

GOA



THROUGH THE TRAVELLER'S LENS

NINA CALDEIRA
EDITOR

Goa, Through the Traveller's Lens

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In fact, this is only fiction: unusual 'visitors' who came Goa's way

FREDERICK NORONHA¹

Enjoying a high profile as an international tourist destination, Goa in recent times has often been the setting for a range of unusual or even peculiar fictional work. The region has been 'visited' by characters like Bahadur (India's attempt at building a comic superhero) and Tintin (the reporter-adventurer whose travels across continents taught European and other children about their world at a time when formal colonialism was giving way to new relationships between nations). In the world of film too, there has been debate over how modern-day depictions shape global understanding of this region as well as local perceptions of the place.

GOA, a travel destination for millions of visitors each year in recent times, has generated a colourful if a little-noticed range of 'fictional' work,

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which depicts the region in strange, unusual and mystical ways, as this essay attempts to point out. Just as the travel writing of earlier centuries shaped the global perception of Goa, today it is these new depictions that set the tone.

Kachka defines a “fiction travel book” as

a book in which a place is as important a character as the protagonist; it's a book so informed by the writer's culture that it's impossible to read it without uncovering the life of the author behind it; it's a book that has shaped the way we see a certain place; it's a book whose events and characters could be set nowhere else.

In the context of Goa, in addition to the above, one could focus on the texts in which a fictional character visits this region. Besides, one could also study texts involving situations where Goa is the setting for a story which is fictional yet believable. The issue of the depiction of stereotypes has been discussed elsewhere in this volume.

It has been noted that, at times, fictional travel stories have been difficult to distinguish from travel literature. This is known to have been the case with the Venetian merchant-explorer-writer Marco Polo (Wood) or the fourteenth-century travel memoir *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, which was once supposed to have been written by a person with the same name (Manuscript...).

The reverse is also true when a place gets ‘visited’ by fictional characters. Goa has grown into a widely visited tourist destination in recent decades, on ac-

count of government promotions as well as other factors. In 2017, provisional figures for tourist arrivals in Goa were set at almost 6.9 million domestic tourists and .8 million foreign tourists, totalling 7.7 million visitors, over four times the State's population (Department of Tourism).

Its beaches, or thinly disguised versions of them, have been 'visited' by Bahadur. The latter was the comic book superhero often fighting dacoits, published by Indrajal Comics and created by Aabid Surti in 1976. Bahadur visited 'Calunge Beach' in 1988. While there is no specific indication that Calunge is closely



connected with a similarly-named beach in Goa, the reader is left without the need to undertake too much guesswork. The 32-page comic contains a story of gangsters, drugs, full-moon parties in fancy dress, a murdered clown and even protests against tourism (Uppal and Brahmania). In its story-line, the Chief Inspector at Calunge is Rui, and there's a gang war between Rocky and Yusuf. Calunge has

miles of clear sands and sea, and warm sunshine
(that) attracts foreigners from colder climes. Earlier, it

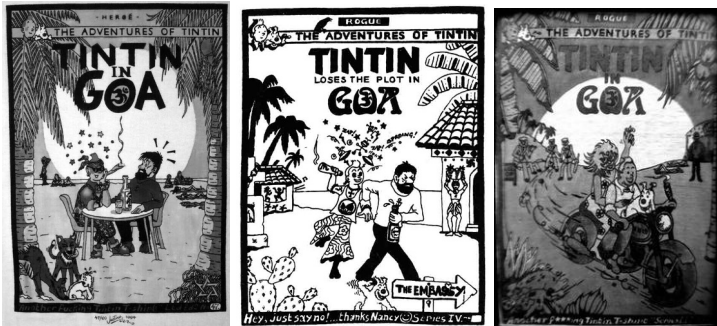
was popularised by the flower-children – the hippies. But later with the easy availability of hash and drugs, it became the haven for drug addicts and smugglers (1).

Bahadur incidentally was meant to be India's answer to the big four foreign comics that then ruled the country -- The Phantom, Mandrake, Flash Gordon and Tarzan. Bahadur's storylines obviously got its cues from its foreign counterparts like Phantom, especially when it came to mixing up fact with fiction. For those who came in late (Samudrala), The Phantom was a creation of the American writer, theatre director and producer Lee Falk in 1936. Initially, Phantom was to find his home in a 'fictional' 'Afro-Indian country' which Falk called Bengala, later changed to Denkali, filled with rajas and, initially, even 'Singh' pirates and Bandar pygmies (Sanghvi). Phantom remained a "comic book hero for the masses" in India.

