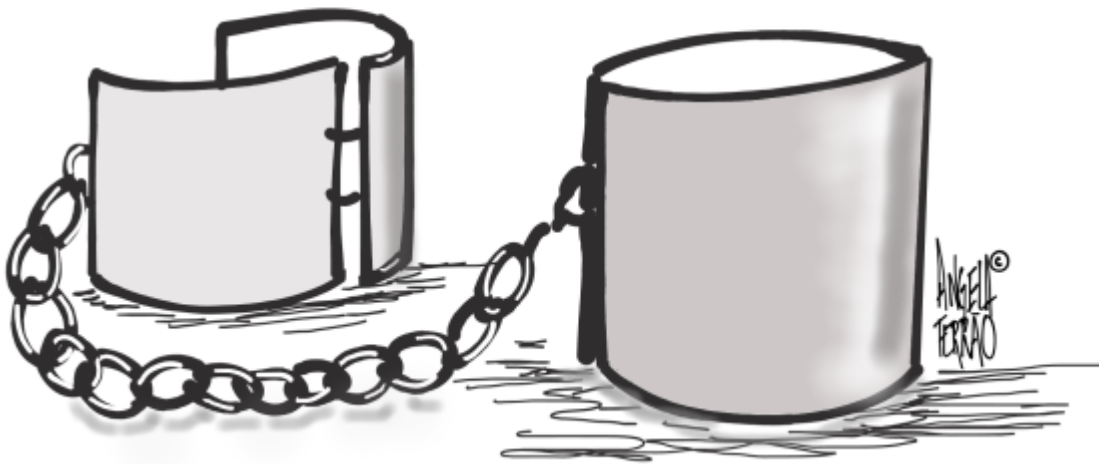


The idyll that never was: Goa and the Indian elites

It was with anger and disbelief that I read Deepti Kapoor's recent article in *The Guardian* titled "An idyll no more: why I'm leaving Goa". While there is no denying that Goa is in fact facing a looming ecological and political crisis, what is galling is that Kapoor does not acknowledge her own role in the mess that Goans find themselves in. Kapoor is silent about the privilege that she enjoys – the privilege of the (largely North) Indian elites, who dominated British India, led the anti-colonial nationalist movement, and who now operate as the embodiment of colonial power in places like Goa. This is precisely the relationship that is to blame for the many ills that Kapoor documents, and that allows Kapoor to escape Goa with relatively no loss, while Goans are left not only with a ruined ecology and social fabric but a continuing brutal colonial relationship with India.



The relationship of the Indian elites to Goa is by no means innocent. For that matter, neither is the relationship of India to Goa. Rather, these relationships are built on the willful ignoring of history, to enable Indians to create Goa and Goans not only as property of the Indian empire but as a pleasure park where they can imagine themselves to be in their own little part of Europe. Take, for example, the way in which Kapoor chooses to label older houses in Goa "Portuguese villas" despite the fact that many Goans, including scholars, have pointed

out that there is nothing Portuguese to these homes. Except for the fact that they were built by Goans, who were Portuguese citizens at the time, these were, and are, Goan homes. The reason for this stubborn insistence is linked to the fact that these houses are in high demand by the Indian elites who choose to own second homes in Goa. It is precisely in calling the built forms “Portuguese” that Goa and Goans are transformed into props that allow for the territory to be read as Europe in South Asia, as a seaside Riviera where Indian elites can play out their European fantasies.

This colonial relationship, it should be pointed out, is not unique to the relationship between Goa and India. In fact, it follows a longer colonial relationship enjoyed by the Northern European, and principally British elites, with the European South – namely, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. It was to these historically Catholic locations that the largely Protestant elites of the North fled to enjoy not just the sun but the pleasures of the flesh. The European South, and by extension the overseas colonies of these countries, were marked out as spaces for frolic and relaxation, and fabulous lifestyles afforded as a result of the poorer economies of the host locations. Additionally, these locations were identified as places for inspiration for artistes and writers. In post-colonial times, the elite British Indian has actively taken on the gaze and privilege of the British overlord, and looks at Goa precisely through the lenses that the British used to view the European South. No wonder then that Kapoor, author of the novel *A Bad Character* (2014), also chose Goa as a place for future writing projects.

