

Goa: An 'Aurorised' Story

Goa: A Daughter's Story,
by Maria Aurora Couto;
Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2005;
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Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (Vintage, 1994) depicts Aurora, as the last of the Gamas and a daughter of Camões, playing the perfect granddaughter to Epifânia da Gama, whom she wishes to murder. We are told that Epifânia had developed a healthy respect for the British, but her heart belonged to Portugal, as she dreamt of walking beside the Tagus, the Douro, sashaying through the streets of Lisbon on the arm of a grandee. Aurora's grandfather, Francisco da Gama, had fallen prey to Annie Besant's theosophy and propounded a theory of 'transformational fields of conscience', but his playing with Gama rays finished him off, after provoking cruel and satirical editorial comments in *The Hindu*. Those who are familiar with this "Aurorised" version of Rushdie's novel (do not miss Chapter 13 of the novel) will find in the present book, another Aurorised version, Chico's daughter and Alban Couto's wife, a soulful, or to use her

father's "alma"-discourse, a passionate and emotion-charged reconstruction of Goa. 'The Sunday Magazine' of *The Hindu* of April 4, 2004 had reviewed this book under the caption 'Apparent Divide, Actual Bridges', relating Goa to south Asia's macro-level processes, without leaving it isolated as a dazzling but inexplicable pendant on Asia's hippie and tourist routes. It should not surprise the reader if a large part of the book is devoted to the Goan musical tradition, which serves to link and also bind the Bhakti cult with Goan Christianity, Goan "kudds" with Bollywood, a lawyer-politician-freedom fighter of Orlim with a Souza lady born to a music merchant in Karachi and trained by an Italian maestro in Bombay and speaking English at home in a predominantly Portuguese influenced Salcete subculture. Even a rat frequented occasionally (p 270) the music classes of Father Philip Soares in the Dharwar parish of Aurora. Perhaps, he mistook the Goan music for the "laddus" of Lord Ganesha.

A New Approach

Couto follows neither the tourist brochure approach that goes little beyond describing the sun and sands of Goa, nor

does she take up the stance of the academic historian, who in this book will have to bear with absence of their preference for footnoted erudition. Aurora prefers rather to "imagine and interpret" the process of conversion, subversion and compromise (pp 240-49) to which the population and the land were subjected since its occupation by Afonso de Albuquerque in 1510. She prefers to build her "story of Goa" on the basis of her own choice of sources, giving the pride of place to family reminiscences and other kinds of oral traditions and F N Souza's canvases, but above all to the two major rivers of Goa. Maria Aurora believes that the "view from the river is dramatically different". This river-borne perspective would certainly make Herman Hesse's Siddhartha keen to come to Goa, even though Aurora does not extend her view to the Buddhist or any other phase of pre-Portuguese Goa. Unlike Rushdie's Epifânia, his Aurora's grandmother, here we find an Aurora who reveals a sound respect for the Portuguese, but whose heart belongs to a greater India. The Portuguese get almost off the hook of most academic historians: they are presented as non-aggressive as a rule and without delusions of superiority. We are told that their coercion did not mean violence against human person, but only the violation of right to practise Hinduism, or that the citizenship granted to Goans was not matched with the right to highest positions of power, particularly in the church hierarchy and during the dictatorship of Salazar.

I cannot but feel deep empathy for the exercise performed by Maria Aurora Couto. My own *Goa to Me* (Concept Publishers, Delhi, 1994) was a somewhat similar exercise of weaving the history of Goa with my own lived experience of situations of anguish and opportunities, not very different from what Couto and most other sons and daughters of Goa have gone through at different periods and contexts of Goa's history. I see *Goa – A Daughter's Story* as yet another worthy attempt to piece together one's own lived experience with the help of the life-performances of many others, at all levels of the Goan community, whose common umbilical bond with Goa makes them all, individually and collectively, the makers of Goan history. Couto does not hide her belief in the role of the elite, but also presents history in tune with Pareto's "cemetery of elite". The book seems to have provided an opportunity for catharsis by seeking to unveil the main causes of

the declining and dying feudal elite to which a large part of her ancestry belonged.

