In the popular imagination, Goan history generally begins with the arrival of the Portuguese, followed by conquest and religious conversions. This four-and-a-half-century long period contains periods of oppression and cultural efflorescence, but mostly unbridled oppression. However, this changes once the Indian army marches into Goa in December 1961, leading Goa and its people, from the centuries-long darkness that they suffered, into the light of unfettered freedom. What the average Goan knows about this narrative is filtered through the lenses of a good amount of political machinations, besides family lore and myth. These unreliable and fragmented memories lead to a skewed understanding of Goan history and identity. The hold of this narrative is so complete that one finds it pervading in all walks of Goan life. Using Kalidas Mhamal's installation "Caste Thread", this essay will talk about the popular narrative of Goan history and its tenacious hold on the people of Goa.

Mhamal's exhibit is currently on display at the Museum of Goa and was also exhibited in "Now you see it!: The invisible river of Konkani Surrealism", curated by Vivek Menezes as part of the Serendipity Arts Festival in December 2017. "Caste Thread" consists of a series of five mannequin torsos, hung on five separate wooden blocks. Each of these five torsos has a *janave*, with a key hung on it. The *janave,* known in Hindi as *janeu*, is the caste thread that Brahmin and savarna men wear across their chests, as a sign and privilege of their high birth. Along with the *janave*, each of the torsos has the rosary around their necks. These torsos also have a symbol or motif painted on them: from left to right, Goan pork sausages, a lit match-

stick, a pão, a band-aid, and a glass of red wine. The wooden blocks from which the torsos are hung also display a set of names, Hindu and Christian, which suggests a transition from one religion to another.

Mhamal's "Caste Thread" thus evokes a period of Goan history that witnessed the establishment of Portuguese sovereignty over parts of present day Goa, and the conversion of Brahmins, amongst others from various castes, to Christianity. The message from the artwork is clear: caste privileges did not disappear with the change in religion. However, the imagery deployed in the artwork to make this point is problematic; perhaps, even going against the very point that the artwork seeks to make.

If we keep the *janave* and the rosary beads aside, what we are confronted with is the use of food imagery. This, I believe, is crucial as rather than just evoking a history of religious conversions, this artwork brings to the fore issues of caste through commensality, and notions of purity and pollution. Within a Brahmanical worldview, interchangeable with the Hindu, certain foods are considered to be impure and thus are forbidden. These foods depicted by Mhamal are not only considered impure, but also foreign, or were created through the intermingling of foreign influences with local ones. Their impurity also results out of their foreignness, in the sense that these foods were not allowed to be consumed in a caste society at the time of their arrival in the subcontinent.

Though Goan cuisine may have evolved from many cultural influences, the consumption of meat was not alien to pre-Portuguese society in Goa. Indeed, non-upper-caste groups did consume beef and pork and even dominant caste groups consumed venison and wild boar; animal sacrifices, in which the meat was consumed by the participants, also took place in various shrines across the territory of Goa, both before, during, and after the arrival of the Portuguese.

The foods depicted in Mhamal's "Caste Thread" today are not just an intrinsic part of the cuisine and culture of Catholics in Goa, but are considered by even other Goans as distinctly 'Goan'. It is true that many Hindus and also Goan Muslims may not consume the fiery *choriço*

(sausages); however, the pão is consumed across social and religious groups in contemporary Goa. To this extent, the pão can well qualify to be Goa's 'national' food, whether one eats it stuffed with pork sausages or a beef cutlet, or dips it in a spicy prawn or vegetable or lentil curry. But, even if the pão is ubiquitous in every Goan home and street corner today, this was not necessarily the case in the past. Historian Fatima de Silva Gracias suggests that owing to the fact that most of the bakers in Goa were Christian and palm toddy being used instead of yeast for fermenting the dough, many Hindus in earlier times would not have consumed it. They would have avoided the "Mediterranean trilogy" of meat, bread, and wine – as indeed Mhamal depicts in his installation.

Like the pão that came into Goa and became Goan, Roman Catholicism too arrived through the same 'foreign' route. Therefore, it is not surprising that Roman Catholicism was (and is) also treated as a polluting influence by all those who lived (and continue to live) within the caste system. Thus, the Konkani/Marathi word in Goa for describing the processes of a person embracing Roman Catholicism is the same one used to describe caste-based pollution: *bhattlo* or *bhatta-bhatti* – to come in touch with pollution. Conversion as understood within Christian doctrine or in the lexicons of modern European languages is not the same as *bhattlo* and *bhatta-bhatti*. Indeed, many Catholics in Goa often use the Portuguese-derived Konkani word, *konverter* to talk about religious conversion, though it is also quite common to hear Catholics using *bhattlo* to refer to the same.