To complicate matters, Goa inspires the creation of 'literature' in other unusual ways. For instance, the tourism boom here has led to the creation of counterfeit covers, some apparently inspired by tee-shirt designs, that playfully seek to pass-off their creativity as books from the Tintin series. The once widely popular Tintin comic albums were created by the Belgian cartoonist Georges Remi (1907-1983), using the pen name Hergé. His work is said to have resulted in creating one of the most popular European comics in the twentieth century.

In Goa, a series of Tintin 'covers' exist in the on-

line world for books which were never actually published. These include ‘Tintin in Goa’, ‘Tintin Loses the Plot in Goa’ and another variation of ‘Tintin in Goa’. The first (Tintin--fake) shows an apparently intoxicated yet shocked looking Captain Haddock seated at a cosy table by the beach, surrounded by coconut palms, along with a seemingly dazed Tintin smoking what appears to be a giant chillum. The second (Tintin Loses...) has a bottle-clutching Captain Haddock, grabbing a hippy-style clad Tintin by the arm, as the fictional boy-reporter appears consuming alcohol himself. The homes in the background depict old-style Goan tiles, and one can also see banana trees and silhouettes of coconut palms. The third (Les Aventures...) in the series has Tintin riding a large, Enfield-like motorbike with a garishly-dressed Western woman tourist seated on the pillion.



But ‘Goa’ does get a number of other travellers from disparate fictional worlds too. One’s interest in this field was sparked off while a post-graduate student of the then just-launched Goa University, almost

three a generation ago. At the newspaper organisation where the present writer was then employed, a colleague came across a German adult magazine *Pra-line* depicting "the wild, man-hungry girls" who supposedly make "Carnival in Goa ... something very special" (Tourism 4, Qtd in Desouza).

Another university fellow-student pointed with surprise to the fiction of Chamberlain's *Gates of Fire*, and how it depicted Goa. Chamberlain's is one of the relatively early fictional works, dating back of the 1980s, soon after the hippy boom, which describes Goa as "an explosive mixture of violence, sex, drugs and mysticism". The latter part of the book is set in Goa. The protagonists reach Goa (Chamberlain 286) with Jeff seated on the "first-class deck of the Goa steamer [looking] out over the glittering sea". His companion Laura, doing "some sort of meditation" in the cabin, had asked him to leave. She has been through "an affair with a Sikh and ... all this guru business".

There are hippies on the lower deck dancing and smoking drugs. In no time, Jeff gets an offer for casual sex from a young blonde speaking English with a French accent and, because of the crowded setting of the steamer, they talk about hooking-up at Anjuna. Yoga, conflict among travelling couples, misunderstandings as the West encounters India, and comparisons of the place are among the more tame themes focussed on in these pages. The place encountered is

described thus:

Goa looked more like Christianstadt or Montego than the dreary India Stan had expected... The taxi sped down shady palm-lined avenues where massive houses, built in an era of splendour, lay decaying now behind bright hedges of bougainvillea and hibiscus. Across rice paddies that looked like magnificent green meadows, whitewashed spires of Christian churches loomed above the coconuts. Laura could have sworn she was in Mexico (290).

The region gets described in what might superficially appear to be a flattering manner:

Goa's a good place. Good Christian smugglers, not those Hindus. You can buy anything here: privacy, protection, immunity -- you name it. It's a tradition or something (291).

The latter part of the book sets much of its action in Goa, painting it to be a place largely of crime and sleaze. But this is not the only kind of depiction that emerges about Goa, along with the place's obvious ascent in the global tourist destination during the 1980s and thereafter.

In the world of film too, there has been some discussion about the projection of Goa and how this shapes perceptions. Gahlot (85) mentions some of the films shot in Goa, including international movies, big commercial films, potboilers, quickies, and alternative movies. She argues that “films too numerous to list have been shot in Goa”, and points out that “Hindi films have had many characters with names like Pinto, Braganza, Fernandes, Gonsalves, D’Costa

and D'Silva; lots of Monicas, Rosies, Michaels and Monas" (86).

Trikal, a film by the director and screenwriter Shyam Benegal who is credited with creating 'middle cinema' in India, has drawn praise for its sensitive portrayal of a Goa. Gahlot says: "This was one of the few films that accurately caught the ethos, lifestyle and language of Goa" (94). Renu Iyer calls *Trikal* (or *Trikaal*) a film "which provides a layered account of the changes wrought upon Goa and its various classes by different rulers -- from the Portuguese to the Indian government" (191).

