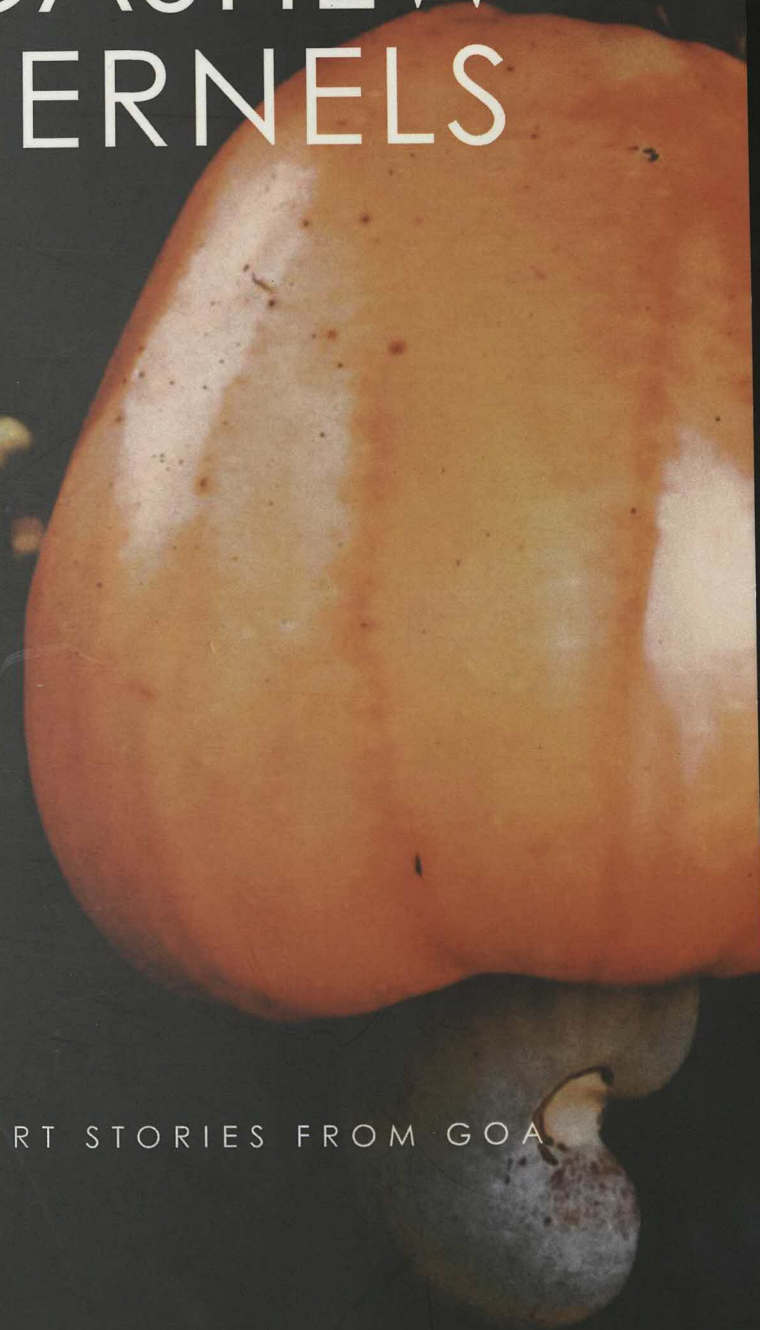


CASHEW KERNELS



SHORT STORIES FROM GOA

Cashew Kernels
Short Stories from Goa

Goa 1556 FUNDAÇÃO
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SCARLET AVA FERNANDES

OFF NH 66, an orange-capped milestone read 'Chinchelim: 2 km'. Its name was a major giveaway; it was probably teeming with tangy *Tamarindus indica* trees at some point. Besides the telling suffix *-lim* in its name, much implied that Chinchelim was a typical Goan village. Or so it seemed. Beyond its confines, however, no one would ever imagine it harboured a secret.

Something was amiss that afternoon. The Church bell had just rung the Angelus at noon. Everybody scurried, like remote-controlled bees to a honey pot, along the trodden dirt trail toward an assortment of rustic houses. The odour of fresh cow dung greeted one's nostrils in the alleyway between dwellings that led to a courtyard, the broomstick swirls still visible in the almost dry dung. Some had sprinted to the courtyard with the *Tulsi* plant in the terracotta *Vrindavan* before the not-so-agile ones. A few stood, others squatted, yet others leaned on whatever could support their tired vertebrae. Anxiety writ on their faces, the individuals gathered spoke in hushed tones, huddled together as if seeking comfort in numbers before the cobalt blue door.

