

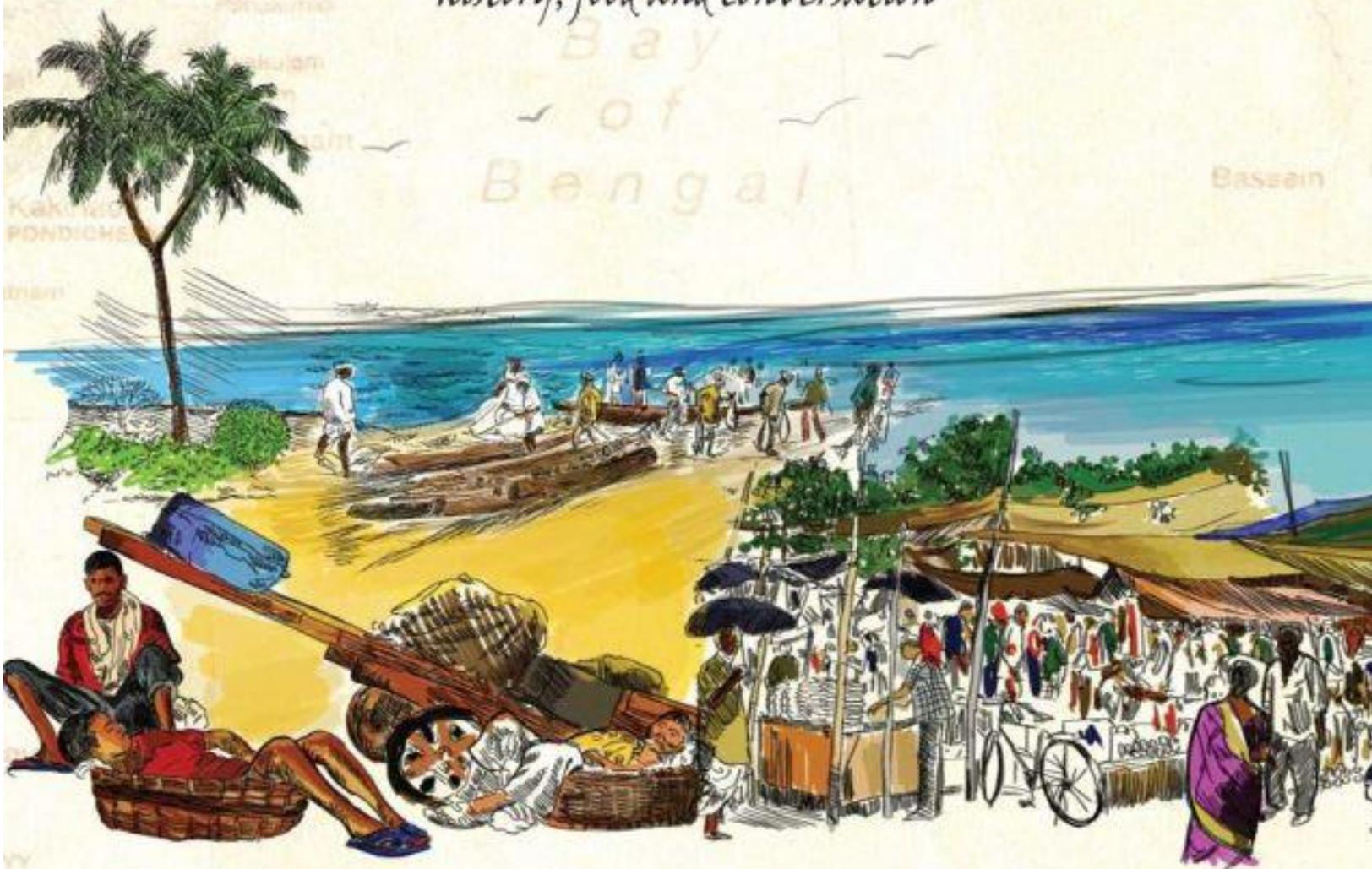


AN XZBT EXCLUSIVE

1400 Bananas,
76 Towns

₹
1 Million People

*A journey along the Indian coast with interludes of
history, food and conversation*



SAMIR NAZARETH

The Exhibitionist is an online literary magazine.