In this context, the theologian Victor Ferrao analyzes the contemporary identity crisis in Goa and how it emerges out of a caste-based reading of Goan history. His book, *Being a Goan Christian: The Politics of Identity, Rift and Synthesis* (2011), talks about how some "of our Hindu brethren appear to understand the [Portuguese] colonial period as an era of pollution and the Goans who converted as the polluted". The purity-pollution principle becomes the main lens through which this part of Goan history is understood, to the extent that it leads to a politics wherein the Goan Christian – already marked as polluted owing to food habits and religious conversion – "is assigned a social space and is rendered as an 'outsider' in his/her own home".

Mhamal's artwork not only indicates the intersection of food and pollution, but also that of caste and gender. The references in "Caste Thread" of food items prohibited within the caste system and masculine bodies indicate a particular reading of Indian history. In this context,

we can think about the vegetarianism that was promoted during the Indian nationalist movement against the British Raj as well as its legacy in our contemporary times. Indeed, vegetarianism and its links to the emerging Hindutva politics are well-known. The cow-protection movements that emerged in the nineteenth century, and its subsequent recognition as a directive principle in the Constitution of India and in the statute books of many State governments, is a good example of this continuum. We can also think of M. K. Gandhi and the anxieties he had growing up about the weakness of his body. In his autobiography, he writes about how he felt that the consumption of goat's meat – like the Muslims living in his village did – was essential for a strong body. It is, however, a different matter that he later espoused vegetarianism as essential for body and soul.

In depicting chiseled bodies with the *janave* strung across, Mhamal is actually referencing Brahmin bodies that in all likelihood wouldn't have been toned, as the Brahmin body did not have to perform manual labour; it was performed by subaltern castes for them. There are stories in Goa about Brahmins wearing their *puddvem* (dhoti) above their knees, indicating that they labored in the fields. Even if it is true, it is an exception to the rule. Thus, by referencing masculine bodies Mhamal's artwork effectively has shut avenues to think of an alternate narrative of history of early modern Goa involving the intersection of caste, gender, and labour.

The main point is that within a masculine Indian/Hindu nationalism consumption of certain foods is associated with anxieties of the male body. It is also well-known that these anxieties that savarna Hindu men had about the weakness of the bodies, during colonial times and particularly during the national movement, translated into a politics of recovering not just the body politic but also the physical body from colonial domination and humiliation, or what they felt to be domination and humiliation. In Goa, this line of thought can also be linked to weakness of the body and the soul that savarnas arrogated to themselves, with conversion to Christianity added in the mix. When this savarna Indian/Hindu understanding is superimposed (or simply *imposed*) on Goan history, it results in an understanding that the cataclysmic violence had led to the destruction of the body and soul of the Goan, making

them weak and subjugated to foreign rule.

Like the savarna Indian, the savarna Goan too had to recover his culture, his history, his self from foreign domination. T. B. Cunha, a pro-India nationalist from Goa, had even claimed that this had led to mental slavery and “denationalisation” of the Goan. The body and soul – thus the self – of the savarna Goan had to be recovered from foreign subjugation and depredation. In this scheme of things one is required to discontinue all those cultural practices that resulted out of the foreign, impure period of Goan history.

Apart from depicting prohibited food, how else does Mhamal’s artwork invoke the history of conversions? It does through the obvious reference to the Inquisition. Interestingly, Mhamal also suggests a way out of this painful episode of Goan history. The motif of the lit match-stick can be considered to be a representation of the fires of the Inquisition, and the band-aid representing a healing of these wounds which resulted from conversions. It can be said that Mhamal is trying to tweak the conventional narrative of the religious conversions in Goa by suggesting that old wounds can be healed (and they must!). However, it is assuming that everyone in the past was wounded by religious conversions. Moreover, Mhamal’s artwork operates within the memory-based ‘history’ of religious conversions in Goa during the Portuguese period. This family- and memory-based approach (rather than archival) to the history of Goa is frequently employed by many writers.

