

# Tribal Imprint on Goa's Cultural Identity: Kunbi-Gawdaization of Goa\*

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## Abstract

Discussions around Goa's unique cultural identity and debates around the need for a special status for the state of Goa within India are not new. Reasons ascribed to this have oscillated between Goa's colonial history, the geography of being nestled in the Western Ghats with a long-indented coastline, the tourism industry and the friendliness of the local people. This article based on an ethnographic study of the Kunbi-Gawda tribal community in Goa explores the tribal contribution to the framing of Goa's cultural identity. Using the tribal icon of dress, namely the *dhentulli* this article illustrates how Kunbi-Gawdaization is the current cultural identity of the State as tribal icons are used in the imaging of Goa.

## Keywords

Tribal, identity, dress, culture, women, Kunbi-Gawdaization

## Introduction: Images of Culture and Identity of Goa

Goa was liberated from colonial rule in 1961 and earned statehood in 1987. Even six decades after liberation, the footprint of Portuguese influence remains etched in popular perception about the culture in Goa. The idea of a 'westernized' Goa has been celebrated by promoters of tourism and in Indian cinema. Some studies on the culture of Goa have used terms such as 'Goa *Dourada*' or Golden Goa and, 'Rome of the East' (Alvares, 2002, p. 206; D'Souza, 2008, p. 259; Perez, 2011, p. 3) to discuss the prevalence of a culture marked by Portuguese and western influences in Goa. According to Routledge (2000, p. 2651), official Goan culture has been represented as the culture of Catholic privileged elite and which is often symbolized by the Portuguese architecture, the food habits, the dress and also the leisured lifestyle. The second perspective on the culture of Goa is that of Goa *Indica*, which emphasizes India's contribution to Goan identity (Ifeka, 1985). There has also been much socio-political debate around Goa's 'unique' identity and the subject of awarding 'special status' to Goa (Kamat, 2014; Newman, 1988).

Ironically, in all discussions about culture and identity in Goa, the tribal voice and aspects of tribal culture have been ignored. Yet, coffee table books, calendars and brochures, particularly those selling

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tourism in Goa, use images that include one of the following three tribal cultural icons: women dressed in a *dhentulli* (the red or blue checked saree worn till the knees, which is popularly yet incorrectly called the *Kunbi* saree), dances such as *fugdi*, *gumttacho nach*, *dhalo* or images of men playing the *gummot* (the tribal percussion instrument made from stretching a skin over a terracotta pot).

In more recent times, there has not been a single Carnival Parade or Goa float for the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi, tourism brochure or coffee table book on Goa that has not included at least one dance, image of a woman in a *dhentulli* or some other image of a cultural icon of the tribal community. Folk dance competitions, entertainment in hotels and on cruises down the Mandovi river to highlight Goan culture, include tribal music, dance and dress. The famous cartoonist Mario Miranda features cartoon images of Kunbi-Gawda community in numerous illustrations of village life in Goa. In 2010, a well-known fashion designer from Goa, Wendell Rodricks initiated a project that aimed at reviving the weaving of the 'Kunbi' saree (another word for the *dhentulli*) which had fallen into extinction. This project took a prominent position at a national-level fashion programme: the Wills Lifestyle Indian Fashion Week held in 2010, in which the Super Model Lisa Ray was seen modelling the revived *dhentulli*. The Serendipity Arts Festival (SAF) in Goa in 2016, 2017 and 2018 had exhibits that showcased tribal cultural icons. In 2016 an exhibition titled 'Ten Histories: Goan Costumes' was included in the SAF. This featured an exhibition of the designer Wendell Rodricks' new avatar of the *dhentulli* displayed alongside a sample of the traditional *dhentulli* which was taken on loan from Advocate John Fernandes from Quepem who is a member of the Gawda tribal community from Quepem. An Art Gallery in Loutolim Goa (Big Foot) displayed 'Kunbi sarees' accompanied by a sketch showing how to wear the saree. Further, the souvenir for the 48th International Film Festival of India (IFFI, 2017) was a shoulder bag made from *dhentulli*. Today in 2022, many others have attempted the revival of the Kunbi saree and the traditional weaving, such as the project of Goa Sudharop and designer Verma D'Mello in Orlim, Benaulim, Goa. This is just a sample of the numerous instances when tribal cultural icons are used in the imaging of Goan identity.

This article is based on an ethnographic study that was conducted between 2015 and 2017 in the villages of Quepem, Velim, Verna and Nuvem in South Goa among the Kunbi-Gawda community. Data were collected from the community members especially women and also men through personal interaction, focused group discussions, case studies and unstructured interviews. A documentation of the instances when tribal cultural icons were used to showcase Goa's culture was begun in 2013 and is ongoing.

