



UNWRAPPING GOAN IDENTITY

When asked to write this short note, the recent autobiographical and polemical novel of Gunter Grass, "Peeling the Onion", came to my mind. That is exactly how I see the Goan identity, with its many wrappings. Some of these make me cry, due to the ambiguities and contradictions involved in the process of the historical growth of "my people". In the course of my 62 years of life (12 of these spent in India but outside Goa for University studies, and the past 14 in Portugal accompanying the former colonialists in their University studies) I have been part of the Goan onion wrappings. This is not a damage controlling Gunterian confession, but I may admit that I was born legally as Portuguese in colonial Goa without my choice in February 1947 (while the rest of the country was on the threshold of independence). I became an Indian without my choice by a legislative process which followed the expulsion of the Portuguese colonial regime. Our personal destiny is greatly shaped by such unchosen developments of the collective history. Mine was no exception and some important life decisions became dependent upon the best available opportunities, but hardly of my choice.

It was only in 1995 that I could find the right conditions to re-orient my life. Recovery of the Portuguese nationality was then an option. Similarly, the recovery of the Indian nationality as OCI in 2007 was another option. These were hard and thoughtful decisions, and reflect my way of integrating consciously, freely and appreciatively the major elements that have contributed to shape my identity as a Goan. In the past I had seen the same elements as forced into my identity. Now I feel that I have come to terms with my identity and feel proud of it. That is a process I wish for every Goan.

Post-liberation generations, and most visitors and recent settlers in Goa are not sufficiently clear about what precisely makes up the Portuguese cultural legacy. Many "outsiders" (*bhaile* for the native Goans) come imbibed with Salman Rushdie's imagery of Goans who love to light candles to the kababed saints and tandooried martyrs which they

preserve reverentially in the home oratories.

At the close of the Portuguese colonial regime in Goa, after nearly four and half centuries of intense and sustained batterings of the Portuguese law, church rituals and inquisition threats on a small enclave, Goans could not escape adopting overt and covert cultural habits that distinguish them from the rest of the inhabitants of the subcontinent. To illustrate the reaction of the Goan Christian elite to liberation, I cannot resist quoting a somewhat lengthy paragraph from Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* depicting a character modeled after Mario Miranda: "When...the Indian Army entered Goa, ending 451 years of Portuguese colonial rule ...Vasco was plunged for weeks into one of his black-dog depressions. Aurora encouraged him to see the event as a liberation, as many Goans did, but he was inconsolable. 'Up to now I had only three Gods and the Virgin Mary to disbelieve in,' he complained. 'Now I have three hundred million. And what Gods! For my taste, they have too many heads and hands'... On the night of India's independence, the red mist came over him in a rush. The contradictions of that high moment tore him apart. That celebration of freedom whose engulfing emotions he could not avoid even though, as a Goan, he was technically not involved... he drank *vinho verde* in quantity and at speed, sunk in darkness."

But the impact of the Portuguese brand of Christianity could also be felt on ordinary rural Goan

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Christian women. For instance, they all love to put flowers in their hair just as would any other Goan woman, but they take them off when leaving home. When I asked my mother once why she did that, her only explanation was: *Kristanv bail ghara bhair fulam mau na*. I discovered a reason in the course of my research, namely in the course of the 16th century the church provincial councils had decreed under severe penalties that women should discontinue the practice of divination by sticking flower petals with saliva to the left or right side of a temple idol and waiting to see which petal would fall first to decide if a wish would be granted or not. By banning the use

of flowers in the hair while outdoors would thus prevent the woman from being tempted to continue an old "gentile" practice. For such and other "lapses and re-lapses" many Goans were hauled before the Inquisition tribunal and punished at autos-da-fé during two and half centuries of its operation in Goa. We can only imagine from distance in time the intimidation and terror it may have had on men and women torn away from their families and kept in the dungeons of the Inquisition. Several of these never returned to their families, or perhaps some did after serving 6 to 10 years as forced labour in galleys or gunpowder manufactory. The Provincial of the Goa Jesuits, my co-villager from Moirá and a trained psychologist, Fr. Tony da Silva S.J., analysed once in a seminar organized by me at the Xavier Centre of Historical Research in 1992 the permanent impact such intimidation left upon the Goan psyche for times to come. We are experiencing the unwinding in some of the social excesses that we have been witnessing in the post-liberation era.

I wish to recall another incident that left me baffled some years ago. It was the statement of an orthodox Hindu Brahmin from Pune. He came to Goa in the wake of the liberation as the Director of Goa Historical Archives and stayed in that job till his retirement about 20 years later. Like many other such non-Goan officers that were little welcomed by Goans and were labeled as "deputationists", he too decided to live his retired life in Goa.

Dr. Gune acquired a house near Mangueshi temple and believed that he could continue his hobby as astrologer (jyotishi) and earn some complement to his pension. My surprise was to hear from him some three years later that he had decided

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to leave Goa. He was disillusioned with Goan Hindus, whom he denounced as "different", a milder way of saying that they were corrupted by the Portuguese influence. They did not meet his requirements of Hindu orthodoxy!

