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Performing Resistance: The Goan Konkani *Kantaram* of Protest

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Abstract:

Resistance to power can take many shapes in the literary world. The use of songs and oral poems has a long history, fulfilling functions like social commentary, education, and the preservation of cultural memory. Songs in literature of protest have galvanised public sentiment articulating their collective anger and inspiring action against injustice. This paper studies the Konkani songs, known as *kantaram,* to understand how in the contemporary times, are a powerful force of activism that voice political dissent. The study analyses the popular *kantaram* (songs) of Olga Vaz, Francis de Tuem and Saby de Divar that offer strong political critique in contemporary times. Foucault's concepts of discourse, knowledge and power are crucial to understanding the performance of this Konkani protest literature evident through the politically charged *kantaram* that aim at decoding the politics of the times for the common people. These songs are, in the terminology of James Scott, "hidden transcripts" that are courageously made "public" and the *cantarists* thereby offer resistance by speaking "truth to power".

Keywords: resistance, kantar, konkani, power, discourse.

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Introduction: Songs are an integral part of the Goan life. As Alfred F. Braganza asserts, "For a Goan, from the cradle to the grave life is but song. He hums before he lisps, sings before he cries" (159). Songs have played a basic role of human communication since time immemorial, communicating emotions and culture, creating social and emotional bonds, motivating humanity and also expressing one's dissatisfaction with the way of the world. Social changes have been brought about by powerful songs like "We shall overcome", "*Vande Mantaram,*" "*Ekla Chalo Re*" and many other songs that led revolutions and encouraged change. Buffy Sainte-Marie the Academy Award-winning songwriter, singer, composer, activist and star of *Sesame Street* boldly declares that, "A great three-minute protest song can be more effective than a 400-page textbook" (Curiosity Stream). Steinbeck echoes similar sentiments with regards to "Tom Joad", a song based on his dust bowl novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, "In 17 verses he got the entire story of a thing that took me two years to write!" (McGuinness).

Numerous revolutions have been stirred by songs. The 79 days of protest in Hong Kong also called the Umbrella Movement gained momentum by the song "Raise the Umbrella", that turned into an anthem which was written by local songwriter Lo Hiu-Pan (Curiosity Stream).

Freddie Aguilar's rendition of *Bayan Ko* (My Country), a deeply patriotic song dedicated to the Philippines, originally a 1929 song, wherein the lyrics compare the country to a bird, who when placed in a cage, cries out in sorrow for its lost freedom; turned into a nationalist political anthem and emboldened hundreds of thousands of ordinary Filipinos to take to the streets in 1986 to support Corazon Aquino and overthrow the hated regime of Ferdinand Marcos.

Music and songs have been rooted in everyday life; and politics therefore gets inadvertently embroiled in songs that are expressions of one's overflow of emotions. Resistance and protest through songs have been culturally rooted in Goan tradition. The oldest

form of folk music; performance of "*Fell*" or "*Khell*" during the Carnival and Easter seasons wherein for the sake of entertainment a group of villagers would "invent an original story which would be acted out using dialogues, folk songs and dance. The accompanying instruments were the trumpet and drums" and very significantly the "lyrics of such folk songs were usually humorous or based on some topical subject or some aspect of social life" (Martins 71). Today the "*tiatr*", the popular form of musical theatre from Goa, with over 125 years of history rooted in the Konkani language, blends drama, song and comedy often highlighting social, religious, or political issues. These *tiatrs* are sought after by the general public not so much for the drama but for the songs (*kantars*); not so much for the music but for the lyrics of the songs and the *kantarists* that write them.

The aim of this study is to understand how, in the contemporary times, *kantaram*, songs in Konkani language, are a powerful force of activism that voice political dissent. The objectives of the study are : to examine the role of songs as a form of resistance and protest within literary and cultural traditions, with specific reference to Goa; to analyse Konkani protest songs (*kantaram*) as a contemporary mode of political activism and dissent; to study selected *kantaram* by Olga Vaz, Francis de Tuem, and Saby de Divar in order to identify their political, social, and environmental critiques; to explore how Foucault's concepts of discourse, knowledge, and power help in understanding *kantaram* as a performative form of protest literature; and to interpret these songs as "hidden transcripts," drawing on James Scott's theory, and examine how they are made "public" as acts of resistance.

