
Devchar: The Supernatural Entity of Goa**Dr. Biula V. Pereira**

Associate Professor

Department of Sociology,

Fr. Agnel College of Arts and Commerce

Pilar, Goa, India.

Abstract

A study of the socio-cultural life of Goa cannot be complete without exploring the concept of *Devchar*. A number of Goans are known for their ubiquitous acceptance of the belief in the existence of certain spirits or entities. The most prominent of such is the belief in a supernatural entity popularly known as *Devchar*. He is accredited as a guardian spirit and is characterized as helpful and protective. Irrespective of religion, caste and community there exists a strong belief in the existence of the *Devchar*. As per the understanding of many Goans, especially the Hindus, the word *Devchar* is an amalgamation of two words, *Dev* meaning God and *char* meaning emissary. As an entity the *Devchar* acts as an emissary and works on behalf of the divine using his own supernatural powers. The present study aims to situate the *Devchar* in the Goan socio-cultural milieu. The beliefs and rituals associated with the *Devchar* have also been highlighted. The present study attempts to understand the role and influence of the *Devchar* in the life of the Goan Community.

Key Words: *Devchar*, Goan religious beliefs, supernatural entity in Goa

I. Introduction

Goa is historically known as a spiritual place. The beliefs and ideas which are outside the scope of the human intellect are often connected to a deity by the people of Goa, questions are placed before the deity and answers are requested from the deity. The *Bhatt* or Hindu priest also recommends the ritualistic offering of *soro* (Alcohol) or *sur ronth* (Toddy and Leavened Bread) to the *Devchar*.

The State of Goa has many temples, churches as well as other religious structures like *ghumtis* or small structures/spots of worship. Many Catholic families of Goa also consult the

Hindu priest(*Bhatt*) and visit the temple for a divine sign also known as *prasad pakkli*. Even though conversions took place five centuries ago in Goa, some Hindu practices still exist among the Catholics.

A number of religious beliefs exist among the people of Goa, particularly in the villages. For centuries these have been continued through certain traditions. The performers of these practices are themselves not aware of the reason behind these rituals. People in the villages of Goa have some unusual and astounding ideas when it comes to religious practices. A number of these practices are strongly rooted within the figure of the *Devchar*.

Many Goans have a strong belief in supernatural powers or entities. This can be seen in the beliefs related to the *Devchar*. However, this supernatural entity is never addressed as *Devchar*. People have a fear of referring to him directly with the term *Devchar* and therefore he is often referred to euphemistically as *Zaryavoilo*, *Talyantlo*, *Bandavoilo* and *Zageavoilo* all of which refer to the presumed dwelling place of the *Devchar*. A number of Goans, especially from the villages, prefer calling him *zantelo* which means elderly male in the native language. Many also prefer calling him *Rakhandar* which literally translates to protector. These terms in the native language also indicate that this entity is a male figure.

Whatever people wish to call him, Goan folk through the ages have believed in the existence of the *Devchar*. In Goan folk culture the *Devchar* is venerated publicly, especially by the Hindus. They unquestionably believe in this entity which is thought to be benevolent and divine. He is considered to be God's envoy, and it is believed that he can help an individual realize his intentions and protect him as well as his property. At the community level he has the duty to protect the waterways and fields as well as ensure the welfare of the community. The Catholic concept of the *Devchar* is diametrically opposite. For the Catholics, *Devchar* refers to Satan or the Devil who is the enemy of God and man.

A number of places in Goa are identified as dwellings of the *Devchar*. A red flag is placed beside a little stone structure (*ghumtti*) erected for him. The place around the stone structure is considered holy. Incense sticks are also lit emphasizing the idea of the place being sacred or holy. The *Ghumttis* in Goa have several unique features. Their architectural designs and

the different rituals performed on demarcated days highlight the complexity and seriousness of the *Devchar* as a unique religious entity.

