

Christmas is a wonderful season to be in Goa. In the olden days there were no huge decorated malls or anything on the lines like in the West, but somehow it always had its own unique charm, simplicity and happiness in the households.

Vibrant atmosphere prevails in the cities and towns during this time. The story below depicts the happiness and wonder of Christmas in Goa from the perspective of a child back in the late fifties.

There may not have been many string lights those days, but a 'star' made from bamboo and coloured craft paper was a must for every home, and it had its own aura that

said it all. As soon as the sun set, these 'stars' would be lit up by incandescent bulbs in the cities, while in the villages they would be lit up by candles or

oil-lamps, accompanied by bright lanterns all along the balconies. The highlight was to attend the midnight mass on Christmas Eve and later folks would be visiting neighbours, wake up the sleeping ones, sing and share sweets. It was probably the happiest night in many a home for the rich and the poor alike. It has perhaps not changed much since then.

THE CRIB – The Joy of Christmas



It was October. December, Christmas and New Year were still far away. But it was already time for the little boy to visualize the setting of

the crib. The boy wondered what Bethlehem must have really looked like so many years ago when Jesus Christ was born. So he shuffled through some old Christmas cards of the previous years which he kept for references, and came across a Nativity Scene with the hills in the background and a manger which stood in the foreground. The Star of Bethlehem was high above in the picture. He took time in looking

at it and put it back where it was among his collection. So then his immediate task would be to paint a back drop of a star-lit night with faint hills as silhouettes in the background. Then he put his thinking cap on visualizing the setting for his crib. He would make a small star using translucent foil with a light in it and NOT a painted one on the backdrop itself, he thought. He would bring the soil from the fields and would

grow
grass in it about a week in
advance on a large flat piece of
wood on which
he would place the crib itself. He
would then 'construct' a "bridge"
with
water underneath and a miniature
winding path that led to the
entrance of the crib. He
would transplant little yellow
flowered plants which he would
scoop from the
fields nearby, trying to make it as
realistic as he could along with tiny
shoots of flowers that grew in the

garden adjoining his house.

December drew near and soon it would be Christmas time. By that time he thought he would have saved enough money in his

“milleur”

(clay piggy bank) to buy a new Nativity Set

that he had set his eyes on in a shop in the nearby market town and hoped that no one else would buy it before he got there.

Two weeks before Christmas the boy told his mother that he would

like to open his clay piggy bank and check what the small coins had amounted to, so that he could go along with her and buy the Nativity piece set. Opening the piggy bank would mean smashing it open. So one day he summed up the courage to do just that in order to collect whatever he had. He then headed to the market town along with his mother hoping to buy the set from the shop where he had seen the crib set during his few earlier trips there.

"That's the shop", he told his mother, pointing to the shop as soon as he reached the busy shopping street. "I've seen it in their showcase the last time I was here", said the boy looking up over his shoulder at his mother.

"It's a lovely piece, come on mother, hurry", he said beckoning his mother to hasten her steps while nodding his head to one side, leading the way.

He looked into the shop window and to his great grief the set was

not there. The boy's heart sank. They went in and enquired. It had already been sold. So they requested the man in the shop behind the cash counter to show them another set if he had. "See over there," the man said looking over his bifocals, pointing his finger to a shelf on the side of the shop. The boy turned and saw in the direction the man pointed. There it was, a set better than the one had seen before. Happily, he asked the price. Sadly, it was expensive. It was not something

he could afford. "We will go to another shop and see" the boy's mother said. The boy was silent. The second shop did not have any either that suited to his little collected savings. "We will see another set in another place", his mother said. After shopping around in the market place for groceries, they returned home, but without the Nativity set.

Soon it was Christmas Eve. The whole crib was ready and lots of

people from the village would come to see it after the mid-night mass. But the boy did not have any nativity pieces to place inside and around the crib.