The study works on the hypothesis that Konkani *kantaram* in Goan tiatr function as counter-hegemonic forms of cultural activism that challenge dominant political, social, and environmental discourses by transforming collective grievances into public acts of dissent and democratic accountability. Drawing on Michel Foucault and James C. Scott, this study further hypothesizes that *kantaram* operate simultaneously as discursive sites of resistance and as

"hidden transcripts" made public, whereby *kantarists* expose corruption, censorship, bureaucratic apathy, cultural marginalisation, and environmental exploitation while resisting attempts at regulatory control.

The research methodology used in this study is qualitative, interpretative, and interdisciplinary grounded in literary and cultural studies. It employs textual analysis to examine Konkani protest songs (*kantaram*) within the tradition of Goan tiatr. The primary texts selected for analysis include kantaram by Olga Vaz, Francis de Tuem, and Saby de Divar. Drawing on the theories of Michel Foucault, to understand how these songs produce counter-discourses that challenge dominant structures of power, governance, and ideological control, the study through interpretative analysis, uses James Scott's theory of "hidden transcripts"; to examine how private frustrations and subaltern dissent are transformed into public expressions of resistance through performance and song.

The Legacy of Dissent: Goan Songs have a legacy of voicing out one's travails through the medium of song and music. One can trace its roots to the famous songs: *Sanquale paddunc guelear*, *Fulu anv jardinintulem*, *Fulola fulancho mollo and Agô chedua*, (Fernandes, J.A.A. 16) wherein one finds references to the existing exploitative system brought in by the Goan feudal system of the *bhatkars*, the landlords, and the *mundkars*, the tenant farmers who lived on the land of the landowners (Prabhudesai 214). The *mundkars* who were largely *kunnbis*, being denied a political forum against exploitation by the landlord and having no recourse to voice their outrage against the libidinous approaches of the landlord's sons towards the *mundkar´*s daughters, "the Konkani poets and composers voiced their grievances in song" (Fernandes, J.A.A. 16).

In *When the curtains rise ... Understanding Goa's vibrant Konkani theatre* Fernandes, André Rafael notes that some of the folk songs especially some *dekhnis* (dance song) such as the popular *deknni: "Kuxttoba mirasi Indiecho"* is based on the historical figure Kuxttoba, a

Goan, a member of the Salekar branch of the Rane family who rebelled against the Portuguese rule. "*Farar-far zatai ranantu*" is one of the best known *dulpods* that depicts the historic rivalry that resulted in skirmishes between the Portuguese and the Rane clan of Sattari: "*Pakle mat´tai ranneank(u). Ranne mat´tai pakleank(u)*" when translated reads: the white soldiers are shooting at the members of the Rane clan. The members of the Rane clan are shooting at the white soldiers, the Portuguese (Fernandes, André Rafael 30).

The *mando* is a dance song of Goa that voices largely the emotions of the Goan woman. Some of the historic events of Goa that impacted the local masses are mentioned in some of the Goan *mandos*. The *mandos*: *"Setembrachê choudavê ratri", "Soglea sonsarak khobor"* and "*Eka Setembrachê rati"* documents the Maratha Sepoy Mutiny of 1895. The *mandos*: *Trato feringuean kelo* (A treaty has been signed by the foreigners), *Soglea sonvsarak khobor* (Everybody knows), *Chintunleari kaliz fafsota* (Even the thought of it upsets us) and *Chintlem na re konnem* (Nobody thought about it) document the fallout of the Abkary Act of 1878 and the resentment it garnered (Fernandes, André Rafael 34).

