

GOA



THROUGH THE TRAVELLER'S LENS

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Reconstructing Goa through travel narratives: a study of select writings from Manohar Shetty's *Goa Travels*

AKSHATA BHATT & NAFISA OLIVEIRA¹

Today, travel writing encompasses a wide range of writings diversified by intent, content and style of narration. Whether it is a self-conscious travel memoir which seeks to amalgamate the particular with the universal or a travel blog written with a backpacker's enthusiastic immediacy, every narrative of travel literature is a palimpsest which contains perceptions about geography, demography, landscape and mindscape, all of which are coloured by the writer-traveller's vision. Goa – the land of many metaphors – has often found a place in the written word. Undoubtedly a favourite of wanderlust dreams since time immemorial, Goa has barely experienced the dearth of curious travellers and explorers. Yet, this essay argues, the contemporary image of Goa as vivid in glossy tourist brochures invariably plays to the galleries – its sun, sand and

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susegaado – neatly fitting into a fourth ‘s’ that has come to define Goa’s touristic identity – stereotype. This ‘all-encompassing’ popular paradigm, however, fails to do justice to the inherent variegation and verve which is a part of Goa’s larger narrative – its diverse cultures, dialects, festivities, peoples and a systematic syncretism which is unique to a land that has endured dynamic dialectics. Working through the baseline of select writings from *Goa Travels: Being the accounts of travellers from the 16th century to the 21st century*, this essay wishes to study and analyse the reconstruction(s) of Goa through the travellers’ lens in view of Goa’s increasing tourist influx and visibility on the global map.

THE phenomenon of travel has been an integral part of the human journey. Whether it was a mandatory seasonal migration, a need to know the unknown or a conscious effort to map the geographic terrain in which humans found themselves, humans carried a story as they travelled – a new knowledge coloured by perspective and imagination. Not all travel stories, however, got documented in the written form. Some transmuted as lore – oral records that were passed on from one generation to another. However, although not embossed in the written word, travel stories have always been a part of the larger hu-

man narrative – of humans' tryst with their environment, of their desire to locate themselves in the vast and often confounding geography around them and of the need to map their own identity vis-a-vis the terrain in which they found themselves.

Travel narratology

Today, travel writing encompasses a wide range of writings diversified by intent, content and style of narration. As literary forms, we argue, travel narratives defy rigid categorisation. For instance, it may be difficult to ascertain whether a travel narrative which claims objectivity as its intrinsic value has not been influenced by the preconceived notions or the biases of the author. It is also, similarly, difficult and perhaps inappropriate to write off a travel memoir as an authentic documentation of facts if one looks at it as a mere record of personal experiences. Whether it is a self-conscious travel memoir which seeks to amalgamate the particular with the universal or the modern-day travel blogs which are coloured by wanderlust visions as well as the immediate visibility that online media demands, the discursive matrices of travel accounts reveal that every documentation is informed by the writer's sense of perception and purpose. Although documented more often than not through first-hand experiences, travel entries have been considered to be problematic sources of information. This is perhaps because of the fact that in an attempt to delineate travel experiences, the writer

of these accounts willy-nilly tries to define the 'other'. This 'other' could be the landscape, the cultures or the peoples one encounters on a travel experience. This endeavour of defining the other, with or without political agenda, is often influenced by the ideological baselines of the writer.

Travel writing and the imperial agenda

Travel narratives written from early sixteenth century have been studied by critics in an attempt to understand the complex rubrics involved in the European imperial and colonial expansion. For instance, contending that travel accounts are connected with important historical transitions, critic Mary Louise Pratt in her work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (2003) opines that written discourses of colonial travel narratives not only encode, legitimise and underline the aspirations of European economic expansion and empire but also expose an obsessive need that the imperial centre feels to 'know itself' by presenting and re-presenting its peripheries and its others. In doing so, these travel accounts do not merely *reflect* places – they *represent* and *reconstruct* them, informed by their own socio-political and cultural paradigms.

In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (2003), critics Griffiths, Ashcroft and Tiffin further bring out the dynamics of the issue of representation. They assert that "in both conquest and colonisation, texts and textuality played a major part" (93). In enlisting

the kind of European texts which captured the non-European subject within European frameworks of reductionist stereotypes, the critics mention “anthropologies, histories and fiction” (93). The researchers of the present paper argue that travel narratives can also be considered as veritable literary frameworks through which the colonial agenda was foregrounded. Masquerading as naive accounts of personal experiences, travel narratives, intentionally or otherwise, participated in the process of otherisation and the discursive reconstruction of the colonies.