## Tribes and Politics

Is the concept of 'tribe' in India, a social, administrative or political category? What does it mean when we talk of a community as the original inhabitants, aboriginal or primitive? Elements of essentialism and discrimination are underwritten in such definitions. Whether or not a community was considered a tribal one by the colonizer's was determined by how 'civilized' or 'uncivilized' they considered that community to be and the measure of civilization was the proximity of that tribal community to caste Hindu rituals and socio-cultural practices (Pati & Indian Council of Historical Research, 2011, pp. 3–4). The same author further stated that the descriptive accounts of tribal culture documented by the colonial officials and anthropologists were based on their understanding and their relationship with 'Brahminical' traditions (Pati & Indian Council of Historical Research, 2011, pp. 3–4). The term tribe evolved with every Census that was conducted. In 1881 the Census reported about tribes using the term 'forest tribes' and in 1901 and 1911 the Census-defined tribes as 'animists' and 'primitive tribes' (Singh, 2011, p. 73).

This label was subsequently replaced with the term ‘Scheduled tribes’ in 1936 (Singh, 2011, p. 73). Scheduled tribes have also been referred to as aboriginals (Ghurye, 1943, 1963) and as backward Hindus who had not yet been assimilated into mainstream Hindu society (Venugopal, 1993, p. 4). Gautam (2016) argued that tribals converted to sects such as Buddhism, Shaivism and Jainism that did not discriminate on the basis of caste and there were no question of being ‘backward Hindus’. Xaxa (1999a, p. 3590) defining indigenous people argued that they are those who had been dwelling in the said country even before colonization, but who have been marginalized with the advent of colonization. Indigenous people, according to Xaxa, have their own social, cultural, economic and legal institutions which set them apart from the rest of the society (Xaxa, 1999a, p. 3590), Schendel (2015, p. 21) lists six identifying characteristics used by colonizers to identify communities as ‘tribal’, namely means of subsistence, level of technology, remoteness of dwelling, absence of a written script, isolation from the larger society and self-sufficiency. Chaudhury (2015, p. 158) further adds a distinct belief system, folklore and dialect to Schendel’s list of six characteristic features of tribes. The official criteria used by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (Government of India [GoI], 2002) to consider a community as a Scheduled Tribe include; distinctive cultural practices; indications of primitive traits; geographical isolation; shyness and lack of contact with the community at large and backwardness. Interestingly however this criterion is not articulated in the Constitution but has become a well-established criterion for categorizing communities as Scheduled Tribe.

The labelling of a community as ‘tribe’ or ‘Scheduled Tribe’ by the ‘other’ is in itself problematic. Further, the criteria used to define this label for a community are based on a narrow understanding of the realities of that community. Often this understanding is based on stereotypes about the community and this stereotyping has consequences for members of that community. They may not necessarily fit in or even identify with that imposed branding and categorization. When the labels are changed, the community concerned has no role to play in that change as also with the label. Xaxa (1999b, p. 1524) recommends the use of the terms such as communities or *janas* instead of ‘tribe’. Ironically in India, ‘tribe’ has been confused with ‘caste’ as the proof of one’s tribal status is a ‘Caste Certificate’. According to Article 342 of the Indian Constitution (GoI 1949) the President of India has the power to notify communities or even parts of the communities as Scheduled Tribes in any State or even Union Territories. This power is conferred after consultation with the Governor (Xaxa, 1999b, p. 1524).

Despite all the varied definitions and identifying features discussed by scholars, all underwrite essentialist elements that might be blinded about the intrinsic marginalization and discrimination even while making tribes seem exotic. The term ‘Sanskritization’ (Srinivas, 1952) is used to discuss the influence of hegemonic traditions that had Sanskritic Hindu roots and had imprinted on the culture of minority communities due to the dominant nature of those influences. Fuchs (1983, p. 265) argues that there are some more economically advanced tribes that have adopted Hindu practices and customs, but this has not impacted their social positioning and a status-quo is maintained in their social hierarchy.

Our experience in the state of Goa is quite the opposite. We see icons of tribal culture that belong originally to the Kunbi-Gawda community being used in the representation of Goan culture in general, thereby resulting in what we have termed as the ‘Kunbi-Gawdaization’ of Goa’s cultural identity.

