

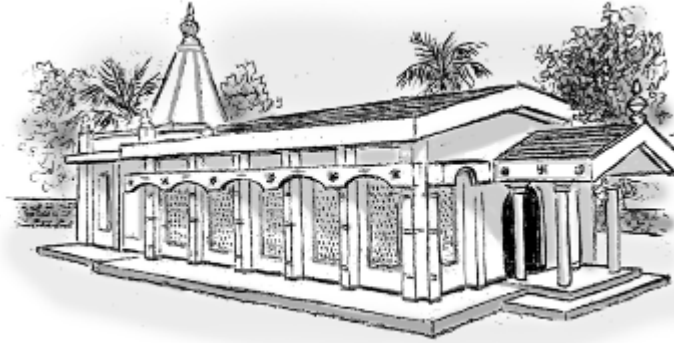
Kiran Budkuley : Modern Konkani Classics

Reprinted from: Muse India

Issue 61: May-Jun 2015

At <http://www.museindia.com/viewarticle.asp?myr=2013andissid=50&id=4272>

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Shri Devi Sharvani Temple, Salmona

**A Quest from Sanvsar
Budti (Deluge) to
Yugsanvar
(Cataclysm)**

Before venturing on a quest for a modern classic or two in Konkani Literature, it will be gainful to dwell critically on the term 'classic' itself, and then, to elucidate the rationale for undertaking such a paradoxical quest, since a classic is by definition a time-tested work, whereas a 'modern' work is believably new or at least 'recent'. Moreover, it is necessary to spell out, at this juncture, the parameters within which this supposed quest could be legitimately operational or located, and mentions reasons, if any, for identifying those parameters.

To return to the discussion of the term, 'classic', it must be maintained that by definition it is undoubtedly associated with a work (of art, literature etc.), that is of venerable age and established reputation. Moreover, it is a work of universal relevance and holds an appeal to a cross-section of readership across a wide spectrum of time and clime. Further, more often than not, a classic shows subtle or overt signs of influence of ancient paradigms and identifiable fore-runners of merit, and is capable of influencing future writers and may even generate inter-textuality in future works.

With scant exceptions, a classic is a work capable of touching the existence and aspirations of a people, of negotiating their lived reality, literally or metaphorically, and thereby, of navigating the text closer to the life-experiences of society. In a vast multilingual nation like India, where literature is abuzz with the vibrancy of multicultural ethos and is attuned, as much to the timeless as to the temporal, such a quest for a classic may help uncover the natural bonding of Konkani literature with Indian literature at large, in that the readership may be able to identify in the 'putative classics' of Konkani, the subtle markers of literary paradigms with which they may be familiar in their respective language(s) and literature(s).

Further, in looking out for modern classics, it is possible to scour through the ages for literary masterpieces of Konkani literature, which fulfill the four-fold criteria of: 1. time-tested presence on the literary and critical firmament; 2. consistent reputation down the years; and 3. the ability to relate to the 'lived reality' of the society and to impact social change; and, 4. the capacity to influence future literary trends, genres, or critical thought. Since it is possible to investigate and assess the potential of a work on the basis of the above-mentioned criteria, only in the socio-cultural and linguistic milieu with which one is intimately familiar, the present quest for a 'modern Konkani classic' will confine itself to Goan Konkani literature. This is because, this writer is closely acquainted with the historical context, socio-political moorings, and cultural and ecological factors conditioning the writing and moreover, with the

scripts, namely, Devnagari and Romi used for writing.

Modern view of 'classic'

In modern times the term 'classic' is defined variously as: 1. of the highest rank or class; 2. serving as an outstanding representation of its kind; 3. having lasting significance or recognized worth; 4. pertaining to ancient Greek or Roman literature or art; classical art; 5. a. of or in accordance with established principles or methods in the arts or sciences; b. having a simple and harmonious design unaffected by passing fashions; 6. of lasting historical or literary significance (See Readers Digest Dictionary 1984: 328).

Of these, the first three definitions emphasize, literary status of the work, its ability to be representative, and significance. The fourth definition points to 'abhijaataa' in the Indian tradition and shows affinity to the notion of classicism in the western literary and critical tradition, which can be briefly described as a philosophy of art and life that emphasizes order, balance, and simplicity. It is often contrasted with romanticism as a philosophy of art and life that lays stress on 'imagination and emotion'.

