By JASON KEITH FERNANDES

Is Camões Goan?

Some months ago, I had the opportunity to participate in a discussion on Goan literature in Portuguese. Central to that discussion was the question of defining a canon of Goan literature in Portuguese. For example, where would the history of such a literature begin from? Who could be considered Goan for the purposes of constructing such a history? In the course of these discussions, a question was half-jocularly posed: could Camões be considered Goan?

Luis Vaz de Camões is considered the national poet of Portugal because he authored the famed epic poem *Os Lusíadas* (The Lusiads). Camões' narrative in this poem inserts the actions of the Portuguese and especially those involved in the 'Discoveries' into the form of classical Greek myths.

Despite the fact that Camões' name was proposed half in jest, the suggestion was seized by a number of us with enthusiasm. Indeed Camões should be considered Goan! Not only was Camões a resident of the city of Goa for a long time, spending, according to Landeg White, a translator of Camões, about "fifteen years in Goa and beyond", but parts of the poem were certainly written while the author was resident in the city. Indeed, White argues that it was his time in Goa that forced Camões to turn from being a conventional poet of the times and experiment with different forms of expression. It was his time in Goa, therefore, that turned him into the towering literary figure that he is. Knowing that Camões initially came to Goa as a conscript into the army I have my own image of the man. The life of the common soldier in Goa was not a comfortable one. In fact, many of them lived in poverty, which was, no doubt, the reason for them to often desert the Portuguese army and find better options in the armies of the Sultanates around the Estado da India. In their state of poverty these soldiers took on lifestyles that were not very different from the locals. I'd like to think that like other soldiers Camões too abandoned heavy European clothing for hanging about in a *caxtti* and drinking water not from a cup but pouring it into his mouth from a jug.

But it is not just Camões life in Goa that it critical to the argument. There is also the fact of

the afterlife of the Lusiadas. The poem was read by people in Goa, and, as O Vaticinio Do Swarga, the recent response to Camões by Prof. Ave Cleto Afonso, so clearly demonstrates, the text continues to have an audience in the territory. For these reasons, we argued, Camões is Goan.

We hardly expected a vigorous rebuttal to this idea, but there was one. “Camões is Goan?” cried a Portuguese national who was part of the discussion. “But that is insane! Camões is Portuguese! If Camões is Goan merely because he passed through, then surely Richard Burton [the English writer who while resident in India journeyed through Goa and penned a much reviled text on the territory] is Goan, and Rudyard Kipling Indian!” they asserted.

I have to confess that I was a little surprised by this response. To my mind the script was fairly simple. Racism was the defining feature of modern imperialism. Human populations were marked off into different races, and some races seen as less capable than others. It was on the basis of this racial difference that some groups were seen as incapable of self governance. Because of this logic, postcolonial justice would rest on the rejection of racism, the welcoming of subjugated groups into governance, and the assertion of universal values. Of course, this has not been the trajectory of postcolonial justice and the post-colonial order has been marked by the sly assertion of racism. Thus, universalism is rejected as the decolonized states have been marked off as the national homes of different racialised groups. It is only such a logic that would ensure that both the former colonizers as well as the formerly colonized would deny the South Asian identities of Camões and Kipling.

This equation can be put another way by using a gustatory metaphor of anthropophagy that I have used once before. Colonialism is often critiqued on the basis that the colonizers consumed the natural resources of the colonies while impoverishing the colonized in the process. This consumption was not merely economic alone, however. There was also a cultural dimension. There can be no denying that both the British and the Portuguese were profoundly marked by the fact of their dominance of the colonies and imperial territories. Words like chintz, canja, pyjama, curry (caril in Portuguese), chutney, shampoo, and many others stand testimony to the fact that the British and the Portuguese were also profoundly marked by their consumption of the colonies. Thus, if colonialism was marked by the consumption of the imperial territories, postcolonial justice, or vengeance if you like, would lie in the reciprocal consumption of the Portuguese or the British. Thus, where the Portuguese

insist that Camões is theirs alone, the Goan response should ideally be to assert that Camões was also Goan. It is when the former colonizer is denied the opportunity to be the sole signifier of symbols that postcolonial justice is truly achieved.

But my argument is not merely about vengeance. Rather it is about recognising the need for complex political moves if we are to assert universality of values and the equality of peoples. Take, for example, the case of Her Imperial Highness Victoria, former Empress of India who is remembered by the people of the Gangetic basin as Rani Toodiya. Rani Toodiya is not merely a foreign queen, but in fact used by unlettered North Indians as a marker of times when there was justice for the common man. This is not nostalgia for colonial times, but in fact a pronouncement on the moral corruption of our times. As in the case of Toodiya, so it should be for Camões.

Returning to the arguments of those who rejected Camões' Goan identity by asking if Kipling could be considered Indian, my response would be that it is precisely the denial of our complex histories, such as Kipling's Indian identity, that we in contemporary India are witness to the horrible politics of almost genocidal erasures of communities and their cultures. The weird and twisted politics of our times is not just the result of wicked Hindu nationalists, but in fact produced through the oftentimes innocent attempts by post-colonial scholars and subjects. These individuals seek to create a space for the native and the indigenous and in erasing the complexities of our history lay the basis for the politics of corporeal erasures that we are witness to today. A fine example of these naive politics are the recent changes of the names of cities in India away from their colonial era names. The fixing of only one vernacular name for the city as the official title of the city have effectively delegitimized the lives of those communities who were birthed in the colonial period and follow lifestyles associated with those times.

Given that politics must be marked by ideas *and* actions I would recommend that the claiming of Camões by Goans and the project of consuming the Portuguese and denying them a monopoly on signifying could begin with a simple act. Sometime in 1960 a humongous statue of Camões was erected in Old Goa. This statue was subsequently blown up by "freedom fighters" in 1980 when Portugal was celebrating the fourth centenary of Camões' death. We need to recognise that this act was a mistake and replace Camões back in the spot that originally held his statue. This is one act would allow us to reclaim Camões as

ours and in doing so recognise that while the man is Portuguese, he is also undeniably Goan.

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