

# Indo Portuguese Art and the space of the Islamicate

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*Parmal*

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pp. 71-88.

16 Mascarenhas, Myra Pinto. *The Pombaline Era in Goa (1750-1777)*, an unpublished MA Thesis, p. 260.

17 Actual name Sebastião de Carvalho e Melo; was prime minister to King José I of Portugal from 1750-1777.

18 Mascarenhas, p. 237.

19 *Monções do Reino*, No. 129B, fl. 552.

20 Mascarenhas, p. 238.

21 Robinson, p. 40.

22 Ibid, p. 41.

23 Mascarenhas, p. 252.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Axelrod, Paul, and Michelle A. Fuerch. 'Flight of the Deities: Hindu Resistance in Portuguese Goa'. *Modern Asian Studies* 30, p. 388, p. 391.



When discussing the impact of Portuguese colonialism on the culture of the territory that we now call Goa, much is made of Indo-Portuguese art, which is, I argue in this essay, in fact, a euphemism for the meeting of Christian/Catholic art forms with Hindu/Sanskritic art forms. While this focus on hybridity is necessary and not out of place, this particular framing of the encounter poses two problems before us. The first is that it continues to play out a colonial Orientalist tendency to identify communities with a religion, hence the Portuguese and European colonizers with Catholicism, and the local inhabitants with Hinduism (if such a concept already existed at the time of colonial conquest). The second problem with this understanding of art forms in Goa is that it by and large ignores the impact of the Islamicate in Goa, more often than not content with dismissing it with a brief reference to Mughal forms in the art works. In this short essay I would like to deal primarily with this second point and make an argument that Goa was very much the space of the Islamicate, and even more crucially that to view 'Indo-Portuguese' art in this light would perhaps open up larger and richer ways of understanding this art, as well as moving it away from the colonial (and communal) tendency of seeing art (and culture) as founded in religion.

One has only to look at the plethora of writing on Indo-Portuguese art to realise that it actually operates as a code for Hindu-Christian, that leaves out immediately the space for any other cultural grouping in the contribution to Goan art. Take, for example, the writings of the otherwise brilliant observations of the art historian David Kowal. Speaking of the Church St Anna de Talualim he remarks

It is evident that the unknown designer of this structure was Indian, surely schooled in the limited colonial examples of Velha Goa and perhaps counselled by supervising clerics scarcely more knowledgeable of classical architectural canons than himself. Ultimately relying upon innate and indigenous Hindu aesthetic formulas, he produced a hybrid structure that can be described as 'Indo-Portuguese' in structure. (Kowal 2001)

Kowal's conflation of Hindu with Indian is no ordinary or chance mistake but part of a larger tradition of understanding the Indian subcontinent as essentially



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Jason Keith Fernandes



a Hindu space into which all other traditions, seen as primarily religious, were intruders, overlaying the deep-seated Hindu consciousness with thin veneers of foreign influence. This tendency, it has been argued, follows the standard British-Indian representation of India, given that Indian history was divided into the Ancient Hindu, the medieval Muslim and the Modern British. The result of this tripartite understanding of the history of the subcontinent for the art world has meant the creation of such terms as Indo-Islamic art or Anglo-Indian art, which not only project the political formation of the Indian nation-state far back into time, but also prevent us from understanding the kinds of synthesis and the multiple traditions that went to form the art forms of various regions within the subcontinent, forcing us to see these internalised art forms as the result of uneasy formulations of artists consciously picking for external artistic vocabularies. This tendency of cobbling such terms as Indo-Portuguese emerged only in the late nineteenth century as part of British attempts to indicate the mixing of distinct art forms. It is perhaps only the British – who loathed the mixing of culture as much as they did the mixing of blood – who could devise such a term so as to emphasise the value and need for distinct cultures and art forms.

