



Decades ago, I immersed myself in Advaita philosophy, and ran into the term *“neti neti”*. The two words are rejections, emerging from the word *na iti*, not this. The Advaitic philosopher, or the practitioner, who seeks to know the nature of the divine, observes the things of this world, and rejects them, indicating that this is not it, until, having negated all things of this world, they eventually emerge at an understanding of the one thing that is divine.

The search for Goan difference in my own life, and indeed by many other Goans, has to an extent been of a similar nature. As we sought to determine what makes Goans distinct from others in the country, we have identified one feature, then discarded it, after we realised that the particular element was not the key to Goan-ness.

Starting from the 1960s, alongside the trauma of integration into India, it was Konkani that emerged as *the* definitive marker of Goan-ness. But, as time has shown us, Konkani is not a complete marker of Goan-ness. This incapacity of Konkani to capture Goan-ness becomes embarrassingly obvious when we look at the way in which, through the Official Language Act, the state-supported Konkani language establishment promotes just one artificially contrived version of the language, and in fact suffocates all other forms, especially the popular version scripted in the Roman alphabet.

But not just that, the insistence on Konkani as *the* marker of Goan identity also negates the life experiences of Goans who for historically Goan reasons are not comfortable in the language. Their complex identity – some of whom have grown and lived in Africa, the Gulf, or in the UK, or parts of Anglophone America – is also a part of the Goan identity. They understand the language, speak it even, but it is *not* the language in which they express affection, or indeed social intimacy.

Thus, the font of Goan-ness needs to be located elsewhere. Of course, the fact that people are not united around it does not have to be the only basis to ignore it as a reason for Goan difference. Konkani cannot claim to be the source of Goan difference simply because Konkani is spoken outside of Goa as well, and these Konkani speakers most certainly do not embody the distinctiveness that a Goan so often does.

Others, myself included, have located this other font of Goan difference in the Portuguese heritage of this territory and the people in it. But, if Konkani can be excluded on the basis that it does not unite Goans, we could surely exclude Portuguese heritage.

However, the fact that Goa has had a Portuguese sovereign for so many centuries does in fact make *Portugalidade* or Portuguese-ness – a good candidate in which to locate Goan

difference. But this is still unsatisfactory because, to my mind, it hides the dynamo that makes Portugal what it is, a dynamo that Goa shares with Portugal, and which it received from Portugal. This dynamo is the living Catholic faith.



There is now, after so many years of searching, no doubt in my mind that it is Catholicism that makes Portugal distinctive, and Goa different.

In Goa, Catholicism manifests itself in both what is seen as Catholic, and what is not. Thus, it is found not just in Catholic edifices but also in non-Catholic buildings, like the famous temples of Goa. As the architectural historian Amita Kanekar has demonstrated, so many features of the Goan temples are, in fact, elements borrowed from the architectural form known as the Goan church – which, it needs to be said, is not merely a copy of Portuguese churches, but a manifestation of the inculturation of the faith brought here by the metropolitan Portuguese. This is to say, the Goans involved in these projects took the Catholic elements brought from Europe and decided to articulate them in a way that was uniquely theirs. Thus, they created a form that was recognizable as Catholic, and European, but also distinctly Goan. So Goan, in fact, that it then gets replicated in temples within Goa, which are then recognised as dramatically different and distinct from temples in the rest of the subcontinent.

But it isn't just century-old temples that manifest the latent Christianity within Goan-ness. I have often remarked on how non-Catholic Goan artists often display a surprising intimacy with Christianity that manifests in profound ways in their art. The work of Vijay Bhandre at the recently concluded temporary exhibition Engraved Treasures, at the Museum of Christian Art is just one, but powerful, example.

Another example of the relationship between the Church and Goans can be gleaned in the location of the Corona Quilt Project initiated by the Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts. This quilt was draped over the walls of the monumental staircase of the Panjim church. Further, it was said to symbolise hope, love, trust, friendship and community; virtues that the Catholic church has systematically embodied. Perhaps for this reason non-Catholic sites weren't seen as an appropriate site for the installation.

The reason I have come to reject Portuguese-ness, or *Portugalidade*, as the singular marker of Goan difference is that very often it erases the impact of Catholicism *per se* in the formation of the Goan psyche. Catholicism, has trained the minds, hearts and souls of the people in Goa, to be gentle, to be forgiving, to accept the will of God. And, even if so many Catholics in Goa have never embodied these virtues, they remain consecrated in the Goan – and not just Catholic – imagination as something worth having, as a necessary moral normative order. Thus, when someone violates this moral order, they can be castigated, or

they themselves know that they have done wrong.



It was, of course, possible for this moral order, an order so dramatically different from what was extant in the region, to take root because for more than a couple of centuries it was enforced by a Catholic sovereign. So many of the ugly practices prevalent before the arrival of the Cross, such as Sati, were suppressed without so much as a by-your-leave, because they were repugnant to Catholic morality.

I never tire of drawing to attention to the insight brought by Prof. Peter Ronald de Souza, who points out that the reason for the low numbers of Dalits in Goa is simply that so many of them moved from the New Conquests to the Old Conquests, and simply changed their identity. And so an overwhelmingly Catholic territory – such as the Old Conquests were – governed by a Catholic prince who did not care about enforcing caste rules became a location of escape and a site of refuge – despite, please note, being marked by the apparently dreaded Inquisition. This defiance of the caste order would most certainly not have been tolerated in a territory governed by a prince committed to upholding the laws of Manu. And so it is, that the bahujan samaj in Goa can thank Catholicism for its existence.

(First published in *O Heraldo*, dt: 10 May 2023)



Share this...