Maria Aurora Couto’s much-celebrated *Goa, a Daughter’s Story* (2004) confronts the history of religious conversions, while telling the story of Goa. Couto tells us that her search for the development of the Goan identity “must go through the flux of memory”. The approach here is to tell the stories circulating in one’s own family and that of other “representative families” and generalize it as *the* history and experience of Goa. Led by the belief that Goan society is inherently harmonious, she searches for an answer to the rather mysterious development, according to her, of Goan society: how is there communal harmony in contemporary Goa (by and large) when there was so much violence in the past? Couto’s search is useful for our purposes because she acknowledges that her identity and that of the family as Goans was always marked by them being Christians. Growing up, it was natural to Couto and everyone else around her that the Catholic religion was an intrinsic part of her identity. It was much

later, she tells us, with the emergence of the new Indian nation-state that she had to confront her identity as a Goan Christian. "My family has been Christian for several centuries," she says, "living peacefully in a society in which various forms of religious worship are an inextricable dimension if not the very foundation of most lives. I have never thought of myself as a convert, nor did my parents, grandparents and members of their community".

And it is true that most Goan Christians do not view themselves as 'converts' because they are not. They have not converted from their original faith. The swashbuckling singer of the Konkani stage (or *tiatrs*, as they are popularly known), Francis de Tuem, even wrote and sang a song making this point in reaction to contemporary Hindutva politics. However, Indian/Hindu nationalist politics, which has had several anti-conversion laws enacted in India, insists on viewing Christians as 'converts', and conversion itself as a crime. Many Christians in India thus find themselves in the crosshairs of Indian/Hindu nationalist politics discussed above. And once in, they find no way out.

Many upper caste Christians, in fact, contributed to the problem. They saw their own caste roots in the emerging nationalist politics in India and the Indian/Hindu culture through which it was articulated. In this politics they assumed that conversion to Christianity had snapped their ties to their primordial culture and religion. Through Indian nationalism they felt they could recover this lost heritage. While going back to their supposed original religion was out of the question, the Christian upper caste started reconciling their Christian identity and faith to that of Indian/Hindu culture. The Christian elite realized that their engagement with the Indian/Hindu culture had to be performative in nature. Thus, the wearing of the sari/kurta pyjamas, a Nehru jacket, and a Gandhi *topi*, and extolling the glories of ancient Indian culture in speech and writing were ways in which they aligned with the Hindu dominant castes, now in power with the end of the British Raj.

The problem of reconciling Goan culture, particularly Goan Christian culture, to norms and forms of Brahmanical culture can best be seen in the claims and actions of the noted Goan cartoonist, the late Mario Miranda. His understanding of Goan history and culture was very poor, which was in marked contrast to the brilliance he displayed with his lines. His funeral perhaps can be taken as symbolic of how upper caste Goan Christians tried to reconcile their Christian identity with Hindu culture. As per Miranda's wishes, the funeral mass was followed by the cremation of his mortal remains in a Hindu crematorium. (Interestingly, it is

considered perfectly acceptable for Catholics to cremate their mortal remains anywhere provided the ashes are not scattered). The writer Mario Cabral e Sa has quoted Miranda claiming that his ancestors were Hindus and Brahmins. “I am a Saraswati Brahmin, originally named Sardessai. My ancestors were forcibly converted to Christianity around 1600 and renamed Miranda. We still belong to the Shanta Durga temple and yearly present Prasad – oil and a bag of rice – a tradition in my family all these years”.

Apart from the openly supremacist claims of Miranda, the quote also demonstrates that Miranda is aware of his caste privilege and would like to highlight it. The justification for highlighting his upper caste heritage is precisely the persecution his family faced. But something in this account does not add up: persecution did not mean an absolute loss of privilege. Though there may have been trying times for his family, yet their caste privileges – the essence of Hinduism, from an Ambedkarite perspective – were left intact four centuries after facing conversion and violence.

Like Miranda claiming persecution in the past, Rajdeep Sardesai’s shameless defense following his infamous tweet of ‘Saraswat pride’ too claimed that his community was persecuted, and thrived despite all odds. This skewed narrative of conversions to Christianity is an industry that produces victimhood for the savarnas, a point ably made by Gaurav Somwanshi in his riposte to Sardesai. Miranda’s claims of his family’s persecution, even if true, feed into this savarna fiction of producing themselves as the biggest victims of colonialism and imperialism, even though the subaltern castes had to bear the greatest brunt of colonial oppression. In fact, as new research has demonstrated, colonial oppression was predicated on the collusion of local elites who stood on the shoulders and profited from the labour of various subaltern caste persons in South Asia.

