

By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA



How India Sees Goa: Reflections in the 60th Year of Goa's Annexation to India  
Although Goa is politically part of Indian territory, the way the rest of India views Goa and its people, says something about the Indian gaze of Goa. I thought it is important to begin by putting down elements of what the Indian gaze looks like, in a bid to understand the sub-text – something that is sub-consciously internalized by people in other parts of India, perhaps based on how the Indian Corporate State has treated and is treating Goa.

When I first began my interactions with people based in other parts of India, it was as a penpal. Those were not the days of internet. We first put out our names in a penpals' column in a magazine, and then the letters flowed. I guess there were more people interested in being penpals with Goans because there was and continues to be an imagery of Goa as a beautiful peaceful place. There is also an imagery of Goa's women as being 'available'.

The letters I got were many and varied. There were females and males who wrote in from different parts of India, and a couple from other parts of the world too. I even received a letter from a Goan in Bombay and a Goan in Australia.

I chose forty out of the 200 plus letters to correspond with as a penpal. I straight away discarded those letters that started with the suggestion of romance simply from a certain imagination of me as a Goan. The forty I chose were beings who seemed to cover a vast breadth of natures, interests, political positions, and educational qualifications. Even the two Goans were each very different from the Goan Catholics I know in Goa. One of them – from Bombay, who I eventually met, spoke a very different version of Konkani.

I even had a penpal from Assam, and those were the days when the students' agitation was at its peak in that region. The penpal from Assam told me their classes were suspended because of the agitation. At that time, I could not even imagine what he was talking about, and here we in Goa (as in other parts of India), are in 2020, up against a similar scenario, albeit for a different reason.

In the letters some wrote after we exchanged photographs, which is one of the first things that would happen after the correspondence began, they remarked that they didn't expect to see the homely face in the pic. Others were taken aback when they saw I had a braid. Still others asked me whether they needed a visa to come to Goa from another part of India. Goa to most of them was a sort of enigma.

As time went by and I began personally interacting with students in other parts of India, I was confronted with many questions: You are from Goa? So you have boy-friends, huh? Not an issue whether I had boyfriends or not, but I was appalled that Goans were defined by sexual

dalliances. And how did they recognize me as a Goan? Because I was wearing dresses (frocks) and skirts and blouses, in an era where college-going girls in many other parts of India wore half sarees, churidhars, and outfits that fully covered the body. There was a kind of stereotyping and commodification and heightened sexuality associated with the 'Western' clothes Goan women wore. We hear that Goans welcome everyone with open arms and open legs, someone said.

There was also a certain imagery about the intellectual capacities of Goans too. I remember coming across a book at Madras, which was written by a Goan by surname Torcato on the history and philosophy of education. I was quite excited to see the book, and I told the others that the writer was a Goan. Imagine my horror when someone remarked, "So Goans can write books?"

Born to Indian nationalist parents, particularly my mother, I had grown up on a staple of 'all Indians are my brothers and sisters'. Imagine my confusion then, when I actually met Indians who saw me as different, in a kind of pejorative way, which made me feel estranged from the others. There was also the fact that the Indian classical music we heard had a completely different tone from the 'Western' music I was familiar with. So the latter was marked as foreign, and not authentically Indian.

I was struggling within myself to understand my identity coming from a place that is integrated into India from 1961. Some people thought Goans were Portuguese, and others thought we are a cross between Indians and Portuguese. There was me affirming that Goans were neither Portuguese nor a cross between Indians and Portuguese, but little did I know then the history of Goans having full citizenship rights in Portugal, and the 1975 treaty of India with Portugal that made it possible for Goans to continue to assert their Portuguese citizenship.

I learnt of many other prejudices and myths as well. Like, I was told that Christians are seen as 'rice-bag converts' a pejorative term implying that they converted in exchange for food. My response was to affirm that Catholics in Goa are not seen as rice-bag converts. We together wondered why. I now fathom it was because the converts ranged from different social locations, that is the advantaged castes and classes as also the disadvantaged castes and classes, and the route of conversion, I guess, was not only through offerings of food for survival. Not to suggest that this should be a word used for Christians in other parts of India as well, as it disrespects their intelligence in making life's decisions under their circumstances.

