

## Narkasur Nite Ruminations by Rajan Parrikar

(A post made on Goanet in October 2009)

While *Narakchaturdashi* is observed throughout India, the practice of Narkasur effigies and their despatch at dawn ushering in **Deepavali (Diwali)** seems confined to Goa and areas within the cultural boundaries of Goa (towns in North Kanara such as Karwar and surrounds, and southern Sindhudurg in Maharashtra). Narkasur-*vadh* is what Goan Hindus associate **Deepavali** with. Although the tradition of exhibiting Narkasurs may exist elsewhere in pockets of India, I think it is reasonable to assume that none has the scale or the fervour of the Goan observance.

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 88, recalls that the Narkasurs 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 big kerfuffle at the time involving the Portuguese (details of which I forget).

Narkasur came to Panjim in the early 1950s, first in Mala neighborhood. 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) in Santa Inez, at Cacule Chawl, Tadmud, opposite the Tadmud ground (alas, later defiled to build what is now the Fire Station). Until 1980 or so, these 4 remained the established Narkasur digs in the Panjim area.

From the earliest days, the practice was to put the Narkasur effigy out for public viewing until midnight, with loudspeakers around blaring out the hit songs of the day on 78 rpm records, interspersed with the beating of drums. At midnight the show turned mobile - the Narkasur was mounted on a truck and taken around the city to the accompaniment 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*

Translation:  
Narkasura O Narkasura  
Let's stuff brand new vestments up your arse

In our Cacule Chawl of 5 adjoining homes separated by walls, the earliest Narkasurs of my memory (late 1960s) involved a contribution of 3 rupees from each of the 5 homes. An impressive Narkasur would be erected for under 15 rupees. That amount later grew to Rs 25 and stayed there for many years. My father, who functioned as the treasurer, would stretch every single rupee, comparison shopping for crepe papers ("foli"), the golden 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 needed for the stuffing was 'stolen' in the stillness of night from a local landlord adjoining field (the 'theft' being a tradition with landlord's full knowledge).

The biggest expense - perhaps as much as half of the entire cost - was the Narkasur mask, and in those days the best ones were made by the artists from Mapusa. These were custom-produced and supply was limited. My father's Mapusa connections ensured 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, spurred by my father, had a fine idea. Instead of dissipating all this youthful energy in rambunctious behaviour as was the norm, it could be channelized in creative and cultural pursuits, they figured. And thus was born the Tadmad Sanskritic Mandal. From that year onward, in addition to impressive Narkasur effigies, we staged a variety entertainment programme. The initial direction was plotted by my father, exploiting 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 or cultural traditions (as if the prick knew anything about them) and of know-nothing Goans in the audience ingesting every word 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 Sanskrit Mandal quickly coalesced into a well-honed 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 quite a devoted following (remember, those were pre-television days) in the city and beyond, and each year we worked our hearts out for a 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 join in. 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 world. As a consequence, the *Narkasur Nite* began tapering 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 took on 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 (money) then yet our cup of joy overflowed every single year.

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