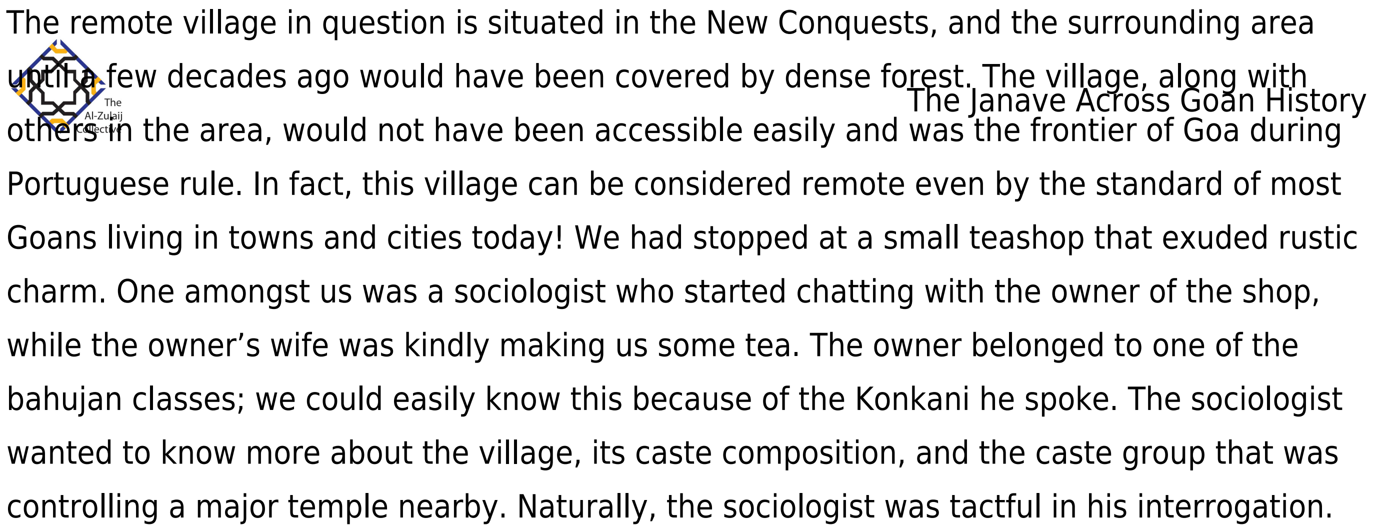
Mhamal juxtaposes Hindu names (assumed to be pre-conversion) with Christian names: Prabhu-Pinto, Laxman-Lucas, Damodar-Domnic, Mhabal-Manuel, Ram-Rejinald (*sic*, Reginald).

One could think of this depiction as simplistic as it is not so much the first names that become (and were) a bone of contention, but the surnames. After conversion the neo-converts would receive a new name, a European or Iberian one, free from any caste markers or caste-based occupations. Many Catholics, who later tried to search for their pre-Christian identity, do highlight their surnames – as Miranda did. What they are looking for, thus, was not so much their identity or family history, but a confirmation of their caste status.

One of the gaping holes within the narrative of the elites in Goa is their failure to explain why, despite the large scale persecution they allege, their caste privileges, including access to land ownership amongst others, have been left intact. One observes, by and large, that it is mostly elite Christians who are obsessed with their Hindu heritage and the reconciliation of this heritage with a history of conversion to Christianity. This is not the experience of the mass of Goans, who do not belong to the savarna and elites classes. In fact, reconciliation with Hindu culture for the Christians hailing from bahujan classes means that they are drawn into ever deeper labyrinths of casteism.

Although the Hindu and Christian elites may be the ones to propagate the narrative of the wholesale violence of the body and soul in early modern Goa, it must be noted that this narrative is the ‘go to’ explanation for many others in Goa. Unfortunately, we can observe persons from the bahujan classes peddling these myths as well.