The continuation of this imperial gaze is also deeply rooted in colonial politics. As Sukanya Banerjee demonstrates in her book *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* (2010), the end of empire and the creation of an independent nation-state was not the goal envisaged by early Indian nationalists. On the contrary, South Asian dominant caste elites were stakeholders in the empire rather than its opponents. Given this proximity to the imperial project, what they deeply desired was the status of Imperial British citizen and equality with the British overlord. Banerjee also demonstrates the way that Gandhi himself was invested in the pursuit of this status. The figure of Gandhi is critical here, because it was he who effectively created a mass movement by recruiting subaltern groups to make what had earlier been a largely elitist cause. This mass recruitment was necessary for the elites to be taken seriously by the British Crown. The Crown was convinced that while the Indians merited the status of subjects, they could not be imperial citizens and thereby claim equality with the British. The rallying of the masses forced a change in the nature of the movement to assume the character of a nationalist anti-colonial project. Independence was now the only

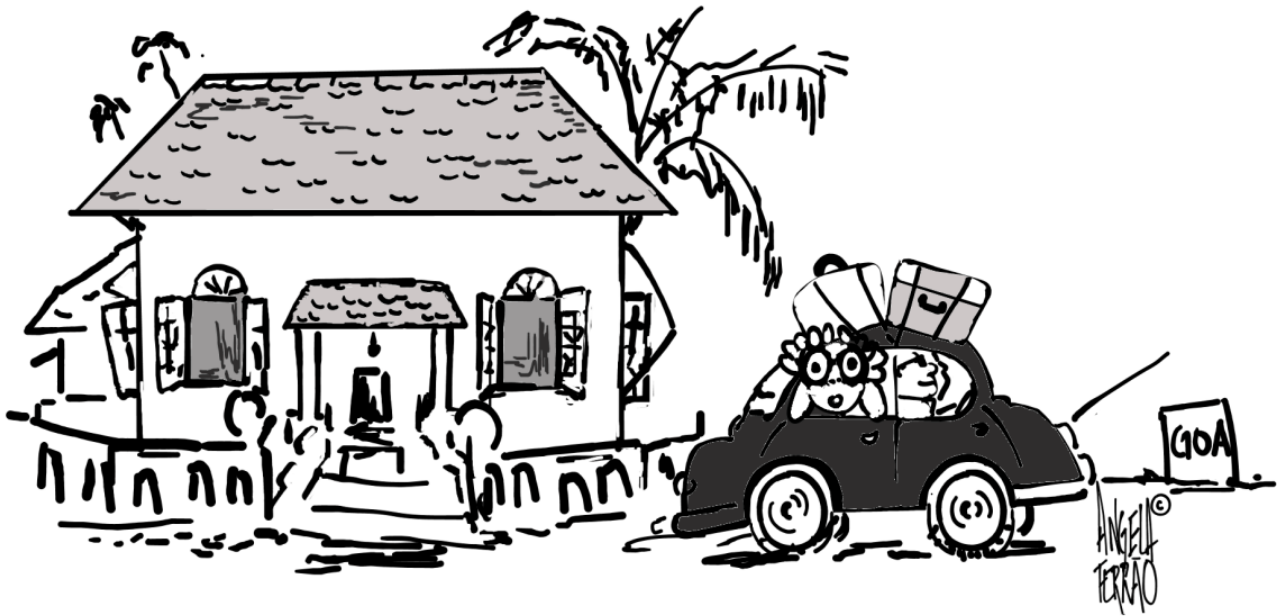
Thus, the objective of the nationalist elites was, rather, parity with the British and participation in the imperial project. The continued desire for imperial prominence that motivated these caste elites ensured a number of features that have marked post-colonial India. By exerting various pressures on the princely states and acquiring, forcefully if necessary, the territories of other colonial powers, the nationalist elites put together an Indian empire that even the British Raj had not managed to. This new post-colonial empire was held in place by retaining most of the colonial laws, and an imperial perspective guided the relationship with the territories and peoples that were assimilated into post-colonial India. Thus, along with Goan houses being labeled “Portuguese”, Goans have been marked out as fun-loving, relaxed, and laid back, just as the southern Europeans and Latins. Further, just as the British elites travelled to the European South for sensorial excess, so too has Goa been marked out as a place for excess. Note that Kapoor’s narrative suggests that her brother had his mind blown – normally a reference to the effect of psychotropic drugs – when he saw his first nudist in Goa. The Kapoor family’s relationship with Goa seems to be marked by an excess that is unavailable in India. As R. Benedito Ferrão points out, Kapoor suggests her own sensorial relationship with Goa through the excessive exclamation marks that she uses when listing the things that brought her to Goa: “The beaches! The restaurants! The music, and the people!” Further, as if to prove the point of a continuity between the imperial British and the contemporary imperial Indian elite, Kapoor states that she has decided “to look toward Europe or Latin America” in her search for a new place to live. It should be obvious that Latin America is placed along the same continuum as Goa in terms of being the place of Iberian influenced tropical languor and excess. Therefore, Kapoor will merely shift from Goa to another location that offers a similar southern European backdrop for the party.