The *Devchar* as a spirit is considered to be benign. He is not considered as wicked, cruel or wrathful or one who punishes people without reason. However, it is widely acknowledged that if anyone makes fun of him, the *Devchar* will punish him. According to lore, the most common type of punishment meted out to an individual is hiding him for days on end. The *Devcharis* also known to assist people in finding their lost things and punishing those who indulge in evil deeds. It has to be noted however, that the *Devcharis* never given the place of the deity, like the other Gods in the Hindu pantheon.

The structures and spots of the *Devcharall* over Goa,communicatethe presence of a supernatural entity in that place. They also provide an insight into the forms of social control that existed over the behavior of an individual and the society at large.

II. Review of Literature

S. Xavier(2009) conducted an analytical study on the sanskritisation of the deities of folk tradition in the State of Tamil Nadu. Folk deities are the outcome of the feelings and thoughts of folk people. These deities are worshipped not only by the folk people but also some of the socially backward people in accordance with their social and cultural settings. The study found that Vedic religion assimilated the elements of folk religious tradition through the ages and made it as a part of the popular Hindu religion. The study indicated that deities of folk tradition were being Sanskritised in line with a changing economic scenario. The deities of folk tradition were transformed physically to match the deities of Vedic tradition. A new message and significance were attached to the folk deities bringing them under the ambit of Vedic tradition.

Sujit Sur (2006) conducted a study on the folk deities of the Sundarbans. The study analysed folk culture of the Sundarbans. Social experiences of sources were carefully retained in folk-culture. It was observed that magic power, which a community believes brought success played a role in retaining folk-rituals. The deity believed to be concerned with the success was worshipped and glorified. The study indicated that these practices continue long after the socio-economic background changes.

Durga Bhagvat (1968) examined tribal Gods and festivals in central India. It was found that the need for cultural unity is felt across India and is manifested in a variety of ways. The study was an attempt to understand the extent of penetration of the aboriginal culture in central India by Hindu religious beliefs and customs.

III. Objectives

1. To situate the *Devchar* in the Goan socio-cultural milieu.
2. To examine the beliefs associated with the *Devchar*.
3. To understand the rituals associated with the *Devchar*.
4. To analyse the role and influence of the *Devchar* in the life of the Goan Community.

IV. Research Methodology

Keeping in mind the objectives of the topic chosen for this particular study, the appropriate research tools were employed. Interviews were conducted with village elders, temple priests (*Bhatts*) and the communities associated with the rituals and offerings for the *Devchar*. The interview questionnaire schedule was the principal instrument for the collection of data required to conduct this study.

In addition, the popular *Devchar* spots were visited and the rituals and practices related to the *Devchar* were observed. Informal discussions about the performance of rituals and practices were also conducted during these visits. Secondary data was taken from various authoritative books and research articles. Since the data collected was qualitative in nature the data was analyzed through content analyses.

V. Data Analysis and Findings

1. The *Devchar*'s Appearance

From the ancient times, all sections of Goa's population have inherited the norm of unquestioned belief in the existence of the *Devchar*. He is generally believed to be invisible but at times he is revealed to be visible.

Even though he is largely claimed to be invisible, a few people do claim that they have seen him in the physical form. Everyone who claims to have seen him, identifies his persona with

a distinct description. As per the description provided by villagers who have seen him, he has a magnificent appearance with an awe-inspiring form. This characteristic has been attributed to him for generations.

A detailed description of his physique is often provided by several Goan villagers. He is visualized by almost everyone as tall, being more than six feet with a dark complexion. In most parts of Goa, people describe him as being strong with a black mustache and a sturdy body. He is described to have an appearance which does not match any mortal being.

2. The *Devchar's* Attire

The *Devchar's* attire consists of a soiled white turban. He wears a *dhoti* or *langot* or a wrap-around garment often used by males, which is white in colour. On his left shoulder he has a handmade woolen blanket (*kambal*). The rest of his body is bare. He wears silver earrings. Around his waist he wears a silver belt. This belt contains several thin strands of silver chains tied together, with twined strings locally known as *khand* or *goff*. In his hands he has a big bamboo staff, with a brass disc fixed on the bottom, which makes a jingling sound as he walks. Tucked into his right ear is a huge country-made cigarette, locally known as *bidi*, which is prepared with the dried leaf of a banana or jackfruit tree. His appearance is thus a sublime version of a rural farmer.