What is interesting, however, is that in the Goan case the Islamic space of history is clearly skipped over. This occurs for a variety of reasons, perhaps largely thanks to our uncritical reliance on Portuguese texts that stress the erasure of the Muslims from the space that they initially conquered in 1510. The Portuguese, of course,

had their own agendas behind their undoubtedly over-exaggerated claim of having expelled all Muslims from Goa. Subhramanyam (1997) points out, however, that this claim resulted from a propagandist desire to project total victory of Christianity over the Moors as well as their determination to erase earlier forms of administration so as to formulate their State on a clean slate. In more recent times, however, this erasure is motivated by the desires to stress the authenticity of Goa as truly Indian. We are all familiar with the rejection of most things Portuguese, and the drive to look for and highlight a pre-Portuguese heritage. But that move also requires us to follow dominant models of British-Indian history writing. The classic feature of this model is the rejection of the influence of the Persianised Turks and Arabs and account for their presence in the subcontinent as an invasion. Thus we have the simplistic interpretations of Goan – popular and other – art as in fact being located within the Hindu order, and the assertion that “the Islamic period had little or no influence on the lives of the people or on domestic architecture... The Muslim presence appears to have been irksome to Goa’s pre-dominantly Hindu inhabitants” even though a few of them may have converted to Islam (Pandit 2003). Following in the footsteps of the Orientalist thinkers who endorsed the idea of different civilisations with different essences, each evolving in its allotted sphere’ (Vanaik 1997) conversion to the faith, and a substantial presence of the members of this faith are seen as necessary for the civilisation to have any substantial impact on local art.



Since the Muslim population is presumed to have been wiped out following the conquest of the Island of Goa, or to have been negligible in subsequent periods, it is safely presumed that there is no Islamic influence on Goan art, which can then be hailed as the synthesis of Portuguese Catholic and Indian-Hindu art forms.

If only the world were this simple however! It is to discredit this simplicity that I seek to introduce the concept of the ‘Islamicate’ into the understanding of Indo-Portuguese art to display the larger influences that were clearly wrought on it.

#### UNVEILING THE ISLAMICATE

The term ‘Islamicate’ comes from Marshall Hodgson, a historian, who defined it as something that “...would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims” (Hodgson 1974). The neologism was coined to open up the space between reductive religious orientations and mobile collective identities, and create a new vocabulary not restricted to modern connotations of words such as ‘Muslim’ and ‘Hindu’. Conversion then

is clearly not a requirement for the impact of cultural traditions, in this case the Persian, Arabic and Turkic traditions associated with Islam since the time of the conversion of these peoples to Islam.