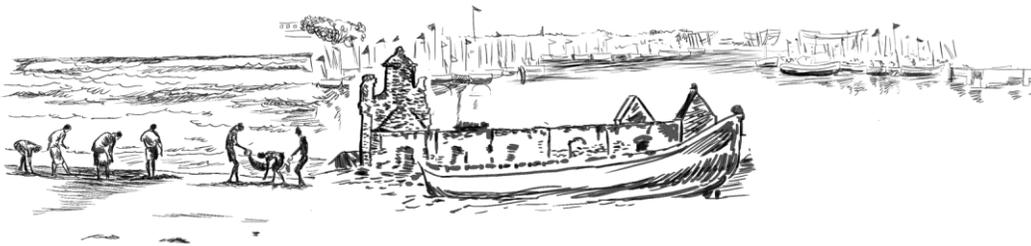
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About 1440 Bananas, 76 towns, & 1 million people

Few of us have the panache to put in our papers, free ourselves from our desks, and take off on a half-year-long trip along the coastal necklace of peninsular India. This richly-flavoured travelogue combines adventure, serendipity, food, and sheer *joie de vivre*. The narrative irresistibly draws us in as benevolent observers of the many facets and foibles of humanity. Living out of a backpack in budget lodgings and eating bananas as a staple only add to the heady challenges that stimulate the spirit of wanderlust of this maverick explorer. The tour diary, starting from the remote north-western coastal tip and climaxing, rather precariously, way above sea-level at the potentially sinister Indo-Tibetan border, is an engrossing chronicle of discoveries about the desires, views, tribulations, joys, and sheer zest for living of the teeming millions of India. Thrown in for good measure, in a refreshingly tongue-in-cheek style, are recipes for some of the gastronomic delights offered in the places traversed. Itinerant sidelights about people of all classes and creeds—fishermen, seafarers, rickshaw-drivers, priests, salesmen, radicals, typical and atypical families, and all the rest—create a colourful kaleidoscope that is quintessentially India. This book is as enjoyable and energising as a good cup of chai...

Illustrations by Suhita Mitra





*To my parents ~
for the gift of wings.*



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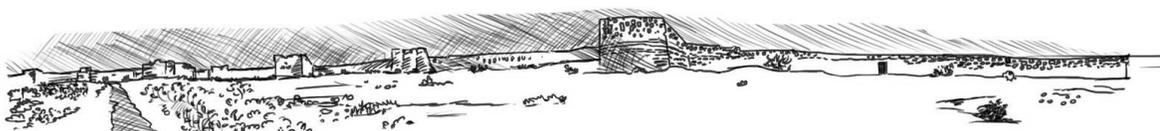
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Acknowledgements



Chapter 8

Goa: Land of Feni and Tourists

Goa's economy revolves around tourism and my visit allows a glimpse into its impact. I also visit little-known historical places in interior Goa and watch moonshine being made from cashew nuts.

Getting to Terekol and the art of drinking

I stop for breakfast at the bus stop canteen and ask the stall owner what he can serve in the shortest possible time. He answers that if I wait there will be poori and subji. I look at my watch, which prompts him to ask about my destination. When I say Vengrul, he suggests pav subji. Once he serves me, he keeps a lookout for my bus. The one that arrives is new and has more space between the first seat and the driver's cabin. As we go along, the driver nonchalantly uses one hand to steer through the hairpin bends of the Ghats, which can only mean the bus has power steering.