The Goan *tiatr,* Konkani drama, that gets its name from the Portuguese word "Teatro" for theatre, is the progenitor of the popularity of songs called *kantaram* (Cardozo). These songs are integral to the *tiatr*, originating from the Portuguese verb "*cantar"*, which means "to sing". These are songs usually unrelated to the play and are staged at the front part of the stage while the sets, scenery, costumes or make-up are being changed behind the main curtain. The lyrics and not the musical composition are significant for these "kantars"; as André Rafael Fernandes puts it, "themes of the lyrics may vary widely – comic, sober, narration of events or anecdotes, criticism of ministers and government policies, social reformation et cetera" (51). Apart from the dramatic element of the *tiatr,* it is these *kantaram* that draw the audiences. The most essential aspect of these songs is not the music but the contents of the lyrics. The strong messages or the storyline that the *kantaram* carry to the audience through the musical

composition is what the audience appreciates. The Goan Konkani songs are written as *cantaram/kantaram*. This paper will use the term "*kantaram*" and "*kantar*". The terms are usually spelled with a "c" as "*cantar*" and "*cantaram*" while writing in Konkani language using the Roman script; while the pronunciation remains the same.

***Tiatr* as Counter-Discourse:** Today in the age of media, one would assume that cinema would take centre-stage rather than theater because of the numerous technical affordances that the present-day cinema enjoys. The Konkani bilingual rock song "*Maka Naka Tuka Naka"* by Remo Fernandes, very strongly asserting the voice of the Goan native, that emphatically shouts out the message that "no one in Goa wants either the corruption, construction or pollution that is destroying the pristine natural beauty of the country" was picturized and edited for the movie "*O Maria*", but later was removed from the film (Fernandes, Remo). Remo blames the servile fawning attitude of the film makers responsible for the cut. Thus, dissent through such media is very often at the mercy of the system that it wants to decry. At such moments the local stage of the "tiatr" becomes a potent source of artistic venture. The stage of the *tiatr* is the locus that exudes the spirit of the *kantarists* without any fear of being censored and it reaches directly to the intended audience. Today, the YouTube channel of the *kantarists* is also used to meet this end. Thus, we have the very popular political *kantarists* like Olga Vaz, Francis de Tuem and Saby de Divar who unrelentingly decry the political and environmental issues leading to the social and moral degradation of Goan ethos.

Foucault's framework of power indicates that it does not merely repress; but produces discourse, shaping what can be said, who can speak, and what counts as truth. The Goan political establishment through ministerial speeches, official narratives during COVID-19, and attempts at instituting censorship; all attempted to regulate public discourse and manage perception. The *kantarists* intervene precisely at this point. Through *tiatr* and *kantaram*, they

produce what Foucault would call a counter-discourse; an alternative regime of truth that contests state-sanctioned narratives.

Foucault speaks of "subjugated knowledges**"**; local, popular knowledges that are disqualified by dominant institutions (82). The *tiatr* operates as precisely such a knowledge system whereby the *kantarists* expose the erosion of democratic values. They render visible what official discourse conceals. They articulate anxieties that mainstream political rhetoric often downplays in favour of economic growth narratives.

Olga Vaz: Olga Vaz has proudly accepted the title of the "undisputed political queen" accorded to her by the Goan audience with such élan that her YouTube channel uses the same nomenclature. Some of her very famous *kantaram* are "*BJP Aunty*", "Uzzo" (Fire), "*Velingkarak Mozo Zabab*" (My answer to Velingkar), "*Censor*", "*Ponnjecho Pul Gurvar*" (Panjim Bridge is pregnant), "*Kollo*" (Fox), *Traffic Police*", "*Ponvoticho Serkar*" (Ill-omened government), "*Ho Kolso bond , Zunkuch zai*" (This coal has to stop), "*Bhumiputra*" "*IIT Naka*" (We don't' want IIT), "*Formalin Fish*", " *Rajkaran*", "*Goa Miles*", "*Ranno fail, Pappu pass*" and "*Utt Mhadei Rakh*".

