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THE GENESIS OF PORTUGUESE DISCOVERIES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON INDIAN CULTURE

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Varying Views

The Portuguese discoveries in the East had a specific purpose in the material and spiritual order. Hence, it would be enlightening to study the background that led to them. One could ask whether the Portuguese discoveries were the result of mere cosmographical curiosity or were motivated by economic necessity or missionary zeal, or whether there was the 'politics of secrecy' behind it all? They did however, all contribute in a greater or lesser degree.

Nautical science in Portugal, towards the end of the fifteen century was dominated by the great figures of Duarte Pacheco and Prince Henry the Navigator. Pacheco was deeply interested in cosmography, while Henry was the *homo economicus*. The former had calculated the value of a terrestrial degree to be about 170 kilometres, while Christopher Columbus found it to have the value of 84 kilometres. This disparity led the latter to believe that the Lesser Antilles was a part of India. King John II basing himself on Bartolomeu Dias who had proved that the Atlantic was joined to the Indian Ocean over the Cape of Good Hope, and had indicated the route to India, declined, without giving any reasons, to finance Columbus for a nautical exploration to India. Here begins the politics of secrecy. Prince Henry, on the other hand, was a practical man and used the knowledge garnered by the Portuguese cosmographers for his politics of expansion.

Jaime Cortesão while summing up the achievements of prince Henry believes that through him and for the first time the thought of the exploration of the planet became the plan of a nation. He infused it with method and it took the shape of an organic and scientific character. The winds and ocean currents were studied. The caravel was created. Fresh efforts were made in the navigational art to observe through astronomical means the latitudes of the earth. Cartography was modernised. But above all he lit up in Portugal the spirit of discovery, transmitting to a whole people his own fire. He concentrated in his hands the strength of the whole Christianity, to mould a new man, eager for the universe. The greatest merit of the Prince lay in having shaped this new man, the man of the Renaissance"¹

The rivalry between the Catholic kings (Aragon and Castille) and Portugal over the discoveries that promised them wealth and a better living, snarled up their relations. The Portuguese, thanks to the calculations of Pacheco and the discovery of Dias, had the card up their sleeves, while the Spanish had only the faulty computations of Columbus based on the Ptolemaic astronomy. To settle the issue they drew up the treaty of Alcacovas in 1479. This put an end to the dispute over the Canary Islands between Portugal and the King of Castille. The treaty settled that the king of Portugal should own Guinea and the Cape Bojadar, *usque ad Indos* (till the land of the Indians) with all the adjacent seas and the coasts discovered and to be discovered, as also the islands of Madeira, Azores, Flores, Cabo Verde and the kingdom of Fez. To the king of Castille and his successors were given the Canary Islands and Granada.

However, the dispute over the proper demarcation of the meridian that would divide the route to India continued. To put an end to this the treaty of Tordesilhas was drawn up in 1494, stipulating that a line be drawn from pole to pole at a distance of 370 leagues (a league is about 3 miles) west of Cape Verde and all that was discovered or would be discovered to the east of this line would belong to Portugal, and to the west of the line to Castille. However, it had a time and space frame, as it could happen that the ships of the Catholic kings would discover islands and other lands within the agreed limit. All such lands discovered by the Spanish ships within the first 250 leagues of the 370 to the west of Cape Verde would belong to Portugal, but all those that would be found within the stipulated time and of the 120 remaining leagues would belong to Spain.

John II, the real instigator of the Portuguese maritime adventure, had in mind at the time of signing the treaty the monopoly of the commercial traffic of the East, in particular the spice trade. It is not difficult to imagine that the king would have thought of the division of the opposite hemisphere, which from his knowledge of the Arab charts brought by Pero de Covilhã, contained the Moluccas and other islands in the Indian Ocean which were known to have rare and expensive spices.

At the celebration of the treaty, the kings of Spain and of Portugal were very satisfied with themselves. Why? The former because they were convinced that they were now in possession of the shortest route to India, while the latter were sure that they would very soon complete the real discovery. On Vasco da Gama's return in 1498 from India, the Spanish kings realised that they had been duped!

