



In her lecture titled 'The Introduction to Ancient History', delivered in August 2014, historian Romila Thapar – current D. D. Kosambi Chair at Goa University– suggested that there is a conceptual difference in imagining the past through historical monuments as compared to reading about them in historical texts. 'Texts' are abstract concepts, she explained, which must be 'read', their meaning understood, and only then can one locate their content in the historical context. In comparison to such abstraction, historical monuments have physical presence which can be seen, touched and felt. But one cannot simply visit a historical location and expect to be enlightened by the experience. An architectural appreciation of monuments requires meaningful engagement with their history and context. It is here that a well-researched guidebook can make a difference. One such book relevant to Goa is the recently released *Portuguese Sea Forts: Goa, with Chaul, Korlai and Vasai* (2015), by architectural historian Amita Kanekar.

In Goa, there seems to be a general disregard for, and the resultant mismanagement of, monuments, be they churches, temples, mosques or forts. There are many reasons for this, including the failure to see architecture as symbolic of specific colonial history, which is a point I shall return to. In the meantime, I'd like to suggest that what might help fill this lacuna is well-researched and accessible information about these monuments.

It is in this exact area that the Deccan Heritage Foundation, the publishers of Kanekar's book, have identified their niche. They seem to bridge the gap between serious academic works and coffee table books, having commissioned established research scholars to produce popular guidebooks on the architectural heritage of the Deccan region. These books highlight the historical context of monuments while also being lavishly illustrated with photographs. This invariably helps in attracting readership, but also can help visitors to have a more informed engagement with the monuments.

Kanekar's book is an effort to present a reliable historical narrative of the many Portuguese sea forts on the Arabian Sea coast of the Deccan, as well as the role of these structures in empire-building. This guidebook is not merely a pictorial one, but has a solid dose of history, 1

both architectural and political, which helps the reader understand the role of these forts



## How to Read Monuments

In the introduction of the book, the author reminds us that “[t]he real Portuguese conquest was less of land than of sea-borne trade. Albuquerque is himself supposed to have reassured the Malabar ruler that the king of Portugal did not build forts to ‘take land’, but ‘to keep his goods and people secure’” along the coast (p.14). It is precisely because of the coastal nature of the *Estado da Índia*, that Goa’s cultural hybridity was further influenced. Kanekar points out that the Portuguese were never more than a small minority in the *Estado* enterprise. It becomes obvious, therefore, that most of those who manned the *Estado* ships, populated its towns, and fought in its armadas and militias, whether they were free or enslaved, might have been part-Portuguese, local Catholics, local non-Catholics, Deccanis, Bengalis or Asians and others of mixed backgrounds. This, Kanekar’s book posits, is still visible in the Luso-Arabic-East African-Asian traditions of the Roman Catholic communities living near forts of the erstwhile *Estado* today. Of the forts documented in the book, apart from those in Chaul, Korlai, and Vasai, the rest are located in Goa.

In terms of architectural appreciation, one of the important observations to be drawn from reading Kanekar’s book is that what sets the Portuguese sea forts of the Deccan apart is that they were designed with a special emphasis on geometry. While speaking at the launch of the book in December at the Goa Arts and Literary Festival, George Mitchell, another architectural historian and member of the Deccan Heritage Foundation, informed the audience that the other forts in the Deccan were different from the Portuguese ones, as they had high walls that skirted around the group of internal buildings, without much emphasis on geometric design. The Portuguese sea forts on the other hand, evolved with a special emphasis on geometry, explains Kanekar. Forts are essentially architecture of walls – articulated, elaborated and reinforced for the purpose of defence. However, the arrival of cannons in the fourteenth century resulted in a change in the design of forts, originating during the Italian Renaissance. Along with an emphasis on geometry, there was now a greater use of earth ramparts, ditches, and earth slopes. While appreciating the history of Portuguese forts that survive today in Goa and elsewhere, we must remember that they are distinctly European examples of offence and defence that were adapted for local conditions.

While the book is successful in describing the many forts it has featured in great detail, its

limitation lies in the fact that it is a victim of its format as a guidebook. It is unable to give us the layered politics of forts in history, nor how these monuments (and other Portuguese period architectural heritage) are perceived by Goans in contemporary times. Take for example the way in which temples from colonial times have been completely modified or rebuilt as part of revisionist efforts to bring Goa in line with a perceived sense of an 'authentic' Hindu-Indian past. Where deliberate disregard allows for the erasure of history and its architectural markers, the vacuum is too readily filled with fabrications. Nevertheless, books like Kanekar's are useful in underscoring the past in the face of dereliction.

(First published in *The Goan Everyday*, dt: 3 January, 2016)



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