While outright satire and ridicule is the hallmark of her songs such as "*Taligao cho Ambo*" (The Mango of Taligoa), Olga is more critical of the various problems caused by the corrupt practices of the ministers of the then government who are called on be the "real citizen" of Goa in the song, "*Za Goenkar Khoro*" (Become a real Goan), the song lists all the ministers that have led the corruption in the state. Her satire is biting and she does not mince her words but spells out the names of each of the government ministers loud and clear giving a clarion call of "Wake up Goans" and "let us change the politics of Goa". Her songs are many a times in response to the heated current debates as in "*Velingkarak Mozo Zabab*" (My answer to Velinkar) is a direct confrontation to the statements made by the then Chief Minister Subhash Velingkar which she strongly asserts are made to incite communal discord amongst the united

Goan public. She is a strong feminine voice on the Goan stage who wears her political badge proudly and is aware that her songs which are "*dharicho koito*" (sharpened knife) will expose the reality without any fear. Her songs rake up various issues – need to build new bridges as in "*Ponnjecho Pul Gurvar*" (Panjim Bridge is pregnant) or potholed ridden roads, the politics of renaming, harassment of the general tourists through corrupt practices as in "*Traffic Police*", the transfer of the righteous Mayor Satyapal Singh, the taxi business being thwarted through "*Goa Miles*", the controversy surrounding use of the chemical formalin to preserve fish in "*Formalin Fish*", the need to awaken the general public to rise and demand their rights regarding the diverting of Mhadei waters in "*Utt Mhadei Rakh*", or the flooding of Panjim the so called "smart city" or the issue of black money being brought back to India. All issues that need to be brought to the forefront for analysis and debate are taken up as the content of her songs.

Francis de Tuem: Francis de Tuem is a *kantarist* with a mission, "Even if two people from the audience take my message home, I am happy" (Mergulhao). Francis de Tuem produces and directs *tiatrs* and thus the *kantaram* in his *tiatr* directly reach out to the general audience, though he also has a dedicated YouTube channel and has released music albums. His songs are effective in creating a fever pitch as his political satire makes scathing remarks on the state of Goan politics. His album "*Political Mix*" uses well known Goan Classics to remix them for his political observations on Goan Ministers, he does not spare any of them; taking up events from the newsroom he derides each of them for their corrupt practices and their controversial insensitive remarks. "*80 Vorsache Mhatare*" (Old men of 80 years) is a song that ridicules the ministers not dying because the keepers of neither heaven or hell are ready to accept them. The song also questions the portfolios given to various ministers irrespective of their education and expertise in the subject. As a *tiatrist* and through his productions like *Social Worker* he puts across various questions regarding corruption and politics (Pires). At one of his

performances in Pai Tiatrist Hall in Margao on Wednesday, 11 November 2015, he was accosted by the supporters of an MLA who was the butt of Francis' derision ("Tuem troubles"). The very famous *"8 Beiman sorop"* (8 ungrateful snakes) castigates the defecting ministers from one political party to another not respecting the sentiments of the voters who had voted for them. His *tiatr* "*Serkar 420*" lambasts the power games in the political field and his song "*Dha Ghakti Hat*" (Ten Betrayed Hands) exposes the greed of the ministers that prompted the defection and betrayal of the voter's faith. The callousness of the ministers seen in this major political upheaval; wherein MLAs from one political party defected to another; rocking the Goan political scene was subjected to mockery by several other *kantarists* (singers) in the *tiatrs* and on their YouTube channels, like Olga Vaz's "MLAs for Sale" and Mariano Fernandes' tiatr "*CM*" that highlighted the greed of the local politicians ("Political Drama finds Space on Tiatr Stage").

