

Wheel comes full circle at Benaulim museum

Paul Fernandes | TNN

Benaulim: If all goes well, two horse-driven Victorias and two tongas of old vintage will carry guests from Benaulim beach to see more of the country's transport heritage at a new museum in the village that is showcasing the evolution of the wheel and its links with India's progress.

Set to open to the public in November by the side of the Goa Chitra—an existing ethnographic museum—Goa Chakra is being projected as a first-of-its-kind transport museum in India. It will showcase 68 carts, carriages, 11 machilas (palanquins), and other related pieces—from the potter's wheel to irrigation wheels, from the



Goa Chakra, a first-of-its-kind transport museum in India, is set to be open to the public in November

spinning wheel to a handloom machine on wheels.

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From Carts, Buggies, Temple Chariots & Palanquins To The Potter's Wheel, Irrigation Wheel, Dowry Chests On Wheels & More... ...One man's finds across country under one roof

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Goa Chakra—projected as a first-of-its-kind transport museum in India—has been set up in Benaulim and is likely to be open to the public in November. In a 750sq m space under one roof, the museum will house the carts, buggies,

“Goa Chakra is everything about the wheel—and based on the evolution of the wheel—right from the potter's wheel to the spinning wheel, irrigation wheel, dowry chests on wheels, grinding wheel, transportation on wheels and warping wheel (a process before cloth goes to the handloom machine). In short, it's about wheels—from creating to process-

try to retrieve crumbling pieces, seeks to celebrate the natives' feats of engineering from locally available materials and the passionate artisanship reflected in the works.

“It was basically a trade of carpentry (in making carts),” says Gomes. “The artisanship bloomed with the designing and evolution of the cart.”

work made all the difference. “One cart would have an artistically done canopy, others carved panels,” says Gomes.

The countrywide jaunts threw up interesting and touching tales. In Yeda, a village on the Andhra Pradesh-Karnataka border, Gomes was left impressed by the residents. “Every family had a beauty of a cart and they fancied them like we adore cars.” Five carts, each a unique piece of workmanship, were bought from Yeda.

One of the oldest carts at the museum was found in the jungles near Yellapur in Karwar district. “Going by its design and mechanism, it is probably about 200 years old and was used to collect firewood,” says Gomes.

Yet another cart, artistically hand-painted with vegetable oil by the Tarkar community that is known for its warli art, was bought from a village near the Gujarat-Maharashtra border. It was blackened by dust. “I was lucky the antique dealer missed the painting behind the dust or he would have doubled the price,” says Gomes with a smile. Since the cart had only three of the four brass braces that hold the canopy in place, it was cast in Mumbai.

And yet another cart took almost two decades to reach him. While researching tribal art in the early '90s in North India, Gomes saw a beautiful, but discarded cart next to a house. The owner's price of ₹70,000 shocked him, but he still paid ₹2,000 on the spot. The full payment took 10 years. “I am happy he kept it for me, but when it came it had fallen to pieces. As the deal had been made, they kept the cart where it was, without any maintenance,” says Gomes.

Interestingly after he bought a dande or dande (a type of cart) from Belgaum, his father, spotting it at the museum, became nostalgic. “It had been used during his school days in Belgaum,” says Gomes.

The in-house restoration of the carts was as much a challenge and a time-consuming task as the acquisition had been. “I had to invest in the cost, insurance (during transit) and transportation. Each cart had to be identified, mapped and then dis-

mantled for assembling later,” he says.

A Punjabi carpenter, Yeshi Singh, who Gomes calls chacha, has helped him for 14 years. “I and chacha worked on the carts, while the polishing, weaving and waxing work has been done by outside people.” A team from Uttar Pradesh did the cleaning, waxing and other treatment. Weavers from different states and wheel-makers from Belgaum were also roped in. Treating each cart with bee wax cost ₹8,000 per cart. “It took a maximum of six months for a cart. I interviewed many cart and wheel makers in Goa, nearby Kharapur, as I had no information,” recalls Gomes.

The restoration methods are universally accepted and the patched-up parts and even coating can be renewed, assures Gomes.