As we approach Vengrul, a beautiful beach lies nestled between two hills. It is small but has the exotic appeal of the secret beaches shown on TV. Like Chaul, this area too, bears evidence of Portuguese occupation. Close to Vengrul, we pass a white chapel. But a large number of Shiva Sena hoardings seem to indicate that this part of the Konkan is a bastion for them. The dash of white, symbolising faith; the green of nature's bounty; and the saffron of ideology, all combine here to form the region's unique colouring. At the bus depot, people explain that there are no direct buses from Vengrul to Terekol, and I will have to go to Shirodi, which means an hour's wait. But at Shirodi I am once again told there are no buses to Terekol and I will have to go to Redi and then get a rickshaw to Terekol.

Waiting on the road at Redi, I notice many rickshaws coming from the same direction, like bees out of a hive, so I head there and wait. A milestone indicates Terekol is in the opposite direction to Redi. Many rickshaws pass by and all refuse to take me to Terekol. I am in no mood to walk as the roads are steep in the Ghats. The land around is green and red – proof of both the verdant vegetation and mining. Every few minutes a dumper truck passes by, either carrying red mud or returning for another load. They leave trails of red as they bounce over the pot-holed roads. The fine red dust coats the verdant green and imparts a reddish hue to the air.

Finally a rickshaw stops and charges me 40 bucks for the 3 km ride. But it is worth the cost as he says a bus leaves for Panjim every morning from the hotel we are going to. Hotel Hillrock sits on a hill overlooking a river and beach. With no sign of the owner, the place is deserted. All one can do is wait. The hotel is located in a cashew nut grove. It is not a fancy structure and all the doors are shut and face the entry gate. Sitting under a cashew tree watching pigs snuffle around with their noses to the ground, is time well spent. There is absolutely no one in sight. Here it's easy to feel like a castaway washed onto a deserted island in a sea of silence. Doubts begin to creep in: is the hotel open? Are there rooms available? Thankfully, the owner finally makes an appearance and gives me a nice room.

After a quick wash, I walk into the town – I mean, village. Terekol is a sleepy village of single-storied, tiled houses. It is afternoon and the whiff of frying fish and what could be feni (the local brew), fills the empty streets. It is a heady mixture. The strong smell of alcohol could be from the fermenting cashew fruit. However, this assumption turns out to be incorrect. I soon pass boilers and hops on the road – Terekol is a 'moonshine' village. From the cashew hops strewn everywhere, one gets the feeling that quite a few houses make moonshine here.

A foreign couple zip by on a bike, wearing a tan and nothing much else. Foreign tourists are like the currency they bring – oblivious to the effect they have on the local society and economy. Back in the hotel, I sit down to a chilled beer and omelette at the bar, and watch the river and sea below. Another foreign tourist arrives and begins talking to one of the waiters about the beaches she has visited. The waiter asks if she has been to Paradise Beach. When she replies that she has not, he explains it is in Redi, and is locally known as Redi Beach. He tells her that if she were to ask for 'Paradise Beach' they wouldn't know the place. This kind of christening is very touristy. It is rather like a pet name for close friends or a code for a secretive society. It is this touch of the exotic which predisposes the foreign tourist towards the place as a veritable piece of heaven.

The evening is spent at the restaurant with a glass of uraak – another local brew. The place has a thatched roof but few walls, allowing for an imposing view of the sea. It's a good way to spend time, soaking in the alcohol and scene – the sea in front and a grove of cashew trees behind. In a corner, hidden by the cashew trees, I spy a hut. Perhaps the owner of the restaurant has a moonshine business on the side. Since there are no couples or women patrons, I ask the waiter why this is so. He explains that the clients are usually men who come in groups from Vengrula, Redi and Shiroda. They generally order whole bottles of alcohol and polish them off in one sitting.