The clanging of the chain door latch jolted the people in the courtyard out of their reverie. The double door creaked open on the inside, and a young man appeared, ducking to avoid the low wooden lintel as he emerged to become an entire person. The tins hung atop the *chikoo* tree to deter bats in the night clanked in the breeze as if to announce some breaking news broadcast. Clad in a *pyjama-kurta*, he reached for

the plaid cotton towel draped on his shoulder to dab the sweat upon his brow. He stood before his brethren, nodding his head to greet those he made eye contact with. A woman meanwhile appeared from behind the door. Finally acknowledging the boon bestowed upon him, he smiled. The throng exulted: "Vaidya! Vaidya!" They meant doctor and healer.

* * *

Chinchelim was mainly agrarian. A few decades ago, amidst the farmers lived Hari and Gita, a barren couple who yearned for the curse to break. And break it did, several monsoons later, when they had Ayush, which in their tongue meant 'blessed with a long life'.

Up each morning before the rooster crowed, the couple shod in calluses left to toil in the fields. Burdened with farm tools, their mammoth angular silhouette led the procession, seldom with a bullock but always with goats. Gita balanced a bundle of millet *rotison* her head as she trod on with a sleeping Ayush straddled to her chest, swaddled in a contraption made from a cotton sari. Life was routine but unruffled.

As days turned into weeks and weeks into months, the boy took his first steps beneath the canopy of a sprawling banyan tree where he passed most of his daylight hours. With few children to play with amidst the profuse flora and fauna, Ayush became a zoophile, with petite creatures literally eating out of his hands. Of all the animals, though, Ayush had an inexplicable bond with the mongoose family and busied himself for hours on end in their company. The sound of Ayush's laughter often confirmed that the herpestids were close. Mongooses are not solitary, so the whole gang turned up whenever they did visit, much to Ayush's delight. A more prominent gang translated to power in their world, with safety in numbers. Ayush amused himself while these curious tawny grey grizzled creatures sourced food: millipedes, termites, tortoise ants, beetles and snake eggs, of course.

An inquisitive child, Ayush had many queries about anything and everything, including his adorable chums, much to the amusement of his father, Hari, who patiently answered them all. Before bedtime, Ayush pulled out a string of interrogatives from his hat.

"Baba...?" He began each question, his intonation climaxing in a high pitch. Ayush was horrified to learn that people hunted mongooses for their fur to make brushes. Forlorn, he cried himself to sleep that night, although thankful that at least the larger predators let them be since their meat tasted disgusting.

Since the mongooses lived in burrows near the rice paddies, Ayush's parents knew the area was safe from serpents, for these swift creatures are their natural enemies, using alarm calls to warn others of any danger. Gita habitually left the goats to forage atop the hillock for the day. One day, she failed to notice the mongooses weren't around and, in her absence, Ayush had strayed to a nearby thicket. As a child's shriek tore through the tranquillity, Gita wailed... AYUSH!... rushing to where she could see him. Numbed, Gita was but a statuette with her arm outstretched as she helplessly watched a reptile slither away from her fallen child. Somehow the child's cries made the mongooses return, perhaps too late. They could not stop the attack, but the dominant female mongoose sniffed out the hiding snake and lunged at it. In the ensuing struggle, the snake succumbed, but not before digging its fangs into her flesh and the unfortunate mongoose, too, lay motionless.

Meanwhile, when Gita came out of her daze, she saw a blanket of mongooses crowding around her child but could not perceive what they were up to. She hollered across the fields to Hari and dashed to the scene to find the agitated mongooses pacing around the inert boy looking like porcupines with their coarse hair standing erect. As they parted, Gita stifled a scream. She saw blood... a lot of it! Some on the lad and some on the mongooses, too. Had the stupid beasts attacked

her child after the snake had nipped him? Her world was spinning. As Hari rushed in, panting, he braced her fall and they dropped to the ground in grief. AYUSH! They shrieked in unison. Had they just lost their child? Just then, Ayush began to stir. They stared in disbelief. At about the time Ayush became fully conscious, the female mongoose, too, was up and about. Hari hastily unwound the cloth wrapped around his head and wiped the blood off Ayush. Only then did he understand the resourcefulness and loyalty of the herpestids. He couldn't help but ponder... Had they somehow transferred their blood, known to contain a glycoprotein that neutralises snake venom, to Ayush to save him?

