

Norma Alvares & Claude Alvares | The Power of Two

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Freedom from plunder | Norma Alvares & Claude Alvares Looking back on four decades of marriage and an intensely close working relationship with his wife, the Padma Shri awardee Norma Alvares, twinkle-eyed, fiercely moustachioed Claude Alvares says: “We do not know what it is to have a domestic fight. We have not had a fight for these 40 years.” The serenity in this partnership—quite evident to anyone who visits the couple’s relaxed, hospitable home in the north Goa village of Parra—is the cornerstone of an extraordinary record of ferocious battles and activism that is one of the foremost reasons India’s smallest state still retains considerable charm and a good measure of its environmental heritage. Starting in 1987 with Goa’s first-ever public interest litigation to save the coastline’s once-pristine rolling sand dunes, the Goa Foundation, spearheaded by this couple, has won famous victories—from forcing the withdrawal of US-based multinational DuPont (which had planned a factory) to the stunning 2012 decision of the Supreme Court disallowing the billion-dollar state mining industry until its unchecked, rampant illegalities were brought under control. “As one monster bites the dust, another rises like the proverbial phoenix,” says Claude, 66. “We have an intense appreciation, like most other people, of the natural beauty of Goa, so we will fight to protect it as long as it takes.” And so the silver-haired, austere Alvareses spend their morning walks hotly discussing Goa Foundation strategies for the “significant challenge” of preserving 1,000 sq. km of open forests (more than 25% of the state’s land mass) or its forthcoming lawsuit against the state government’s plan for land use. “Not many people decide at the inception of their married life to do something different from the prescribed format,” says Norma, 62, “so naturally, spending one’s life as full-time activists appears to be unusual, though the experience of our independence movement will show hundreds of individuals who simply threw up a treadmill life for revolution.” Such aspirations were never on the cards for this idealistic couple, who became partners soon after they met at St Xavier’s College in Mumbai. He had grown up in Khotachiwadi, Mumbai, and studied philosophy, and she was a history student from Mahim. Their initial goal of working in Bihar gave way to Goa, where they had friends, and after a relatively unsuccessful stint trying to will an ambitious rural development project into existence, Claude did steady work for the Pritish Nandy-edited

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while Norma studied law as they raised a family of three boys. Then the

Goa Foundation

was born. Says Norma: “There have been some disappointments, strategies which didn’t work out, but that is intrinsic to all public interest work. Since social activism is something we chose—as opposed to being academics, which both of us were prior to getting married—we have enjoyed our involvement with issues of a public nature,” says Norma. But legal challenges are only one aspect of their work together. The Goa Foundation’s Green Goa Works Environment Company provides services to treat and convert garbage into manure, and sewage into a resource for plants. In 2008, it took over Goa’s largest garbage dump at Sonsoddo, to construct a landfill and clear out accumulated waste (the project was later terminated owing to political opposition) and has been entrusted with the installation of eco-friendly, cleanliness systems at Margao’s main marketplace.

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More than 25 years ago, Claude, and Norma also “wanted to do something about the fact that while European and American publishers succeed in filling up our book stores with their titles, we know very little of the view of people from Africa or other parts of India and Latin America, simply because their books are not available, despite the fact India has much more in common with those countries than the West,” says Norma on email.

Thus was born the most unique bibliophile haven imaginable: Mapusa's *Other India Bookstore*, crammed from floor to ceiling with publications "exclusively from the global South", a "one-stop shop for books on environmental issues" with hard-to-find treasures on every shelf, and thousands of loyal customers served by mail order. In 1990, its companion, the Other India Press, came into existence—it is now "the single largest publisher of alternative literature in India, including organic farming, home-schooling, environment and wildlife" says Norma.

"Claude and Norma motivate and guide a whole lot of us who are now working on environmental and social issues," says Nirmal Kulkarni, a 34-year-old herpetologist who is on the state wildlife advisory board, and only one of the scientists and environmental activists who credit the Goa Foundation with setting an example to follow.

Kulkarni says, "One goes to them not only for legal advice, but questions and concerns about all larger and smaller conservation issues, for what I would call a very significant conservation philosophy on why we do what we do, with what motivations." He is particularly appreciative of the "hard-core study and documentation" side of the Goa Foundation's contributions, especially its landmark 1993 "citizen's report on Goa's ecology and environment", *Fish, Curry And Rice*.

Though they have perhaps done more than anyone else to preserve their home state's environmental blessings, the Alvareses are not hopeful about its long-term health.

Using the [Goa Foundation](#)'s David-versus-Goliath win at the Supreme Court as illustration for their prognosis, Claude points out that the verdict grants ownership of huge iron-ore assets to the state, which could yield tens of thousands of crores in income over the coming decades. "But the chances of that happening are slim," he says, because "Goa's tragedy is that it has run-of-the-mill politicians, who are simply driven to convert our natural and built-up assets of natural greenery, hospitality, and the fantastic image of a tourist destination, into cash for ego and party politics."

Norma says: "The government of India we inherited with our independence has not changed its character or spots even after the transfer of power from the British. It remains a foreign institution, an exotic implant. It has no connection with our political or justice traditions, our cultural history. Thus, while it is required to enforce a constitutional mode of development, it continues by way of habit to implement the older colonial form of development whose interests have always been contrary to the country's interests."

United in unflinching commitment to their work, and their lives together with three grown sons, the Alvareses readily admit they are like yin and yang, with strongly contrary energies that flow together to become formidably complementary. Claude says: "She is so much better balanced, sober, articulate. She prepares herself. She leaves nothing to chance. I am just the opposite. But somehow, this basket of qualities has taken us so far. We respect each other's strengths, we make up for each other's weaknesses."

Norma agrees. "When we sit on the balcao on a sunny day, we know that when we decided that 'this is the person we want to live our life with', we did the right thing, so there is never a twinge of regret."

Vivek Menezes is a writer, photographer and founder and co-curator of the Goa Arts and Literary Festival.

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[Goa Foundation](#) - environmental action group Green Goa Works, Mapusa, offers organic food and other products. Other India Bookstore is crammed from floor to ceiling with publications exclusively from the global South, ...