It is in light of this argument that this essay wishes to study select entries from Manohar Shetty's *Goa Travels*. Goa's contemporary status as a tourist destination is well-established. The glossy brochures aimed at alluring tourists from around the world unapologetically play to the galleries – selling the land as a place for fun, frolic and abandon. In the larger economic paradigm, these narrations informed by popular stereotype increase Goa's visibility on the global map. However, a lot is lost in this metaphorical translation. Goa's identity as a land of many metaphors – of variegated cultures, syncretic traditions, diverse peoples and more importantly significant historical transitions – is conspicuous by its absence in the Brand Goa of the contemporary tourist's imagination. In doing so, these representations also participate in the 'otherization' of Goa by exoticising it. However, in contemporary times, a lot of counter-narratives have

emerged which challenge and even deconstruct the stereotyping, vociferously putting forth the view that Goa's distinctness should not reduce it to the status of the marginalised 'other' in the contemporary socio-economic polarities.

In light of this, the travel-entries incorporated in Manohar Shetty's *Goa Travels* open up a new, multi-dimensional vista to the politic of travel narratology. In the entries selected for the study, there is a *semi* re-presentation of the land and the ways of its people. Through select entries, this paper will revisit Goa through the travellers' lens in order to gauge the underlying narratives which have informed the multiple layers of Goa's identity over the years.

Study of select entries

As mentioned earlier, Goa's scenic beauty often becomes the selling point of the touristic agenda. This aspect of the Goan landscape finds representation in early travel narratives incorporated in *Goa Travels: Being the accounts of travellers from the 16th century to the 21st century* (2014) too; but apart from a sheer fascination with the topography, these accounts also speak about the recuperative and restorative qualities of the land. Pietro Della Valle, the Italian composer-musicologist who visited Asia in the Renaissance period, for instance, records that,

In Goa, likewise, for the most part, the beginning of the Rain is in the first days of June; yet sometimes, it anticipates, and sometimes falls sometime later, with little difference... [b]y this Rain, the heat diminished

and the earth, which before was dry and all naked becomes clothed with new verdure and various colours of pleasant flowers and especially the air becomes more healthful, sweet and more benign (81).

The travel narrators, however, like their predecessors, were keenly aware of the commercial benefits of the land and recorded the economic potential of Goa which may have contributed in the colonial extension of the Portuguese imperial power in the land. Calling it a land which is 'exceedingly fertile', Duarte Barbosa, the writer and offer in early sixteenth century Portuguese India, speaks of Goa as a city which is

very great, with good houses, well girt about with strong walls, with towers and bastions. Around it are many vegetable and fruit gardens, with fine trees and tanks of sweet water with mosques and heathen temples. Here the Hydalcam had a great revenue as well from the land as from the sea (4).

The identity of Goa and its peoples as a palimpsest of variegated cultures finds representation in the travel accounts. For instance, the seventeenth-century French navigator François Pyrard de Laval describes a woman as she appeared at the mass,

The scene is a medley of the Occident and the Orient, of the Latin and the Indian... of the Catholic and the Pagan... Her gown is gold brocade, which glows under a mantle of black silk gauze. She comes riding in a palanquin, seated on a Persian carpet and propped on velvet cushions (76).

Some of the travel accounts deconstruct the processes by which the early colonisers consolidated

their position in the colonies by assuming new identities and restructuring social hierarchies in the *terra nova*. For instance, Pyrard de Laval speaks about the arrival of the Portuguese colonisers in India and says,

Many of the soldiers were ex-convicts, released for the purpose, and all belonged to the lowest class, but as soon as they landed in India they became gentlemen [...] The real nobility winked at this practice. If Indians could be induced to believe that all Portuguese were aristocrats, or, at least, that all Portuguese in India were gentlemen of quality, so much the better (72).

The view is reinforced by yet another Frenchman, the gem merchant and traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier when he writes,

The Portuguese who go to India have no sooner past the Cape of Good Hope than they all become fidalgos or gentlemen, and add Don to the simple name of Pedro or Jeronimo by which they were known when they embarked; this is the reason why they are commonly called in derision 'fidalgos of the Cape of Good Hope'. As they changed their status, so also they change their nature... (118).