Carts are the only ones which can negotiate rough terrains and narrow lanes, something beyond mechanized vehicles. The carts' ingenuity at work could be seen, as they made carts with broader wheels for sandy areas and thinner for harder terrains. “The design of the ubiquitous bullock cart has often been modified to make its movement easier in slushy conditions and undulating terrain of rural areas and rubberized steel and wooden wheels with bearings also increased their efficiency for carrying agricultural produce and as a means of commercial transport.

In time, Gomes wants to

SHOWCASE

▲ The walls of the gallery will display panels with information and researched documentation

▲ Two galleries on the first floor will provide information about coastal trade and related artefacts, and on the second display photo archives related to the wheel for research and scholars

▲ A section on grinding stones will display dhantem to make wheat flour and girondd to dehusk paddy

▲ Four gypsy carts of a caravan that carried tools, belongings and people. The carts can be easily converted into a temporary home by pitching a tent over them. There is a safety locker for their precious belongings. The wheels are solid and broad and braced together with camel leather straps

▲ Cart-related objects like yokes, harnesses, lights, whips and some personal things belonging to gypsies and other cartmen will be displayed

▲ A cart pulled by a black buck from Rajasthan

Infographic: Rakesh Mundaye



Victor Hugo Gomes, the curator of Goa Chakra, and some of the archaic modes of transport at the museum

temple chariots, palanquins, once pulled and carried on shoulders by humans, drawn by horses, mules, bulls and even black backs, and virtually hand-picked by an individual over two decades from across the country

—and the progress of Indian society through the wheel,” says Victor Hugo Gomes, the museum's curator and proprietor.

Transport museums around the world often proudly feature the vintage and grandeur of factory-made vehicles, some used by royals and high society. But Gomes, who roved through remote areas, backstreets and backyards of the coun-

Drawing a parallel to modern-day “competitions” between neighbours, Gomes says, “We buy cars to compete with neighbours, as a show of money and power, little realizing that the vehicles are factory-made. These village farmers, who made the carts, were also competing, but the differences were crafted in their decorative motifs.” While the cart frame and wheels stayed identical, the jute or cane



Tonga, Victoria rides as ‘tourist attraction’

Victor Hugo Gomes whose treasure trove of transport heritage will be opened to the public soon, is saddened by the government ban on carts and carriages of old vintage in some metropolises.

Human-pulled tongas carrying passengers were first banned long ago in Chennai and just a couple of years ago in Kolkata.

Tongas were banned in Old Delhi and recently the Victorias

were banned in Mumbai to make way for modern and fast cars. “All the Victorias are lying

along Mohammed Ali road in Mumbai,” rues Gomes.

The concept of a tonga was brought by the British to India. It was known as a gig. “Originally it was known as the British tonga. Later, it was re-designed to suit the type and size of draught animals and road conditions,” Gomes explains.

Hand-pulled carts in Kolkata had registration number plates. “They never overcharged due to strict monitoring,” he recalls. But the wheelies and carts has been shut down with just the stroke of a pen. “The ban on carts has affected multiple trades—cart makers, carpenters, wheel makers, metal smiths and the cartmen themselves. The only trade these persons knew has been taken away,” he sighs.

Gomes is hoping the state tourism department will permit the introduction of four tongas and Victorias in Benaulim to ferry tourists to his museum. “It will be a good tourist attraction in Goa,” he says. TNN

When the wheel let children take their first steps...

The ingenuity of our ancestors saw the wheel being used cleverly in shaping children's first tiny steps and also providing them toys to amuse themselves.

A small section in the museum will be dedicated to children's carts and toys-on-wheels. A child's walker, locally called babba gaddi or hat gaddo, a wooden tricycle helps the child take its first steps.

The Chittari community of Guntur are known for making these carts in Goa, though the tradition has faded



NO CHILD'S PLAY

ed now,” says Victor Hugo Gomes, curator of the new transport museum.

The section will showcase, among other things, a child's paliki which is 200

years old, which he bought from Nandgaon in Maharashtra.

A few pastimes of yore were fashioned on circular objects and wheels. Children would tow a wheel frame (at-to) with a wooden stick and run behind it. A flattened bottle cap on a thread was whirled for amusement, too.

A miniature trolley of sorts of discarded reels of thread mounted on a bamboo contraption and connected with thread was another innovative toy. “All these toys have the wheel as the motif,” says Gomes. TNN