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Christian Life in Goa During Colonial Times

Charles J. Borges, SJ
Xavier Centre of Historical Research, Goa

This paper is an attempt to describe briefly some of the ways Christians of Goa and a few other parts of India lived their faith since the time of the first conversions by foreign missionaries.

"The true Church is universal", wrote a Church historian. "It is not restricted to any definite country or nation, it is not tied down to any particular culture or civilization, it is not identified with any distinct race or people and is ready to adapt itself to all sane customs, climates and conditions of life. Everywhere it can find itself at home. And in the Church all men, all nations, all cultures, all values, can find and achieve their perfect fulfilment".[1]

India, as described by a Swiss Jesuit, Felix Plattner, is "a land subject to and conditioned by the unalterable cycle of the monsoons, which provide or deny the life-giving rain to the parched, thirsty tropical land. This leads to a mix of gloomy fatalism and glowing faith which people bring to the worship of their gods. Theirs is the world of demons, of animals deified, and the mythological powers which dominate men's destinies. People are held in a fatalistic cycle of a never-ending round of birth, life and fading away"[2]

Into such an India did the planting of Christianity begin. It started with the Syrian Christians, immigrants into Kerala from Asia Minor in the first century. Over the years they increased in numbers by their intermarriages with local groups. Towards the end of the 4th century, a group at Cranganore was reinforced by a new influx of immigrants who had travelled from Syria and Edessa under the leadership of Thomas Cana. Yet another group came from Persia under Marwan Sabriso in the 9th century. These Christians, though they belonged to the East-Syrian rite, were by and large at home in Kerala as they had adopted many social, cultural and religious customs and practices of the place.

Conflicts over doctrine and discipline arose with their contacts with the Portuguese from the 16th century onwards. The Religious Orders operating in India at the time (Fransicans, Jesuits and others) failed to understand and tolerate the natural peculiarities of the Indian-Christian communities they had to deal with over the decades, and the schism of 1653 was an inevitable consequence. Francois Houtart[3] describes well how the Portuguese presence and activities in South India led to a split in the Syrian group and to the birth of a Latin community. They introduced a strong ecclesiastical structure and the

Synod of Diamper marked the destruction of the cultural identity of the Syrian Christians while upholding the orthodoxy of the Roman Catholic doctrine. Goa, with its strong Portuguese presence and religious authority, became the starting point of the apostolic action of the Church in the whole of the East.

The Portuguese right of patronage gave widespread powers to the clergy to announce the gospel. It backed them as they asked or forced unbelievers to give up their rites and customs. It was done

> "so that in this manner all might be united and joined together in charity of law, and love, since we are created by one (common) Creator and redeemed by one Redeemer. But if the people are so stubborn as to reject the true faith they should be put to fire and steel".

Pope Leo X's words to King Manoel of Portugal in 1515 had a provocative flavour about them. He addressed the monarch:

> "Receive this warlike sword in your always victorious and warlike hands. With this you will wage wars under the most happy auspices; you will subject the enemies of the Faith, as you have done up to now ... may you use your force, strength, and power against the fury of the infidels; may you consecrate not only Your most religious spirit, but also the kingdom itself, and the forces of the kingdom, to the giver of them, to God the best and the greatest, so that having received through this gift the help of heaven in battles, you may bring back abundant spoils and most famous triumphs"[4]

The words were sincerely followed by those working under the Padroado system in the East. One among the many activities that the Religious Orders were engaged in in Goa was education. Thus Goans (excluding women for most of the colonial times) had the unique opportunity of being educated by men from various nationalities, for Portuguese, Spaniards and Italians (among others) taught in Goan schools. Education was linked to the need to spread the Christian faith, though in the process the methods and courses which covered various fields helped in broadening and expanding the mental horizons of those instructed. But to a large extent traditional education did suffer or was given little importance in Goa.

We get an idea of the priestly formation given to boys at the then newly started Jesuit-run Seminary of the Holy Faith in Goa. A letter dated October 7, 1545, from Goa mentions that there were 60 boys there from the ages of 21 and below. Some of them had been forced to attend while others had come of their own free will. They were being instructed so that in turn they would impart instruction to others in their respective homelands. Their teachers were graduates in theology and humanities from Europe, rather overtrained for their work. The same letter concludes that had the students (mainly the Portuguese *mestico* and orphans) not been trained there, they would have gone their wayward ways.[5]

Coming up close on the heels of this centre, was the Seminary of Rachol. An article in a souvenir of the Semi-

nary speaks of its long and glorious history which had given much honour to the archdiocese of Goa by its services to the cause of the faith in India and during time when there were no other ecclesiastical institutions in India. Barreto Miranda[6] comments that like the Seminary of the Holy Faith (set up in 1541), this Seminary had sustained the faith of the people and spread its influence to all parts of India, and no literary establishment could compete with it in matters of instruction and education.