When reading the various entries, a few thematic discrepancies become apparent to the readers. Pietro Della Valle, while discussing widow burning (Sati), mentions in his excerpt that it was prohibited by Afonso de Albuquerque when he took the city of Goa and that it was a reproach to the British Government that not until the year 1829 was the practice of widow-burning forbidden by law in British territories. Perhaps he wishes to indicate that the Portuguese were ahead in reform as compared to the British. In the seventeenth century, there arose colonial rivalry

among the European imperial powers who were vying for supremacy. Considering the fact that travel books were vital to imperialism, emphasising on this legal move would be a positive step on the part of the Portuguese to expand and strengthen their colonies. “Civilising” the natives would include eradicating any anachronistic and decadent practices such as Sati, a custom which unquestionably was a social evil which needed to be addressed. Even today, the law bequeathed by the Portuguese has been generally regarded as fair, if not fine.

In the vein of law and morality, several writers have constructed the identity of the imperial subject as depraved and in need of being tamed. Jacobus Canter Visscher (1692-1735), the Dutch minister who arrived on the Malabar coast in 1717, claims, “There is no place in the world where [the] law is less regarded than here” (160). Most of the European colonial powers through interpellation would convince the colonized nations that they were primitives in need of civilisation. This ideological hold was the strongest weapon of colonialism. While these derivative accounts would constitute the Empire for its readers, they would justify the cause and presence of imperialism on the other. In their respective pieces, François Pyrard de Laval, historian José Nicolau da Fonseca, and the German adventurer J. Albert de Mandelslo question the chastity to be found in the place. To quote Mandelslo,

The men there are so jealous of their wives that they permit not their nearest relations to see them: for chastity is so strange a virtue in those parts, that there is no woman but contrives all the ways imaginable to pursue her enjoyments, never minding the breach of those laws which God and nature hath imposed upon them, though the frequent misfortunes which happen upon that occasion should engage them to be more curious and reserved (114).

In his paper on "Travel Writing and Ideology", H.S. Chandalia opines, "Western travel writing coincides with the colonial expansion of the empire." In keeping with the assertion of the West that the colonised nations were in need of being civilized and that consequently it was almost an act of kindness bestowed upon them, descriptions of the people as "heathens" and "pagans" is explicable. One particular writer stands out in this regard, though there are others who have written of Goa in a patronising manner. Richard F. Burton scathingly remarked, "It would be, we believe, difficult to find in Asia an uglier or more degraded-looking race than that which we are now describing" (177). He goes on to declare, "This race is decidedly the lowest in the scale of civilized humanity we have yet seen" (180). Demeaning the colonised people may have been a necessity in order to assert their superiority and justify civilizing the so-called "savage"; or it may have been a total preoccupation with the Self and misconstruction of the Other.

However, Denis L. Cottineau de Kloguen, writing in the 1800s, differs in his description of Goa saying,

It is certain that the authors of the life of St. Francis

Xavier themselves, though Portuguese, give a dreadful account of the state of morals in Goa... [O]n the contrary it would be difficult to find a community of the same number of individuals, pursuing a more regular, tranquil and moral conduct, than that of the present inhabitants of Goa; very seldom, indeed, does there happen any misconduct among the females, not only of the first respectability, but of the great majority of the population... quarrels are very rare, and murders, or even duels, are still more so... (173).

It is pertinent to note that there are differences in the narrative of various authors. This may be related to the target-readership that the writer wishes to address, the purpose of the account as well as the writer's individual personality. Some writers may have been more concerned with enabling the Europeans back home to imagine this Empire of which they were in control. Travel narratives are indeed what David Spurr has called "the rhetoric of empire".

The change in the global political scene may have led to a change in the tone of travel writing as well. One can find in Graham Greene's account of liberated Goa, a different portrayal of the state from the ones above. There is an objectivity apparent in the narrative and the author avoids being judgmental. His understanding of the state and the people is profound. His observations range from, "The far-ranging Goan has loyalty to his village you seldom find elsewhere," to "Goan hospitality will not cease till the cellar is empty" (251-254).

