



MHAMAIS OF GOA

IN THE NETWORK OF TRADE AND CULTURE



EDITOR

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NEW SOURCE MATERIAL FOR THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE HINDUS OF GOA

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Some preliminary remarks

It is my pleasure to participate in this first local history seminar being organized by the Goa University. It is a development that I have desired since long. My *Medieval Goa* published in 1979 says in its concluding lines : "It can be hoped that the forthcoming university will be interested in promoting wider and deeper analysis into the socio-economic past of Goa in order to help the efforts at socio-economic reconstruction of liberated Goa". I regard this fulfilment of my desire in the silver jubilee year of Goa's liberation as particularly auspicious. In the meantime it was my good fortune during the course of the last decade to contribute personally and through the Xavier Centre of Historical Research as much as I could to foster serious efforts aimed at promoting researches, publications and seminars on Goa's history. While my limited efforts, and the limited resources of the Xavier Centre can contribute to serve the cause of Goa's history, we can now look forward to the guidance and encouragement and coordination of all our efforts on a much bigger scale. It is our good fortune that the first Vice-Chancellor of the Goa University, Dr. B. Sheik Ali, belongs to our tribe.

Coming here, as I do with great hopes, I wish that the Goa University seminar on local history will not be like one of the many seminars that I have attended, and which perhaps have only one undoubtable achievement to their credit, namely the resolution to hold another seminar! I believe that a seminar should provide a meeting place for older scholars to exchange notes about their more recent findings, and for the younger scholars and students to share their research experiences with one another and seek guidance from the older ones. I am hoping to find this happening at this seminar.

Before I come to the theme of my paper, allow me just one more comment, which is rather a suggestion for the future. It is an experiment that I am trying at the Xavier Centre, and it is aimed at ensuring that our seminars do not become exercises in sterile academics. The seminars should not serve only for reinforcing the illusions of our historical research as it most often seems to be doing. Instead of dumping our research upon the people and expecting them to take interest in it, it appears to me important that we sound the various sections of the people and allow them to raise the issues and ask questions that are relevant. This would mean inviting non-historians as participants and discussants at our seminars. I would like however to end this with a caveat: The importance of making our research should by no means reduce our emphasis on the required methodological rigour and standards.

In keeping with my preliminary remarks and expectations I have come to listen to our veteran colleagues and younger researchers. My small contributions will be to bring to your notice some features of the Mhamai House Records that are deposited in the Xavier Centre of Historical Research, and to raise some questions that may help to orient future research in the social history of the Goan Hindu population.

Mhamai Kamat Papers: Provenance and General Features

I have already introduced these records and the background of the family to whom they belonged quite extensively at the 2nd International Seminar on Indo-Portuguese History (Lisbon, 1980) and then at the Bombay meeting of the Indian History Congress that same year. A version of the same study has also appeared in the journal of the Indian Archives². While those interested can look for many details in the different printed versions, it may help to recall here some information about

the history and historical importance of the Mhamai Kamat family in order to appreciate better the value of its records.

The surname *Mhamai* was assumed by the Kamat family from an important deity of their original Guirdolim village in the Salcete *taluka* as reported in the traditions of the Goan Saraswat Brahmins recorded in the *Konkanakhyana*³. According to the oral tradition of the family, the *Camotins* of Guirdolim fled the village to escape the conversion drive in the mid-16th century and sought shelter in the neighbouring territory of the *Sundas*. The family deity was for quite some time at a place called Shiroti at Cabo de Rama. From there they sought to shift it to Kundaim in Ponda *taluka* in the mid -18th century, but as per traditions, the bearers of idol could not proceed beyond Fatorpa. It was then decided to establish it there under a banyan tree, and for that reason it came to be called *Vatadevata*⁴. The decision to shift may have been motivated by the fact that other big temples of the Saraswats were coming up in the Ponda taluka which was still outside the Portuguese jurisdiction but not too far away for the Hindus engaged in business in the Goa city to frequent⁵. Subha Kamat may have had some business in the Goa city before he shifted his residence to Panjim around the time Count of Ega, the Viceroy shifted his place to Panjim, that is, in 1759. Subha Kamat had become one of the four official brokers at the Goa customs in 1757, and with the assistance of his four sons, the Mhamai Kamat House extended its activities to cover revenue farming, contracts for supplies of provisions and ship repairs, brokerage and insurance and large-scale country trade. My past discussions of the value of the Mhamai Kamat House Papers from this angle of their business involvement have served to stress the value of these records for an economic history. We hope to put in your hands before the end of this year a detailed descriptive catalogue of the French papers of this collection. These will bring out in addition to the value already stressed, the value of these papers for political history

relating to the Anglo-Mysore and the Anglo-Maratha conflicts. As French brokers in Goa, the Mhamais were also acting as political informers to them. I would like to point out now, though very tentatively and sketchily, that this collection made of over 100,000 loose papers and 250 codices also contains a sizable amount of papers that can interest socio-economic historians of Goa. I can only proffer a guess that such material could be found in the bulk of papers that are written in the Old Kannada and Modi scripts, but it is definitely there in the 300 and odd loose papers and a bound volume of 187 folios in the Marathi language and the Devanagiri script.

Marathi Records of the Mhamais : External Features

(a) *Physical features* : All the loose papers are of the thick, handmade type variety, and as such they are fairly well preserved. With some exceptions, the ink used is dark black, and fortunately it does not show any corrosive effect on the paper. They are almost all of small size, measuring approximately 8" x 6". The bound volume measures approximately 12" x 9.5 ". Its pages are of thicker variety, but of poorer quality. Folios 21 to 32 have been seriously damaged by the corrosive effect of the ink used. Several folios of this volume have interesting leaflets and newspaper cuttings stuck to them.