Then there has been this imagery about Goa being comprised majorly of Catholics. Various State promotions, including even Air India's calendars projected that imagery. And again, one

had to clarify that the demographic majority in Goa are Hindu, even as Catholics constitute a large minority. The commercialised Carnival parades were yet another medium to promote that imagery and more. Goans were seen as a fun-loving non-working people.

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I began to see that these commodifying perceptions of Goans were fuelled by advertisements in national newspapers as well as tourism promotions in India and abroad, which projected Goans as a people who merely sing and dance and 'do nothing', or Goa as a land of wine, women and song because it suited the tourism industry, including the multinational tourism industry, to do this in order to draw a certain kind of tourist to Goa for extracting maximum profits, never mind its implications for the local people.

At one point, I was among those who met travel writer duo Hugh and Coleen Gantzer after they asked to meet representatives of activist groups in Goa who were raising objections to the projections of the commercial Carnival parades in Goa. Goa, they said, had an Iberian culture, and in opposing the Carnival, we are actually erasing that Iberian culture.

The point they were completely missing was that opposition to the Carnival parades of yore in Goa, had various hues. For instance: the Shiv Sena did not want the parade because it was a means to project a Catholic image of Goa and they wanted to negate the Catholic presence in Goa; the hierarchy of the Church in Goa did not want the parade because they considered Carnival a pagan festival; but the women's groups were not resisting Carnival as such but the commercial Carnival parades, which were pulling cultural expressions out of their settings and stage-managing Goa's culture by projecting Goa, and particularly its women, as commodities in the way women were made to dress and dance, just so as to attract a tourist that was looking for hedonistic pleasures.

Unfortunately, the media did not catch the nuances in the opposition, and the women's groups were treated as also-rans with the articulations of the Shiv Sena and the Church being predominantly reported, and simply a mention that *Bailancho Saad* - a women's collective of which I was then part - was *also* opposing the Carnival parades.

The Manager, Goa Office, of the Tourism Department of Government of India, who was not a Goan, did not appreciate women protesting against its promotional material that was commodifying women in Goa, and said that it did not speak well for women in Goa that they should be protesting on the street against projections. The women's collective, *Bailancho Saad* had to tell the Manager that it in fact spoke greatly of women in Goa that they would not take these mis-projections quietly.

There have been other misconceptions too. In discussions with even progressives from the rest of India, there was (and is) this idea, for instance, that I had constantly to engage with:

that Goa has a Uniform Civil Code, and therefore Goa's women have no problems - no issues of domestic violence, no dowry problems, no economic insecurity. It has even been argued that if you have equal inheritance rights, women who are governed by such laws can be free - when there is absolutely no correlation in this. Goa is a society that is as besieged with patriarchal, feudal and capitalist notions. The existence of Uniform Civil Code was also then the rationale for successive Governments in Goa to say that Goa does not need any affirmative provisions for women.

The silver lining to all this is that with concerted efforts by some Goans over time, India is finally learning: that the mantra of Uniform Civil Code per se does not guarantee anything; that Goa is much more than sun, sand and beaches; that it has an alert citizenry, especially women, many of whom do sing and dance, but do many other things too; that Bollywood and successive Indian Governments have led the world in stereotyping Goan men as drunkards and Goan women as 'available'; that the *sussegado* of Goans is not about laziness but about a slower pace of life that is so much needed in this dog-eat-dog world, that *sussegado* could not be and cannot be retained with exploitative labour conditions, especially the low wages and the changed and increasingly exploitative labour codes; that Goa - small as it is - has a diversity of peoples and communities, not just Hindus, Catholics and Muslims, but tribal communities, artisan communities, fishing communities, and many more; that Goa also has its dark side of caste and communalism and corruption, contrary to the communal harmony and corruption-free notion that is being talked about, that there is a slowly-growing recognition of the diversity of influences on Goa, and its variegated histories.

The silver lining is that at least a few people from the rest of India are realizing that seeing Goa from a devouring position to buy a 'piece' of little Goa is about consuming Goa to irreparability, at least a few are beginning to say Stand with Goa: and that Goa is Not - Ought Not to Be - One Single Story of a pleasure periphery of India, and wine, women and song.

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