

# **Goa: Educational Institutions Through the Ages**

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**Directorate of Archives and Archaeology  
Government of Goa  
Panaji - Goa  
2002**

**Price: Rs. 200/-**

**Published by :**

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Government of Goa,  
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Panaji - Goa 403 - 001

## **Terms of Reference and Teaching of History**

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While teaching history in the classroom or making an endeavour to an article on any aspect of the subject we refer to terms which are overlapping but not coeval. Arbitrary reference to terms leads to blurring of boundaries which are defined by accepted usage of those terms. Terms of reference lay the epistemic foundation of any idea. For example when we refer to the formation of a state or political organisation and describe that as an empire, we have to say why we designate something as an empire, or according to what terms of definitions we do it. Hence the term of definition has to correspond with the term of reference, or that the object we are referring to has to correspond with the terms that define it.

However, blurring of distinctions might sometimes lead to the production of new ideas. But for that moment it would confuse different aspects of the subject. For example while introducing the idea of 16th century world-economy, one has to make it clear that one is not referring to the general economic and social condition of Europe in the 16th century merely, but that the idea of world-economy as such has a different status as a category. Also while introducing the idea of world wide colonial empire, or colonial systems, policies and practice, as an aggregate - one should clarify that one is not analysing the economic, social or political history of particular colonies. Of course general social, economic and political history could relate to either concepts, but conceptually both could not be same things.

When one talks about a subject or a field of study like Indo-Portuguese history one is referring to a set of common concerns or issues among historians. These are international maritime trade and politics, Portuguese administration and policies, and its impact on society, nature of change coming about in different parts of Portuguese colonial empire and so on. These aspects are constituents or the substance of the conventional discipline of Indo-Portuguese history. But one has to distinguish between such studies and the theorizations on the subject of Portuguese empire, in which the idea of empire itself constitutes the subject to a great deal. Such theorizations recur frequently because very often we tend to ask questions of fundamental nature: why do we call something (a political entity) an empire? This is different from the question: What is an empire?, for which the answer could be descriptive. Therefore the terms within such discourses which might refer to various objects of enquiry would carry implicit theorizations which cannot be ignored. Such theorizations form the context in using those terms which thus cannot be allowed to shift from the context. For example, the term the empire of the Portuguese, i.e. the *Estado da India* and the notion regarding the nature of authority which it conveys today - i.e. after recent research - is quite different from the notion of power and authority which was conveyed while using the term, *Estado* or empire, fifty years back. Therefore while using the term Portuguese imperialism, it is important to clarify which notion of imperialism is one adhering to. Relativism of definitions is thus important to consider, for a teacher of history, as teaching becomes more historiographical rather than merely historical. However, history has an objectivity of its own which would make essentialist discussion and use of categories in an absolute sense unavoidable.

The job of a teacher therefore becomes more complicated when one starts with an argument itself, for example that of an improvised empire of the Portuguese in the Bay of Bengal. Certainly we do not address the standard issues discussed within the limit of traditional historiography. In that we start with a different notion regarding the Portuguese presence.

The second problem is reference to historiography. One knows for example the broad contours of the historiography of Indo-Portuguese history. It can extend its canvas to the writings on the subject by Portuguese, Goan and Indian scholars of 19th and 20th centuries at one end, and the proceedings of International Seminar on Indo-Portuguese History on the other. But should one include the history of Portuguese presence in other regions within this limit or within the limit of the history of each individual region like Malabar, Coromandal, Bengal, Gujarat or Maratha country ? If Indo-Portuguese history means the study of the Portuguese within their maritime or territorial empire then it would be difficult to determine this question. This would be particularly difficult because traditional historiography of these regions have treated Portuguese presence in those regions as a part of its own domain. For example, studies on Portuguese in Bengal has had a life of its own, but its status within the study of Portuguese maritime empire was quite uncertain till very recent times. Studies on Bengal started with the pioneering work of Father Henry Hosten followed by the works of J.J. A. Campos, Armando Cortesao and S. N. Sen. But the magnum opus of C. R. Boxer hardly refers to Bengal in a significant way. Chittagong Portuguese are not mentioned. Hugli is mentioned once only as an unfortified settlement. These anomalies in emphasis on regional studies makes it difficult for a teacher to adopt a perspec-

tive. The teacher has to make every strand of historiography clear while teaching and should not present an unified view of the Portuguese history in Asia.

Such unity in presentation of history blurs the perspective further when words such as 'expansion' are used denoting an unilinear process. Is it possible to use the phrase European expansion to cover the regional studies of Portuguese; and their maritime empire alike. Critical questions can be posed if one considers the problem of externality of Indian Ocean economy or its submergence under expansion process, and tries to date them. The label of expansion has to be used discriminat-ingly by a teacher while discussing maritime empire or presence in any other form.

Multiplicity of views therefore makes us guard against establishing any sort of arbitrary interchangeability, equivalence and synonymity of terms of reference. Within a very wide field of study of maritime empires and colonialism there are many intersecting planes of study which overlap but should not deceive the eyes of a conscientious teacher. This is what the teacher and his or her students should always remain sensitive to, and consider the problems while discussing the framework of syllabus, or say, the phraseology of questions posed.

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