Through Maria Couto's account, researchers like the present reviewer will perhaps find a wider readership for research on Goa's agrarian economy and the baroque style of Christianity introduced by the Portuguese (p 158), the imposition in Goa Portuguesa of a "xendy" tax along the Mughal "jizya" model (p 200), the Mhamays of Goa, the debt owed by Jesuits to Bhagvatiny Camotiny at the time of their suppression, and African slavery in Goa (p 219), Lam Jaku's (the reviewer's grandfather) tirades against the pants-wearing ("calção-kar") rulers and their native lackeys (p 239), the Jesuit impact upon the Goan agriculture and culture (p 251), the native Oratorians of Goa (p 319), the Pinto Revolt (p 324), and many other bits and pieces of information that do not always carry overt indication of their source. Maria Couto's wide and rich survey of oral traditions and her encyclopaedic readings also validate many of my research conclusions, including the fact that Portuguese colonialism was sustained with the active

collaboration of Hindu artisans, traders and diplomats (p 263). I can recall having chatted with Couto during her visit to Portugal and also during my visits to Goa. I remember having conveyed to her my conviction that with her socio-political background she was better placed than the scholars born and bred exclusively in Goa to present Goa on a larger canvas. That seems to have happened and a comparison of the book reviews at the local and national level bear witness to it.

Couto discovered in her genealogical lists a great-great-grandfather Antonio Caetano Pacheco, who has a road named after him in Margão. In 1955, the postal services of Portuguese India issued a stamp with his picture and name, to commemorate 450 years of the foundation of the "Estado Português da Índia", to which he was elected as MP to serve in the Portuguese parliament in 1839. Had Couto gone beyond oral tradition, listening only to Priti Camotim, and "senhoras" Hira Sardessai and Hira Sakhardando in Lisbon, and found time to glance at the records of the Portuguese parliament (many of them

can now be consulted online), she could have traced interesting details about her ancestor's capacity to draft legislative projects in the company of Bernardo Peres da Silva. He was back in the Portuguese parliament after suffering exile from Goa in 1832 and after an aborted attempt by his relative and opium-baron Rogerio de Faria in 1835 to bring him back to power to serve his own business ambitions by ousting the Portuguese through a naval expedition he planned from Bombay, but which landed on the rocks of Vengurlá due to little attention paid to the announcements of early arrival of the monsoon that year (p 366), Bernardo Peres da Silva continued to be re-elected as MP for Goa till his death. He continued his political harangues on behalf of his land and his people in the Portuguese parliament, even when no minister in government cared to listen or respond to his demands. Silva did not relent till the end and earned for himself a mausoleum in Lisbon's glamorous "Cemitério dos Prazeres", a kind of open-air museum erected by the liberalism and secularism of the mid-19th century that

took the burial grounds away from the medieval Catholic church precincts.

The Old Aristocracy

If I have pointed out in some detail the above cases, it is meant as an indirect comment on Couto's lamentations and frustrations of the Goan feudal "bhatkars", affecting significantly the destinies of her ancestry, including her beloved father (p 356) and inspirer of this book. They found little or no scope for idealism and creativity in the prevailing economic constraints that followed the British grip over Portuguese Indian economy (p 292) and after Salazar's grip over the native political ambitions (pp 386-87). It is true that Couto cites the case of some young Goans, like Telo Mascarenhas, Adeodato Barreto and Lucio Miranda, who founded a "Partido Nacional Indiano" in the university city of Coimbra, in Portugal, or some visionary Hindu reformers in Goa, such as Hegdo Dessai, who led single handedly a press campaign through his newspaper *Bharat*, when some of his influential correligionaries had been co-opted to serve and toe the line of the administration. I am left with the impression that, while filial and human sensitivity makes Couto seek to mitigate the personal culpability of Goans who drowned their frustrations in alcoholism, she seems to be at a loss to explain how several others could resist and act within the same socio-political context with an intense sense of mission. Should we believe that most Goans, and many of the elite, like her cherished father could only find sublimation in faith and "alma"-driven music? If so, are we to conclude that the Portuguese "violence-free" colonialism did very well through the strategic promotion of a "lamb of God" or "suffering servant of Yahweh" theology with Lenten motets and what Salman Rusdie calls "kababed saints and tandooried martyrs"? Did music truly liberate the Christian soul (p 237)? Did it not rather lull and dull the pains and sufferings under the colonial rule, preventing an adequate political response of the masses?