Classicism, on the other hand, stresses reason and analysis and seeks what is universally true, good and beautiful, and looks to the past for its models. Conversely, romanticism seeks what is exceptional and unconventional. It is often sympathetic to revolutions in society and in art. Classicism adheres to the formal rules of composition more closely than romanticism which is more adventurous, innovative and seeks to create new paradigms.

The Konkani Paradox

If these observations are applied to the quest for the 'classic' in modern Konkani literature, it will be seen that while certain literary works, by all the above standards, are undoubtedly 'classic', the literary sensibility that has created them has been exceptionally romantic. Thus, when the perceptive Konkani mind confronts the question, "What is a modern classic?" it is posed with an interesting paradox!

Examples of this paradox are the works of the 'father of modern Konkani literature' Vaman Varde Valawlikar, better known by his nom de plume 'Shenoi Goembab'. Each of his path-breaking works - the satirical poem Goemkaracho Mumbaikar (1910), novelette Sanvsar Budtti (1939), Bhagwantalem Geet (1939) - contain potent ingredients of a 'classic'. For instance, his well-conceived satirical poem Goemkaracho Mumbaikar (1910) is an apt portrayal of the predicament of the contemporary Goans in Mumbai who lost their identity, by espousing the 'other' as their own, and erasing their self-respect and selfhood. But this poem, which is in the kataav-form, is also reflective of the abiding fraternal relationship between the highbrow protagonist and his socially marginal erstwhile Goan neighbour, Chimne-Aakaa who promptly comes to his help in Mumbai. Likewise, Sanvsar Budtti dwells on the existential issues of life and comments on the philosophical dimension of existence. While Bhagwantalem Geet, prose commentary on Bhagvad Gita, has the basis in a classical text, it also shows an experimentation with vocabulary, creation of neologisms and the evolving of a sublime but simple expression, befitting the august original, hitherto unknown to Konkani literature.

Notably, the significance of these works as potential 'classics' lies not only in their aesthetic appeal but mainly in their rational grain, at times concealed under veneer of myth or the façade of parody. This is visible in the following features of these works: clearly realistic design, robust linguistic appeal of the hitherto unused Konkani idiom, socially oriented theme even under the cloak of metaphysical subjects,

gently subversive but minutely descriptive and/or finely analytic insights into lived reality, and a visionary orientation of the reader into an acknowledgement of the truth of his predicament and/or perception of reality necessary to negotiate change by countering hegemonies.

More importantly, Shenoji Goembab could devise and achieve these venerable goals even while he had no models of genre, formal specimen of language, or even well-laid literary conventions before him. Moreover, the authorial sensibility that created them was driven by the singular objective of Konkani 'selfhood', of creating a revolution in the moribund Konkani language and society by awakening the readership to patronizing hegemonies and thus rekindling the spark of identity in them.

These were all laudable romantic aspirations and literary objectives; and they can be seen to be further amplified in his non-fictional works and bolstered by the formidable arguments in his well-substantiated polemical writings. In fact, this trail of identity-quest and the trends of self-realization and self-celebration, so necessary for a people lost to their self-hood, continues in the visionary poetry of all-time greats such as, B.B.Borkar known by the fond home-spun appellation of 'Bakibab', the most popular of all his contemporaries Manohar Rai SarDessai conferred with the sobriquet of Kavirai (Poet-king), and prose oeuvre of Ravindra Kelekar, the Konkani litterateur conferred with the Padmabhushan.

From the provenance of Bakibab's Sasai (1960), and Manohar Rai SarDessai's Aiz Re Dholar Padli Badi (May 1961) and Goeam Tujya Mogakhatir (June 1961) by half a century of readerly, academic and temporal commemoration of quality and merit, to the present times through celebrated contemporary works such as Pundalik Naik's Achchev (1977), Damodar Mauzo's Karmelin (1982), Ravindra Kelekar's Mahabharat: Ek Anusarjan (1985; 1991) to Mahabaleshwar Sail's Kali Ganga (1990) and Yug-Sanvar (2005), it is an interesting journey of the modern Konkani 'classic'. The fore-runners have 'arrived' while the more recent works await the inevitable verdict of time. After all, the stamp of temporal sanction endorses the popular approval which has catapulted them to fame and adoration.

Philosophical and Literary realism

The present paper will try to trace this journey in the light of insights drawn from the contemporary notion of 'philosophical realism' that establish the timeless worth of a paradigmatic work as against 'literary realism' which enervates the readerly sensibility into an enthusiastic response to a contemporary literary work. As Satya P Mohanty, observes, "the best way to understand the connection between philosophical or theoretic realism and literary realism is to focus on what each says, explicitly or implicitly, about knowledge—about how we come to know things, especially in the social realm" (2012:13).