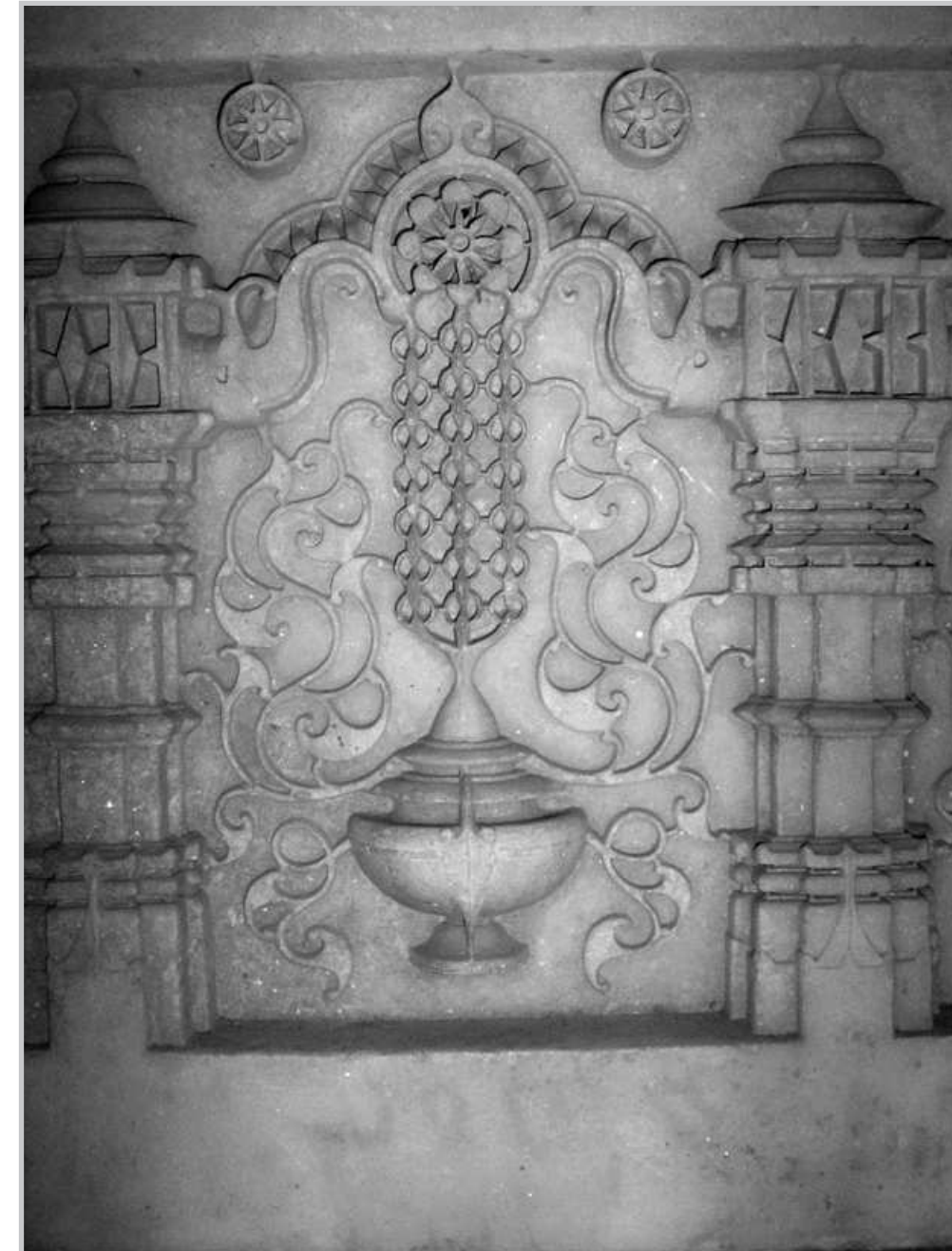
One has only to look at the slowly emerging historical work on the Deccan to realise that religious conversion was not necessarily required to participate in the Persianised vocabulary that had been brought to the Deccan along with the Turks (Wagoner 1999). On this front we have the work of Wagoner (Sultan among Hindu Kings) who points out how the supposedly 'Hindu' kings of Vijayanagara incorporated an 'Islamicate' character to a great extent, adopting the title of Sultan among Hindu (in this case non-Turk) kings, creating an equivalence with the Turkic Sultans with whom they had to deal; and adopting Islamicate dress for court rituals.

The reason I introduce the Deccan into this argument is only to stress the Deccan as the crucial site which influenced Goa both prior to and for many years subsequent to the arrival of the Portuguese. The territory passed like a buck between the Sultans and Vijayanagara for a few years, before stabilising in "the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries... under an autonomous branch of Bahmani administration (as the formation of an independent Adil Shahi state was still under way at this time)... it would appear likely that a number of administrative and fiscal features" (reference here being to the revenue system articulated through the *Mahal*) "characteristic of Indo-Persian Sultanates was put into place at this time" (Subrahmanyam 1997).

The role of mediating these structures between the Sultan and the local people, Subrahmanyam points out, was one in which "a crucial role was played by Saraswat Brahmins, that curiously mixed group, with an administrative, commercial and religious vocation".

