



By JASON KEITH FERNANDES


## Goan problems with the Portuguese Left

On the 16th of February Susana Sardo, the Portuguese ethnomusicologist from the University of Aveiro, presented a paper focussed on Goan and Mando music at the symposium organised by the Ketevan World Sacred Music Festival in collaboration with the Goa University.

A 20 minute documentary, titled *Sons de Goa* (Sounds of Goa) formed part of the presentation. The film was produced by Rui Pedro Pereira de Oliveira based on portions of Sardo's doctoral thesis, as well as video footage that Sardo had gathered over the years.

Almost at the very start (3 mins, 33 seconds), the documentary makes an extraordinary claim, that passes quickly, but whose implications pervade the film and Sardo's understanding of cultural politics in Goa. Sardo suggests that Portuguese domination over India was marked by a kind of double colonization, of economy and faith. I did a double-take when I heard this characterization. Sardo's position was in fact not very different from that of the proponents of Hindutva, who argue for *Gharwapsi* or *reconversion*. Contemporary consensus, at least since the 1940s is that European colonization was unacceptable, and formal decolonization critical to freedom of colonized persons. By the same logic, if the conversion of groups of natives to Christianity is to be seen as spiritual colonization, then surely the call for spiritual decolonization is also in order?

This is not the only problem with Sardo's characterization of practices of the early Portuguese state in India. Sardo makes it out that conversion to Christianity was entirely the result of force. As a result, there is no space to consider the possibility that perhaps locals welcomed the arrival of Christianity. There is substantial scholarship to suggest that this was in fact the case, both with Islam as well as Christianity, and not entirely the result of force, another favourite Hindutva claim.

It needs to be emphasized that Sardo is not the only scholar who makes such problematic assertions. Indeed, the problem is common among left-leaning Portuguese academics.  Goan problems with the Portuguese Left  
Opposed to the excesses of the *Estado Novo*, the Portuguese authoritarian state that held sway from the 1930 until 1974, a number of these academics go out of their way to invert the assertions of this regime. Added to this, given their liberal location, the only role that the Catholic Church seems capable of playing is one of force. In their eyes, partly because of the role of some members of the Portuguese clergy during the *Estado Novo*, but also because of the anti-clerical tendencies of Southern European intellectuals since the 1800s, the Catholic church is seen as the original authoritarian agency and hence always and forever the villain of the piece.

As a result, a good amount of scholarship emerging from left-leaning Portuguese about Goa is held hostage to Portuguese domestic politics as scholars seek to battle the political Right in Portugal, and attempt to exorcise the ghost of the authoritarian regime. While one can recognize, even sympathise with the need for such battles, these cannot be at the cost of real lives in Goa or the territories that comprised the former Estado da India. In a case where Goan Catholics are painted as clones of the colonizers, the works of scholars such as Sardo effectively justifies, though this may not be her intention, the violence of the Hindutva.

Responding to situations such as these, in his book, *Refiguring Goa* (2013), the US based scholar Raghu Trichur suggests that there is a need for “serious theoretical and methodological interventions within Goan historiography” (p. 30). I would respond that the key to such theoretical and methodological interventions lies in recognizing that the natives of early modern Goa were not merely driftwood being swept along in the current. Rather, as demonstrated by the work of Ângela Barreto Xavier, they were individuals and members of groups that made active choices within the circumstances at their disposal. More importantly, it is critical that the Portuguese are not allowed to hog the historical limelight. They and their contemporary descendants need to make space for other players as well.

To avoid misunderstanding it needs to be reaffirmed that this problematization of the Portuguese Left does not mean that the readings emerging from the Portuguese Right are to be embraced. If the Portuguese Left tends to deny agency to the native, and sees them largely as victims, then the Portuguese Right often swings to the other unwelcome extreme of seeing the Portuguese Indian as an image of the Portuguese original. Neither positions do

justice to the history of the peoples of Goa, and the larger *Estado da India*. The need to call out the problems of the Left emerges primarily because not too many now take the Goan problems with the Portuguese Left arguments of the Right seriously. On the other hand, the Left, whether in Portugal or elsewhere, claims to speak for the cause of the colonized, and are recognized as such. As should be clear from the arguments above, this is a problematic claim since not only are members of the Portuguese Left in fact addressing their own issues, but in doing so they compound the problem by refusing to recognize the agency of the formerly colonized, and thrust us straight into the tridents of Hindutva.

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