### *Socio-politics of Tribalness in Goa*

Goa was colonized in 1510 and remained a Portuguese colony for 451 years till liberation in 1961 and became the smallest state of India in 1987. During the Portuguese colonization of Goa, many people from the tribal communities converted to Christianity hoping to benefit economically from conversion (Desouza, 2000). Parobo (2015, p. 66), argues that,

Christianity opened economic prospects for the catholic lower caste. Many lower caste who may have converted for social reasons discovered that the extent of such mobility was not very great. They remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy and despite losing their pollution found that the church itself was becoming a medium to express caste hierarchy.

In 1968, the following five communities were listed as tribes of Goa, Daman & Diu, namely Mang, Mahyavanshi (Vankar), Mahar, Chambar and Bhangi (Hadi) (GoI, 1968). This was subsequently modified by 'Goa, Daman and Diu reorganization Act' (Government of Goa [GoG], 1987) which listed the following eight communities as Scheduled Tribes of Goa to include Velip, Gawda, Kunbi, Varti, Siddi (Nayaka), Dhodia, Dubla (Halpati) and Naikda (Talavia), which were included in Part 19 of the Schedule to the Constitution. This list was later modified and only three communities, namely (a) Kunbi, (b) Gawda and (c) Velip, were listed as Schedule Tribes (STs) of Goa (GoI, 2002). Only Kunbi, Gawda and Velip communities continue to exist on the current list of Scheduled Tribes of Goa. There exists, however, a community known as the *Dhangar* community that has been voicing a demand to be included on the list of Scheduled Tribes but who have not been successful in getting included on this list.

Interestingly, Kunbis and Gawdas often consider themselves to be one community. The titles 'Kunbi' and 'Gawda' are often used interchangeably. Some might call themselves both Kunbi and Gawda, using the terms Kunbi-Gawda or Gawda-Kunbi to refer to themselves. Gomes (2008, p. 307) argued that Kunbis also used the terms Gauda, Velip, Gaonkar/Gaunkar and Gouly to identify themselves.

During Portuguese colonization many sections of the tribal community in Goa converted to Christianity (Desouza, 2000). In 1928, through the *Shuddhi* or *Shuddhikaran* movement (Desouza, 2000), a large number of people from the tribal community who had earlier converted to Christianity, now chose to convert to Hinduism. These new converts are called Nav-Hindu-Gawda (Desouza, 2000). Religion of the tribal community is often used to distinguish between Kunbi and Gawda communities. Those of the '*Gavdi*' community that have been converted to Christianity are often referred to as 'Kunbi' (Gomes, 1987, p. 79; Shirodkar, 2015). Interestingly, despite conversion to Hinduism, a family might continue using their Christian names and might interchangeably use the terms 'Kunbi-Gawda' or 'Gawda-Kunbi' to refer to themselves. Gawda, Kunbi and Velip are considered to be one Adivasi community of Goa. Albuquerque (1989, p. 22) stated that Gawdas are also referred to as Kunbis.

The Inquisition in Goa which started in the year 1560, instituted several bans on the perpetuation of customs and traditions that were considered to be contrary to the missionary agenda (Desouza, 2000). Traditional dances as well as the dress (*dhentulli*) were prohibited to those who chose to convert to Christianity. However, despite political decrees and bans on traditions and rituals imposed during the inquisition, Christian Gawda and Kunbis who accepted Christianity continued some of their practices and traditions (Angle, 1994, pp. 42–43; Barbosa, 2012; Da Silva Gracias, 1994, p. 37; Desouza, 2000; Emma, 2002, pp. 53, 108; Mascarenhas, 1989, pp. 84–85; Priolkar, 2008; Robinson, 1998, 2000, pp. 289–301, 2004, pp. 186–187; Shirodkar, 1997, pp. 36–37; Xavier, 2010, pp. 145–148).

## Dress and Cultural Identity

According to Battezzato (1999, p. 343), 'Every ethnic group uses representations of clothing as a means of constructing its identity'. According to Woodhouse (1989), clothing can be used to signify occupation, social setting, social status, sex and gender. Becker (2006, p. 42) argued that women both create and wear the artistic symbols of that community's identity, implying that, often the community culture is determined by making the objectified and adorned female body a symbolic representation of that community. Durham (1999) also illustrates this in her study of South African women's dress and states

that it is women who bear the burden of ethnic representation and perpetuation of tradition. Women are always linked to cultural heritage (Lakshmi, 1997, p. 2953).

Discussing dress and the feminine body, Choudhury Lahiri and Bandyopadhyay (2012, p. 20) state that dress has been an important aspect of society. It not only characterizes our evolution as 'cultured' human beings but in different contexts, it serves as a signifier of individual self-expression, cultural diversity and national identity.

