

"KONKNNI CHOLCHITRAM" [Konkani Filmbook] by Isidore Dantas.
- a review
by Francis Rodrigues.

One glorious summer morning almost a hundred and twenty years ago today, the great Thomas Alva Edison opened our eyes to the magic of the kinoscope, and the enchantment of film was born. It was left to the Lumiere brothers to chart the course of cinema four years thence with their path-breaking 'moving pictures', in much the same way that over a century later Konkani film maven Isidore Dantas has documented its history in his own "Konkani Cholchitram"- literally Konkani moving pictures - or Konkani Filmbook.

Since their beginnings in the late 1940s, Konkani films and film songs have dominated the swathe of Konkani culture in south-west India, growing even stronger across the diaspora as the Konkani folk migrated across the globe. Their content, both on celluloid and the printed score has been described variously as lush, folksy, trite, schmaltzy, easy-on-the-eye and ear. Quite possibly true. Jazz never really gained a foothold in Konkani filmdom. Isidore Dantas addresses many of these issues, tracing in detail the rise and fall of Konkani film over the past six decades - starting with Al Jerry Braganza's "Mogacho Anvddo" (1949), the first Konkani film to appear almost two decades after India's first talking picture "Alam Ara" in 1931.

Whilst to the average filmi-buff Goencar, the content of Konkani film is often dismissed as "purely commercial", Mr. Dantas' work demonstrates quite convincingly that in terms of the story-line, moral issues and dramatic content, it was the parent film that quite powerfully shaped the Konkani film song rather than the other way around. His documentation of every minuscule tidbit of trivia that he was able to lay his hands on, quite eloquently demonstrates this. I will not spoil the surprise and gasps of discovery that you will encounter buried deep within Konkani Cholchitram, but suffice to say you will be pleasantly delighted.

The late lamented Andrew Greno Viegas commenced documenting our filmi-pop cultural history in his beautiful "50 years of Konkani cinema", which was to be followed by "90 years of Konkani music". I cannot resist mentioning my own successful commencement of Volume 1 of this series "Greatest Konkani Song Hits" which will eventually cover the whole gamut. Mr. Dantas too has included the rudimentary musical score of 85 songs (from his total of 107), a veritable treasure-trove. Where my work differs from his is in the transcription and arrangement - mine being for performance, whereas his is academic. Inevitably, Mr. Dantas' dissertation leads to a different and enriched perspective of Konkani film, their key role in our sub-culture, and subsequent influence on our second and third-generation diaspora.

I grew up abroad in a deeply-steeped Western music culture, where my father (a medical man) performed the violin with an Italian accompanist.

The handful of Indian radio stations there played a cross of filmi-geet and devotional songs throughout the week. Yet one evening was indelibly

different. Friday nights as I lay deliriously soaking in a hot tub, promptly at 9 pm from hidden speakers throughout the house, emerged the heart-tugging strains of Frank Fernand's score from "Amchem Noxib". It was an unforgettable experience. Granted the music was lush, even banal. But it echoed a haunting Latin past, buried images of a land and culture I never knew - literally 'moving pictures' in the windmills of my mind. The same 'moving pictures' that the pioneering Isidore Dantas has so movingly engineered to life.

To most Goans, at home or in the diaspora, the golden age of Konkani film, in picture and in song, spanned the 3 decades 1949-1978, starting with Al Jerry's "Mogacho Anvddo" and poetically ending with Chris Perry's "Bhueirantlo Munis". Certainly the music, if not necessarily the story, was unforgettable. Mr. Dantas' documentation of this period is epic - his collection of memorabilia quite startling. Not that his coverage of the following three decades is any less - in total 282 colour-filled pages of 269 photographs covering 31 Konkani celluloid productions, all the way to last year's internationally acclaimed "Poltoddcho Munis".

If there is any hesitation, perhaps it is that Mr. Dantas' text is entirely in Konkani. But the true Goencar will be overpowered by its unsurpassed visual splendour. This is not your average coffee-table trophy. Mr. Dantas' magnum opus is - as I do often - meant to be treasured and lovingly re-opened and re-read. On 21st September, 2010, as his book is launched worldwide, Isidore Dantas deserves our undivided praise.