It has been contrasted against the cliches otherwise widespread in Bollywood. Film-maker Benegal has discussed films dealing with the "contemporary Muslim experience" and others dealing with Anglo-Indians, the British, or a Goan Catholic family in Mumbai (*Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai?*), saying:

...I made a film called *Trikal* (1985), about a privileged Catholic family set in a Goan village at the time of the Liberation of Goa. The earlier diffidence that filmmakers felt in tackling subjects dealing with minority communities was replaced with a new confidence. Sterile representations of minorities, very much part of the Indian cinema before 1971, were replaced by depictions of ordinary people grappling with problems of life and change in a modernising world. Several of the films I mention had a favourable audience response and some of them were reasonable box office successes (Benegal 236).

But this movie, when watched with a critical eye, could itself face debate over its own depiction of Goa.

The film begins with the disclaimer: “All the characters and situations in this film are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual events and people is purely coincidental and entirely unintentional.” Nonetheless, the “revolutionary Ranés” mentioned in the movie carry the same name as the clan from North Goa that was politically influential before and during parts of the Portuguese era, as also at the time the film was in the making. There are other names which might sound familiar to local audiences.

The film begins with the unlikely depiction of an impoverished peasant carrying an empty coffin balanced on his head, as he races through rice paddies and coconut groves. Other workers are (symbolically, perhaps) readying the grave for a funeral. In between these scenes, the rich scion of a landed family is returning to Goa, and to the elite village of Loutulim, after an absence of 24 years. Bells toll in the background. The old elite is, as expected, Portuguese-speaking, depicted at times as eccentric, and some of its members are ‘always drunk’. They are steeped in intrigue or jealousies and bear names like Erasmo, Aurora, Renato, Milgrinia or Ernesto. Some of their lives come with the hint of scandal never far away. The old and fading elites in the movie are sometimes depicted in an unflattering light, even as tributes seem to be paid to their lifestyle, music, achievements and the loss of their fast-vanishing world.

One can notice the contrast between the dis-

empowered elites of the Goan world, and its subalterns. At one point, one of the servants of the affluent family say: "The masters keep changing, we always stay there."

Robert S. Newman, the anthropologist who has studied a range of issues on Goa from the late 1970s, described earlier in this book, has a forthcoming paper in his two-book compilation on Goan themes, exploring the same subject. He writes:

Goa has been repeatedly mythologized over the centuries and Goans' image has been consistently dominated by others -- first by the Portuguese and occasional foreign travelers, then by the anti-colonial forces in Delhi, then by hippies and those interested in their lifestyle, and finally by Hindi language films (99).

There are other depictions of Goa too, as for instance in the eponymous play by Asif Currimbhoy. He has been called a controversial figure, though when his play was being staged in Bombay, the *Times of India* (Bombay Edition, 17 August 1997) slotted him "among India's best-known dramatists writing in English". Currimbhoy penned some 30 plays between 1955 and 1975, and his play Goa was read by a theatre group in 1997, three years after his death. Currimbhoy swims strongly against the tide of perceptions in this part of the world, when the play was written. When it was staged at The Hindu MetroPlus Theatre Festival in August 2006, the event's sponsoring newspaper critic saw the play thus:

The characters are stereotypes -- Maria of mixed blood, her innocent daughter, colonisers political and religious, aggressive nationalist, pimp, smuggler, street loungers... Add to this simplistic symbols -- cross, prayer beads, liquor and rose; and the two rivals (Alphonso, Krishna) representing Portugal and India, greedy for the land, while Rose stands for Goa. Symbols, unlike images, are hardly capable of conveying multiplicities. The blurb claims that the play raises questions about the concept of nationalism, and political machinations which rob the people of freedom and choice. This Theatrecian production did not go beyond naive statements about these complex issues.... (Ramnarayan)

Other writers have also made Goa home to their fictional works. At the age of 29, Colin Fernandes got his fiction published by Penguin India. *Viva Santiago* is set in Goa, and it is largely the Goa of the expat Goan and the national media stereotype. Its blurb reads: "Replete with the sights, sounds and flavours of Goa, and a good dose of sex, drugs and rock music, *Viva Santiago* is the story of Alonso Gonzalez and his colourful, dysfunctional family." Its location is Divar, and one can even run into the Bonderam flag festival on its pages. Fernandes has been a journalist at *India Today* and *The Hindustan Times*, and features editor at *Maxim India*.

Authors like Paul Mann have written 'fictional' works that found echoes in subsequent real-life cases like the death of the teenage British tourist, Scarlett Keeling.