(b) *Date and language*: The loose papers contain incoming correspondence of the Swamis of Partagal as well as of different dependents and other contacts of the Mhamais. The correspondence of the Swamis always begins with "Shri Vithal" written in bold letters and covering the whole width of the paper. The same inscription can also be seen on the seals of lacquer that have survived intact on some of these letters. While all the other letters begin with "Shri", the Swami's correspondence ends with "Shri". The name of the addressing Swami appears in all the letters of the Partagali Math, and the name is accompanied by the various high-sounding titles of the Swami. In the assorted samples of sixty

loose documents that I have gone through, I have come across the correspondence of six Swamis, namely Jeevottam, Ramchandra, Kamalakanta, Shreekanta, Ramanath and Ananadateertha. Since all the correspondence is addressed to the Mhamais after they settled in Panjim, it belongs to the second half of the 18th century and thereafter. The bound volume is devoted exclusively to the correspondence between the Swamis of Partagal and the Mhamais, but it also contains several other documents and paper cuttings that relate to the contents. The documents in the bound volume are late 19th century copies of the correspondence dating back to the 1830s and contains day-to-day reports of certain events of the first half of the 20th century. As regards the dates of individual documents, all the correspondence of the Swamis gives the *sanvatsar* according to Jupiter cycle, followed by month, date with reference to *Shud'da* or *vadya*, and sometimes also the day (*var*). In the other private letters there is rarely the mention of the year, and then one has to depend entirely on the internal evidence for dating and that also very vaguely in most cases on very limited circumstantial details.

My experience of reading Marathi records does not allow me to compare these with other contemporary records elsewhere, but the influence of Konkani and Portuguese on these records is unmistakable, e.g.: In a letter from Hari Pitre, he requests the Mhamais to send him a carpenter with his *tasnni*, *vinya* and other required *aspav* (for plane, chisel and tools in Konkani). The contents of another refer to *Kanngya* (sweet potatoes), *kondde* (bambus) and *nisann* (ladder). As instances of Portuguese influence one comes across words and expressions *Fernandin* mangoes, *fidalku*, *notifikar*, *for* (cloth lining), *sarkarachi poddteri*. There is a very amusing piece in the volume on fl.103. It is perhaps the only document in the Devanagiri script, but with a mixture of Konkani and Portuguese. It seems to have been composed by someone of the Mhamai party and hits out at

one Azrekar who belonged to an opposing faction. It is in the context of some socio-religious conflict as a result of which the Mhamais came under excommunication for over four decades. Allow me to quote some bits of this:

Marathi Records of the Mhamais : Contents

हांव दिसतां तुमकां ल्हान, पूण म्हज्या हातांत सगल्यांचे कान तुमच्या ब-याक हात घालचो पडलो ख-याक पिशानो, आमी सगले गोंयकार, तें जाणा कोण? चोर खंयचे, तांणी आमचे मुखार उलोवचें हें तुमकां आवडना? येव येवपेतेई मुं बुकादु तरी येवत फिजेदामाय सोडिना वाद, देपोयझ येव लागेय सबाद, म्हाफा जाय तसो; आइन्द येव दीग सगल्यांक, आरपुन घरा आपल्या गल्याक, ना तर येव येदि कॅम्यार चोल्याक. येव नांव सोब दणायत काका, तें आयलें बोडकें आका, तसलें आवडना म्हाका, हें तुमकां खबर ना? यातिफ आजरेकारान खुबयलें ताका, दिशेंत केलो गोंयच्या लोका. असले वायट लोक हांगा नाका. फिकोव मुईनकांड येव प्रिसिज फाझेर ऊं वॉलत पारा बोंबाई; आदेवश सिन्योर प्रिजीदेंत. म्हजी तकली जाली फेल, पुर येवत मोतिव येव नांव मॅत कसल्याय कामाक. येव पेस दिशकुल्यं पोर्के म्हजें कसलेंच ना कुल्य!!!

These records, particularly those of the Partagali Math, are very specifically of socio-cultural interest. Many are *adnyarayas* (instructions, orders) of the Swamis tackling individuals and groups of persons accused of violating certain socio-religious customs of the Saraswats. It is quite obvious from this documentation that the social ferment was greatly helped by the printing press in Goa. The first rumblings almost coincide with the liberal discontent and political unrest that was getting hold of the educated Christian population issue that could be the subject matter for a deeper study: How was the Hindu community affected by the winds of Portuguese liberalism since the 1820s and of the Portuguese republic in 1910? The socio-religious upheavals within the Hindu

community need to be studied with these questions in mind.

For those who are looking for descriptive data regarding housing, dress, food, festivals, and others, these records have quite some.

I do hope that this sketch introduction will serve to stress the need of looking out for newer documentation and for newer ways of interpreting the past of our people. Our liberated Goa demands this from us if we want to draw the fruits of liberation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. T.R. de Souza, *Medieval Goa*, New Delhi, 1979, p. 186.
2. T.R. de Souza, "Mhamai House Records: Indigenous Sources for Indo-Portuguese Historiography", *Indian History Congress Proceedings* (Bombay Session, 1980): 435-45; *The Indian Archives*, XXXI, n.1 (Jan-June 1982, 25-45).
3. Wagle, V. *Konkanakhyana*, Bombay, 1909, p.13.
4. Loc cit.
5. V.N. Dhume, *Shri Mangesha Devasthan*, Margao 1971, p.89; *Golden Goa* (Marg Publishers), Bombay, 1980, p.91.

One could compare this material and complement it with the findings of the late G. H. Khare, "An uncared for source-material for the socio-economic history of the Goa territory". *Source of the History of India*. ed. S.P. Sen Calcutta, 1978, pp. 447-52.

(Goan Society Through The Ages, ed. B.S.Shastry, New Delhi, 1987, pp.186 - 192)