The pieces towards the end of the anthology differ in tone, as well as, in narration from those in the

beginning. There may have been an inclination in the traveller to integrate with the Other and internalise the experience, rather than othering the outside world. In the same vein, Hemendra Singh Chandalia opines,

Besides the quantity and variety, travel writing in the twentieth century has grown into a more complex kind of writing where it mixes adventure, landscape, emotion and longing with a conscious exploration and depiction of an ideology also. A journey outside, more often than not, corresponds with a journey inside the self... Having come to the end of the journey, he records the experiences of not just the physical distances negotiated, but also the mental and spiritual experiences felt by him. At times, his entire personality undergoes a transformation and returns a changed man with a new understanding of life, a new ideology.

In 'The Contemporary Traveller' sub-section of *Goa Travels*, the journalist Homer A. Jack gives a vivid description of his experience in the piece 'Hunting Satyagrahis'. His analysis of the event stems from logic and an understanding of human nature. He says, "I think it correct to assume that people everywhere are more preoccupied with problems of food and family than with politics" (244).

Another narrative in this section, by Helene Derkin Menezes, is reflective of the shift in focus from the political to the personal in the history of travel writing on Goa. In her entry, 'Like no other place on earth,' she muses while on a holiday, "This is nirvana. How can something so simple be so indulgent?" (272).

The shift in the tone of travel narratives is an indication of the writers' desire to assimilate the unfamiliar, to accept the other, and to arrive at an understanding of a different culture. Not a culture that is 'higher' or 'lower', but distinct and perhaps having a charm of its own.

Conclusion

In speaking about the issues of representation in colonial and travel discourses, the editors Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin as well as Mary Louis Pratt speak about the dichotomic otherisation in European literary discourses, stating that in establishing the colonial subjects as the other these texts establish the colonial masters as the centre by implicitly giving them the power to re-present and represent. In fact, this is true of most travel narratives – in context of post-structuralist perspectives, it would be an error to believe that travel narration carries an innocent reflection of the world which it describes. In fact, it may be internally fallacious to categorise travel narratives into rigid genres of fact and fiction for one can see an inevitable interplay of both. What is also evident in these travel narratives is a fact that the critics mentioned above underline too that in representing the 'other', the narrators of travel writings actually attempt to define the 'self'. In this sense, travel writing is not just an external process of recording; it is also an internal process of self-validation. The travel entries in *Goa Travels* also display similar ma-

trices. In fact, it is interesting to note that there is a robust competition among the European travel narrators, as they describe colonies other than those that their own countries have colonised.

In this sense, there is a constant shifting and re-shifting of centres and a process of otherisation not just in the master-subject paradigm, but even in the master-master paradigm. What is conspicuous in its presence, as is in the larger imperial discourse, is the silence or rather the “muteness” of the signified. Although there are entries in which the ‘empire writes back’, *Goa Travels* opens up a larger paradigm in travel research to talk about the implicit process of reconstruction of places and creation of spaces that happens willy-nilly in all travel narratives.

Filipina poet and critic Dinah Roma-Sianturi raises some pertinent questions about the future of travel writings when she opines,

Recent travel theory books are often introduced in a growing standardized manner. It begins with a reminder of how there has been a resurgence in critical attention to travel writing over the past decades alongside commentaries on how the belated recognition of travel writing genre has been on account of its heterogeneous nature. It crosses boundaries and unsettles the conventions of other disciplines. It is both fact and fiction. It was for a long time viewed [as] amateurish and sub-literary until finally, the introduction touches on its so-called “imperial origins”. And it is here [that] the arguments begin to tread on sensitive grounds. The key question that confronts contemporary travel theory involves the very question that launched a long-standing investigation [of] the genre. Can it divest itself of its imperial origins? Can it, despite being reminded of its violent beginnings,

move forward and achieve discursive maturity (qtd. in Youngs 3).

Today, as pertinent discourses of post-modern narration, travel writings have not remained self-enclosed. The important presence of travel narrations, more often than not informing tourism-trends, cannot be ignored. It is pivotal to view travel narratives not merely as literary documents but as significant socio-cultural commentaries which can impact and relevantly shape the reconstruction of a region's identity. In light of this, travel entries from *Goa Travels: Being the accounts of travellers from the 16th century to the 21st century* can play a noteworthy role in facilitating a further discussion on the role of travel writings as a distinct genre in the larger twenty-first-century human narrative.

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