

Christmas cheer

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Bombay is a difficult city to put down roots in. As the buildings get higher and higher, there is virtually no common ground for a community to meet. The concept of community space doesn't exist at all.

Even the parks for children to play in are few and far between. And then there is that insidious thing called an eleven month lease. No sooner have you found a dhobi, a restaurant that home delivers at two in the morning, and learnt your neighbours name, than it's time to move — your lease is up.

The one place where I have seen the concept of a supportive community alive and well is in chawls — where the compound in the centre ensures a middle ground for people to meet and get involved in each others lives. The rest of us middle class and above live in little boxes, cut off from each other and from forging an identity that extends beyond our little class.

It's a sad thought that the word 'communal' has it's roots in community - in a core idea of belonging. If you are born and brought up in Bombay you can boast a support system, but for the lakhs of migrants who move into the city, rootlessness is a very real problem. It always came home to me at Christmas time in the city. At midnight mass, I'd look around the sea of unknown faces around me and wonder who I was going to wish. Life in a village is very different.

My little village is called Assagao — it means 'Is there a village here?' It is set in a valley, and covered with trees, so it is really impossible to tell that a large village exists. Of course Goan villages aren't like villages in the rest of India. We boast a cyber café, a nouvelle cuisine restaurant and art gallery called Axirvaad, a branch of Animal Rescue, the Pallotti Institute of Philosophy, and Casa Tres Amigos — from where bike adventure tours across India are run.

The inhabitants are a mix of Indians and intrepid foreigners, and the Sarpanch runs a catering service that serves great Sorpotel. Here you feel very much part of a living breathing community. You are invited for the village fest, the school sports, the football match with the neighbouring village of Siolim, and every birthday, wedding and funeral that happens. You know your neighbours names and they know more than you would like them to about your life!

Nowhere is the feeling of community more apparent than at Christmas time. You can see Christmas coming from weeks

away. All the houses are white washed, and a frenzy of activity takes place at the church. Midnight mass was at the Pallotti Institute.

Here young men from across India train to be priests, so the hymns were in English, Tamil, Hindi and Portuguese. And after the mass we were all invited to a midnight feast in the main hall. As we toasted each other and scoffed Christmas Cake, I looked around and found myself surrounded by a sea of faces that I could put names to.

There was the postman, the young doctors from the Animal Rescue, my immediate neighbours, the owners of the cyber café... it felt good to belong. And so for all of you too, I hope your Christmas was spent among people you know and love, and I hope the New Year brings you a community that shares your ideas, your life and your hopes.