Complicated as were the conditions embodied in the treaty, much more were the reasons that lay at the basis of the Portuguese expansion. They were the geographical situation of the territory, imbalance between the demographic evolution and internal resources, maritime experience of those who lived in the littoral, the existence of advanced nautical science, the rise of the middle-class and the growing need of wheat and gold, class ideology (mercantile spirit of the middle-class, cavalier spirit of the nobility, adventurous spirit of the people, the cruzading spirit of the clergy and of the kings) and personal influence particularly of Prince Henry the Navigator.²

Modern Portuguese historians like Antonio Sergio, Jaime Cortesão and Magalhães Godinho, have each their own opinion. Sérgio gives greater prominence to what he considers one of the causes of Portuguese expansion, namely, the crisis of subsistence in Portugal in the fifteenth century, the crisis for which the granary of Morocco furnished immediate solution. Simultaneous with this regional crisis, there was the European crisis, European economy threatened by the Turkish triumphs in the Levant, in which the Muslims would replace a civilisation accommodatingly mercantile by one that was belligerent, perhaps intolerably belligerent, thus upsetting the balance and breaking commercial contacts with India. He stresses the fact that in the fifteenth century, Portugal was in the hands of the commercial and maritime middle-class. To the Portuguese the instability of the commercial economy in Europe was the most sensitive aspect of its relations with India. Influenced by Oliveira Martins, Sérgio was carried away by the former's linearly

economic interpretation and discarded the aspect of religious fervour that was one of the stimuli for the expansionist activity of the Portuguese in Africa and the East.

Cortêsão on the other hand, found it difficult to dissociate, in his attempt to explain the Portuguese expansion, the economic motive, from the religious. If the maritime and mercantile aspect that the European economy including the Portuguese took, forced Europe to confront the other civilization, maritime and mercantile like that of the Arabs, who were since long intent on the exploration of the same gold and the same oriental spices now sought after by the Europeans, it also favoured the conflict between the two civilizations thanks to the theological hatred that divided the Christian from the Muslim. Among the Christians the group which was militantly expansionist was the Franciscan.³

Godinho, however, notes that Cortêsão has changed his interpretation of Portuguese expansion and emphasizes the religious factor as the real stimulus of the discoveries. For him the 'decisive diagnosis of the cause' has three aspects — sociological, physiological and logical. The convergence of the needs of the territorial expansion of the nobility, and of the conquests of markets of the middle-class, concurrently with the search for cereals, cloth, gold, chillies, slaves from Guinea, spices, precious stones, rare and aromatic timbers from India, and the strategic position of Morocco. To the Order of Christ belongs the initiative of Portugueses discoveries, not due to religious fervour (excepting in the case of Prince Henry) but primarily to materialistic aims.⁴

Mixed Motivations

Another motive that instigated the expansion was the quest for Prester John. The aim of king John II was both religious and commercial. It would beat the Muslims from behind and obtain the powerful support of Prester John. He could thus divert to Lisbon the commercial current from which the Turks and the Venetians made their fortune. The strategy was two-pronged: to contact Prester John by land and by sea, the latter being less chancy.⁵ He abandoned the coastal navigation and utilized the regular winds and sea-currents. This led to the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope by Dias and the opening up the sea-route to India.

One cannot overlook, as Prof. Boxer reminds us, the relative in-

ternal and political stability in Portugal, while other countries like Spain and Western Europe were embroiled in internecine quarrels and were settling their problems. He believed that the four main motives which inspired the Portuguese leaders were the crusading zeal against Muslims, the desire for Guinea gold, the quest for Prester John, and the search for spices.⁶ The motives that led the Portuguese to conquer Ceuta have usually been explained as being aimed at striking the Muslims and breaking the stronghold that commanded the trade route. Yet an alternative explanation could be that it was inspired by economic and strategic motives. The Portuguese were desperately in need of cereals and they thought that Ceuta would provide their need while unaware that the Muslims imported them from elsewhere.