Then a brilliant idea flashed past the boy's mind. Why not make a figure in the form of Baby Jesus in a cradle with outstretched hands like the one he had seen in the various Christmas cards he received the previous year. 'Good idea! he thought to himself. But where's the clay? Too late for getting clay. Its dark

outside, he cannot get clay at this hour and soon it will be time to go the church for the midnight mass along with the other boys and girls from the village.

Just a few hours before midnight the boy's mother was busy in the kitchen kneading flour to make some extra sweets at the last minute as the neighbours would stop for tea or coffee on their return

from Midnight Mass. People would be coming to wish them in the morning too. She did not want to run short of sweets to offer. At that moment the boy thought

"Why not use flour instead of clay?" So he asked his mother for some kneaded dough and started to make a rough form, and then slowly handcrafted a form of Baby Jesus which he himself could not believe that it turned out so well. He was

running out of time. He has to get dressed to go for the midnight mass – his new pant and shirt his mother had stitched for him specially for Christmas was neatly placed on his bed. So in the meantime he painted it in water colour, let it dry for a while and placed 'Baby Jesus' inside the crib. He switched on the crib lights and there it was. He was very happy and pleased with himself at the outcome.

The village boys and girls had already assembled outside his house beside the path that led to the main road. Everyone sounded very cheerful. After making sure that no one who wished to go to church remained behind,

they all proceeded to the the church - half an hour's walk away.

The midnight mass service was grand. After the mass the village

chapel choir boys sang
and played Christmas
Carols to the
accompaniment of the
guitar. After the carol
singing it was time to
leave for home. It was a
clear, star-lit and chilly
night and a slight cold
breeze blew across the
land. Everyone wore
sweaters. Keeping close

to
each other they
proceeded on the
winding path through the
village. The boys's
grandmother led the
group with a lantern in
her hand. Some sang
carols along the way,
while others giggled,
laughed and joked in
childish and innocent fun.

Lots of people from the village came to see his crib after the midnight mass. The light from the 'star' made from bamboo and craft paper shed its glow on the front courtyard while they all sat in the "balcao". "Come on children," said the boy's mother distributing

sweets to all the children first and then to the rest, "taste some of our Christmas sweets". "I hope they have turned out well and hope they are sweet enough" she continued.

The folks came into the house to see the boy's crib and expressed great admiration for its detail and layout, but no one else knew the boy's little secret about baby Jesus in the crib except

his mother. Later they visited their neighbours' houses and sang some more Christmas carols along with the other boys and girls of his age from the neighbourhood. Then it was time to go to home to bed.

When the boy woke up the next morning he went to the Crib and found that 'Baby Jesus' was missing from there. He was puzzled. He was sad. Did somebody steal it? Was there somebody else like himself who needed it

so badly?

The boy decided to make another piece. He was astonished that it turned out to be better than the first. He painted it, let it dry and placed it inside the crib.

A few hours later someone was caught "red-pawed" trying to take it away the second time. Yes, you must have guessed it. It was the house pet-cat that was the real culprit and the puzzle was finally solved.

Then finally on
Christmas morning,
the boy decided to
craft one out from
fresh and 'REAL

CLAY” that was found in abundance in nearby fields. At that time of year village people dug wells in their respective lots, in order to obtain water for their vegetable patches. He was very surprised at

himself getting better
at the craft of clay
moulding and uses
the tiny statue of Baby
Jesus every year to
this day.

This season I sit and
reminisce about that
night of that chilly

Christmas Eve once
again. That was a
long time ago, but still
seems like yesterday.
We were
all young then.
Child-wonder and
Christmas spirit
reigned supreme. The
 momen

t may have passed
but what still remains
is the memory that
bears t
estimony to the
undiminished spirit of
Yuletide.

And I know this story
is true. I was that boy.

WISHING YOU ALL A
JOYOUS
CHRISTMAS AND A
PEACEFUL NEW
YEAR 2011.

Tony Fernandes

Author of: Goa -
Memories of My
Homeland
Poems and Short
Stories