3. Traditional Paths and Areas Reserved for the *Devchar*

Some villages have traditionally demarcated paths for the movement of the *Devchar* which cannot be disturbed. Many such traditional paths and areas still remain unoccupied by people and civilization.

A number of village paths and areas leading to other villages or forests are marked as areas of the *Devchar*. It is believed that if a traveler has lost his way, the *Devchar* who resides in that area will come to his aid and peacefully guide him back to the right path or destination. Such spots have come to be identified with the spirit who resides there. People hold the belief that a traveler who has lost his way on a road or in the forest is guided by the *Devchar* with the help of a burning torch, locally called *chudd*. This *chudd* is made with palm tree fronds. It is also said that a traveler can see the torch and hear the *Devchar's* footsteps but cannot see his

invisible guardian spirit. Today, even though roads have improved and highways have been built in these spots, they still remain spots of *Devchar* worship.

4. Beliefs and Rituals Associated with the *Devchar*

Among the Hindu community in particular there is a basic unity in thought and philosophy with regard to the *Devchar*. In Goan spirituality the *Devchar* is not considered a deity, but a spirit that is benevolent, helpful and protective. Across Goa rituals are conducted in honour of the *Devchar* on specific days. Sundays and Wednesdays are demarcated as days for offerings to the *Devchar*.

The *Devchar* is appeased with offerings for all favours granted and to be granted. The offerings of *soro ronth* (Alcohol and Leavened Bread) are considered propitious and as per the taste of the supernatural entity. Originally the offering consisted of toddy or *sur*. The offering of toddy or *sur* along with *ronth* (Leavened Bread) was together known as *sur ronth*. Presently, toddy has become scarce so it has been replaced with alcohol, which is locally prepared.

Ronth is prepared from the mixture of rice flour along with grated coconut. This mixture is wrapped in a banana leaf and roasted. The person preparing the *ronth* has to observe some rules. During preparation or roasting the *ronth* cannot break. Salt cannot be used to prepare the *ronth* which has to be flattened with the finger tips. Many people still prepare the *Devchar's* offerings by following traditional methods and beliefs.

The *soro* or *sur ronth* offering is mostly offered by men. A woman during menstruation has to avoid the *Devchar's* spot. If she disobeys this social norm it is said she will be liable for punishment from the *Devchar*.

Not all offerings to the *Devchar* contain alcohol. In some villages like Bali, which is situated in the Quepem Taluka of Goa, the *Velipor* Scheduled Tribe Community does not offer alcohol. Here, bananas, arecanuts and betel leaves are offered to the *Devchar*. The *Devchar* is also called *Nas* by them.

Depending on the place and the tradition of offerings, some places offer bananas, betel leaves, arecanuts, dry fish, slippers, *kambals* or blankets, candles, flowers, etc. Betel leaves,

betel nuts, dry fish, *rontth* and alcohol are considered to be the *Devchar*'s favourite offerings. Gifts and offerings are duly left at his sacred spots. As the *Devchar* is considered to be the protector of the village, the blood of local roosters is also offered to the *Devchar* in certain places.

In most popular spots of *Devchar* worship a special community is in charge of the offerings and prayers also known as *asgaranem*. Individuals and families make offerings for good health, before starting a new business, before getting married, after the birth of a child, before building a new house, for a job or when a person is sick. Prayers and offerings are also made to get back lost or stolen things, as well as if an individual is facing harassment by another person, thereby keeping the members of society under control. Almost for every milestone covered by an individual in life, particularly in the Hindu community, offerings are made to the *Devchar*.

Thus, a number of practices with regard to the *Devchar* are observed at different times and in different contexts, at the family level, at the individual level as well as at the community level. Some of the places in Goa inhabited by the *Devchar* are popular for individual offerings. Large crowds can be seen in these places late in the evening to make offerings to the *Devchar*.