The imbrication of these and other caste groups in the Islamicate mode of the time is evidenced from illustrations from sixteenth century text called the *Códice Casanatense*. A group of "76 coloured drawings produced in India around 1540, it described various peoples from the Kaffirs of the Cape of Good Hope to the Batachinas" (Mota 2001). Of particular interest to us are folio 98-101 that depicts a Canari wedding, and folio 71, 72 which depicts Canari clothes-washers. The wedding illustration is that of a Hindu wedding where the groom is depicted in *jama*. The *jama*, *angarakha* and similarly stitched garments we know were introduced into the subcontinent via the Persianised Turks. Given that we know that the Portuguese knew the people of the area they conquered as the Canarim, and in the illustration depicting the washer people, the people are identified as Canarim from Goa, we know that the people of Goa were not only politically, but culturally as well, located within the Islamicate world.

Further proof of this imbrication is available if we have reference to the famous image of St Christopher that hangs to the left of the main entrance to the Sé Cathedral in Old Goa. Literature about the synthesis of Indo-Portuguese art exults in the fact that the European saint is wearing a *dhoti* – symbol of the Hindu artist who wrought the image. While this may be true, what





is ignored is the fact that the European saint in addition to wearing a Hindu *dhoti*, is wearing an *angarakha*-like shirt, one more proof of the pervasive influence of Islamicate fashions within the presumably 'Hindu' space. The overlooking of this shirt appears ample evidence of the either the lack of depth in art history, or the enthusiasm to see Goa as Indian/Hindu by the interpreters of Goan art. Clearly the artist may have been 'Hindu' but he was very clearly also influenced by the Islamicate modes that were dominant in the Deccan by this time.

The Islamicate influence did not, however, end with the conquest of the island of Goa from the Sultanate. The Portuguese had to wrest Bardez and Salcette from the Sultanate, and continued to live within the shadow of the Sultanate until the time of its demise, whereupon it engaged with the court of the Mughals. The present district of Ponda is often presented to us as a Hindu heartland, the safe-house to preserve a pure, untarnished and authentic Hindu culture fleeing from Portuguese barbarism, under the patronage of 'Hindu' kings. To see it as such, however, is to entirely miss the nuances of history. David Kowal points out how the famous temples of Ponda built with the support of the Marathas or allied rulers incorporated into their design not just the classical ground-plan required of temples in the Sanskrit texts, "but architectural aspects drawn from both the Islamic structures of Bijapur and the Christian structures of Goa" (Kowal 2001).

This of course is not surprising given that temples as locations of sovereignty invariably articulated the

styles of power. The Bhonsles, the later Marathas and their allies were not only imitating the style of their rivals the Portuguese, but were also firmly imbricated in the Islamicate world of the Sultanates and the Mughal Empire. Of course it wasn't just the temples that were marked by the Islamicate style of Bijapur; Kowal goes on to point out that the polygonal towers of churches in Salcette "bear close resemblance to the octagonal cupolas capping Hindu temples built contemporaneously in the adjoining district of Ponda, then under Maratha control. Both the Christian parish churches and the Hindu temples incorporate various forms, particularly minaret designs, developed in neighbouring Bijapur during its late sixteenth earlyseventeenth century Islamic architectural Renaissance". Further "[I]n Bardez... multiple round-headed windows, often encased in shell niches with hybrid stucco decoration above, or in squared frames derived from Indian Islamic examples of the Deccan, appear on the lower part of the façade."

What all of this should reveal to us therefore is an artistic vocabulary not drawn from religious traditions, but artistic traditions being used in combination to make statements of power. Each power employed a dominant idiom, the Portuguese a Latinate idiom, the Bhonsles a Sanskritic, the Sultanate a Persianate, but each borrowed heavily from the other, recognising the symbolic power of the other, perhaps as foes, but as respected foes whom one could not ignore.