There is a certain routine followed in such group drinking sessions. As everyone places his order, collective surprise is evinced when a few refuse a hard drink or choose a milder one. Those not drinking offer excuses that have religious connotations. Giving a health reason would put a damper on the evening and bring up questions regarding choosing to drink at all. The talk moves to 'capacity' or how much drink each one can hold. Stories are shared about what happened when 'an acquaintance' drank beyond his 'capacity'. Once the drinks arrive, one person

in the group takes charge of service. He enquires, 'water; soda?' of each one, while pouring. There is usually one greenhorn drinker who says he leaves it to the discretion of the pourer. There is a round of introductions as not everyone in the drinking group knows the others. Once the drinks are poured, everyone waits for someone to take the lead. Finally someone lifts his glass and says 'cheers' and everybody clinks glasses and choruses 'cheers'. The pourer then attempts to infuse some life into the party with jokes and chit-chat.

Getting to know feni and uraak better

I walk across the village to visit the Terekol fort, which is a heritage hotel now. At the gate, a guard asks, 'Kya?' (What?), as he picks his teeth. I tell him I am going to the fort. Guards and bouncers at such hotels are required to take on the demeanour of the place they work in. While they may live in humble conditions and earn a pittance, on the job they become arbiters of who is 'with-it'.

Like St. Peter at the Pearly Gates, the guard gives the wannabe a thorough look-over and decides whether he can enter paradise. He is the Praetorian of the establishment and guards against anything or anyone bringing down the snob quotient. Patrons are supposedly cool if they are on one-on-one terms with these poor guardians of pretentiousness and superciliousness. They are unwitting proponents of reverse psychology – the more people are turned away, the more they want to get in, believing that they are missing out on some life-altering experience. This time the guard lets me through.

Terekol fort is where Portuguese soldiers shot and killed Goan freedom fighters and a memorial to them stands at the gate. But the fort has undergone plastic surgery to cater to the 'discerning tourist'. The grounds have been transformed into manicured lawns and the ramparts into sundecks. The place has

a very nouveau colonial feel. My tour of the fort does not take long. There is then enough time to walk along some of the roads in the area. I pass an open-pit iron ore mine which looks like an inverted anthill. The trucks and earth movers below look like toys digging into an ever-increasing abyss.

I return to a lime juice at the restaurant and then check out the in-house distillery I had noticed the previous evening. Most of the space in the shed is taken up by a water tank and a few kilns. The boundary of the place is demarcated by plastic drums that either contain fermenting juice or liquor. Just outside the shed there are two pits, over which stand a juicer/shredder and a winepress.



Distillery Vats and Feni processing, Hotel Hillrock, Terekol

The owner explains the process of making alcohol. Ripe cashew fruit is shredded in the shredder and then squeezed in the winepress; the juice collects in the pits. This is then transferred into plastic vats and left to ferment for four days. The fermented liquid is then poured into copper vessels fixed to a bhatti (fireplace), and boiled. The vapours pass through coils cooled in water. The condensed distillate then flows into another plastic barrel. The plastic vats which store the distillate are in fact, used chemical containers. It seems uncertain whether the potency of the liquid is due to its alcohol content or residual chemicals present in the vats. The owner's wife is busy stirring the distillate with a glass stick to check the strength of the brew. If the stirring causes a slow formation of bubbles, then the alcohol is nice and strong.

There are two women and a couple of young men working in the distillery. They are uncomfortable with my presence but the owner tells them that it is important for outsiders to learn new things. He then turns to me and explains the difference between feni and uraak – feni is made by distilling the liquid twice, while uraak is distilled once and mixed with a little fermented juice. The pulp is dried and used as fuel to boil the fermented juice.

Mapusa bus stand and Aldona

I wake at 5.30am as the bus to Panjim leaves at 6.45. Emerging from my bath, I hear the bus start and snarl as it warms up, and then leave. The time is 6.10am. This presents an opportunity to go back to sleep but I choose to make an attempt to catch up with the bus. I hurriedly dry myself, pack, and rush down to the road. I pass the owner's son brushing his teeth outside and ask him if the bus has left (obviously it has since it is no longer parked in the compound). He says it will return. And lo, the bus does return. Once on board, the driver asks if I stayed at the hotel. He mentions he was unable to sleep on the verandah last night because of the mosquitoes, and had been tempted to knock on my door to ask if he could sleep inside. Although I immediately say he should have done so, I am unsure whether I would have, in fact, allowed them in.

