

Ruminations on Narkasur

by

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While *Narakchaturdashi* is observed throughout India, the practice of staging Narkasur effigies and their dispatch at dawn ushering in **Deepavali** is confined to Goa and areas within the cultural boundaries of Goa (such as towns in North Kanara and southern Sindhudurg in Maharashtra). Narkasur-*vadh* is what Goan Hindus associate **Deepavali** with. I am not sure the tradition of exhibiting Narkasurs exists elsewhere in India. At any rate, it is reasonable to assume that the scale and fervour of the Goan observance is not to be found anywhere else.

How did Goa come to embrace the Narkasur mythos and when did the practice originate? I don't think there is definitive research on the topic, and we must seek recourse to anecdotal accounts (memo to self: find out more about the history of Narkasur in Goa).

My guess is that the practice is at least 100 years old. My father, now 91, recalls that the Narkasur effigies of his childhood were to be found in the villages of Bittona (Britona) and Ribandar/Chimbel. According to him, Mapusa acquired its own Narkasur circa 1950, and there was a kerfuffle at the time involving the Portuguese (details of which I forget).

Narkasur was introduced to Panjim in the early 1950s, first in the Mala area. In the mid-1950s, 3 other Narkasur sites came to be firmly established: (1) near Mahalaxmi temple (*Deul vaddo*), (2) in Santa Inez near the slope leading to Altinho (behind Gomantak), and (3) our very own (much before I was born) at Cacule Chawl in Santa Inez (now site of the hideous Caculo Mall), opposite Tadmad ground (now the Fire Station). Until 1980 or so these few remained

the established Narkasur digs in the Panjim area.

From the earliest days the practice was to unveil the Narkasur effigy for public viewing until midnight to the accompaniment of loudspeakers blaring out the hit songs of the day on 78 rpm records, interspersed with the beating of drums. Those were days when Panjim still had its original trees. At midnight the celebrations turned mobile. The demon's carcass was hauled onto a truck and taken around the city to the beat of *dhol* and other implements of noisemaking.

The children of those days well remember the looping chants of the signature ditty. For one night this off-colour utterance in the company of elders and ladies was permitted.

*Narkasura re Narkasura
navim navim kaapdaam bhokann bharaa*

(Narkasura O Narkasura
Let's stuff new vestments up your arse)

In our Cacule Chawl comprising 5 adjoining homes, the earliest Narkasurs of my memory (late 1960s) were cobbled together with a contribution of 3 rupees from each of the 5 homes - that is, the total cost of the hardware worked out to less than 15 rupees. That amount later increased to 25 rupees and stayed there for many years. My father functioned as the treasurer, stretching every single rupee, comparison-shopping for crepe papers (*foli*), the gold and silver trimmings (*begad*) at both JD Fernandes and Barnabe Souza, two of Panjim's historic stores. Other raw materials required were jute, nails, and lumber. The hay for the stuffing was 'stolen' in the middle of the night from a local landlord's field in a choreographed annual ritual.

The biggest expense - perhaps as much as half of the entire cost - was the Narkasur mask. The artists from Mapusa were especially renowned in this department. Unlike today, these were custom-

designed faces and supply was limited. My father's Mapusa connections ensured that we got a good product at a good price.

By 1970 the 5 homes in our chawl had grown to accommodate a critical mass of youngsters in their teens and early 20s, besides the under-10s of my generation. In that year, our elders had a brilliant idea. Instead of dissipating the youthful energy in rambunctious behaviour as was the norm, they figured it could be channelized in creative and cultural pursuits. And thus was born the **Tadmad Sanskritic Mandal**. From that year onward, in addition to staging an imposing Narkasur effigy, we put up an outdoor variety entertainment programme. The initial cultural direction was pointed by my father, drawing on his considerable talents in the fields of drama and music. (*)

[* Some day I plan to write about the cultural climate of my father's times, the vibrant literary, poetic and musical landscape that his generation grew up in. I am amused when I hear of people like Amitava Ghosh pontificating on Goa's literary and cultural traditions (as if the prick knew anything about them) and of know-nothing Goans approvingly nodding like it is the 5th Veda. That's what Goans have become today, a bunch of sorry ignoramuses, so unaware of their own selves that they fall for the droppings of any passing pissant.]

Anyway, to continue with the story -

From rudimentary beginnings, Tadmad Sanskritic Mandal quickly coalesced into a group of performers of diverse talents, capable of presenting an engaging vaudeville of drama, song & dance that came to be known as the **Narkasur Nite**. Our 3-hour show developed a devoted following (remember, those were pre-television days) in the city and beyond, and each year we worked our hearts out for the whole month preceding the event. All of us thought of ourselves as singularly fortunate to be born into that setting of space, time and people.

As our shows grew in stature & quality over the years, others from the neighborhood were invited to participate. Noted singer Hema Sardesai, then wet behind her ears, gave some of her earliest public

performances at our shows.

The **Narkasur Nite** ran without a break for 21 years. By the late 1980s, we, who were once the lads in shorts, had grown up and dispersed to all corners of Goa and the globe. As a consequence, **Narkasur Nite** began to taper off, losing its mojo. The final curtain came down in 1991. Today, there is very little memory of this once-famous event in Santa Inez.

In the mid-1980s, the loud, coarse & distasteful spectacle of the Narkasur competitions took root in Panjim, and the character of the night swerved into a different trajectory from that of the early years. To us, who saw and lived through the real thing, what passes for the Narkasur tradition now seems bereft of all charm.

I cherish the memories, for the camaraderie we experienced was real. We had very little growing up, money as well as material things, yet our cup of joy overflowed every single year.

When I watch my little nephew and niece enthused about putting together their own Narkasur, I hear echoes of my own childhood. But these replays fail, for that Panjim no longer exists. These kids will never know the intimacy, the richness and the beauty of an era now lost forever.

It was a timeless Goa, or so it felt at the time. Panjim has today lost its foliage, its fields, its beauty, and its quiet. The barbarians are at the door.