Couto's preliminary disavowal of academic history left me with some misgivings, but as I reached the end of the book, I could not help recalling the 16th century Portuguese adventurer in Asia and author of his world-famous *Peregrinação*. Till very recently, the literary critics believed that Fernão Mendes Pinto was lying or exaggerating most of the incidents he was narrating. Now it is admitted by serious

researchers that he was truthful even in most details, but was forced to put into the mouths of others whatever he himself wanted to say about the Portuguese atrocities and opportunistic behaviour in Asia. The Portuguese Inquisition would not let him publish his book had he said those things as personal testimony. He had devised a literary style. Maria Aurora Couto seems to have laboured under some kind of self-inquisitorial pressures and done a superb job of making many others, including the present reviewer, say whatever could go counter to her determination to avoid extreme positions.

Just as I cherish Jawaharlal Nehru's approach to Indian and World History through his well known *The Discovery of India* and *Glimpses of World History*, I have no doubts that Maria Aurora's *Goa – A Daughter's Story* will go a long way in presenting the social and cultural (which is always political, as the author admits in one place) in a language that is both polished and passionate, conveying deep love and the "Indian-ness of pluralism" as another reviewer has summed up in his conclusions of the book. Despite my wholehearted concurrence, I fear that the "mestiços" who are presented as the real enemies, feared and hated by Goans from both communities (p 193), may feel themselves at the receiving end of this otherwise suave treatment of Goan cultural pluralism. The recently published second edition of a massive three volume listing of *Os luso-descendentes da Índia Portuguesa* by Jorge Forjaz could provide much powder for commemorative salvos, if not for more provocative exercises, as the fifth centenary of the conquest of Goa and Afonso de Albuquerque's policy and politics of miscegenation nears. Could the "mesticos" or their descendants be brushed aside in Couto's account of Goa Portuguesa? Were they dismissed summarily (pp 134-35) to avoid getting sucked into less pleasant reflections and interpretations? How about Goan natives, men and women, who sought matrimonial alliances with the white Portuguese, and are now integrated on either side of the present-day political geography divide? Where do they figure in the evolution of Goan identity as presented in *Goa A Daughter's Story*? While it is easy to present the mestiços as enemies in the context of the liberal politics and pre-liberation conflicts of the Goan society, a more systematic treatment of their long-lasting presence in Goan identity could surely enrich our understanding of Goa's cultural history.

Contrary to general belief, more white blood transfusion may have entered the Goan society through white females who married propertied and influential Goan "ganvkars" than through Portuguese males for whom native taboos made it difficult to find high caste native mates. These are just some provocations, hoping that Couto will accept the challenge and answer some of these questions in the near future by delving little deeper into the feats and adventures of the "gente muito fina, ... tao delicadas, tao bonitas" (very refined people, very courteous and beautiful) about whom Couto's mother used to reminisce (p 330). Why limit and stop the influences on the character of Goan women (and perhaps men as well?) with Dravidian matrilinealism, Buddhist philosophy and Kadamba queens (p 51)? This is not applicable only to the Christian community. If we are to go by oral tradition, the choice of D Bhandarkar as the first elected chief minister of post-liberation Goa permitted a smooth transition for Goa, less politically than genetically! Hopefully, the Muslims who were left out from the present Aurorised version will also find some place in future versions. It was among them that Afonso de Albuquerque found the "mulheres castas e alvas" (chaste and fair women) to reproduce the "casados" and to forge a new identity for Goa Portuguesa.

Misspellings

To conclude, I wished the paperback edition that is reviewed here had made accessible this magnum opus of Maria Aurora Couto, not just for less price, but also with less misspellings of Portuguese words. Goans need not be made more "socegado" than they seem to be by replacing "ss" with one "c", or made less braggarts by taking away one "r" from "fanfarrão" (braggart)! (p 360). Many missing Portuguese accent marks change the meanings of words, particularly in some phrases that are not accompanied by English translation. The archaic Portuguese orthography could have been modernised as most research historians usually do nowadays. But these are minor complaints. I would add on a lighter note that, if Aurora continues copying dutifully and affectionately the Portuguese texts of her father without fearing his knocks (p 260), she will certainly have all the spellings right very soon and in time for the future editions. [P]

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