He opines that the early realist writers try 'to achieve greater fidelity to things as they are—that is, going beyond existing representations that are ideological or distorted for some other reason. Their concern is with greater objectivity or greater truth than what the hegemonic perspectives allow [us] to glean—but it is not with some notion of absolute fidelity to nature. The best realist writers tend to provide an analysis of reality, and their re-descriptions of the world are meant to support their 'analysis' (ibid).

While it is the presence of the philosophical realism in a literary work that ensures its thematic and visionary worth, as well as its timeless relevance, the literary realism is a clue to the superficial aesthetic propensities in the readership seeking a 'realistic' portrayal of their times and experience into a work, but may or may not assign it to universal approval of merit and lasting worth.

In the light of the analysis above, two works that merit discussion as potential classics are ManoharRai SarDessai's *Aiz Re Dholar Padli Badi* and Ravindra Kelekar's *Mahabharat: Ek Anusarjan*—both for distinct reasons. If the former has been a pioneering romantic achievement par excellence, the latter is the culmination of Konkani literature's tryst with a classical paradigm in the sense of being 'abhijaat' i.e. derived from ancient Indian classical epic, *The Mahabharata*, an *Arsha mahakavya*.

Interestingly, it must be reiterated here that in the context of modern Konkani literature one cannot discuss the 'classic' without in the same breath elucidating the 'romantic' – not as an antithetical concept to the former but rather as an essential, integrating, and complementary process that helped evolve the former. This can be better illustrated by briefly referring to the historical predicament of the Konkani language and elucidating the evolution of modern Konkani literature.

Predicament of Konkani language

After Goa was conquered (beginning 1510), within two-three decades, the Portuguese altered their previously declared policy with regard to spread of religion and conversions of the natives. For the spread of Christianity, the European missionaries had set themselves to the task of learning, preaching and writing in that language. Initially, this benefited Konkani and helped create new literature in it. However, by the Official Decree of 1684, Konkani was served the 'death sentence' by the Portuguese rulers whereby the natives were ordered to 'abandon the use of their language and speak only Portuguese within three years' (See Budkuley, 2012: 22-27).

By 1835 all the religious Orders had been suppressed, in 1774 the printing press was abandoned and the native language Konkani was left to die a natural death presided over by governmental neglect and absence of patronage and support from the Church. However, in spite of such measures, the language did not die. It survived despite all odds on the lips of the common people. Today it is the State Language of Goa.

Illustration of Konkani's survival

One of the most tenable illustrations of this tenacious survival is Shenoi Goembab's novelette *Sonvsar Budtti* (literally 'deluge', hence the 'titular reference' of this essay) published in Mumbai. This first novel in Devnagri script deals imaginatively with the motif of the 'mythical deluge' to create a compelling narrative with several unexpectedly diverse characters, who dwell on the issues of existence and afterlife. The surface focus of the work seems to be philosophical, its tone erudite and its mode discursive. It is closer to non-fiction in its apparent lack of 'action' and conflict so necessary to fiction.

Yet its literary worth has been considerable in its versatile weaving of metaphysical issues as diverse as human life and predicament, deep-rooted religious and existential ideologies that govern human behavior and belief, with the immediacy of societal realities that confound individuals, plight of Konkani language, potential of its idiom as fit vehicles for an elevated form like a full-fledged novel. More importantly, considering that Shenoi Goembab was acutely aware of the need to infuse contemporary literary genres into modern Konkani literature, its discursive format akin to Plato's *Dialogues* or Dryden's *Essay on Dramatic Poetry*, providing various points of view, but finally clinching the argument with a rational and well-illustrated perspective is noteworthy.

Classic poetry of ManoharRai SarDessai

Taking a page out of Shenoi Goembab's objectives, if a poet expressed the soul of his people, it was

Manohar Rai SarDessai. His verse-play *Aiz Re Dholar Padli Badi* (Today the Stick Has Hit the Drum) followed by his most popular collection *Goem Tujya Mogakhatir* (For the Love of You, O Goa) emerges as the expression of an idealistic, optimistic and positively oriented sensibility. In *Aiz Re*, rapturous melody, metrical finesse, dramatic element, narrative design with a string of events dominate as befitting a verse play. However, its inherent allegorical potential elevates this work to a spontaneous expression of the suppressed populace denied any fundamental rights in the Portuguese territory. The portrayal of enslavement of contemporary Goa, Salazar's dictatorial tendencies, curbs on freedom of expression, Goa freedom struggle initiated in 1946 to reach its helm in 1954-55, and the intense realization of the imminent liberation in 1960-61- with all these collective societal contexts, this verse play based on the mythological theme of 'Kamsa-vadha' (slaying of Kamsa) captivatingly unfolds the sublimation of the poet's personal emotions, with alleviation of the societal sufferings and aspirations.