## The Dhentulli

There is a unique style of draping the *dhentulli* (traditional dress of tribal women in Goa) adopted by the Kunbi-Gawda women. The *dhentulli* (also referred to as *kapod*, *denthli* or *denttli*) is very similar to a saree, except that it does not end at the ankles but at the knees of a woman dressed in it. Before 1961, the *dhentulli* was worn without a blouse (*choli*) and the flowing end of the saree (*pallu*) would cover the breasts of the woman wearing it. The *pallu* was tied on the right shoulder in a knot made with the fabric (Da Silva Gracias, 1994, p. 34; Fernandes & Fernandes, 2014, p. 26; Khedekar, 2010; Mitragotri, 1999). The *dhentulli*, which is 9 yards in length was traditionally made of 100% cotton. Today one can purchase a *dhentulli* which is a nylon and cotton mixed fabric. Some tribal women have preserved old *dhentullis* which are used for special occasions, many however have hidden their *dhentullis* or have got rid of them completely as they see this dress as a mark of discrimination. The traditional *dhentulli* had a maroon border and the checkered saree came primarily in just three colours: red, blue and black. Today the *dhentulli* is popularly known as Kunbi saree and it is worn by community members when they are performing their traditional dance which is popularly known as Kunbi dance. A thin white towel is usually tied around the waist while dancing or sometimes worn around the neck when they are not dancing.

The *dhentulli* is an icon of culture of the tribal community intrinsically connected to the lives of Kunbi-Gawda women. Its survival to this day is a symbol of women's agency. It is this cultural icon of the Kunbi-Gawda community that has been used by the state tourism department, the tourism industry and even by the society in general to represent the culture of Goa.

## Iconic Dhentulli or Symbol of Discrimination

The *dhentulli* holds different meanings to different people from within the tribal community and has held different meanings to those who are from outside the community. To some, the *dhentulli* symbolizes 'backwardness', while to others it might symbolize ethnicity. The subordination and discrimination experienced by tribal communities are in no small part owing to the portrayal of the bodies of women particularly from those communities that are less privileged, as polluting and impure (Sabala & Gopal, 2010). Despite the *dhentulli* being a symbol that has been iconic of Kunbi-Gawda culture to the wider society, for some women belonging to the Kunbi-Gawda community, the *dhentulli* has been the symbol by which they have been identified and targeted for discrimination and the outcome has been that many within the community have stopped wearing this traditional attire. Some women have been compelled by their children who are now attending school and college to stop wearing the *dhentulli* because the children do not want to be identified as Kunbi-Gawda by their peers. The younger generation views the *dhentulli* as home attire, backward and traditional. However, for carnival parades dance performances at the time of marriage and other cultural festivals, stage

performances and other occasions, the *dhentulli* is used as a symbol of cultural identity. The use of the *dhentulli* has been important in the imaging of culture and identity of Goa by the 'other'. Women from the Kunbi-Gawda community do not object to the use of the *dhentulli* by people from outside their community. To most tribal women, it is the person wearing the *dhentulli* that will determine the social significance of this cultural icon. And there is an underlying hope that this might change the social status of the Kunbi-Gawda community. This experience of the Kunbi-Gawda women is similar to that of the Mayan community in Guatemala (Macleod, 2004). The authors discuss how the traditional attire of the Mayan community is used by the tourism industry resulting in the enhancement of weaving and indigenous handicrafts and has also a positive impact on the status of the community which was earlier discriminated against. However, there is within the Kunbi-Gawda community some resistance to the commercialization of the use of the *dhentulli* when the profits of this commercial use are not accruing to the community to which the *dhentulli* belongs.

### The Dhentulli Today

Twigg (2009, p. 1) argues that 'clothes display, express and shape identity, imbuing it with a directly material reality'. The use of the *dhentulli* by women from the tribal community has diminished. Young married and unmarried women do not wear the *dhentulli* and the cost of the cotton *dhentulli* today has contributed to this in no small way. To make the *dhentulli* more affordable the traditional cotton has been replaced by synthetic fabrics. Some elderly tribal women have preserved the traditional cotton *dhentulli* also referred to as '*kapod*' and have them locked away in steel or wooden trunks for auspicious occasions, for school children as well as other women who perform Kunbi-Gawda dances and for display during Tribal Festivals. Today there are only a few women from the community who wear the *dhentulli* and even when it is worn, most use it with a *choli* or blouse, while the traditional way of wearing the *dhentulli* was without one. Some older women have preserved the *dhentulli* which they also call as *kapod*. For those who treat the *dhentulli* as precious, it is done to preserve their identity as '*Nizachim Gawdi*' or original inhabitants.