Word spread fast in the community. Some saw the child as fortunate, others as cursed. A couple of monsoons later, when Ayush was old enough to attend the village parochial school, Hari and Gita escorted him on his first day. One of the older boys mocked them.

"Oh look, Man-goose has brought his *nana-nani* along!"

A late child, Ayush often faced ridicule of this sort but was unfazed by the unkind greeting. He was eager to learn well, make his parents proud and support them as they got older. Every morning, clad in khaki, he hopped, skipped and ran along the *bunds* from his home to the meandering river of tar he followed to school, his hand-sewn cloth bag, equipped with slate and chalk, strapped across his torso. On that stretch, he encountered creatures that amazed him: glittering tortoise beetles, damselflies and dragonflies, droopy-eyed frogs and warty toads and birds that pirouetted mid-air for him. He made halts only to blow air into the seasonal papery *chirput* and listen for the pop when it hit his forehead or to pick wildflowers for his teacher to embellish her *shendó*. Some days, the mongooses, too, took the parallel path, racing through the fields. Ayush played hide and seek on those occasions, picking out their light rust-coloured muzzles through the rustling foliage. However, when he reached the asphalt road, they stopped, turning around to

head back to their safe haven only when they lost sight of him.

Every year in July-August on *Naga Panchami*, the Hindu villagers sought divine protection from snakes. It was binding to keep a fast and not plough the Earth to avoid harming the snakes. As part of the festivities, worshipers bathed a clay serpent with milk, applied *akshat*, *kumkum*, *haldi* and *chandan* on it, then offered flowers, *dhoop* and food to the deity. Each year, the festival for Hari and Gita was a reminder of how close they had come to losing Ayush.

Mongoosees have a lifespan of about ten years in the wild. The dominant female mongoose passed on her leadership role to the next generation and this one to the one after her.

Ayush too, progressed to a higher class each year and to a bicycle, although second-hand.

The entire village of Chinchelim envisioned Ayush as a snake venom antidote, yet no one risked broaching the topic. One fine day, when Ayush was in his late teens, a venomous snake bit a man. Since the government hospital was far away, the villagers rushed to Ayush's house, begging him to do something. As Ayush was unmoved by them, an elderly woman stepped forward and reminded him of his childhood encounter... as if he hadn't heard enough versions of that narrative!

"But... What can I do?" he frowned, flailing his arms, "I do want to be a medic someday, not a quack!" Ayush could not fathom how he could possibly walk on water. He jerked himself free from the woman's grasp tugging at his sleeve and stormed out of there. In the present, the most appropriate strategy he could think of was to merely walk away. Later, he learnt the man had succumbed at the Cottage hospital. A sadness gnawed at his thoughts. "Whoever goes to that hospice never makes it back alive anyway," he thought, in an attempt to water down his remorse. Wherever Ayush went, following that impasse, he noticed

people glancing his way and murmuring or, worse, imagined they did. Hari and Geeta were the proudest parents when Ayush, a first-generation learner, completed his education. Eternally gravitating toward the medical line, he qualified as a nurse at the nearest Institute as he didn't make the cut to get into Goa Medical College. Not long after, when a doctor moved into the village and set up a clinic at his home, Ayush began his first job there. However, his otherness preceded him, and the General Practitioner kept an eye on Ayush; he was pleased to note that his trainee nurse was as efficient as they come. Bizarre... he did notice that the lad hovered around the only computer with internet access. It was time for the doctor to play detective.

One late afternoon, Ayush was at the computer and, when all the patients had left, the physician sent him out on an errand. Unaware of his boss's intent, Ayush minimised the window and left, planning to resume whatever he was doing once he got back. The doctor swiftly stepped in and clicked the mouse to maximise the window. A page from the Guardian popped up. Next, he scrolled through the browsing history and opened a National Geographic webpage. Evidently, one common thread running through all the texts that Ayush had been reading was snake venom! Ayush had highlighted certain portions of the texts in yellow, which made speed-reading easy. The physician quickly scooted, leaving no trace of his snooping. He thought it prudent, nevertheless, not to confer with Ayush yet, but it left him preoccupied. His suspicions were confirmed: Ayush was driven to develop anti-venom, possibly a human-derived one. The doctor began comprehending Ayush's perspective and decided to mentor his ward. Well, if you can't beat them, join them!