The Seminary which started on November 1, 1601, under the Jesuits, remained in their care till their disbanding in 1759 and went into Oratorian hands from 1762 till 1774. It then remained closed till 1781, functioned under the Lazarists till 1793 and was back with the Oratorians till 1835.

The Seminary while celebrating its tricentenary referred to its role as a representative of a multisecular, rich and brilliant tradition. "There does not exist in the East any ecclesiastical institution like the Seminary", it tells us. "Nothing in her 300 years has lessened the exuberance and vigourous action of evangelization and civilization that it irradiates. She forms men who, trained in science and culture, go to the world to teach the gospel"[7]

A note by Dom Antonio Sebastiao Valente, the then Archbishop of Goa, mentions that the Seminary was meant to instil the spirit of the Council of Trent and make seminarians ministers of the altar. In an exhortation, the Archbishop told his men: "you are the priests of tomorrow ... it behoves you to be not only good scholars, but holy seminarians, for this is demanded by the sublime ministry for which you are preparing yourselves.... The priesthood in not a profession or a career. Hence a seminarian who does not have in himself the courage and strength to become a saint must have at least the courage and the strength to leave the Seminary".[8] Parochial schools came to be set up in Goa and a look at the Constitutions of the archdiocese of Goa for 1953 gives one an idea of the way these schools conducted themselves:

> An important point of education is the establishment of the Catholic schools where the young may be educated in the principles and practice of Christian religion. A special secretariat is needed to study various problems connected with education especially with the raising of the level of education of backward classes, and also of orienting all activities according to the dictates of the Bishop. Parents have a grave duty to see to the Christian education of their children. Priests have an obligation to give a Catholic education to the youth in their instructions and in their catechesis. In Catholic schools the teaching programme, books and organization must be guided by a Christian spirit, and religion must be the foundation and crown of education at all levels. In Catholic schools the principal place must be given to the teaching of Christian religion. Priests should be aware about their duties to backward classes. The Church extends her saving actions to all social classes without distinction and therefore efforts must be made to raise the education of these.[9]

One notices that the various types of Christian schools in Goa did make

an impact on the minds not only of the students but also of their parents and those they were in contact with. Education was meant primarily to further the Christian faith. It was based on a European model, and was taught till the mid-18 century by Europeans. It did give the students a wider vision of things. The missionaries themselves excelled in many departments of life (writing, adventure and diplomacy) and shared this spirit with their students.

Side by side with the drive for education, there had been in the early days of the Portuguese conquest a certain religious rigor, as A. D' Costa informs us. He recounts the story of how Portuguese soldiers would fill wax dolls with wine, cut off their heads and gulp the wine. The people thinking that they had drunk human blood, would take fright and become Christian. Becoming Christian came to mean a clean break with the past way of living, and Indian names and the wearing of nose-rings for women, for instance, were considered incompatible with Christianity. Temples were destroyed even though the quality of Hindu temple architecture was "very sumptuous and of exceedingly fine workmanship" as described in a letter of 1567 by one missionary who had worked at their demolition. The order for the destruction had come from the first Provincial Church Council which stressed that an excellent way of bringing the Christian message to non-Christians was to build churches in their midst and station there priests of good and exemplary lives.

Much as one condemns the wanton destruction of temple and temple art in the excitement of the evangelistic movement in 16th and following centuries in Goa, one is struck by the emergence of a local Christian art. Jose Pereira tells us in his *Golden Goa* that foreign and Indian craftsmen re-created Spanish and Portuguese styles in the churches of Goa. The influences were from Italy and France initially, but it is to the credit of Indian craftsmen that their creations were not mere imitations of the original, but were an elaboration in new forms with local materials and local sense.

