

By JASON KEITH FERNANDES



Lux in tenebris: Paulo Varela Gomes

Paulo Varela Gomes succumbed to cancer on Saturday, the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 2016. He was familiar to many Goans both because he headed the Delegation of the Fundação Oriente in Goa for two terms, 1996-1998 and 2007-2009, and for his book on Goan churches.

It was in the first capacity that I met with Gomes. Prior to this meeting I had been warned against him. He was racist and offensive, I had been told. Also that he was just another one of these supercilious Portuguese, mocking Goa and Goans from their metropolitan position. I have no idea what pushed me to meet with the man despite these warnings, but I did, and I have not once regretted that decision.



Gomes was in fact—to be fair to the person who warned me against him—pessimistic, foul mouthed, dismissive, and from time to time a tad racist. But there was a logic to his madness. The prickly exterior was armor, but breach that spiky defence and one realized that Gomes' barbs were the provocations of a profoundly sensitive and giving man with a wicked sense of humour. A man who relentlessly asked questions, and never accepted the given until it bore up to the critique he subjected it to. When caught, he would laughingly confess to his prejudices, and it was this intellectual honesty and the ability to confront oneself that

has left a lasting impact on me.



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As our association matured Gomes grew to become an intellectual father. Lucky enough to live in the same neighbourhood as he did in Goa, I found myself able to go over to his home, engage in conversations that went on for hours, and borrow books from his library. Gomes' library was an intellectual wonderland because he was a widely read man. Despite his learning and the difference in our ages, ours was not an unequal relationship. Gomes suffered my irreverence, and indeed encouraged it with his own. It was thanks to these conversations that I was able to sharpen my perspectives, not just on Goa, but also on Portugal, a country that has come to be my second home. Gomes was among the first to point me towards developing a deeper understanding of the Bijapuri Sultanate and make sense of Goan history in that context. As luck will have it, the idea of an Islamicate Goa has now gained more appreciation, and for this alone, Gomes has left a lasting legacy on the way Goa can and should be studied. Gomes was also the one who pointed to the complex history of the *Padroado* and the manner in which by the time it was wound up it was Goan priests who were the stoutest defenders of this right of the Portuguese state. It was also Gomes who problematised, to my delight, the term Indo-Portuguese. Asking several piercing questions of this category that is so taken for granted he revealed so many problems with the term, not least being the fact that it can be crafted only in the context of the peculiar racist politics of the British Empire.

Perhaps the greatest testament to Gomes's wide reading, his ability to go against the grain, ask unorthodox questions, and come up with a new, more meaningful vision, is what was possibly his last academic publication; *Whitewash, Red Stone: A History of Church Architecture in Goa* (2011). In this book Gomes broke with the hitherto established ways of looking at ecclesiastical architecture in Goa. His argument was bold, and there can never really be any going back to earlier ways of looking at architecture in Goa. His study demonstrated how the position that Goan elites chose in the conflict between of *Padroado* and *Propoganda Fide* had a distinct influence on the architecture of our churches. It is the conflict between these that led to the emergence of specifically Goan architecture. Gomes's argument was that churches in Goa were not Portuguese buildings, nor were they mere copies of European buildings. They were in fact entirely Goan. These buildings participated in a European vocabulary of building construction, but the way these various elements and plans were assembled was entirely Goan. Churches in Goa were Goan buildings, constructions of a native elite who were making a statement about the uniqueness of their

culture and their place in the world. It was for this reason that the Goan builders of these churches continued to hold on to a Baroque architectural style even in nineteenth century when the days of Baroque were long over and other styles were appearing in British India.

*Whitewash, Red Stone* is a critical work that would allow Goan ecclesiastical architecture to be appreciated more profoundly and deserves a wider audience than the one it currently enjoys.

In making this argument, Gomes went beyond, and challenged, two orthodoxies. The first was the one that seeks to delegitimize the uniqueness of Goan Catholicism, and the second that sees Goans merely as blind copy-cats of the Portuguese. In a nuanced argument, Gomes acknowledged that Goans were South Asian alright, but pointed out that they were South Asians who participated and innovated within European frames and hence they were also European. It takes not only a profound understanding of the field to make such an argument, it also requires that one have a profound respect for the people one is studying. As an architectural historian, and as one with deep friendships with Goans, Gomes had both in abundance. In his passing, therefore, there are many in Goa who will feel as devastated as they did at the death of the late Pedro Adão, Portuguese Consul in Goa between 2005 and 2006. There are few like them, persons who are willing to step out of their comfort zones, make themselves vulnerable, and engage meaningfully with the local. For this reason their memories will indubitably be long cherished.

When I moved to Portugal I imagined that Gomes and I would be able to pick up where he had left off, the same rambling, but always stimulating conversations. Unfortunately, however, the distance between our residences, and the distractions of my frequent travel between Lisbon and Goa ensured that this was not to be. Our meetings were too few and far between, and our interactions limited mostly to virtual correspondence. Further, the possibilities for physical encounters became impossible after his tumour made conversation difficult. And yet, it is a testament to the loyalty, and the grace, of the man that he was known to respond to every communication that one sent to him, almost until the very end. My own experience was that our correspondences became more intense and poignant and will remain a cherished part of my virtual archive.

As much as one mourns the passing of Paulo Varela Gomes the fact is that there can be no crushing sorrow simply because every cherished memory brings to mind not just his courage,

but also his irreverence, and this brings a smile even amongst the tears. Gomes's life was a lesson in picking up challenges and besting them. How else does one explain the élan with which he took up writing fiction in the last phase of his life? Of course, to those who knew him there was little surprise. For someone who was a natural teacher, and taught through lively debate, there was absolutely no doubt that the man was a natural raconteur.

Paulo Varela Gomes, my friend, father, philosopher, and guide. Our world is diminished by your absence, but it would have been so much lesser without you.

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