At the end of that week, when the rest of the staff had left, Ayush too was about to head home.

"Ayush," the physician beckoned with a hand gesture, "do you have some

time to spare? Come this way!" Perplexed, Ayush placed his helmet on the table and followed his boss to the room he had stepped into at the far end of the corridor. He peered through the door left ajar and sauntered inside. He had never been to this part of the building. The clinic was, after all, located within the doctor's residential bungalow. He would be overstepping his boundaries if he did.

The doctor had his arm outstretched and dangled several keys from his fingers.

"This, Ayush, is your new laboratory," he said, handing him the keys. "I know what you've been researching. I'm here to help make your dream a reality."

Overcome by amazement and exhilaration, Ayush began to stutter. "Sometimes snakebite victims die anyway because their bodies reject anti-venom taken from horses. Snakebite envenoming causes significant human deaths, especially in remote agricultural areas where getting a victim to a medical facility is as problematic as storing anti-venom under refrigeration."

The doctor then handed him a sleek box. "Open it," he urged, placing the box on Ayush's palm. Ayush opened the clasp. Inside was a snakebite first-aid kit he could slip into his pocket to carry wherever he went. As his parents had taught him, Ayush bent over and touched the doctor's feet as a gesture of respect and to seek his blessings.

The pre-monsoon showers arrived early the following year and, along with it, the smell of petrichor. Ayush loved the pleasant earthy scent of rain falling on very dry soil. But for Gita, pre-monsoon showers reminded her that the monsoons were round the corner, and the alarm went off to spring clean the house and ready it for the monsoon months. Owing to her advancing arthritis, she wasn't too productive anymore but delegated the heavy work to Ayush while she potted around. Dur-

ing one such decluttering session, Gita discovered a stash of disposable syringes among his belongings. Worried that Ayush was involved in some addiction, she turned hysterical, imagining the worst. "You do have much explaining to do, Ayush," she confronted him, holding up the pouch of syringes.

"Calm down, *ma*, please. You're overreacting! It's not what you think," he reassured her, putting his arm around her shoulder. "You know well, *ma*, I wouldn't do anything of the sort," he said, playfully pinching her chin.

A few days later, a woman plastered her courtyard with cow dung and headed out into the woods to pick firewood, a routine day for her. Suddenly she felt a sharp, stinging pain in her left foot. A snake had bitten her. She reached home and collapsed in pain. Her husband rushed to where Hari lived, begging him to convince Ayush to do something. But this time round, Ayush needed no convincing whatsoever. He bolted to the woman's hut just a hundred metres away as fast as his legs could carry him and shut the door behind him. Soon, a restless crowd had gathered in the courtyard. Ayush emerged after about half an hour, sweat upon his brow. The woman appeared from behind the door, free of the snake venom.

The crowd exulted: "Vaidya! Vaidya!" He was, for them, doctor and healer.

Glossary

Tulsi (many Indian languages): Holy Basil.

Vrindavan (many Indian languages): A raised cuboid stone structure in which the *Tulsi* plant is grown in front of Hindu homes.

Chikoo (many Indian languages): The sweet tropical Sapota fruit.

Pyjama (many Indian languages): A loose-fitting trouser worn by men and women.

Kurta (many Indian languages): A long top shirt worn by men and women.

Roti (many Indian languages): Flatbread.

Baba (many Indian languages): Father.

Nana-nani (many Indian languages): Grandfather-grandmother.

Bund (many Indian languages): A dyke; a long wall or embankment built to prevent flooding from a river or sea.

Chirput (Konkani): Wild caped gooseberries.

Shendó (Konkani): Hair bun.

Naga Panchami (many Indian languages): Hindu festival that worships snakes.

Akshat (many Indian languages): Unbroken and uncooked rice grains.

Kumkum (many Indian languages): Vermillion powder.

Haldi (many Indian languages): Turmeric powder.

Chandan (many Indian languages): Sandalwood powder.

Dhoop (many Indian languages): Incense.

Ma (many Indian languages): Mother.