It was not like the Portuguese artistic element was without its own Islamicate influence. The kingdom of



Portugal may have emerged from the violence of the Reconquista, but preserved within it are memories of earlier times of mixing. Indeed, as documented, “when the Portuguese first saw Diu they ‘longed for the fatherland of which they were reminded by the towers and the beauty of the buildings in the Iberian manner...’” (Varela Gomes 2007). The Iberian manner they longed for was of course the *Mudejar* style that had emerged in Spain, mixing Latin and Arabic architectural features prior to its destruction by the Reconquista. Under the influence of the Sultan of Cambay, one presumes that the walled city of Diu displayed an Islamicate manner that the Portuguese, themselves nostalgic for their Islamicate homeland, identified with instantly. Any person familiar with the plaster work in the palaces of Granada will recognise a certain similarity with the plaster work above the door of the Blessed Sacrament in the Sé Cathedral in Old Goa where, almost hidden under the image of the Blessed Sacrament, lies a stylised pomegranate and geometric design that could as easily have come from *Mudejar* vocabulary as from the Persianate styles of the Deccan and the Mughal Court.

The *azulejos* of Portugal (and Spain) continue to indicate their Moorish ancestry, both in Portugal and in the churches built by them in Goa. Similarly the courtyards of the great churches of Old Goa, such as that of the Basilica of Bom Jesus evoke the Islamicate pattern of the garden with the formal symmetry of the fountain in the centre complemented with palms in every corner. It is in light of these and other evidences

that we can make as yet, a tentative claim that the Indo-Portuguese (if one wishes to continue with this appellation) art style was made possible precisely because of a shared Islamicate vocabulary that both the residents of the coast of the South-Asian subcontinent and those of Portugal shared. There were differences, no doubt, but there was also a shared history of ideas and motifs, and a contemporary vocabulary of power from which they could and did draw from.

#### CONCLUSION

The effort of this essay has been to briefly indicate that, contrary to popular perception, Indo-Portuguese art is not a mixture of the European Christian and the Indian Hindu but a style that has emerged in fact via the mediating presence of the Islamicate. The discerning reader will realise though that the term Islamicate has been used sparingly within this essay, with attempts to intersperse it with the term Persianate. This has been an act of deliberation.

While the Islamicate did, in its time, serve to distinguish the purely religious from the secular culture associated with people of a religion, it has its problems. It fails to exorcise the emphasis on religion when determining culture which is where the root of the problem lies. As if to underline this fact is the emergence of the term Indic for the culture of the subcontinent that nevertheless, when put in binary relation with Islamicate, continues to operate as the “secularised cultural counterparts” of the problematic Hindu and Muslim (Wagoner 1999). In the words of the historian

Eaton “one may question the usefulness of any and all binary oppositions. By resisting easy placement in any dichotomised scheme, such terms would seem to illustrate the commonplace fact that human societies are constantly taking something from ‘out there’ and making it their own, quite heedless of its historical origin” (Eaton 2003). His observation indicates the need for a more rigorous art (or any) history for Goa, one that resists the easy – and eventually communal and Orientalist – categorisations of race and religion. While attempts have been made in British-India to move out of the British-inspired racist and essentialist historiographical models of the Raj, most notably through the Subaltern history series, the same has not occurred for Goa. We need to realise a history writing for Goa that would skip the British-Indian models and find one that would do more justice to the facts of Goa.

Continuing with the concern for justice, the attempt of this essay is clearly motivated by more contemporary concerns, that of the fears of an increasing Muslim population in Goa and the ‘invasion’ of Muslims from Bijapur. The attempt of the essay has been to indicate that Goa has enjoyed a historical conversation with Bijapur, in the process producing its famed culture and that this dialogue needs to continue into contemporary times. The understanding of Goan (Indo-Portuguese) culture as either Hindu or Catholic is born of politically-biased history writing, those that seek to stress the Europeaness of Goa, or the Hinduness of Goa. This essay has attempted to show that if one is

casting history in religious terms, then one can very easily insert the Muslim right at the very heart of Goan culture, making them as authentic as any other. The other attempt of this essay has been an attempt to add another dimension to the spatial imagination of Goa. So far such imaginations have been tied to Portugal and Europe across the seas, and Maharashtra to the North. An art history that escapes the limiting framework of the Indo-Portuguese, will indicate to us that Goa is also historically and integrally tied to the space of Bijapur and the Deccan as well, allowing us to see the recent migrations not as ‘invasions’ but as homecomings.

