



A thorny question faces a number of parishes in Goa where the congregation has outgrown the existing churches. Some are more than willing to tear down, or drastically modify, their old churches to build bigger ones. Others are horrified at such proposals and argue that these churches, like the one in Nuvem, are part of the unique architectural heritage of Goa.

But what makes the architecture of churches in Goa exceptional? When and how did the characteristically Goan church appear, if there is, indeed, a distinctly Goan style of church architecture? This is the subject of *Whitewash, Red Stone: A History of Church Architecture in Goa* (Yoda Press, 2011), a book by Paulo Varela Gomes, former professor of architectural history at the University of Coimbra, Portugal. The book traces the history of church architecture in Goa from its beginnings in the sixteenth century to the twentieth century.

Gomes documents three major stages on the development of church architecture in Goa. The first was the influence of European late medieval period, of which the church Our Lady of Rosary (still standing) in Old Goa, is an example. The Second phase was the influence of European Renaissance on church architecture of Goa, of which the two great examples are the Sé Cathedral (begun 1564, consecrated 1652) and the Jesuit church Bom Jesus (begun 1594, consecrated in 1605). The third major stage of the evolution of church architecture that Gomes identifies is from the late seventeenth century onwards when the specific form of the Goan church building emerged.

Although scholars like Jose Pereira (1995) and Antonio Nunes Pereira (2010) have focussed on the influence of Baroque and Renaissance styles on Goan churches respectively, it is Gomes' attention on the emergence of specifically Goan church that is most critical to understanding the history of religious architecture in Goa. He argues that the advent of a Goan church form was the result of the deliberate attempt by the 'native' Catholic elites, especially the Brahmin and the Chardo clergy, to assert their identity as separate; as much from the metropolitan Portuguese, as the rest of non-Christian India. This reference to caste is refreshing, as caste politics is not often discussed in architectural history.



Gomes claims that the assertion of difference was born from the desire of the 'native' elites to assert themselves against the other elites in the territory – i.e. the metropolitan Portuguese, and the Luso-descedentes. The erection of monuments proved one way through which the 'native' elites could affirm their presence and relevance in the territory.

According to Gomes, the architecture of churches after seventeenth century had “far less Portuguese influence than one would be led to believe” (p.4). Regarding the multiple influences on the evolution of Goan Churches he writes, “It is true that, analysing the buildings in parts (...), one can see Portuguese wall composition, Flemish vaulting or ornament, Bijapuri tower design, Konkani stucco pattern and ornamental design, etc. But the churches as overall buildings did not result from the sum of their constitutive parts. The builders and patrons knew how they wanted a Catholic church to look and how they wanted it to be experienced...” (p.6). What was going on is that the 'native' builders and patrons were engaged in intelligent articulation of architecture to further their claim over it.

The book allows us to appreciate the evolution of various components of the church architecture, including the uniqueness of its setting, the plan type, its external form, its interior elevation, its material and construction, and their decorative elements.

There is no doubt that *Whitewash, Red Stone* is a very important work. The book allows us to see that the Goan churches were able to assimilate global ideas and elements to create a unique local architecture, especially because many of these churches were built and financed by 'native' Goan elites. More importantly, in participating in a European language of architecture, they were also contributing to a European architecture. This is to say, they were producing European-ness in their buildings, and producing themselves as Europeans. Gomes claims that even in the twentieth century, despite the rise of neo-classical and modern styles, the churches in Goa continued to maintain Goan-Catholic identity forged in the seventeenth and eighteenth century because architecture was a way of maintaining their own identity from the rest of the world.

The lack of visual explanations seems to be a common weakness in most books on architectural history and *Whitewash, Red Stone* is no different. Although the book is geared

towards academic readers, many Goans who use and manage local churches, like Nuvem, must read the book to know how special these churches are and not be in tearing hurry to pull these buildings down. But would merely savings the monument be enough? Probably not! As Gomes rightly asserts that the Goan churches are landscape monuments and they are not comprehensible without the territory in which they were built. So, shoving a monstrous new building next to a historic monument would also be insensitive.

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