

By JASON KEITH FERNANDES

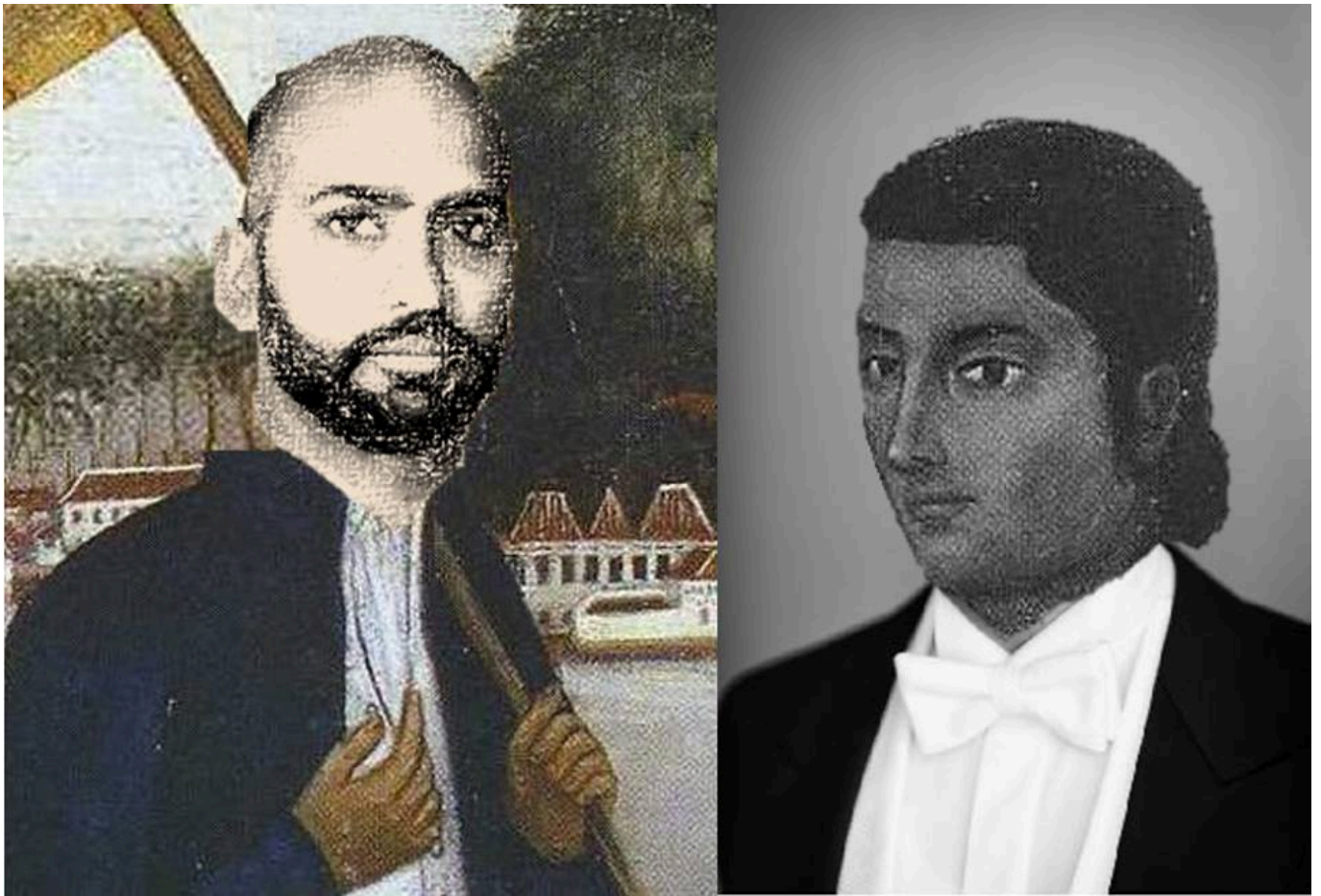


## A Goan Waltz around Postcolonial Dogmas

Some days ago I found myself invited to a ball in Lisbon hosted by the Austrian embassy in Portugal. Revived after more than a decade, the current initiative was conceived of a way to generate funds for deserving causes. In this inaugural year, funds were raised in support of A Orquestra Geração, *which is the Portuguese application of the El Sistema method created in Venezuela. Another objective was to introduce Portuguese society to aspects of Austrian, and in particular Viennese, culture.*

It was because the event was billed as a Viennese ball that I have to confess being somewhat concerned about the protocol at the event. For example, would there be dance cards? It was when I actually got immersed into the ball, however, that I realized that I was not in foreign territory at all. The ball followed a pattern not merely of contemporary wedding receptions and dances in Goa, but also approximated quite well the manners that had been drilled into me as a young boy, when first introduced by my parents to ballroom dancing. One requested a lady - any lady - to dance, accompanied her on to the floor, and at the end of the dance, one thanked her, applauded the orchestra or band, and returned one's companion to her seat. In other words, there was, structurally, not much at this ball that I, as a Goan male, had not already been exposed to.

