

As Planning and Development Authorities (PDA) are sought to be imposed on Goan villages, in opposition to which fervent calls are made for the preservation of villages, curiously both are using the hashtag of *Goemkarponn*. The life of the recently deceased athlete Floriano Almeida (1947-2018), Goa's undisputed long distance runner for over a decade and a half from 1965 onwards, may just about offer another kind of *Goemkarponn*, to reflect on. A *Goemkarponn* shaped by the sports spirit of yester years that can point to equitable realities for villagers, while also repelling exploiters who are making our villages a real-estate playground.

Sports, it seems, had the ability, in the days of Floriano, to create village camaraderie, as it brought the rich and poor, the privileged and the disadvantaged castes, local people and settlers (meaning those not originally from the village) together. Even if it be with some reticence at first, some landed local people were drawn by sports – playing and running with fellow villagers. It was a matter of time before they would ultimately mingle as comrades, to the mutual advantage of each other and to the general advantage of all in the village.



Floriano Almeida.

Those were the days when paddy fields and compounds transformed into sports grounds in the summer. The environment for sports in Taleigao, was actively enhanced by Portuguese Governors, notable among them being the last governor Vasalo e Silva.

As I encountered my uncle Floriano again now, through my conversations with the many people whose lives he touched, I realized that when he set his foot into athletics, albeit by accident, his talent was noticed and supported by his fellow villagers. They supported him despite their social and economic backgrounds. He in turn relayed this support to his generation of runners from various backgrounds – providing badly needed basic financial assistance, and also letting them in on his winning strategies in athletics, especially when they displayed the inclination for hard work.

Says a fellow villager, José Alexandre Viegas, “I ran with Floriano every morning at 5.30 am, in the late 70s and early 80s, but I never aspired to be an athlete. I didn’t think I had it in me, I just enjoyed running for the fun of it, and for the fun of running with Floriano”. Floriano’s dedication was such, say his co-runners, that those who ran with him, feared he would exclude them from his company, if they talked and disturbed his practice.

Floriano’s sports contemporaries remark that despite his then frail and short stature, his strides were large. They recall him beginning the race with short steps, then using long strides to pick up speed, and these long strides were then only interjected by short steps to catch his breath, until he got to the winning post. In taking short steps and long strides, it was perhaps not just his athletics career that was defined, but perhaps his life too. He ran like a horse, as Sheikh says. His stamina was terrific. Not for him the access to special diets like those available to contemporary athletes, nor the access to today’s terrific resources. Just normal Goan food, wholesome and straight from the fields (now vanishing under the gated complexes and second homes of the super-rich) around his home, seemed to have given him stamina. The kind that would make him look fresh and ready for another run from Taleigão to Mandovi Hotel at Panjim, and back, after the routine practice run.

Floriano’s contemporaries reminisce the days when they walked from Taleigão to their schools in Panjim. “Our stamina was built through all these steps”, they say. Sportswomen



and sportsmen remember Floriano's familiar whistling of the *Alvorada*, a tune played by the brass band at 5 am outside the Church on feast days. Being an early riser, he mastered this tune and it was a kind of signature tune for team Taleigao and also team Goa. Both Floriano's whistle and contagious laugh are memories that his fellow villagers and sports colleagues treasure.

A real man, gentle beneath his firmness, and firm beneath his gentleness – that was Floriano. His mother having died when he was barely three years old, he spent most of his growing years in a family of mostly men – in the process learning aspects regarded feminine: how to cook, keep the house, do the gardening; as much as he learnt tasks considered appropriate for men: how to fix things, replace a tile, and do the shopping. He also relayed this trait of not stereotyping roles to others. As a child, he taught me the basics of carpentry with a toy carpentry set. In other words, he was emblematic of what men can be if only society doesn't condition them to only do what stereotypical men do. He showed the world this is the mettle sportsmen can also be made of. Hard work and practice is what made him the man that he was. His journey to full personhood was ably complemented by his wife Estefania Fernandes. His three daughters, and two son-in-laws, valued his quiet unflashy support. They in fact miss his fried fish and beef cutlets.

If his daughters had a query about cooking, they could ask him about it with as much ease as they could ask their mother. "If we called to ask how to make ghee, pat came his answer, even before passing the phone to our mother." That is why he was a hero to his children, who candidly said so in their thanksgiving at the funeral.

Reflections on the lives and social relations of people such as Floriano Almeida, who have lived and sweated it out in Goa are essential if one is to take our villages out of their conservatism and yet not be swallowed by fast track urbanization, for it is they who can throw light on what works for sustainability, and what doesn't. It is they who can tell you which *Goemkarponn* works and which doesn't. And they would certainly affirm that the aesthetics of *Goemkarponn* is determined by sweat and toil, not simply looking-good or grand. The rapid urbanization which the PDAs seek to usher will not only destroy the ecological balance of our villages, but also the sporting spirit of many Florianos who continue to reside in them.



Floriano Almeida — Another Kind of Goemkarponn
(The writer gratefully acknowledges inputs from Elma D Cunha e Colaço, Torres Martins, Luciano Fernandes, Sheikh Abdul Ahmed, Pedro Coutinho and Jose Alexandre Viegas).

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