Other books which follow such depictions include *Grave Secrets in Goa* by Kathleen McCaul. London-

born McCaul, 33 when the book was published, has been a journalist, a freelance reporter for BBC World Service, involved with starting-up Iraq's first post-invasion English-language newspaper, and was a news producer for *Al Jazeera* English. McCaul paints a mosaic of beaches, full-moon parties, deep religiosity, religious rivalry, murder, mystery, corrupt policemen, and dubious politicians. What entangles fact and fiction is how the book manages a close mimicking of reality and allusion to real-life events, places and believable characters. "An Indian paradise with murder in its heart," says the subtitle of the book *Grave Secrets in Goa*. Chapter 1 starts off with: "The head of the bull had been hacked off cruelly; it looked like the work of a chainsaw." By the third paragraph, we're into:

Goa. Paradise Lost. We're getting used to news of drugs, Russian gangs, murders of foreigners, corrupt land deals. But this crime is entirely new to the state. Idol Theft.

Another book from recent times is Khushwant Singh's -- a text variedly classified as fiction, Asian/Indian literature, and adult fiction or erotica (Goodreads). Among the many sexual encounters the protagonist Mohan Kumar indulges in, is "Molly Gomes of Goa". She is depicted as having claimed to be a trained nurse specialising in physiotherapy, using massage to treat those with partial paralysis or having limb ailments. Singh, who was known to have a long fascination with Goa -- Amardeep Singh comments that some pictures of "bikini-clad free-love kids in Goa"

that Kushwant Singh “splashed on the pages of *The Illustrated Weekly* were rather more like tabloid sensationalism than serious journalism”.

Stepping up the trend to a new level, are the depiction of Goa in adult-focussed writing. Nagvenkar has highlighted the case of a fictional “toon porn star” venturing into Goa. He writes

India’s biggest and outrageous toon porn star Savita Bhabhi has set foot in the sands of Goa – of course, in cyberspace. And the state government is not too happy. Already banned by the Indian government, the website showcases the adventures of the seductive, sari-clad Savita, who is the face of Indian graphic porn art. The latest edition of ‘Savita Bhabhi – The sexual adventures of a Hot Indian Bhabhi’ has the much-married protagonist visiting a Goa resort with her female friends and ending up in a series of sexual encounters with resort owners, masseurs and sundry.

In conclusion, one could say that the image of Goa is often created by forces external to the region. Leave aside being able to set its own agenda and image, this region finds it difficult in even tracking and understanding in what ways the others shape it.

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Travel writing comes packaged as documentary, or as literary and journalistic works. Such writing could range from the humorous to the serious or the clichéd. Travel writers have increasingly been associated with tourism and their output finds its way into guidebooks too. Such work can be found on websites, in periodicals, in books and, increasingly, in blogs. But the situation was

different in the past. Across the centuries, travel writing has come from a wide variety of writers—travellers, anthropologists, spies, military officers, missionaries, explorers, pilgrims, social and physical scientists, educators and migrants.

For a region like Goa, such writing carries with it a lot of implications. Not only does it interpret this tiny region to the outside world, but it even influences Goans' perceptions of themselves. This book focuses on how travel writing depicts the small, historic, often hard-to-understand region called Goa. For a change, scholars from the area turn the magnifying glass onto those who have long presented Goa to the world.

These pages look at how scholars travelled to meet kindred spirits. Or, how an American anthropologist then based in Australia understood villages in Salcete. Other contributions look closely at travel blogs focussing on Goa; a French journalist's radio travelogues; travel narratives; Naipaul's "Goa"; the depiction of this region in the works of writers of distant centuries such as Francois Pyrad de Laval, Tomé Pires and Denis Cottineau de Kloguen; reflections in Manohar Shetty's *Goa Travels* and the *Goa Writers' Inside/Out*. One essay looks at Goa's depiction in some works of fiction.



CONTRIBUTORS: Nina Caldeira, Ph.D., is Professor and Head of the Department of English, Goa University. This book is based on papers presented at an eponymous seminar held at the GU in March 2017. Contributors to this volume include Dr Isabel de Santa Rita Vás, Dr Sushila Sawant Mendes, Dr Xavier M. Martins, Maria de Lourdes Bravo da Costa, Dr Prema Rocha, Sunita Mesquita, Dr Glenis Maria Mendonça, Dr Brian Mendonça, Irene Silveira, Akshata Bhatt, Nafisa Oliveira, Natasha Maria Gomes, Palli Gaonkar, Ambika Kamat and Frederick Noronha.

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