Though 1415, the year Ceuta was conquered, is considered the year the maritime Portuguese expansion began, yet seafaring explorations had been on before that date, yet after 1415 marine activities assumed real significance in Portuguese history. H.G. Wells mentions that all over Europe in the fifteenth century merchants and sailors were speculating about new ways to the East. The Portuguese, unaware that Pharaoh Necho had solved the problem ages ago, were asking whether it was not possible to go round to India by the coast of Africa. Their ships followed (1446) in the course that Hanno took to Cape Verde. They put out to sea to the west and found the Canary Isles, Madeira and the Azores. That was a fairly long stride across the Atlantic. In these maritime adventures in the eastern Atlantic and on the west African coast the Portuguese were preceded in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and early fifteenth centuries by Normans, Catalonians, and Genoese. But in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries their activities rose to pre-eminence, and it is they, at any rate, who fixed and established discoveries that hitherto had been mere vague and incidental visits. They were the pioneers of nautical astronomy. The Portuguese were already working their way to the east before the Spanish went west.⁷

For Cortesão the word *descobrimento* (discovery) contained all the reasons that led to the Portuguese expansion in the fifteenth century. He believes that *discovery* is linked with the concept of the revealed secret. What Vasco da Gama did was to discover the great secret of the efforts of prince Henry and of King John II. The secret that involved astronomical science and one of its most significant results, namely, the verification of approximate value of the degree,

the secret that increased the co-ordinates and distorted the contour of southern Africa, the secret that hid even from the chroniclers the two joint voyages of Bartolomeu Dias and Pero de Convilhã, the secret that was the key of the treaty of Tordesilhas and which hushed up entirely the exploration of the Mozambique Canal in 1495 and the experimental voyages in southern Atlantic, a secret finally revealed in 1498. The world learnt with surprise of the great objective of more than half a century of sailings. The significance of *discovery* was at last revealed in its plenitude.⁸

On 20th May 1498, the day Vasco da Gama reached Calicut, was the day when two civilizations met, one ancient, the other Christian and comparatively new, the one peaceful and content with itself, and the other fired with a consuming zeal for proselytization. Three armadas came in 1503 one of which was captained by Afonso de Albuquerque. He was to follow in 1509 D. Francisco de Almeida, the first Viceroy of India, and one who followed a strictly commercial policy.

With Albuquerque began the first real encounter between the two cultures, though he was mainly interested in the material aspect of conquests. He had very clear ideas of his mission in the East. Briefly, they were to destroy the Muslim power and lay lasting foundations of a strong empire. He gave immediate proof of the first objective. On 25th November, 1510 he ordered all Muslims who were found inside the city to be killed. Subsequently he set about building fortresses in Panjim, Banastarim, Chorão and Divar. He found Goa an excellent *point d'appui* to keep the Indian potentates in check as also to protect Portuguese navigation and dominate the sea routes between India and the straits of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. When he died at the age of 53 he had laid the foundations of the Portuguese empire on a solid basis. Of his achievements one could say briefly that he set about organising the municipal government on the lines of that of Lisbon, established legislation and tribunals of justice, revived commerce, preserved the system of *comunidades*, lightened the imposition of heavy taxes, built a mint, was tolerant towards religious beliefs, banned *sati*, and encouraged marriages between the Europeans and local women.⁹ Preoccupied as he was with organizing and establishing the empire, he had hardly time to interact, or even care, for Indian culture. His was the attitude of the conquistador.

A Clash of Cultures

Since Indian culture is intimately linked to religious thought, the only

impact that Portuguese discoverers could make on it would be by its encounter with the religious culture. This would immediately imply the methods of missionary conversion and the intervention of the Portuguese civil authorities in the local social life.

While on the above theme, the present Dominican master-general, Fr. Timothy Radcliffe writes that the fundamental blindness that marked the evangelization of the Americas continues to afflict the church today. Even the best of the missionaries shared the mentality of the conquistadores. They automatically accepted assumptions about the superiority of western culture.¹⁰ Learning from evangelization history, Cardinal Lavigerie, founder of the White Fathers, asked his men to let Africans be themselves. They were to use the local languages, were to record the indigenous languages, make grammars and dictionaries and even collect oral traditions for catechetical purposes, before they were adulterated by European influence.¹¹

Vasco da Gama on his first voyage to India was accompanied by six priests, who made no conversions, and the only success was that Vasco da Gama could carry some merchandise back with him. In 1500, Pedro Alvares Cabral and the missionaries with him made some conversions among the inhabitants of Angediva. Three years later three armadas arrived, one of which was captained by Afonso de Albuquerque.