Interestingly, the insistence of Indians, such as Kapoor, on labeling the built landscape in Goa as different from India reveals a disinclination to be attentive to the historical and legal differences of this former Portuguese territory. Unlike the legal scenario that unfolded in British India, Goans were constitutionally recognized as Portuguese citizens as far back as the early 1800s. This resulted in a restricted segment of the population being entitled to vote in parliamentary elections. And vote they did. Goan elites regularly sent voluble representatives to Lisbon, who established the legal and social parity of Goans with metropolitan Portuguese. This situation was temporarily suspended in the years when Goa, like the rest of Portugal, suffered an authoritarian regime from the 1930s until 1974. It was in this situation that India

sent troops in to militarily wrest Goa from the Portuguese. Rather than engage with the political agency that was being expressed within and outside of the territory, India simply asserted sovereignty over the territory and extended citizenship to persons residing in the territory. Given the right of colonized peoples to self-determination, this was an act for which there was no legal precedent, but was based on the assertion of a dubious argument of cultural homogeneity.


With the normalization of relations between Portugal and India in 1975, Portugal recognized the continuing right of citizenship of residents of its former territories in India. As consciousness of this continuing right percolates through Portuguese Indian society, many have chosen to access and assert this right. The Indian state, and consequently most Indians, however, fail to see this as a resumption of an existing right. They see it instead, as the acquisition of dual citizenship, which some argue is prohibited by the Indian legal system. This places Portuguese Indians – in this case, Goans – in an awkward situation, where they have to give up political engagement with Goa, and a host of other rights, if they choose to assert their right to Portuguese citizenship. Like most Indians, Kapoor seems to fail to recognize this complexity and naively suggests that Goans are leaving, or, as she puts it, “looking elsewhere”. As I articulated in an essay some time ago, Goans are not leaving; they are merely employing one more way to maintain their historical connections and pursue livelihood options. It is only in the face of an Indian state that refuses to recognize the complexity of Portuguese Indian history, and prevents this movement, that Goans are, in fact, being *forced* to leave.

At the end of the day, it is the refusal to recognize this most basic of rights, that of citizenship pre-existing the Indian takeover of Goa that complicates the relationship of India, and Indians, with Goa, and Goans. The refusal to recognize a pre-existing constitutional right of citizenship transforms the Indian presence in Goa into one of occupation and not post-colonial liberation.



