

I've always liked Indian pudding. This is a sweet cornmeal dessert often served with a small scoop of vanilla ice cream. It does not hail from the subcontinent, but rather descends from Native American cuisine. I also like bagels, originally from Eastern Europe, but am not a great fan of pizza, from Italy or of American Chinese food, though it has its moments. "Soul food" is just another term for African-derived cooking, found throughout the South and often beyond. American food encompasses a lot more, including tacos and burritos, clam chowder, apple pie, and of course hamburgers and hotdogs. When people eat any of these items, do they think in some hyphenated way as in "Italian-American", "Chinese-American"? No, I would argue, they don't categorize their food very often, they just eat it. If they think about it at all, they would think, "Yes, I'm American so I eat American food. All those things are what we eat."

To change from food to religion, Christians in various parts of the world call themselves "Christian" (OK, also "Catholic", "Protestant", "Orthodox" etc.). They don't think, "I belong to a syncretic religion, one in which many cultural practices and beliefs have come together to form a new whole." But nevertheless that is what all the major religions are: syncretic. They have borrowed from earlier religions, they have absorbed beliefs and practices from surrounding cultures over the centuries. When we think about them, though, we don't call them syncretic. We look at them as wholes.

Why am I writing this? What has this got to do with Goa? I think it has a lot to do with how Goa has been perceived in the past and is still being talked about.

I first have to say *mea culpa*. When I began to study Goan society in the 1970s, there was a lot of literature written by Portuguese scholars, bureaucrats, and travellers that claimed that Goa was utterly different from India, that it was Portugal in fact. Other people, Indian nationalists, said that Christianity was a foreign intrusion and did not belong in Mother India. Goa should return to its previous cultural condition (which also included Islam by the way). During the course of my research, I came to believe that both these claims were gross misunderstandings or deliberate "head in the sand" wishful thinking. I studied Goa over

many years and wrote about it as a syncretic culture, using the words “Catholic-Hindu” or “Hindu-Catholic”. I wanted to point out that elements of both religions and types of society existed in Goa and they had combined to create a new “Goan” society.

I am writing this short notice to say that I think I erred somewhat. Not that Goan culture is not a mixture of elements from different societies. It is. But, after all, nearly every society in the world is the same. We don't have to wait for globalization to appear in the 1400s-1500s era or for it to increase dramatically in our own time to see syncretism at work. Solomon's kingdom in Israel was heavily influenced by Egypt, the superpower of its day. Rome was a hotbed of different religions and regional cultures that existed side by side for centuries and must have introduced many new ideas, goods, and practices. Islam borrowed a great amount from Judaism and Christianity. The practices of Arabian nomads are still enshrined in this international religion. The Christmas celebrations of Europe and America are connected to pagan practices of Scandinavia as well as to the Roman-era cult of Mithra. Japanese culture is deeply indebted to China and Korea. I think we can add dozens more examples. Do we call all these civilizations “syncretic”? Not usually. The use of the word “syncretic” increases when a culture is new, when a religion is new. When people speak of the 20th century Rastafarian religion with origins in Jamaica, they like to use the word. Why then did I refer to Goa as a “syncretic” culture? It was only to point out that it was definitely not Portuguese or European alone. I think it is time to stop using this word and stop employing terms like “Hindu-Catholic” and “Catholic-Hindu”. Goan culture is, like most others, a mix. We accept that mix, but we can call it “Goan culture” without using the modifier “syncretic” because that modifier is too common to be relevant. Goa has its own culture, just as do Tamilnadu, Bengal, Punjab or Kashmir.

Let us acknowledge that fact without applying any other labels.



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On Goan Culture