The new converts they obtained were mainly household slaves, outcasts and poor. There were exceptions and the mass conversion of the Parava pearl fisherfolk subsequently gave lasting results. But it was the Society of Jesus in its role as the spearhead of the Church Militant, which made the struggle for souls as intensive and wide-ranging as the competition for spices. The Jesuits set and maintained much higher standards than did their predecessors, and the remarkable development of the Portuguese missions between 1550 and 1750 was mainly their work, which frequently elicited glowing tributes from otherwise hostile Protestants.¹²

But it was not exactly so. They used the carrot-and-stick methods in which the stick predominated. The Tridentine Council had expressly stated that conversions must never be made by force for nobody came to Christ by faith unless he was drawn by the Heavenly Father. The missionary policy departed considerably from the decisions of the Council.¹³

Subsequent events made a mockery of this. Conversions were not

individual. They were either in groups or village-wise. Refusal meant destruction of their temple. At the height of the fanatic fury all the Hindu temples in Ilhas, Bardez and Salcete were razed to the ground. Some of the higher castes agreed to be converted in order to preserve their ancestral property, while the lower castes found an emancipation from the tyranny they were subjected to by the higher castes. The Muslims did not fare better. In fact the old hatred manifested itself more virulently. Copies of the *Koran* were destroyed and the Muslims were not allowed to utter the name of their Prophet. On the site of the destroyed temples and mosques, churches were built. These were maintained by the income possessed by the mosques and the temples. Public celebrations of non-Christian marriages were banned and inter-faith conversions were likewise forbidden, excepting conversion to Christianity. The Portuguese were under the impression that the Brahmins were the real obstacle to conversions of other Hindus because of the influence they exercised on the lower strata of their society. Francis Xavier himself found them a stumbling block. In an interesting discussion he had with this class in Cape Comorin, he wrote that despite convincing them of the truth of the Christian religion, they refused to be baptised because they wondered how they would live if deprived of alms they usually got at the temples. But in Goa many of the higher castes preferred to abandon their possessions and flee to the neighbouring territories rather than submit to the missionaries. In their blind fanaticism the missionaries did not pause to study the ethos of the Hindus.

Religious Aggression

But the religious aggression of Goa had gone too far. As it has often happened in the history of nations, there comes a stage in such development when a certain psychological blindness sets in. The Portuguese onslaught was arrested because at that time the moral and economic decadence of Goa was already patent. Viceroys and bishops quarrelled, the population led an idle life without resources and wasted time on vice and bad habits, the judiciary was weak and corrupt, Portugal struggled with its internal and external problems. The empire was rapidly declining, the Dutch had taken Moluccas and Sumatra, Persia, with the help of the English had taken possession of Ormuz.¹⁴

The great empire had now begun its descent. Towards the latter

part of the sixteenth century, despite the initial efforts of Albuquerque to have the Portuguese populate Goa, there were very few who had managed to stay on. Goa had become a very unhealthy place to live in, due to the primitive sanitary conditions of the city. All that the Portuguese craved for was a life of luxury and sensuality which was one of the factors that shaped their disaster. Xavier on his last visit to Goa in 1542, in his capacity as the Fr. Provincial of India, reformed the Seminary of St. Paul by dismissing those novices who were unfit for religious profession and punished the Fr. Rector. He was unhappy with the small number of converts in Malabar, and with the lack of enthusiasm in his missionaries. In his great zeal he resorted to secular power to aid the religious. In 1548 he wrote to one of his companions in Kochi mentioning that the only effective way to spread religion in India was for the king to trust only those who exerted themselves for the spread of the faith.¹⁵

Xavier did not live to see the indiscretion and brutality of the way in which conversions were carried out nor of the rigours of the Inquisition. His exasperation of the slowness of growth of his missionary endeavours, is reminiscent of St. Dominic (1170-1221), when he faced a similar situation while dealing with heretics. It would be wrong to condemn these two great saints for the methods they advocated. They were both products of a society that considered such acts as a matter of course.