The migrant issue is also taken up by the *kantarists*. Goa is the richest state of India it has the "highest GDP per capita among all Indian states, two and a half times that of the country. In 2018-19, per capita NSDP of the State was Rs. 4,67,998 against per capita income of Rs. 1,26,406 for India (Government of India Press Bureau). According to the Census report of 2011, Government of India, 78.2% of the Goan population are migrants. And the locals "*gavkaris*" believe that "the operations of the migrants change the demography and add burden to the limited infrastructure" (Devi). The issue of migrants is a burning issue that got aggravated after the enactment of the *Bhumiputra Adhikarini Bill* of 2021. The term "*Bhumiputra*" is defined in the Bill as "a person who is residing in the State of Goa at least for a period of thirty years before the date of making application under section 5; and in occupation of a dwelling unit and includes his or her spouse, son, daughter in law and unmarried daughter" (Legislative Assembly of the State of Goa, lines15-20). The Bill faced severe backlash from all quarters and the *tiarists* lambasted the lawmakers pointing out the haste in its enactment citing the bizarre

early hours of its enactment – 3.30 to 4.30 am – on July 30, 2021 from, until it was finally revoked after two years in August 2023.

Francis de Tuem's "*Lamani Micheal*" voices the anxiety of the *gavkars* (locals) of Goa and in a tongue in cheek manner lambasts the MLA responsible for the vote bank politics that is a threat to the future Goans. "*Ghanteyeancho Kumpar*" is a disparaging comment upon the various problems that the state has been seething with after the influx of migrants.

Saby Dias: Saby Dias, popular as Saby de Divar, is yet another *tiatrist* who is known to expose the shams of corrupt politicians through an in-depth study. Olga, Saby de Divar and Francis de Tuem each take up many facets of corruption and in their style expose each of them forthrightly; while Olga and Francis de Tuem are blunt and outspoken spelling out names, Saby de Divar uses nicknames. He does not resort to personal upfront attack but uses statistics and information culled from various newspapers and research papers to expose the illegalities taking place in Goa. Some of his famous political *kantars* are '*Azunui Bhiepachi Goroz Na?*' (Shouldn't one still not be afraid?), '*Lockdown Korun Dilem Bhorun*' (Effects of Lockdown), '*Goa Kelam Watermelon*' (Goa is turned into a watermelon), '*Prime Minister*', '*Sot Tem Sot' (Truth is truth), Ho Uzo Assemblyin Pavlear?*' (If this fire reaches the Assembly?), '*Serkar 30-40*' (Government 30-40) and '*Corona Virus vo Business?'*(Corona Virus or Business?). His songs indicate how in the Foucauldian sense knowledge becomes a tool of political accountability.

The anti-government songs thus incited the Goan Government to bring the *tiatrists* and their *kantaram* under censor in 2015, this move too is taken up by Olga in her song "Censor" where she vehemently derides the decision and asserts that the censor should be applicable to the ministers rather than the *tiatrists* as she takes up the case of the Goan Tourism Minister who made loose statements on June 5, 2025, as he described the accused of a rape incident as "naïve" and dismissed the crime itself as a "stray incident" ("Men Accused of Gangrape").

These songs are not sentiments that belong to a few *kantarists* (song writers), but are those that are in circulation, in discussions at homes, markets and villages. When *tiatrists* like Olga Vaz, Francis de Tuem, and Saby de Divar bring these critiques onto the public stage, the "hidden transcript" becomes dramatically "public"; in the same vein as Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* talks of the "public" and the "hidden transcript". The critique, the seething anger, and growing resentment that circulate offstage among subordinate groups find it difficult to emerge into public discourse, "a critique of power spoke behind the back of the dominant" (Scott, xii); the public anger over border reopening during COVID, the frustration over political defections, their grievances about vote-buying and corruption, their anxiety over demographic and environmental changes are all "hidden transcripts" which are brought out vociferously into the dominant "public" narrative as satire by the likes of Olga Vaz, Francis de Tuem, and Saby de Divar, as Scott puts it, "spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power" (xiii); thereby generating "the power to disseminate knowledge" in the Foucauldian sense (34), taking a great risk, showing courage by making their knowledge visible. By calling pandemic deaths "cold-blooded murder" or questioning the Chief Minister's rationale for reopening borders, the *kantarists* break the boundary between backstage complaint and frontstage confrontation, transforming murmured dissent into collective political speech and convert satire into a weapon of accountability. This is precisely what Scott calls "the moment when the dissent of the hidden transcript crosses the threshold to open resistance is always a politically charged situation" (207). In Scott's terms, one can assert that the *kantarists* courageously convert backstage dissent into frontstage defiance; thereby "speaking truth to power" and reaffirming *tiatr* as a democratic site of resistance.