This encounter made me realize once again, the validity of the argument that my colleagues at the Al-Zulajj Collective and I have been making for a while now; that Goans, or at least those familiar with the Goan Catholic milieu, are in fact also European. Given the fact that Goans participate in European culture, and have been doing so for some centuries now, denying this European-ness would imply falling prey to racialised thinking that assumes that only *white* persons born in the continent of Europe, are European.



To make this argument is not the result of a desperate desire to be seen as European, but to assert a fact. One also needs to make this assertion if one is to move out of the racialised imaginations that we have inherited since at least the eighteenth century. It is necessary to indicate that European-ness is not a culture limited to a definite group, but like other cultures, is a model of behavior, in which one can choose to participate in. And one chooses to participate in this cultural model because the fact is that, whether we like it or not, this is the dominant cultural model in the world. The choice then is not determined by a belief in the model's inherent superiority, it is simply a matter of pragmatic politics.

Some days before the ball, I intimated a continental Portuguese friend about this upcoming event, and the fact that I was on the lookout for a place I could rent a tailcoat from. She sneered. The suggestion in the sneer was, why do you have to become someone you are not. One should remain true to one's culture, and not try to engage in the culture of others, or in other words, not engage in social climbing. The response was upsetting, but not particularly out of the ordinary. This is, in fact, a standard response, one that derives directly from our racialised imaginations. There is this misplaced idea that when we participate in one cultural model, say the European, one is abandoning other cultural models, and, more importantly,

that non-whites would always be on the back foot when faced with European culture. A look at the cultural practices of Goan Catholics, however, will demonstrate the ridiculousness of the proposition.

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Goan Catholics have not only taken up Western European cultural forms, but in fact excelled at them. In doing so, they have not abandoned other cultural models, particularly the local, but in fact rearticulated both these models at the same time. One has to merely listen to the older Cantaram (Concani language music) regularly played by the All India Radio station in Goa, to realize the truth of this assertion. Take the delightful song “Piti Piti Mog”, crafted by the genius Chris Perry and Ophelia, for example. Set to a waltz, the song talks of the desires and sexuality of a Goan woman. The emotions are honest to her social location. There is no betrayal of the local here, even as Perry articulates it within an international idiom. Indeed, one wonders if there is much of a difference between this song, and the soprano aria “Meine Lippen, sie küssen so heiß”. From the opera *Giuditta*, and featured at the Viennese Ball, this aria also sings of the sexuality of a young woman in her prime.

There are some who would argue that what has been described above is not participation in a cultural model, but in fact mere mimicry, or at best syncretism or hybridity. To put it bluntly, Goans are mere copycats, there is nothing original in what they do. Indeed, a good portion of the post-colonial academy would describe the examples I proffer as syncretism or mimicry. To such critics my question is this, were the young Portuguese women and men, making their social debut in the ball, not also participating in an etiquette that is not quite Portuguese? The waltz itself, that great institution of the Viennese balls, originated in Central Europe. Does their participation pertain to the category of mimicry, and syncretism, or is it somehow an authentic performance? To suggest that it is, would be to fall right into the racist paradigm where things European appropriately belong to whites, and the rest are merely engaging in impotent mimicry. The anti-racialist argument would recognize that all of these groups, whether continental Portuguese, or Goans (indeed also Portuguese by right), are participating equally in a common cultural model, each of them giving a peculiar twist to the model in their performance, all of them authentic.

Another challenge to my argument would perhaps emerge from Indian nationalists. If no one culture is authentic, and one merely chooses to participate in random cultural models, why privilege the European? Why not join in the *Indian* cultural model? In the words of a




passionate young man from the Goan village of Cuncolim I once interacted with, why not prefer your own people over foreigners? At that interaction I pointed out that crafting the choice in terms of *Us* Indians, versus *Them* Europeans, and stressing a biological or genetic proximity was falling back into the very racist equation we should be trying to be exit.