The colonial nature of India's presence in Goa is perhaps best captured in the way the territory has been actively converted into India's pleasure periphery. In his book, *Refiguring Goa* (2015), Raghuraman S. Trichur points out that "it was only after the state sponsored development of tourism in the 1980s (more than two decades after Goa's liberation/occupation in 1961), was Goa effectively integrated into the Indian nation-state" (p. 13). This is to say that the integration of this former Portuguese territory, which ought to have been given the right to self-determination, was ensured through the process of articulating Goa's "otherness" or cultural distancing, as evidenced by the social practices and performances that constitute the tourism destination in Goa. Thus, Trichur argues, Goa's emergence as a tourism destination is more than the fortuitous agent of economic growth: "it is also an arena, a discursive frame where the Indian State intersects with Goan society" (p. 16). Tourism, then, is precisely the way through which Indian colonialism is exercised in Goa. Indeed, the usage of "Portuguese" houses, in reference to the homes of Goans, suggests homes not continually inhabited by Goans but open for occupation by the "helpful" outsiders that come to renew Goan life.

While Kapoor correctly lists the many problems that are cropping up in Goa as a result of a tourist industry gone wild, she seems to place the responsibility for the looming ecological and social disaster primarily in Goan hands. One reads in Kapoor's narrative the usual suggestion that it is the greedy Goans who are selling agricultural land and pulling down ancestral homes, and that the local government has no vision. What escapes her is that Goans are all too often subject to forces not within their control. Goans are trapped in an economy that, rather than working on producing more varied opportunities for the locals, has