Through the timeless allegory of Kamsa-vadha (slaying of Kamsa at the hands of Lord Krishna), it also endeavours to awaken the society from the passive, emasculated condition by invoking its latent proactive potential or the capacity for resistance to exploitation and repression.

Kelekar's assessment of Aiz Re

In his preface, to the poem Ravindra Kelekar has analysed, the intellectual motivation in *Aiz re* to create social awareness and the nature of the change in the social psyche. Discussing the notion of Avtaar (incarnation) he points out that: "He whom we describe as Avtaar emerges from the lower strata upwards; he is one amongst you and me. The only difference is that his individuality embraces the entire society and the hopes and aspirations of the whole community intensely come to fruition in him~1" (Kelekar, 1961:n.p.). Further, underscoring the allegorical dimension of the poem, Kelekar observes that when Krishna fore-warns: 'Kamsa tujo koroonk dhvams/Vishnoolo aila aunsh' (Kamsa, in order to annihilate you/ here comes the very essence of Vishnu), he is no longer the playful prankster or the conventional cowherd. He represents the voice of the suppressed but awakened society pitting itself against perennial injustice and oppression (ibid).

This analysis underscores the deep-set symbolism, the covert allegorical potential and the formidable thematic core of the poem, and highlight the outstanding place of *Aiz Re* in Konkani poetry due to its intellectual acumen and romantic vibrancy comparable to the best in terms of its poetic, picturesque, semantic and visionary aspects. Varied aspects of poetry operate in this poem exceptionally well; but its descriptive capacity, apt imagery and powerful allegory help the reader to identify his own predicament and understand its 'reality'. Interestingly, the native homespun Konkani diction of SarDessai, rubs shoulder with select, melodious, Sanskritised vocabulary with commendable ease and grace. Given its mythological framework, rich but archaic usage selectively deployed in consonance with the spatio-temporal context of the plot of the verse play, enhances its narrative appeal substantially. For instance, the following description of river Yamuna on whose banks young Krishna grew up: Smit-vadanaa digvasanaa/Chapala-charana mridu-nayana//Hiche deger ramat veti/ Vrija-ramani jala-bharanaa// (Smiling countenanced, space-appareled/ Fast-footed, doe-eyed tender// On her banks gallivanting /The Brij-belles fetch water from yonder//) (See Budkuley, 2012: 82-85).

However, befitting the atmosphere, the societal level of the dramatis personae and in tune with their mental states, the poet also experiments with familiar but impactful diction. For instance, the delusion of 'Krishna-presence' which haunts Kaunsa is expressed thus: Paat Krishna, taat Krishna/Krishna vonota, Krishna daar//Krishna vastr,Krishna haar/Dhample dolle tareey Krishna/Mutthee valleet mhaje mukhaar// (The seat's Krishna, the plate Krishna/ Krishna the wall, Krishna the door//Krishna attire, Krishna the garland/Eyes shut hard even so/ Krishna/ accost me fists rolled//). Any reader familiar with

the consonance of the Konkani words and their rhythm will realize that here the poem touches the zenith of aesthetic experience through melodious exposition of emotion; rather than merely conveying the exact connotation of intended meaning through verbal expression. Thereby, the heightened semantic appeal of these lines takes the reader to an intense *rasa* experience (ibid)

A glance at Goeam Tuja

Some of the poetic qualities aspects of *Aiz Re* can also be re-lived in the reading of *Goeam Tuja*. This too is very sublime, touching and collectively sensitizing poetry. Yet, *Goeam Tuja* relies more on personal experiences unlike *Aiz Re* which are based on social context. No doubt, in *Goeam Tuja* also the representative aspect exists to a certain degree, individual woes and hopes are seen to have been intricately woven into poetry to a large extent, A careful observation will reveal that *Goeam Tuja*...is sheer lyric poetry steeped in subjectivity and nostalgia. Yet, the 'protagonist-self' is neither self-centered nor is it self-effacing; it is to a large extent sublime, universal and accessible. Yet, despite its universality, its field of experience is fundamentally personal. It encompasses the poet's lived experiences and his aspirations and expectations. In spite of this, in several poems the 'self' enlarges itself and speaks on behalf of all; grieves for the sake of common man; and identifies with their woes and suffering. It is a self that bonds with society, upholding the priorities and hopes of that society; and according a much higher status to the social concerns over personal priorities.