5. The *Ghumtti* of the *Devchar*

Earlier, the *Ghumtti* or the traditional residence of the *Devchar* was a small, empty structure. It had a small red flag to identify the spot of the *Devchar*. Presently, many of these small structures that existed in the past have now been upgraded to temples. Such upgradation is supported by the members of the society after favours are granted to the devotees by the *Devchar*. This is illustrated in the construction of the Bodgeshwar Temple in Mapusa.

Today, idols are created as per the description provided by people and placed in the *ghumttis* or small structures or temples. Presently, an idol with certain features is being installed in all the *Devchar Ghumttis* and temples across the State of Goa. Other functions and festivals are also being celebrated in these *ghumttis* which have been elevated to temples. A small flag or a bunch of flags made out of red cloth, locally known as *ghudi*, are still found around the *Devchar* spots or temples.

6. Community Offerings to the *Devchar*

Community offerings are those offerings made collectively to the *Devchar* on behalf of the whole village, while individual offerings are made for the personal benefit of an individual. For instance, during the *Dussehra* Festival in the village of Shiroda, situated in the Ponda Taluka of Goa, all 12 *vangddi* (members of different castes) consult *Rawalnath* and *Betal*, the village deities and pray for the welfare of the village as well as make offerings. On this occasion, it is mandatory to appease the *Devchar* for the smooth functioning of the festival. The local alcoholic drink *Feni* is used in the appeasing of the *Devchar*.

Villagers also make offerings to the *Devchar* at temples. It is mandatory to appease the *Devchar* of the temple before any festival. It is believed that if the *Devchar* is not appeased he can interfere in the smooth functioning of the festival. At the end of the festival he is appeased again and thanked for the success of the festival. Most temples in Goa have specific communities that are in charge of the offerings made to the *Devchar*. This is an indicator that in the olden days every community joined in to celebrate village events and every community played a role in this celebration.

The traditionally selected head of a village community, locally known as the *Gaunkar*, is given the social rights by the community to perform the rituals of appeasing the *Devchar*. *Sangneor gharane* is a prayer made by the *Gaunkar* who is in charge of all offerings. He intercedes on behalf of the people to the *Devchar*. The devotees also stand in front of the *Devchar's* spot or the *ghumtti* and make prayers or requests to the supernatural entity.

VI. Conclusion

The *Devchar*, a supernatural entity, is popularly accepted by a number of Goans. He is acknowledged as a helpful and protective guardian spirit. Scientifically, the existence of the *Devchar* is not credible. However, more than 95 percent of the Goan population, Hindus in particular, strongly believe in his existence. In fact, he is considered the moving God, all protective and helpful. Over the years he has occupied a place as a God.

Many Goans, Hindus in particular, consult the temple priest for *Prasad Pakli* (Divine Sign) from the *Devchar*. He recommends ritualistic offerings to the *Devchar* which is called *ronth*. Thus includes *soro* (Local Alcohol) and locally made bread. Even though no daily worship is

offered to the *Devchar* he occupies a central place in the lives of a majority of Goans especially for the Hindu community. A consensus is found among the people about the appearance and rituals of the *Devchar*.

As per popular beliefs he is propitiated on Wednesdays and Sundays of every month. He is also propitiated on certain occasions, specific to the village, to avoid harm which could befall the community. It is believed that the *Devchar* protects the entire village community, from any type of misfortune. Hence, a special worship for the *Devchar* is observed even before the beginning of any festival. However, while making offerings, no coconuts are broken before the *Devchar* which happens before other Hindu Gods and Goddesses.

The *ghumtti* which was the traditional residence of the *Devchar* has in many places been upgraded to a large temple. This has been supported by members of the society whose favours and requests have been granted by the *Devchar*. In these *Ghumttis* which were normally kept empty earlier, idols are being installed using the description provided by devotees. Presently, an idol with certain features is being installed in all the *Devchar Ghumttis* and temples across Goa.

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