Until this moment I had only noticed (like most

Goans do till today) the differences between Goan Hindus and Christians. I needed a Hindu from outside Goa to bring the similarities to my notice.

Goa had been in its past history, at least since the 11th century under the Kadambas, linked to a widespread network of Afro-Asian seaborne trade, and of hinterland trade with the Deccan through ghat passes. The integration of Goa into the Portuguese eastern empire after 1510 catapulted it into an unforeseen scale of operations. As headquarters of an early modern European empire from 1530, Goa exposed its inhabitants very early to the challenges of modern globalization. If the early decline of the Portuguese failed to sustain this process, the economic pressures and the cultural acquisitions permitted the Goans to avail of the opportunities presented by the British empire in the neighbouring territories, particularly since the establishment of the rail link.

Ironically, the allegedly harassed Hindu community of Saraswats (one-sided historical perspective conveniently bandied around for political gains in post-liberation times) sustained the fiscal-commercial structure of the Portuguese in Goa, and the Hindu dubhashis effectively served their diplomatic needs in Asia as extensively documented by Dr. P.S.S. Pissurlencar in his *Agentes da Diplomacia Portuguesa na Índia* (1952). Without such vital support the Portuguese colonialism in Goa would have short-circuited and burnt out very much earlier than it did. But the self-interested collaboration of Goan Hindus gave lots of time for masses of poor Christians, and allegedly protected by the Portuguese Christian rule, to make a bee-line as emigrants to eke out their living in British India.

It should never be forgotten however that it was the structure of the Portuguese Church Padroado throughout Asia, manned largely by native Goan clergy from the 19th century onwards, that gave the scattered Goan emigrants the emotional sustenance they needed away from their homeland. The Padroado parishes in Bombay and the village kudd dedicated to the patron-saints of the respective parishes in Goa were the visible and effective props in the process of adaptation to painful socio-economic challenges.

The church connection also helped developing the musical talent of many Goans, and the westernized culinary skills opened job markets for many Goans in British India. Sad to say also, the tradition of an international slave market where females and males from different countries were

bought and sold (and that made Portuguese Goa famous through the writings of the Dutchman Linschotten and other contemporary foreign travelers) contributed to the exodus of many Goan women who earned their living with prostitution in Bombay.

If language is a core component of any social identity, it may surprise us to find that Goans preserved their language even during the colonial period, and barely 5% of Goan population could read, write and speak in Portuguese according to the last census of the colonial regime. These included ethnic Portuguese serving in Goa and about one hundred families of mestiços and luso-descendentes.

According to statistics presented by Dr. Froilano de Mello as deputy to the Portuguese Parliament on 24 January 1947, English schools were experiencing fast growth in Goa, while the Portuguese Lyceum languished! He referred to 63 private English schools in Goa employing 389 local teachers and 71 foreigners. They had a total of 8890 pupils! That meant 22 times more than those who frequented the Portuguese lyceum! The needs of emigration to British India fuelled this trend.

Rural folks in Goa and low middle class emigrants held fast to their Konkani. However, close contact with the Portuguese clergy during the early centuries after conversion, elementary training in the parish schools, and compulsory primary schooling in Portuguese since 50s, resulted in the absorption of a hefty proportion of Portuguese loan-words into the spoken Konkani of Goan Christians.

Fuj-da-put (filho da puta), bonku (bom cú), fodricho (foder), etc. became common folk utterances alongside besanv (benção), maldisanv (maldição), etc. Such linguistic colonialism, despite the colourful ingredients, greatly endangered the

healthy growth of Konkani language and many decades of sustained efforts became necessary after 1961 to restore its linguistic-cultural legitimacy and standards so as to make it acceptable as the official State language in 1986 and to permit its entry in the Constitutional schedule in 1992.

No discussion on Goan identity can be complete by ignoring the caste system that dogs the Goan society. "*To konnalo?*" (to which family does he belong?) is a question which a good Goan usually asks or intends to ask, be it in Goa or anywhere in the world. Goans married to non-Goans and living in non-Goan ambience may care to ignore the caste linkage, and even in Goa today money and power call the shots.

However, deep in the unconscious a Brahmin knows he is a Brahmin, a Chardo resents being a Chardo, and the same old trap works. Spoken Konkani retains grammatical inflections and vocabulary preferences that identify castes, such as aila and eila, taka and teka, sokoilo and khailo, etc. Despite all the haute couture and other external shenigans that Goans have acquired over time and make them presentable global citizens, the Goan identity has yet to break out of its caste-shell. A glance at the archives of Goanet (www.goanet.org, the oldest and global Goan Internet discussion forum) should confirm my point. Thus caste remains a challenge for Goans for yet another millennium. It is what the Portuguese would call a *pedra no sapato*, a cultural irritant that we need to learn to freely detach from the requisites of our personal and collective identity. Until we can eradicate it, we can hardly call ourselves global Goans. We will remain puny caste-bound Goans doing relatively well globally. In the meantime only the common cause against the "bhaile" will distract us from our schizophrenia.