It is the driver's first time on this route and he does not know the way, so the conductor becomes the navigator. As the bus passes between the states of Maharashtra and Goa, it becomes a Babel-on-wheels – each new passenger bringing along a different dialect or accent. The bus is a mix of office-goers and students from various villages, all going to Mapusa. At Mapusa, the bus stand is a medley of passengers rushing off or waiting. There are sudden bursts of speed from those standing about, as if breaking free from their torpor, while those

running after departing buses suddenly strike poses of disappointment at being left behind. Like a group of soloists, the bus conductors bellow destinations, each trying to attract people by out-shouting the others. The conductors also promise early departure, and the drivers add weight to this assertion by frequently revving the engine and jerking the vehicle forward a little. The conductors immediately slap the sides of the bus with their open palms, indicating the juggernaut has moved enough. The passengers onboard are quite helpless and sit listlessly, every small movement signalling another unredeemed promise of immediate departure. Each bus finally moves when the next one for the same destination arrives. In the midst of all this, there are islands of unworried motionlessness. People in the know stop at kiosks for a bite, like actors waiting in the wings for their cue; others do some shopping.

The plan is to stay with relatives in Aldona. There are a few apartment complexes now in the village, but these stand out as eyesores rather than symbols of economic development and social progress. The residents of these supposed icons of progress still follow village ways. There is a sense of community and everyone is a neighbour. Bread is bought from the local bread man who arrives twice a day. There are few streetlights and everyone is tucked into bed by 10pm. The village and church feast are important social occasions in villages like Aldona. But it is worrying to see what development and progress can do to a land and its people – forcing change in the way people look at the land.

It destroys continuity (like Greece losing its 2000-year-old drachma to the euro). There is a conflict between the way people choose to live and are forced to live. The ugliness of modern kitsch now shares space with old world charm. But then, how much of today's old world charm was yesterday's kitsch?

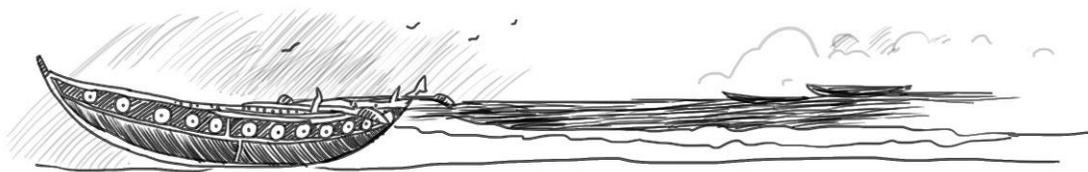


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Samir Nazareth is a freelance consultant whose focus lies in the areas of research and writing on socio-economic and environmental issues. He has been associated with setting up community-based waste management projects and has worked on national policies for hospital and municipal waste management. His concerns for the environment have led him to work with organisations that promote these causes, both in India and abroad. Samir has also worked with a national Hindi newspaper as Senior Editor for special projects. Someone who revels in all creative pursuits, Samir enjoys spending time in writing and cooking. He has also registered three designs with the Indian Patent Office and is working towards a Masters degree in Psychology. For Samir, travelling is all about endless opportunities to experience new places and know people.



Suhita Mitra was born in India in Kohima, Nagaland – a region of untouched, natural beauty. Wherever the eye travelled, there were hills, trees, flowers, and wildlife. Television was still unknown and all that young children had to amuse themselves with was the enchantment offered by the gardens, the playing fields and books...lots of story books. Such an environment was a natural nursery for the imagination. Suhita joined the National Institute Of Design in Ahmedabad, India, where the untrammelled imagination fostered by her childhood environment suddenly found meaningful channels through art appreciation, photography, freehand drawing, animation, and typography. With love and gratitude for the bounties of nature, she feels inspired to give something back through her work as an illustrator and designer.



