

MAPPING MUMBAI

BY MEHER MARFATIA



IN A 10-PART SERIES, THE WRITER UNCOVERS LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES BEHIND WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE AND PLACES

You can write to Meher at mirrorfeedback@timesgroup.com

Little Goa in a room



Members of the Majorda club at Sunday's centenary celebrations

Why do I stare at the Amar Akbar Anthony poster? It should be no novelty to see a still of Manmohan Desai's cult masala movie on any wall. But this hangs bang beside a sepia print of Anthony Gonsalves, the musician on whom Bachchan's career-defining role was modelled. The bit of Bollywood history enjoys almost equal pride of place as a centrepiece vintage wooden altar across the room.

I'm in the Majorda coor (club) at Dhobi Talao, where manager Bruce Fernandes announces "the real Anthony Fernandes was from our club." He adds that its members are gearing up for a feast to greet the club's century on October 5. With a celebratory brass band and dawn mass in homage to their patron saint Our Lady of Boa Morte (Good Death). Three floors up a rickety staircase of Jer Mahal, the iconic World War I-built building opposite Metro Cinema that conservation architects hail as "Mumbai's most beautiful chawl", we're in one of 20 coors located at this address alone.

A coor is a rental room every Goan village reserved for its residents in Bombay since the 1850s. This unique social arrangement stemmed from the need for migrants to have a home away from home on first docking in the City of Gold. If educated Goans became clerks and scribes, drawn to coors before boarding their boat were sailors working with shipping companies, butlers of British military officers, cooks in Parsi households.

Unable to afford independent quarters, men on meagre salaries relied on their club, also called a union or chummy. Besides Dhobi Talao, coors sprang up at Dockyard Road, Mazgaon and Lohar Chawl. They charged two to four rupees monthly plus a rupee towards death benefit fund; the amount even later seldom exceeded Rs 100. Seamen to tailors to chefs blessed visionary ancestors founding the coor system for reasons beyond economics. Bombay bewildered them. So the coor's formally declared aims included "to be together as brothers in a foreign land" and "to help each other in sickness and emergencies".

They came from Bardez, Salcette and Ilhas, crowding clubrooms to sleep atop a trunk each of personal belongings. These yet lie lined along the foot of four walls of the room. The trunk is symbolic: a man literally lives out of the box and on it. Above the "bedding" are clothes pegged in assigned spots. Gilbert Pinto, caretaker of Bastora Union, recalls old rules — rosary prayers and ladainis (litanies) at 8 pm, lights out at 10, no women on the premises.

"We didn't miss parents because of goodhearted club elders," says Felix Dias, the proprietor of David & Company Printing Press. "Coors gave us the best camaraderie, what friendships were forged there!" President of the Federation of All Goan Clubs, he reveals 80 existing city-wide coors registered with the Charities Commission — a fraction of those community hubs that thrived when he joined his in the 1950s.

The footfalls now thinning, club lights are dimming. Felix Dsa from the Vagator coor explains that Goa's tourism boom ensures more jobs on native soil, while those already here fly the coop sooner today. Like a young call centre employee who will leave his Raia Club down the passageway on marrying in December.

Climbing to the terrace, startling rafted pigeons en route, I reach the Grand Club of Vanxim door. It is creaked open by Cajetan Pinto, typewriter repairer by profession, theatre make-up man by passion. Sniffing curry on the boil, his smile fades as he likens coors to Konkani tiatr whose actors he daubs with greasepaint. The future of both great traditions seems bleak, he rues.