To conclude, the argument presented in this paper is not to demand for a redocumenting of Goan art as Goano-Islamic, or Indo-Portuguese-Islamic. This would only continue to the point of ridiculousness existing modes of understanding the art and cultural traditions within Goa. Similarly, this essay does not suggest that any of the representatives of Indo-Portuguese art is communal, or mal-intentioned, or displays bad research skills. If anything, this essay seeks to point out that the absence of the Islamicate in the discussion on Indo-Portuguese art is a testament to the strength of the blind spot that writing on Goa has developed, the power of the discourse on the representation of Goa, located between a Luso-tropical representation of Goa that denies the local representation and sees it only as Europe or Portugal, and the British-Indian nationalist that is prejudiced in favour of the national, national that is understood in upper-caste Hindu terms.

What is demanded from us is to unveil the political

agendas that consciously or unconsciously structure our reading of art and culture, and a more rigorous method of examining the documents that we rely on to build our understanding of Goan history and culture. Toward this end, to look for what we have left out before, in this case the presence of the Islamicate, would undoubtedly reveal to us a larger confluence of traditions that go to build the Goan space, taking us beyond familiar tropes of Goa Portuguesa, Goa India but building for us the image of a dynamic, constantly changing culture.

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ethnography is at its best when experienced and written from inside the culture that is being researched – the ethnographer as one living with the people of his study, speaking their language and sharing their perceptions. Antonio Bernardo de Bragança Pereira's, *Ethnography of Goa, Daman and Diu*, succeeds to a great extent in meeting this rare criteria in his portrayal of Goan culture, its splendour, and its endearing tolerance and appreciation of the pluralisms of its society, comprehending every apparent inconsistency and peculiarity.

The cultural life of Goa, the manners and customs of Goans and the structure of their society provoke issues and questions which are of more than localised interest and significance. Descriptive accounts by travellers, missionaries and traders before the nineteenth century tended to dismiss the special features of Goan society as aberrations that did not conform to established patterns that were in vogue in the vast subcontinent of British India. The small enclave of Goa, Daman and Diu on the western coast of India, grandly called *Estado da Índia*, was all that remained of Portuguese occupied territories when the British Empire in India was at its peak. British administrators had mapped and surveyed the almost boundless limits of their Indian empire and, in their gazetteers, they had, with professional thoroughness, classified the physical and human resources of the subcontinent in all its complexity and divisions – all done no doubt with the objective of more effectively administering this agglomeration of tribes, castes, classes and peoples. To them, the Portuguese colony of Goa, Daman and Diu presented a sorry spectacle. The *East India Gazetteer of 1828*, purporting to contain particular descriptions of the empires, kingdoms, principalities, provinces, cities, towns, districts, fortresses, harbours, rivers and lakes, had this to say about Goa:

*The once splendid and populous city of Goa is now a wilderness . . . Goa was taken from the Hindu rajas of Vijayanagar by the Bahmani Mohammedan sovereign of the Deccan about AD 1469 and in 1510 was besieged and taken by Albuquerque . . . [who] made it a capital of the Portuguese dominions in the East . . . At present, excepting a very few of the highest classes, the great mass of Portuguese population . . . are the spurious descendants of European settlers by native women and the numerous converts that have*



## ETHNOGRAPHY OF GOA, DAMAN AND DIU

Aurora Maria Couto