Conclusion: The *kantarists*, thereby shout loud their conviction that callous behaviour of the minsters in the assembly is not to be tolerated. The defection of the Congress Goan ministers is a sore thumb that is questioned by them. Issues like the mismanagement of the

State during Covid 19 pandemic are taken up by these *kantarists.* When Olga in *"Uzzo"*, Francis de Tuem in *"Coronacho Vepar"*, *"Pehle Corona baad mein Kangana"*, and *"Yes Boss CM"*, or Saby de Divar in *"Azunui Bivpachi garaz na re?"* question the Chief Minister's decision to open Goa's borders during the pandemic, they are not merely criticizing policy but reframing the narrative. The shift from "green zone" to "red zone," and the charge of "cold-blooded murder" for pandemic deaths, disrupt the official discourse of governance and development. They transform grief into political accountability.

The ruling government made several attempts to restrain these *kantarists* from creating dissent. The Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS) submitted a memorandum demanding that a censor board be established for plays and Konkani *tiatrs* so that communal harmony is not disturbed ("HJS wants Parrikar to establish Censor Board for Tiatrs"). Foucault reminds us that power responds to resistance with mechanisms of control. The demand by the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS) for a censor board for *tiatr* represents an attempt to discipline discourse; what Foucault would term: a regulatory apparatus. But these attempts to restrain the *tiatrs* and their *kantaram* have been a futile task. Olga Vaz's album *Censor* strongly hits out at the attempts of trying to curb democratic voices from speaking out against the prevalent system and its anomalies. Her album *Censor* becomes, therefore, an act of resistance against this disciplinary control. Several *tiatrists* too reacted equally strongly. Francis de Tuem's assertion of freedom of speech foregrounds *tiatrists* as subjects who refuse to be silenced within a hegemonic discourse. Rallying under the banner of 'Tiatristancho Ekvott' eminent *tiatrists* condemned the government's purported move of censorship on Feb. 21, 2015. Kala Academy's Chairman Vishnu Surya Wagh strongly reiterated the role of these *tiatrists*: "Tiatrists are not mere artists but defenders of society and have a right as well as do enjoy the freedom of expression to speak out and criticise the government and other personalities" ("Govt shouldn't Censor Tiatrs").

The *kantarists* by critiquing corrupt politicians, bureaucratic inefficiency, misuse of public funds expose the corruption in governance. Their satire on vote-buying, false promises, opportunistic party-switching, speak about the erosion of democratic values. They voice local concern regarding the marginalisation of the common Goan because of large-scale in-migration, its political implications, and the fear of loss of local identity. Environmental issues are also taken up indicating the manner in which greed and callousness is damaging the pristine life of Goa, its forests, rivers, and village life. Goan *tiatr* with its *kantaram* functions as a powerful medium of political and environmental resistance, offering a counter-discourse to dominant structures of power. Thus, through a Foucauldian lens, the *tiatr* becomes more than entertainment; it becomes a site of discursive struggle. *Kantarists* become cultural watchdogs, democratic conscience-keepers and producers of counter-hegemonic truth. Drawing on Foucault's ideas of discourse, knowledge, and power, the *tiatr* can be seen as generating alternative knowledge that exposes corruption, electoral malpractice, cultural marginalisation, and the erosion of democratic values. In critiquing corrupt politicians, bureaucratic apathy during COVID-19, electoral malpractice, and environmental exploitation, the *tiatr* generates a living archive of dissent. It exemplifies how cultural performance can offer resistance to dominant power structures and reaffirm democratic participation through satire and song. These songs function as "hidden transcripts" made "public" as the *kantarists* transform private frustration into collective articulation; thereby turning their *kantars* into a powerful force of activism that voice political dissent.

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