

## *The Indigenous People (Kunbis) of Cuelim*

The *Kunbis* of Cuelim, which comprise nearly 48 percent of the population of the village, are mostly concentrated along the foothills in the wards of *Borsullem*, *Oisollem* and *Murdi*. They live off the land as farmers and toddy tappers and have done so for generations as closely-knit community. They are the descendants of original developers of the land and megalith builders of Megalithic Age (~2000-3000 years ago). Reportedly, several caves around the hill with bats roosting remain to be explored by archaeologists.

The rice fields the *Kunbis* cultivate are the most fertile in the area, as it is watered by the many springs flowing from the hills of Cuelim, the adjacent villages of Nagoa and Verna which converge to form the beginnings of River Sal.

Before the arrival of the new migrants from the north centuries ago and displaced the earlier developers from most of their land, their footprints have lasted as seen in the rice fields, bundhs and most significantly in megalithic structures, seen in the village and many others through which the river flows - many of these ancient structures have been destroyed or are in ruins.

There is no historical documentation about the village prior to the conquest of Goa by the Portuguese in 1510. The earliest archival record – *The Foral of Salcete 1567-68* – however lists a number of temples as having existed in Cuelim possessing immovable assets, like plantations and rice fields. None of these earlier temples are now standing. There is an inland pond, *madeuachem tarem (tollem)* – in *Borsullem* – which is surrounded by houses. Perhaps many of the ancestors of the present residents may have been associated with the temple rituals. The other temples listed in the *Foral*, include *ozineser*, *santeri*, *gumo (gaum) puroso*, *oizari* and *quetrapal* (guardian of the field). The *gaum puroso (purusha)* or village elder-god was erected to commemorate the death of a village hero.

In 1579, Fr. A. Monserrat wrote that in Salcete, each caste had its own temple and that they had gods of war, of the sowing season, of fortune, of life, of death and devil god, whom they revered the most.



Samtu Naique, Purso Naik-son of Nagua Naique, brothers Diogo and Jorge Fernandes, all *gaumkars* and Ramu Sinai (scribe), had to declare under oath to government officials, the immovable assets of the temples. As documented in the *Foral*, many residents also offered their services to the temples, like, annual thatching of the roofs, carrying processional flags of the temple and at nights, sleeping in the temples guarding assets.

**Jose Maria Soares** of *Borsullem*, considers his family to be the original *gaumkars* of Cuelim and have enjoyed the inherited right of carrying the flags during the processions at festivals, just as his ancestors did for the temples. Presently only his sons carry the flags, parasol and beat the drums during the processions of the three kings.



All three kings approaching the Chapel at the top of the hill



The flagman pays homage to the megalithic stones seen in middle of the rice fields along the traditional path.

The megalithic stones (dolmens) seen along the King's trail - some in ruins – are much revered by the tribal community. There have been many explanations, but the real reason is lost to history, nevertheless, the tradition has lasted. The alignment of the sun during the Equinox (as seen below) may have had cosmological significance and served as a calendar to the new cultivators.



Sunrise at Spring Equinox – 2015



Volunteers serving *congee* to the tired & thirsty at the foothills on the day of Three Kings feast.



A walk through the village with Menino Borges



An old woman herding goats home after grazing



A cattle shed at dusk



Madheu tollem, Inland pond



A well - carved out of solid rock



Women growing their vegetable in the fertile fields



Roberto Fernandes of *Borsullem* sharing information.



Menino Borges (*Borsullem*) my guide in finding megaliths in the area.

***Themistocles D'Silva, 05/23/2023***