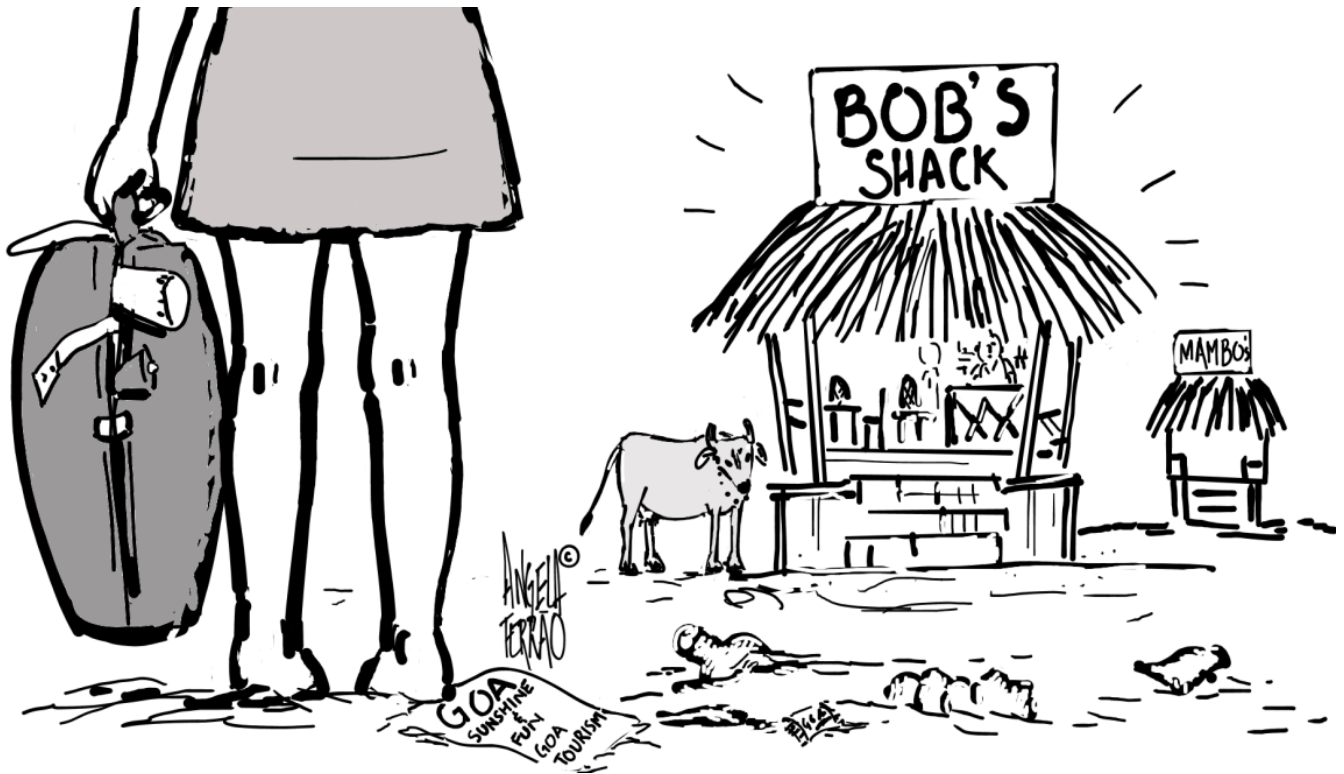


for decades now relied exclusively on tapping the extractive industries of either tourism or mining, or on overseas remittances. While the tourist economy has produced huge profits for some, incomes have not risen to keep pace with the increased cost of living. In such a context, there are two options that will assure people without the material resources or skill sets to fuel social mobility of persons who cannot achieve betterment in Goa. The first is the sale of land to persons in search of the fabled Goan lifestyle. The second is migration in search of gainful and respectable employment. The irony is that the critique of the Portuguese presence in Goa was that they failed to develop a viable economy, which required people to migrate to earn a living that would assure them and their families of a higher standard of living. Indeed, for the vast majority of the population life under Portuguese rule was experienced more as life under landlord rule. And this Goan lifestyle was no idyll. It was only through migration that they could economically emancipate themselves. It was only with the economic liberation possible through migration that Goa, now a place to return for the summers, was constructed as an idyll. As it turns out, the transition to Indian rule has not changed much, as many Goans are still *forced* to migrate.

Yet it is not economics alone that Goans are trapped by but, the political system itself. There is a clear understanding among the many groups in the territory that this system is not delivering good governance and that there is a need for dramatic change. In their imitation of Britain, British Indians adopted the unsophisticated first-past-the-post system of determining political representatives. As Dr. Ambedkar pointed out, the ills of the system are such that it does not allow for marginalized groups to find a voice in the legislature. Even though there are moves to shift to a system of proportional representation, it seems unlikely that there will be a change anytime soon. Thus, Goans are chained to a political structure that they had no say in determining, and that clearly does not work for their territory, given that it reproduces persons who represent majoritarian politics. One wonders whether Goan politics may not have been dramatically different if the people of the territory were allowed to innovate with a proportional representation system followed in Portugal.

But Kapoor's text is not merely illustrative of the problem that Goans have with the Indian elites. Rather, it exposes the colonial relationship of these elites with marginalized Indian populations. The trouble with the Indian elites is that they do not see themselves as a part of the political processes of the subcontinent, believing themselves too good for the rest of the citizens of India. Indeed, this is part of their adoption of the colonial gaze. These elites see the residents of the rest of the continent as a strange race that requires firm governance. The

review of Kapoor's book by Prashansa Taneja makes this quite obvious when she reports, "more often than not, she gives into the temptation to exoticise Delhi, and India, for the reader. The idyll that never was: Goa and the Indian elites. Many Indian women cover their heads on a daily basis, but when Idha [the character in Kapoor's book] does so at a Sufi shrine, she feels she becomes 'Persian, dark-eyed, pious and transformed'." One could argue that she succumbs to the use of clichés precisely because like other members of her class, Kapoor looks at the people in the city of Delhi, through a gaze adopted from the Raj.



Goa and Goans are locked in an unequal and unfair colonial relationship with India. Until and unless this inequality and injustice are resolved, and the relationship is made more equal – indeed, until the colonial equation at the heart of the imperial Indian project is resolved – Goa and Goans may be doomed to destruction. Kapoor's text is offensive precisely because she is blind to these facts, and while also being blind to her own privilege is completely oblivious to the extent to which her article is a gripe about the loss of her own privileges. Kapoor's problem seems to lie in the fact that with other Indians, and not just other elites but all sorts, coming to play with her toy, the party has been ruined. While Kapoor may be able to trip off to some other island paradise and live the life of the wandering elite, where, pray, will the Goans go?

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