The Church today has moved a long way from the Tridentine structure. The Ecumenical Council convened by John XXIII in 1962, tried to prevent, among other things, disturbing the life of communities, overthrowing traditional wisdom and endangering the character proper to each people.¹⁶ The new missiology that flows from it tries to inculturate the elements of the new culture it encounters, into Christian culture. Neither Dominic nor Xavier did this but followed compulsively the temper of their times. They could not contradict each other. If Francis was not in such a great hurry, he and his Portuguese overlords missed a golden opportunity to point out the evil of the prevailing caste system which still prevails among the Christians in Goa and certain parts of Malabar. We would probably have a situation like that of the Rawat Christians in Rajasthan where the two faiths, Christianity and Hinduism, have worked out a *modus vivendi*.

The real terror, however, was the introduction of the Inquisition. It was left to the Marquis of Pombal to remedy the situation. He had

a remarkable grasp of the conditions prevailing in Goa. In 1774 he issued his *Instructions* to the Governor D. Jose Pedro da Camara and to the Archbishop D. Francisco de Assunção e Britto in which he abolished the Inquisition and ordered means to be used to remove caste divisions. He wrote to the Archbishop telling him to offer posts in the parish, and in public life to the natives of the land.¹⁷ This was indeed hard for the Portuguese clergy and officials to accept.

One of the most odious orders of the Inquisition was regarding local customs and habits. The *tulsi* plant, the *dhoti*, the *choli* were forbidden for Christian use under severe penalties. However, what out-did all the ridiculous methods at civilizing the Goan was the order issued on 27th June, 1684 by Viceroy Francisco de Tavora regarding Konkani. The order forbade its use and ordered school teachers, priests and their parishoners, to learn Portuguese within three years. Earlier the Franciscans had half-heartedly used Konkani for their work. But 23rd March, 1567, Pope Pius V declared that no religious should occupy the post of parish priest unless he was conversant with the language of the place.¹⁸ This papal brief served as a boost, and for the next hundred years or so Konkani flourished under the Franciscans and the Jesuits.

It was left to Cunha Rivara, the chief secretary of the Government of Goa, and a great lover of Konkani, to write prophetically in 1865, in his *Historical Essay on Konkani Language*, a stirring appeal to the Goan youth to restore Konkani to its rightful place. Since then Konkani has risen like a phoenix from its ashes.

Concluding Remarks

Though in the historical time-frame the great discoveries of the Portuguese turned into an ephemeral sideline, thanks to their shortsightedness, their impact on Indian culture continues to echo, amidst much that is negative, some of the positive influence they left behind.

The genesis of the expansion cannot be traced to a single factor but rather to a plurality of motives. While for king John II, territorial conquest and the resulting commercial advantages were uppermost in his mind, for Prince Henry, the prime mover of it all, the spirit of the Crusade and politico-strategic considerations were all-important. But behind it all were the politics of secrecy. What Portuguese historians like to call 'civilizing action', consisted in the establishment of the printing press through which men like Cunha Rivara, wrote not only about Konkani but also spread much knowledge about the geo-

graphy of the conquered territories whereby the Renaissance in Europe profited immensely.

On the religious front the wildcat missionary efforts left much to be desired. Though one would feel compelled to condemn conversion by force and material enticements, yet there were conversions through genuine conviction. That could perhaps explain the great missionary accomplishments of Goan priests not only in Goa but in other Portuguese conquests. Faith is a fragile virtue and it rebounds to the credit of the Goan clergy that they endured the scandalous discrimination of the Portuguese hierarchy until Pombal with his sense of justice relieved them of their subjection. It was short-lived though, because old prejudices die hard.

In fine, what is the upshot of all this long cultural encounter? It has produced a Goan who is open and receptive to western influence and culture, yet with roots firmly in the soil. The Goan of the thirties till the fifties was already stirred seeking the source of his heritage. It would be a pity if this symbiotic culture disappeared with time, but since genetically the hybrid is, as a rule, more resistant than its parents, Goan culture had every probability of forming an integral part of Indian culture, and will therefore endure through the usual vagaries of historical cultures.

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