradition that enjoins Hindus and Catholic Christians to jointly salute the formless village deity.

On the first Monday after Christmas, Hindu and Christian residents of the *waddo*, or hamlet, of Dando congregate on an open plot of land to keep a night-long vigil and appease the deity who is believed to protect the village.

The *zagor*, or wake, begins with prayers that are unmistakably Christian, though the sing-song chants are said to have been drawn from the abhangs of Sant Tukaram, Maharashtra's poet-saint. And the wizened priest leading the congregation is a Hindu villager from the toddy-tapper caste who does this just once a year.

"I am the fifth generation *purohit* (priest) to carry on the tradition," says Vithal Devraj Shirodkar. Sprightly and sharp despite his 83 years, Shirodkar emphasises the non-Brahminical traditions of the post-harvest festival. "It is a salute to Khazaneshwar, or the god of the khazan, after a good harvest. People offer oil, candles and even cigarettes and *feni* (a local intoxicant) in thanksgiving," says Shirodkar, affectionately called 'Daaji' by the villagers.

The khazan-style of agriculture unique to this region enables paddy cultivation, pisciculture and salt manufacture on the same land, by regulating the ingress of seawater.

Shirodkar's annual ritual is preceded by 40 days of abstinence when he stays away from non-vegetarian food and prepares for the *zagor* with prayers and rehearsals with the villagers. The proceedings begin with a procession from the house of his neighbours, the Fernandes family, with a coconut ritually offered to the deity. The procession halts at wayside crosses and Hindu shrines, including St Ann's chapel. "Traditionally, three hymns are sung by Hindus and Christians at the chapel before the procession moves on," says Santan D'Souza, one of the hereditary participants in the *zagor*. Then, the Hindus make offerings of oil while the Catholics offer candles at the chapel.

At prayers before Zagorio, as the formless deity is called, Shirodkar offers salutations to the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The ritual five hymns by Shirodkar are followed by traditional dances and folk theatre enacted by the villagers, hereditary participants whose roles are inherited through generations. Principal characters like the *firangi-raj*a (white lord), *mali* (gardener), *malin* (gardener's wife), *mahar* (untouchable), etc, represent Goan society as it evolved through the years.

The all-night vigil is also helped by the Konkani *tiatr*, or theatre, where skits on political and social issues are performed.

According to Dr Alito Sequiera, head of Goa University's sociology department, the tradition of

zagor encountered stiff opposition from the erstwhile Portuguese rulers and the church. "Zagors were banned from the mid-17th century till the 1930s," says Sequiera. But the ban proved largely ineffective and Hindus and Catholics performed distinctive *zagors* across the state, he adds.

In her book *Feasts, Festivals and Observances of Goa* (L & L Publications, 2004), Maria de Lourdes Bravo da Costa Rodrigues traces the Siolim *zagor* to 1865 when the Hindus and Catholics lobbied with the then Portuguese rulers to get the ban lifted. "The Catholics who were banned from participating in the prayers got the Hindus to pray on their behalf," explains Shirodkar about his singing praises to the Christian trinity.

Till the singer Remo Fernandes discovered it in the 1980s, the *zagor* remained just another tradition dotting the Indian spiritual landscape. "It used to be so localised that few (people) outside Siolim knew about it," recalls the singer. The *zagor* hit the big time after Remo wrote about it and gave performances for almost a decade. But he stopped attending after the *zagor* threatened to become just another party. "It got bigger and more famous and I was no longer comfortable with it," says the singer.

With the Siolim *zagor* now firmly on the tourist agenda, hereditary participants in the *zagor* have money in their pockets. "Money is causing problems for everyone," says Shirodkar. A few years ago, the residents of Dando got into a fight with the neighbouring villagers who wanted to take the place of the traditional performers. "There was trouble and the police had to be called in," Shirodkar says.

Communalism is also raising its head. Differences among the villagers cropped up after Shirodkar's family built a small shrine, akin to a temple, on the *zagor* rounds. Though no idol has been installed, some Catholics are showing signs of discomfort. "After some people complained, our parish priest told us not to dance with the Hindus," says Santan D'Souza.

The Shirodkar family, however, maintains that the funds generated during the *zagor* are used to improve amenities in the village. "Earlier, people had to spend out of their own pockets; now we have the funds to provide facilities," says Kanhaiya Shirodkar, the old man's son and a local pharmacist. According to him, the committee managing the funds has representatives from both the Hindu and Christian communities.

Meanwhile, the villagers insist that most of the 28 Catholic families in Dando showed up for the last *zagor* despite the church's injunctions. "Only a few who joined sects like the Believers didn't turn up," says Fernandes.

Growing prosperity, though, poses a bigger danger. "With the spread of education, entire Catholic families are migrating out thereby altering the colour of the *zagor*," explains Kanhaiya Shirodkar.

Though the villagers of Dando have resolved to maintain the *zagor's* character, observers like Dr Sequiera warn of shared spaces transforming into purely Hindu shrines. "It would be tempting to adopt Brahminical practices to attract more people and money," he says.

(This article is part of the series 'Communal Polarisation and Threat to Shared Traditions in India', supported by the National Foundation for India. It first appeared in the Sunday magazine of the Tribune)

InfoChange News & Features, April 2006