The *dhentulli* as it exists today in Goa is of three kinds:

1. The traditional, pure cotton *dhentulli* which has been preserved by members of the community and often on display at tribal festivals.
2. The *dhentulli* which is made of synthetic fabric and is in big demand during the carnival, is less than one-tenth the price of the cotton *dhentulli*.
3. The *dhentulli* which has been revived by the fashion industry.

On 26 April 2017 under the banner of Goa Adivasi Parampara (GAP), a programme titled 'Tracing the History and Heritage of Goan Adivasi Sarees' was held at Goa Sanskruti Bhavan. A Facebook group by GAP was also started which showcases celebrities such as Priyanka Gandhi and Smriti Irani wearing the revived *dhentulli* but worn like a saree. Attempts have been made to get a Geographical Indication for the *dhentulli* and an intellectual property right of Goa.

### Kunbi-Gawdaization of Goa

Several theorists have argued that there is cultural domination by the ruling elite (Haslett, 2000, p. 52; Milner & Browitt, 2003, p. 60; Rojek, 2007, p. 6; Smith, 2002, p. 7) and that the culture of 'the other' is



considered to be 'inferior'. Pierre Bourdieu and Theodor Adorno discuss the role that culture plays in society to legitimize inequality as culture is most often determined by the dominant class that presumes superiority in its imposition on the rest of society (Gartman, 2012, p. 42). Newman (2019, pp. 41–42), specifically discussing the culture of Goa, states that culture of the privileged castes, such as Brahmins and Kshatriyas, is often idealized by communities that are less privileged. The culture of the rural communities is further labelled as folk culture, implying a subordinate status to their culture. Contrary to these positions, we find that cultural icons of the Kunbi-Gawda community, a people that are largely landless labourers are the icons used to mark the cultural identity of Goa.

Despite the repressive regime during the colonial rule in Goa (Desouza, 2000) that made efforts to prohibit tribal cultural practices, the tribal community, irrespective of their religion have retained their cultural symbols, retained cultural forms such as the dress which is now a marker of Goan culture. Pereira argues that 'the development of the tourism industry facilitated the establishment of folklore groups and traditional dances and music was objectified as genuine culture and a sign of the "Gauddes" and Goa's authenticity' (Pereira, 2014, p. 99). While the use of cultural icons of the Kunbi-Gawda community has predominantly been used by the tourism industry in its promotion of the culture of Goa, seldom is this important role played by Kunbi-Gawda dress, dance and song acknowledged in the cultural imaging of Goa.

Although the Kunbi-Gawda community today are involved in multiple activities and professions, in earlier times, they were largely engaged in agricultural activities. To many members of this community farming tools and other aspects related to agriculture are what they consider to be icons of their culture. However, to others, it is the Kunbi-Gawda dress and dance forms that have been more popular markers of tribal identity in Goa. The cultural idiom of the Kunbi-Gawda dress, namely the *dhentulli* has been used to demonstrate the culture of Goa without necessarily ascribing these idioms to the Kunbi-Gawda community. The use of this Kunbi-Gawda icon, namely the *dhentulli* in imaging the culture of Goa, is evidenced in illustrated non-academic books on Goa, in local entertainment for tourists, and in tourism advertisement brochures on Goa, calendars and other media.

We have demonstrated through this article how the culture of the Kunbi-Gawda community, who have a history of marginalization, exploitation and subordination has played an important role in the cultural identity formation of the State of Goa. Cultural symbols and icons of the Kunbi-Gawda community have played an important role in the imaging of the culture of Goa and the Kunbi-Gawdaization of Goa cannot be denied. Guru (2012, p. 28) recommended novel theoretical focus that will 'remove the cultural hierarchies that tend to divide social science practice into theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras'. The acknowledgement of 'Kunbi-Gawdaization' or the contribution of the tribal icons in framing the identity of Goa will be a giant step in that direction.

There are many reasons this article is significant. First, there is not much literature on the Kunbi-Gawda community and even less is known about the origins of the cultural idioms that are used in the portrayal of Goan culture. Even when images of Kunbi-Gawda dance, dress and songs are used to talk about the culture of Goa rarely are these idioms ascribed to the Kunbi-Gawda community. Using the example of the *dhentulli* which is a part of the traditional way of life of the tribal community in Goa, we have tried to shatter some myths about the need for Sanskritization and Hinduization for minority communities to improve their standing in society. The process of Kunbi-Gawdaization of Goa's cultural identity has illustrated that it is possible for majority communities to turn to cultural icons of minority groups to create a new State identity. While Goa has been through the phase of Goa Dourado and Goa Indica, in the present day it is the phase of Kunbi-Gawdaization of Goa.

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