I had an interesting experience once in a remote village of Goa, some years back. Those who know a bit of Goan history would be aware of the difference between the Velhas Conquistas and the Novas Conquistas – the Old and New Conquests. The territories that formed part of the Old Conquests were the earliest to be conquered by the Portuguese; consequently they were the earliest ones to experience conversion to Christianity as well as the brutalities of the Inquisition. By contrast the territories of the New Conquests were slowly added in the latter half of the eighteenth century, and the Portuguese state, and the Church in Goa by this time was not interested in proselytizing; in fact it assured and made good of their assurances that the non-Christian peoples in the New Conquests would not face any religious interferences.



The remote village in question is situated in the New Conquests, and the surrounding area until a few decades ago would have been covered by dense forest. The village, along with others in the area, would not have been accessible easily and was the frontier of Goa during Portuguese rule. In fact, this village can be considered remote even by the standard of most Goans living in towns and cities today! We had stopped at a small teashop that exuded rustic charm. One amongst us was a sociologist who started chatting with the owner of the shop, while the owner's wife was kindly making us some tea. The owner belonged to one of the bahujan classes; we could easily know this because of the Konkani he spoke. The sociologist wanted to know more about the village, its caste composition, and the caste group that was controlling a major temple nearby. Naturally, the sociologist was tactful in his interrogation.

It is in the course of the conversation, the owner of the small teashop claimed that at one point of time due to religious conversions (he used the word *bhatta-bhatti*) many people fled from the villages around that area and the temple in the vicinity also had to face hard times. But something did not add up, and the sociologist was quick to point out that religious conversions were impossible because the Portuguese state and the church reached these areas almost at the end of the Portuguese presence in Goa. The owner of the teashop quickly realized that his story did not make sense, and admitted so after some equivocation. The topic changed, our tea was served, and we left that charming little teashop. However, being a spectator to this exchange impressed upon me the hold of this narrative of religious conversions on the people of Goa. The distance between this remote Goan village, both in time and space, from other, Old Conquest areas was indeed large and the difference appeared to be stark considering that these two regions had experienced Portuguese state and religious policies entirely differently.

Even if we read Mhamal's use of the lit match and band-aid motif as a metaphor for reconciling the history of religious conversions to contemporary Goan identity, it can also be read as a reconciling of the same history through Indian/Hindu culture. In itself, these two motifs point towards a certain truth: there was violence that accompanied the establishment of Portuguese power and conversions to Christianity. But violence was not the only occurrence in this long history. This, and owing to the fact that the artwork makes use of Brahmanical imagery, indeed solely evoking this history through Brahmanical experiences and memories, the artwork fails to provide the viewer with any possible reconciliation, or healing. And this is so because there cannot be any reconciliation of a society whose history and culture is marked by caste oppression.

Owing to the fact that the dominant perspective of Goan history has been clouded by the fantasies and myth concocted by members of the savarna caste, there is a need to understand how the period of Portuguese rule also provided the subaltern sections an opportunity to break away from caste, and how (and notwithstanding the casteist practices prevalent amongst Goan Christians) missionary activity during the Portuguese power allowed many communities to re-invent themselves. Much of the Goan culture that is widely recognized and celebrated even in India for being liberal, peaceful, and comparatively less patriarchal, today is the result of this breaking away from (some aspects) of the caste system.

What constitutes the other – or subaltern – aspect of Goan history? To be fair, we do not know much, as for the last many decades historical research was rather focused on producing a historiography of Goa in terms of the tenets established in Indian nationalism. It was devoted to produce a past for Goa largely based on a Nehruvian vision for India. In this historiography, the narrative of religious conversions was not challenged; the reason why the subaltern sections converted was not an issue at all. Thus, if many in Goa – including artists and intellectuals – find it obvious that the initial two centuries of Portuguese power in Goa was marked by wholesale violence then it is much due to the failure of the academia to produce new perspectives and challenge the established status quo. Many times, the academia in Goa is the status quo.

In a recent journal article, "Disquiet on an Island: Conversion, Conflict, and Conformity in Sixteenth-Century Goa" (2007), Ângela Barreto Xavier, based at the University of Lisbon, argues that in the very initial moments of Christianization, led by the Jesuits, the focus was on the subaltern sections. It was true that those who did not convert were either punished or their privileges curtailed by the Portuguese administration. However as Xavier argues, the subaltern castes had better reasons to convert. They were given access to fertile lands that were otherwise owned by the higher castes. In the initial moments it was the subaltern sections that were most eager for converting to Christianity. Moreover, sati was banned and a woman could claim inheritance from her natal family, having precedence over her non-Christian brother(s). The wife could also claim a share in her husband's property. However, this situation of the missionaries and the Portuguese state favoring the subaltern classes of Goa did not last long.

