



Through the Looking Glass: Examining memories of the *Estado da Índia Portuguesa*

A few weeks ago, while dawdling in the by-lanes of social media I ran into an antique image of the streets of Lisbon decorated to celebrate a public festival. The caption indicated that this was an image of the celebration of the establishment of the *Estado da Índia* in Lisbon. The image had been shared from its original source by a group whose postings I follow and in this group the image was accompanied by a caustic observation “When the Portuguese had a memory”.

I smiled, if somewhat sadly, at this observation because I knew it to be true. The *Estado da Índia Portuguesa* is only a fading memory in contemporary Portugal. Younger generations in this Iberian country are less likely to know, or feel strongly even if they know, about the Portuguese territories in South Asia because this history is no longer fed by state propaganda. For most contemporary Portuguese, *Índia Portuguesa* is something that is in the past, and for some, as I will soon demonstrate, an object that is perhaps safest in the past.

There was a curious timing to my viewing this image and caption, because just a few days prior to this my attention was drawn to another link on a social media group. This link highlighted the interview conducted for the Portuguese newspaper *Diário de Notícias* with Luís Filipe Castro Mendes, a Portuguese diplomat who was ambassador to India between 2007 and 2011. The link drew the readers’ attention to the following quotation, which I reproduce in the original Portuguese and will then translate to English:

... vou-lhe contar uma história: uma aristocrata [Goesa], dessa classe dominante, era uma salazarista militante e um dia vem a Lisboa visitar Salazar. Ele diz-lhe que ela fala muito bem português e ela responde que é portuguesa. Ele pergunta-lhe se tinha sido o pai ou o avô que tinham ido para Goa, mas ela fica gelada e responde-lhe que a família é católica e portuguesa desde o século XVII. Na cabeça do Salazar, para aqueles lados eram todos selvagens debaixo de coqueiros e toda a civilização que tinha ido para lá era da Europa.

[I’ll tell you a story: an aristocrat [a Goan lady] of this dominant class was a supporter of Salazar and one day comes to Lisbon to visit Salazar. He tells her that she speaks Portuguese very well and she replies that she is Portuguese. He asks her if it was the father or grandfather who had gone to Goa, but she gets frosty and replies that the family is Catholic and Portuguese since the 17th century. In Salazar’s head, those parts of the world were populated by savages under coconut trees and all the civilization that existed there was that which had gone there from Europe.]

There is a moral to Ambassador Castro Mendes’ narration. It participates in the demonisation of Salazar that marks the Third Portuguese Republic and offers an example of why the

confidence that the Portuguese people, in this case the segment of the Goan aristocracy of which this lady was a representative, was misplaced. Salazar, in this telling, was nothing but a racist boor and an entirely irredeemable character in the long story of Portuguese history. *Through the Looking Glass: Examining memories of the Estado da Índia Portuguesa*

This, then, is the kind of memory that is being built up in contemporary Portugal of the former Estado da Índia Portuguesa, or at least this is the way that I read Ambassador Castro Mendes' reminiscence – that the quincentennial history of Goa with the Portuguese is intimately related primarily to Salazar and the *Estado Novo* and for this reason the longer history of Goa and its relationship with Portugal should therefore be treated like a bad dream that we move on from now. If Portugal has moved on from Salazar, to the Third Portuguese Republic, Goa (that central constituent of Portuguese India) has also moved on, and is now part of a democratic India, which despite the current challenges, Ambassador Castro Mendes is confident, will always remain democratic.

I would not like to contest the truth content of the anecdote related by Ambassador Castro Mendes. First, because I know the Ambassador personally, recognise him to be a scrupulously honest man and count him among my friends, even if we have somewhat different political positions. Secondly, because even if Ambassador Castro Mendes reads this anecdote that he narrated in the way I suggested above, counting on its veracity, I read it in a somewhat different manner.

My reading does not seek to reprove Salazar, on the contrary it relies on Salazar actually having said and thought the things attributed to him, because the response of the Goan aristocrat is more interesting. When she realises that along with the nature of her Portuguese-ness, the antiquity of her noble ancestry is being questioned, she turns frosty. This is not the response of an underling. This lady is affronted and even though she is speaking with the *de facto* head of state she is willing to put him in his place and dispel his offensive ignorance. This is not an unusual feature of the Goan aristocracy. Goan public memory delights in recounting how in the Portuguese Governor Fernando de Quintanilha da Mendonca Dias slapped the Goan Antonio Bruto da Costa in the course of a vigorous argument. Rather than take this humiliation lying down, Adv. Bruto da Costa returned the slap, leading to a fistfight between the two men which – according to the memoirs of an ADC present in the room – the Goan won.

This willingness to stand up for themselves was a feature of Goan elite of the times, but also speaks to the nature of Portuguese citizenship that we continue to be heirs to. Portuguese citizenship was not some gift that simply dropped from the lap of the Portuguese monarchy, and subsequently the various republics. It was a right that was wrested from the realm of the legal discourse and concretely realised through the activism and self-assertion of the Goan

elite. The Goan elites, and we the Goan people who are their political descendants, were not Portuguese because of some accident of history, or some coercion. No, they were – and we are – Portuguese because we actively engaged with the circumstances of the time and asserted our equality within the order in which we found ourselves. We would do well to remember this.

The narratives that are established by contemporary Portuguese elites, and Indian nationalist elites whether Goan or otherwise, often mask the agency demonstrated by the Goan people – whether elite or otherwise – in the course of their history. The Goans took the Portuguese framework that they were placed in, and cleverly, and bravely, asserted themselves within that frame. They asserted a unique culture within that framework, where they were Portuguese while simultaneously Goan. We should not forget that Goans were not victims of history, and they should not be.

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