Early Christian images in India were very similar to those in the West. Yet gradually, according to K. Desai, an Indianness entered both in the model and the iconography. The images of Our Lady, for instance, took on various forms. She was represented as the mother goddess with her eyes painted black to heighten depth and with the lotus flower placed in her right hand.[10] Or as Pereira tells us, " Indian craftsmen reflected their own peculiar world-views in their creations. Their crucifixes in wood, ivory and metal were decorative and exude not torment as such and have none of the twists and turns of the tortured Christ visible in the West".[11]

Yet one perceptive writer felt that in Goa one earlier noticed traces of Portuguese forms of worship. "There was a strong Europeanization in worship. The city had become a second Lisbon and Church festival days corresponded to those observed in Portugal with her national saints like St. James, St. Sebastian and St. Anthony making a lasting appearance here.... This ten-

dency to feel a permanent debt to Europe and to imitate her ways and customs has remained a dominant trait in all Goan Christians and this fact may explain why so many inhabitants of Goa seem unable to feel that they are true citizens of India.... Luckily over the years the Goan Church has evolved an original manner of worship suitable to the traditions of her people".[12]

Along with education and Church art, flowed the devotional life of the people. Street preaching and singing were a regular feature of life. On their way to and from school in the villages, children could be heard proclaiming the Christian message in chant. They would climb trees and alternately sing their catechism in two groups. The arrival of the printing press brought forth in 1557 the first Portuguese catechism, with a Konkani version four years later.

There were devotions being practised which were similar to the local traditional ones. People used blessed water and relics in time of illness, venerated the cross and holy pictures and used images and beads. Converts on their deathbeds would ask for a cross to be placed in their hands. Many a home would have a cross painted in the front rooms. Local traditional feasts were merged into the Christian ones. It had been the practice for the village astrologer to bless the rice-harvest which the people brought in procession to offer at the temple. A Jesuit letter describes how the recent converts of Divar village in Goa at harvest time requested their parish priest to bless their new yield. They had come carrying a banner with the names of Jesus and St. Paul on it and sheaves of rice to the accompaniment of music and dance. These the priest accepted and placed on the altar-steps.[13]

In an article "Popular Religiosity in Catholic Goa", I have described the forms of popular devotion in Goa in the 16th century. Various reports of the period speak of the variety of religious expressions of the people. Being converts from Hinduism they needed these to feel at home in their new-found faith and events like processions, baptisms and feasts helped in this process. These expressions of their religiosity did not differ very much from the European religiosity of the time or for that matter from the Hindu practices. The Church in Goa allowed them to unfold lest the new converts felt the absence of their former practices and reverted to them. The new converts needed these to bring about an amalgam of mind and heart in themselves.

These Christian religious devotions, the processions in particular, marked an important time in their lives. They had little else to look forward to in normal days and longed for the special days when the processions to mark *Corpus Christi,* the rosary and the Passion of Jesus came around. The impressive larger-than-life statues which were carried around the city on these occasions were artistic and caught their fancy. Preachers used many realistic props to heighten the effect of remorse during their preachings that accompanied these events. Flagellations during Lent, for instance, were common. The Easter processions were generally more joyful. The many

accounts of the miraculous show the desire on the part of many to prove the efficacy of the new faith, and rival Religious Orders outdid each other in proving they had been more successful.

One may wonder how these practices persisted for so long. It is likely that the clergy of the time and the civil authorities suggested by their tacit approval of these practices that only supernatural intervention could solve their problems, thus preventing the people from using their natural freedom to improve their economic and social condition.

It should not appear that the Church existed in the southern part of India alone, for she did have a presence in the north as well. The Jesuits in the 16th century, in answer to an invitation from the Mughal emperor Akbar, were to spend many decades at the royal court at Agra and Fatehpur Sikri. The three missions they undertook there failed in the primary sense they were intended, i.e. the conversion of the royals. But they did succeed in forging Christian-Muslim links, winning concessions and establishing a Christian presence there.

Missions came up in Tibet and Nepal, in Patna and Lucknow, too. Education was taken up in a big way along with medical and social activities. In Sardhana, for instance, Fr. Marco della Tomba realising the evils of the caste system organized a *panchayat* in which the people decided to divest themselves of their caste. In the 19th century, it was Fr. Constant Lievans (1856-1893) who was to put his indelible stamp on the history of the Church in Chotanagpur in north eastern India. His approach consisted in the legal defence of his converts.

Missionary accounts do not speak much of the lives and times of the converts they worked for. Recent writings have corrected this and stressed what T. de Souza calls "the historiography of the voiceless". He mentions how the common people did not remain unaffected by the changes in economy, land relations and regulations under the colonizers. In some cases villagers who rebelled against the colonizers had their entire villages confiscated in punishment and given as grants to other individuals.[14]

It is interesting to see how converts to Christianity in India viewed foreign missionaries. They complained that European teachers came to the East to convert, yet their personal lives needed correction first. Some Indian Christians like Upadhyay Brahmabandhav (who died in 1907) aimed at the liberation of Christian teaching from the trammels of European theology and at a syntheis of Christian faith and Indian thought, and of Christian dogma and Indian *Vedanta*.[15]

