



The release of a book titled *The Queen The Courtesan The Doctor The Writer* by Sabah Khan of the Parcham Collective in Mumbai was held recently. The book has write-ups of who the author considers as 50 'inspiring Muslims' in India. The author does drive home a message by the title itself that inspiration can come from location in various quarters, including the traditionally perceived quarters. We also do live in times when people who are othered and demonized are forced to prove themselves. In that context Sabah Khan's book is one such attempt. As the author herself says, she considered it unfortunate that she had to write this book. Indeed, this is true even of Muslims in Goa. Increasingly, the small minority of Muslims in Goa is being demonized and othered. As dangerous people, as people who cannot be trusted, as stone-pelters. Though inquiries and fact-findings have proved otherwise. The need for a counter-narrative couldn't be more pressing.

This prompted me to think about whether Goans are not going to be forced to prove themselves as well, and more specially Goan depressed castes, tribals, Catholics, Muslims, women, given their systematic minoritization. Often othered as an easy-going nothing-in-their-heads set of people, it seems that the time is come to put together this sort of books. There have been some books already which have been published which are compilations like *Trailblazers* about some Goan women achievers by Fatima da Silva Gracias, for instance, and just as well that they are. They could be providing the very initial corpus for further research and probing and certainly leave a little less groundwork undone. The time is now ripe for writing these in a manner that demolishes the stereotype and pejorative narrative about Goans as commodities waiting to be consumed along with the land on which we live.

Also, the continuous absence of Goans in history books and other books that are written about Indian people, is disconcerting. It also others Goans by the omissions and the erasures. Not to speak of the various distortions of history that are an ongoing project of the present regime. As a matter of fact, another book release of two books by Dr. Celsa Pinto, namely, *The Idea of Constitutional Liberalism in Goa* and *Understanding Bernardo Peres da Sliva's Dialogo*, and, *A Concise History of Goa*, also brought in the element of invisibility. Retired IAS officer, Mr. Tino de Sa, lamented that Bernardo Peres de Silva, a great Goan intellectual and dreamer of the times, is simply absent in any Indian books. Mr. de Sa suggested that perhaps the omission is not deliberate, but due to the fact that Goa has a different colonial trajectory and became part of the Indian Union later.

However, 60 and more years is a long time, for India not to have internalized the existence of a place (and its people) that it annexed. At its worst, there needs to be a conscious effort to duly research and highlight the Goan presence in various fields, and also highlight the

difference that the Goan presence made to the various spheres it populated. Since the Indian State is not automatically doing it, it becomes sadly our onus to keep raising the flag – a flag which has historically straddled life in various continents – predominantly in Europe, Africa and Asia, and in modern times, within the Gulf region and Australia and America too. More specifically in Asia, it or different parts of it have also straddled life in various political kingdoms before the arrival of the Portuguese. Putting together the sketches about Goans and their contributions can in fact not only efface the myths, but also speak to a global need to appreciate the evolution of diverse cultures, and to deepen understandings of historical trajectories of India in all its diversity.

The challenge however has been and continues to be the selection of people who should make it to a book of inspiring people. Our own social locations do come to bear on who we choose and how we go about choosing. Incidentally, an internet search of Google for the first Goan woman doctor, threw up an article on a Dr. Emmeline da Cunha, in the digital news publication Scroll by Filipa Lowndes Vicente. The article, in fact, modestly acknowledged that, while several historical records identify her as Goa's first female doctor, "statements about pioneers always run the risk being imprecise or inaccurate". A pertinent point that Vicente makes is that she found Dr. Emmeline while researching the latter's father. "To be able to discern historical traces of women, we must scrutinise the archives of men in a creative and committed way", Vicente says. Which in turn tells us that with those sections of society that are undocumented or under-documented, there is need to creatively look for sources.

A scholar of Goan origin and a professor of feminist studies and literature at University of California, Anjali Arondekar, offers another refreshing perspective. In her article *In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Sexuality, Historiography, South Asia*, she draws from her research on the emergence of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, to suggest an engagement with a queer historiography that paradoxically adds value to "lost archives (which) must be resurrected, found, produced for future gains", "precisely by staging interest in its modes of reproduction". Arondekar also draws attention in her article in the 2021 publication *Bombay Brokers*, albeit about Bombay, that rich ethnographies can present us "with snapshots of the articulations and navigations of difference that are tantalizingly revelatory, even as they underscore the staged nature of their own exposure".

(First published in *Goa Today*, March 2023).



Share this...