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To begin with, this construction of the Indians, versus Portuguese works only because like most Indian nationalists he privileges the terrestrial contiguity of Goa to the subcontinent. The art critic Ranjit Hoskote phrased a succinct response to this claim in the curatorial essay for the exhibition *Aparanta* (2007) when he argued “Geographical contiguity does not mean that Goa and mainland India share the same universe of meaning”. In highlighting Goa’s Lusitanian links, Hoskote rightly pointed out that the seas were not a barrier to conversation but a link, and maritime connections are no less powerful than the terrestrial. Indeed, while connected to Europe, Goa has been an equal part of the Indian Ocean world, often sharing as much, if not more, with the East coast of Africa than with the Gangetic plains; that privileged location of Indian-ness. Terrestrial contiguity apart, this nationalist argument also succeeds because it willfully ignores a legal history, of Goans being Portuguese citizens, and hence European, in favour of a biased construction of cultural history. The most important support to nationalism, of course, comes from the racism inherent in the post-colonial order which is built on recognizing cultural difference managed by nationalist elites rather than stressing continuing connections. Indeed, as I go on to elaborate below, to some extent everybody participates in the European model in today’s world – in clothes and speech and education and science, and so forth. But the control of nationalist elites over the national space, and the international post-colonial order itself, would be threatened by such recognition. It is therefore necessary that while quotidian affairs run along European lines, the extraordinary is sanctified by the irruption of the national. Thus, while Indians wear pants and shirts every day, they believe that special days call for *traditional* garb, like kurtas. The Goan bucks this trend by privileging special moments with a lounge suit. In other words, Goan culture celebrates what is overtly European, which is what the Indians don’t like as it wrecks the nationalist posturing of not participating in European culture.

To those who would simply ask, why not exert a choice in favour of the Indian, the answer is two-fold. The first, is that there are many Goans, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, who are in fact choosing the Indian model. They do so because they see that this is where local power lies. Behaving like Indians, they believe that they can make their way better in the Indian world. Others, however, recognize the limitations of the Indian model. It can take you only so far. Upwardly mobile Indians themselves recognize that they have to perform by different rules when they emigrate. Worse, the captains of industry will tell you that they have to



perform by European rules whenever they meet with their compatriots from other parts of the world. As indicated before, where the European cultural model dominates the world, it is merely pragmatic politics to follow that model. Finally, it is precisely the lack of social mobility that makes many wisely avoid the Indian cultural model. The very attraction of the European model is that practically any person can learn to perform in it and be accepted as authentic. Indian models are so limited to Hinduism and caste that one cannot hope to make this parochial model work as a tool of social mobility. Indeed, one could ask whether there is an *Indian* cultural model at all, and if it is not just a savarna/brahmanical model?

This lack of social mobility is best illustrated by an example from Goa, where the Saraswats are a dominant caste. Speaking with a Saraswat gentleman at a Nagari Konkani event, he indicated to me how pleased he was with the response to the elocution competitions organized by the Nagari Konkani groups. Many a times the winners were Catholic girls. “But their accent is so good”, he shared with me, “one cannot even tell that they are Catholics!” Where Nagari Konkani is largely based on the speech of the Saraswat caste, one is forever trapped into behaving *like* a Saraswat, and distancing oneself from one’s natal behaviours. One can never *be* Saraswat unless one is born into the caste. A good part of the Indian model is similarly pegged according to the behavior of the dominant castes of various regions. This model has been created not necessarily to enable a democratic project, but to ensure their continued dominance within post-colonial India. As such, they *will* put a person in their place when a person from a non-dominant caste performs effectively. The adoption of the European model, however, is not restricted to birth precisely because it has been adopted so universally. The adoption and occupation of this model by diverse groups has thus ensured that its very form now allows for local variation. Indeed, it needs to be pointed out that the model is very dynamic. Let us not forget that at one point of time one was expected to speak *Queen’s English* on the BBC, but the same platform, at least in its local transmission, has now made space for a variety of accents.

The policing of cultural boundaries is one of the silent ways through which racism continues to flourish. It is in partly in the breaching of cultural boundaries that racism can be broken. Further, it is in operating within the idiom of power, and then filling the forms of power with differing contents, that negotiation with power operates and one moves from the margins of power towards the centre. In this project, Goans are past masters. Viva Goa!

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