That is why, the poet can by pass the established, the prestigious 'vested interests' and embrace the poor and the down-trodden. He can announce to the world with pride: 'Dev mhajo maatyecho/Kunbi zavn shetaant gholpee//Tache baile-bhurgyanvari/Peje ghontaak voll-vollpee//' (My God is of the earth/A Kunbi-like farm hand//And like his wife and children/ Wanting for a porridge bowl//). The poet challenges the establishment: 'Mhurta tumi ghadayaat re/Bhangarachi, vazrachi//Kaale-kitt garbhakudeent/Anik karaa puja tichee// (Make thou an idol anon/ Wrought in gold diamonds too/ And in pitch dark sanctum sanctorum/ Worship it do). He warns the vested interests bluntly: 'Tumcho dev lavn daraan/Choraan bhayaan lipoon baslaa/Minminte pante soreen/Rupyanchya chilaam-mulla//' (Your God behind shut doors/ Afraid of thieves crouches timid//Besides a flickering oil-lamp flame/ Under the jingle of coins hid//) (Mhajo dev 127). Such intense poetry, reminiscent of Rabindranath Tagore's lyricism in his English *Gitanjali*, flows with ease from Manohar Rai's humanistic pen (ibid).

An early forerunner

Another work that deserves mention in this discussion, being the first social novel written in Konkani is Eduardo Bruno de Souza's *Kristanv Ghorabo* (written 1905; publ. 1911). Written on the backdrop of Christian doctrine and values, it provides a realistic picture of the Konkani society although driven with an overt idealism. Matters of common interest such as the corrupted Konkani idiom and the need for standardization of Konkani are significant considering the adverse age in which he wrote. Again, the view that, restraint and strength in one who seeks to usher in a change- whether social or religious- is palpable in the novel. In many ways, this novel is a veritable prototype of the contemporary Konkani novel. But while it is able to create a sense of literary realism, in the absence of a universal vision, it fails to evoke the sense of philosophical realism.

Potential contemporary classics

The first among equals that deserves mention here is a potential future classic is undoubtedly Kelekar's *Mahabharata: Ek Anusarjan* (*Mahabharata: A Trans-creation*; 1985; 1991). For one, it is derived from a classical text. Secondly, it is replete with philosophical realism, over mere literary realism. Issues

pertaining to human destiny, meaning of life and death, timeless values in relation to change-prone customs –these and such other matters find an easy expression in his work without affecting the aesthetics and creative potency of the trans-created text; and without tarnishing the age-old appeal of the Mahabharata tale among the readership.

Born of exhaustive research and thoughtful interpretation, Mahabharata: Ek Anusarjan displays simple, chaste, home-grown Konkani idiom. While Kelekar admits fidelity to Bhandarker's authenticated version, his 'cleansed and scrubbed tale' brooks no irrational or divine aspect of theme or character to go without comment. Conceding that the Mahabharata is a compendium of multiple religious and philosophical strands, Kelekar explain a few in the 'Introduction'; while devoting a detailed discussion to pragyavaad and karmayoga in the Appendices. As such, this lucid re-rendering is as appealing to the lay reader as it is interesting to the erudite.

Realizing the tremendous hold of the epic on the Indian psyche, and aware of his responsibility as an author, Kelekar discusses even those episodes and ideologies, that are extraneous to the authentic version, even while he does not accept them as such. This helps to identify superfluous ideologies concealed in interpolated episodes, and thereby to subvert the hegemony of vested interests. Wherever Kelekar suspects interpolation, he reverts to the verified version, elucidating with great care and evidence why the left out version is unacceptable and unlikely to be authentic. Notably, rational argument analysis is used by him in preferring one interpretation over another, even when the temptation to go with a version for emotional reasons, is great. For instance, Karna's so-called insult by Draupadi for being a Suta-putra (charioteer's son) is frequently exploited by modern writers for its 'dramatic potential. But Kelekar prefers careful, rational analysis of character, context, and dramatis personae to meaty drama and facile sensationalism, howsoever captivating.