Some rightly believed that Christianity was not the religious expression of a culture and that the unity of the Church represented the unity of humankind. In the history of the Church's encounter with other cultures, the Church not only received elements from other cultures but it also contributed towards the Christianization or sometimes destruction of other cultures.[16]

The Portuguese presence in India marked the start of a western colonial-

ism and of western cultural influence. As a result the alliance between colonialism and Christianity in many ways influenced the nature of the cultural and religious tradition of India and distorted the nature of the Church, its theology and its missions. While studying the psychology of the colonial process and analysing it, A. da Silva[17] speaks about the dynamics of interaction between the two. The trampling upon of local sensibilities and cultural traditions was psychologically most debilitating to the identity of a people. "However benign and noble the colonizers may have claimed themselves to be", he points out, "the very act of colonization is brutal and destructive. Since the colonized had to learn to live according to the rules drawn up by the colonizers, they had of necessity to develop psychological coping mechanisms, the more common one being that of submissiveness. This enabled the local population to avoid conflicts and tensions with the colonizer". Not quite true. We know of mutually shared hard and antagonistic feelings that some foreign missionaries had for the local people in Goa. An interesting 17th century document relates the antagonism and the comments that sometimes came to the fore.[18] The local Catholic clergy (Brahmin by caste) had once in a memorandum to Rome accused the Jesuits of persecuting them for being unfit for their religious tasks. In reply the religious listed their many achievements in education, in providing jobs for the poor, in composing books, in arresting converts in the act of worshipping their former idols and called the local clergy a dark-skinned people unworthy of any respect. Missionaries wrote regular reports to those who managed their affairs in Europe. These are a mine of information for the times during which they were written. They describe the various kingdoms, wars, local traditions, the growth of Christianity, the money received, and the reactions positive or negative, to the work of evangelization. These writings reflect, too, the views of the writers themselves. In them India and her people come across as an exotic land with people steeped in misery and ignorance, great yet not capable of much.

Conclusion

I had intended to describe some aspects of the daily life of Christians in India during colonial times. The idea has been to highlight some behaviours and to pinpoint how loud and sincere had been the reaction to the imposition of the new faith in India in some quarters. And though, typical of the historian quoted earlier, many believed that in the Church all men, all nations, all cultures, all values could and do find and achieve their true fulfillment, the picture has been largely different.

Notes

1. Carlos M. de Melo, *The Recruitment and Formation of the Native Clergy in India (16th-19th Century): An Historico-Canonical Study,* Lisbon, 1955, p. xxv.
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3. *Genesis and Institutionalization of the Indian Catholicism,* Louvain-la-Neuve: Universite Catholique de Louvain, 1981. pp. 25, 36-37.

4. V. Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka,* vol. 1, Colombo: Tisara Prakasakaya, 1989, pp. 465-88.
5. *Documenta Indica,* ed. Josef Wicki, Rome, vol. 1, pp. 12, 28-29; vol. 3, p. 575.
6. *Annuario do Seminario Patriarcal de Rachol,* Panjim, 1934, pp. 1-2.
7. *Annuário do Seminario Patriarcal,* 1934-35, p. 1.
8. *Pastoral Exhortation,* 1940.
9. *Constituições da Arquidiocese de Goa,* 1953.
10. "Images of Christianity: Ivory and wood icons from Goa", *India Magazine,* June 1985, pp. 40-47.
11. Golden Goa, Mumbai: Marg Publications, p. 11.
12. F. Plattner, *Christian India.*
13. A. D'Costa, *The Christianization of the Goa Islands,* Mumbai: 1965, pp. 154-171.
14. "The Christian Missions in the Aftermath of Discoveries: Tools for shaping the Colonial Other" in his *Discoveries, Missionary Expansion and Asian Cultures,* New Delhi: Concept, 1994, pp. 33-44.
15. George M. Anathil, *Theological Formation in India,* Pune: Pontifical Athenaeum, 1966, pp. 155-156.
16. "Relation between Theology and Culture in the Perspective of Church History", *Voices From the Third World,* 16 (no. 2, Dec 1993), pp. 94, 109.
17. "The Discoverers versus the Discovered: Psychological perspectives on Portuguese-Goan Prejudices in the 16th-18th centuries" *Discoveries, Missionary Expansion and Asian Cultures,* pp. 45-54.
18. *Archivum Romanum Societatis Jesu,* Rome, *Fondo Gesuitico,* 1443/9, file 23; Goa 22, I, fls. 59-65.