The elite castes countered the breaking-away of the subaltern groups, such as the Sudras and Farazes (untouchables), as well as their loss of privileges in the spiritual and temporal realms by joining the new faith. This restored, as Xavier argues, the initial ruptures in the old caste order, that is, the caste order that preceded the establishment of Portuguese power. The elites now became the favored group of the Portuguese ecclesiastical and state regimes and could maintain their spiritual control, in addition to their control over land, by gaining access to church committees – and in due time, to priesthood.

As Xavier states, the heavy work in the village was done by the subaltern groups and the elite groups looked after or controlled the religious/spiritual and administrative affairs of the village. "As a result," she writes, "in a society where the religious and social order were deeply interconnected, the structural relationship between those at the top and those at the bottom of local society remained basically the same both before and after conversion. In that sense, someone who travelled to Goan villages, at least until 1961, would get the impression that – and I am reducing different situations with several layers of complexity to a snapshot – the religious order had visibly changed while the social order had not".

In many ways, one can also think of Mhamal's use of the *janave* as reflective of a similar history of the endurance of the caste system, as discussed by Xavier. The issue of allowing the *janave* and other caste markers had witnessed heated debates amongst the missionaries, especially the Jesuits. The best example of this would be the Jesuit Roberto Nobili. In her book, *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India* (1999) Ines G. Županov writes that Nobili, based in Madurai in the seventeenth century, not only participated in forms of Brahmanical culture but also aimed to transform it from within. Nobili was a fierce advocate of allowing Brahmin converts the use of the *janave*. He argued, to his superiors in Goa and Rome, that the *janave* symbolized social status, and was not a religious marker. In any case, the episode of Nobili demonstrates how there was a diversity of opinion on the best way to proceed with Christianization. The Portuguese state and Christian missionaries aligned with many different caste groups and the strategy they pursued, more often than not, was compromise and negotiation rather than force and coercion. The examples of such compromises and negotiations are replete in the documentary and textual sources for the history of Goa. These are also well studied in the works of sociologist, Rowena Robinson.

The two incidents, mentioned above help us to re-position the debate about religious conversion in early modern Goa. It tells us that not all caste groups faced persecution, or even if they did it was not in equal measure.

Could it be possible to read Mhamal's artwork as a critique against the very caste practices and privileges that many groups in Goa sustained through the colonial period, and also in the post-colonial one? Is Mhamal drawing our attention to the fact that there are other histories in Goa differing from the Brahmanical ones? Even if it is so, the use of certain symbols and elements, and the participation of the artwork in Brahmanical/Hindu readings of Goan and Indian history suggests otherwise. If the artwork seeks to critique caste practices and privileges, it fails because it gets trapped in the very symbols that it seeks to critique. While Mhamal's artwork boldly displays some caste markers, the artwork nonetheless shares an uneasy relationship with Goa's caste history, and the encounter with the Portuguese power and Christian religion. In as much as it tries to reveal caste, it also hides other aspects of it.

And finally, the little key that hangs on the *janave*. Is the *janave* really the *key* to understand the artwork, indeed the history of Goa? Arguably, there are problems with such an approach as it draws Goan history (and one might even say, Goan art) into a narrative of persecution of body and soul, and a loss of culture. This necessitates a healing of the wounds caused by history and reclaiming of the lost culture. In this sense, Goan art is drawn in a political project that seeks to use Goan history in order to produce narratives that fan hate.

A Brahmanical reading of history and the use of Brahmanical/savarna idioms, symbols, and culture in art ensures, more often than not, that the histories and memories of other groups remain suppressed and remain forgotten. These groups had found moments – however brief – of liberation from existing oppressive structures, and Goan society had witnessed a flowering of new forms and vocabularies of art, architecture, and literature within the same colonial period. To liberate these suppressed histories, one would have to first search deeper for narratives that go beyond the family lore and fragmentary memories.

Historians on Goa can be, perhaps, forgiven for lacking an imagination; for being unable to break free of narrow ideologies. But Goan artists…they have to imagine a different future and a different past.

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