However, it is necessary to emphasize here, that Kelkar's rationalism is not devoid of empathy for nature, women and other differently oriented/abled individuals. In fact, his rationality helps re-instate the subaltern to their legitimate positions of power or privilege with regard to gender, caste and race; and subverts the hegemonic ideologies and vested interest through razor-sharp iconoclasm. Thus its claim as a potential classic is indeed high.

Other contemporary potential fictional classics

The novel which created a lasting impact on the Konkani society and its literary landscape has been undoubtedly Pundalik Naik's Achchev (1977). A heart-churning saga of a society's blind sale of soul for lucre, it entails a shocking revelation of how family life yields place to ghetto-existence, marital bliss to ugly concupiscence, ethics to materialism, ecology to environmental disaster, spiritualism and religion to soulless ritual and hollow custom. Enriched with spontaneity of folk-lore and captivating descriptions of natural beauty, the impersonal narrative of Achchev marks the vivid bonding of nature and culture in an idiom that is stunningly poetic yet lucid and gripping.

Damodar Mauzo's Karmelin (1982) bolstered the structure, characterization and visionary insightfulness of the Konkani novel. Choosing a 'fallen' woman a protagonist he redeemed her by endowing her with rare courage and tenacity to surmount the miseries and misfortunes that fell to her lot. This struggle of a solitary woman won the novelist a lot of attention, if not always perceptive praise. It is a noteworthy paradigm of consistent psychological realism marked with humane sympathy that is hard to come by in the Konkani novel. A salient feature of this novel is the portrayal of a Christian society with a minute eye and a fine sensibility.

The second phase of the contemporary Konkani novel begins with Mahabaleshwar Sail's *Kali Ganga* (1990). It marks a salient departure from conventional novel. It is a superlative achievement in characterization and contextualization of theme. It carries with ease the cultural efflorescence of the Konkani agrarian society in the neighbourhood of Karwar in South Kanara region (bordering Goa).

Besides *Kali Ganga* two novellas of Sail, *Aranyakand* and *Adrushta*, deserves special mention here. They fulfill most expectations of a novel such as characterization, plot, clear-cut theme and a authorial vision. The cohesive structures of the novellas are striking. Their subject-matter is refreshingly 'different' and well-contextualized.

However, Sail's paradigmatic milestone is *Yugsaanvar* (2005) which literally means cataclysm. It deserves unstinted commendation for its vast canvass, complex thematic network. True to its semantic implications, the novel probes deep into the socio-political subversion of the Goan society caused by the Portuguese conquest of Goa in the early 16th century and the subsequent religio-cultural schism caused by the inhuman Inquisition brought in by the more intolerant section of the conservative non-native clergy in tandem with an autocratic regime that had taken over at that crucial juncture of Indo-Portuguese history.

With a rare sense of sympathy and insight, the novel portrays an adamantly conservative but non-aggressive society ridden with casteism, self-interest and superstition. "Using anecdotes and legends from history and alluding to mythic patterns of thought and behaviour, the novel revitalizes a 'lost' period of Goan history in a vivid and palpable narrative marked by simplicity of diction, spontaneity of event, vivid depiction, and, clarity of theme and vision. Adopting a largely conventional, indigenous mode of lucid narration, the novel touches rare heights of creative sublimity. In so doing, it compels reader's admiration inspires an unstinted identification with the spatio-temporal context of the novel. In fine *Yugsaanvar* provides a supremely overwhelming aesthetic experience for the reader" (Budkuley, 2012: 144).

Conclusion

Besides the texts discussed above, a host of other writing with distinct subject matter, technique and vision have emerged. The contemporary Konkani writer's hold over form and vision is steadily maturing. A mention must be made here of Mahabaleshwar Sail's *Haavtthan* dealing with the marginal community of potters being uprooted from their traditional culture. In like vein, Damodar Mauzo's *Tsunami Simon* attuned to the marginalization of the fishing community due to mechanized fishing, deserves mention. What mileage these works will cover in terms of being modern classics is hard to predict. But it is possible to deduce that *Sanvsaar Budti* (1930) and *Yugsaanvar* (2005) symbolically represent the century long march of Konkani literature. While its maiden bloom has been *Kristanv Ghorabo* (1911), its timeless 'classic' is *Aiz Re* (1961) with its invocation of an invincible today ushering in a hope-filled tomorrow, despite the irredeemable gloom of yesterday!

Note:

1. This and all other translations in this paper are of this writer, unless otherwise indicated.

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