

Goans In The Middle East: In Search of A Better Tomorrow?

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This paper is the outcome of a long engagement with Goans who have ventured away from their homes to nurture their dreams of building a better home. With the ushering in of the era of decolonization by the Portuguese colonies, the image of Goa Dourada faded and the Gulf countries provided an El Dorado for the Goans. The sample for the study comprises of fifteen Goan households who have worked in different types of jobs in Kuwait. It also highlights the challenges encountered by them and their initiatives to preserve Goan identity in a foreign land. An analysis of some literary works written in post colonial era also reflects on the social fabric being affected by Goan migration.

Introduction

Diaspora refers to any dispersion of an originally homogeneous entity such as language or culture. The Goan Diaspora began at a massive pace in the latter half of the eighteenth century. This period witnessed the dwindling of the lucrative spice trade from the Portuguese and economic decadence of Goa. Bombay was ceded by the Portuguese to the British as Princess Catarina de Braganza's dowry when she married King Charles. The subsequent rise of Bombay, created favorable conditions for steady emigration of Goans to British India.¹

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Goan economy was in dire state, as the Portuguese grip over the maritime trade was being replaced with British monopoly on trade. This led to constant migration of Catholic Goans to Bombay, in order to seek employment. While some educated Catholic Brahmins did seek

clerical employment, most of the migrants were of the lower strata of society, who sought employment as cooks, butlers, musicians, etc.² The shortage in labour within the village communities was met by Hindu laborers from the New Conquests.

Goan Economy

Goa's economy relied predominantly on agriculture. The rural economy during the pre-Portuguese Goan society consisted of a self-sufficient village which comprised of farmers carrying on agriculture with primitive means such as the plough and bullock power. The village artisans manufactured goods and rendered their services to the local people. The village was self sufficient and social contacts involved travelling short distances for marriages or on a pilgrimage. An important component of inland trade was the village weekly markets and fairs where the villages indulged in commercial transactions in agriculture or domestic crafts.³

The Goan village comprised of a cluster of houses and the surrounding lands, cultivated as well as uncultivated. The land was collectively owned by a body of persons residing in the village, which formed the village community. The village had a common tank or well as well as a village temple or shrine where the village deity or *gramadevata* was worshipped. The temples in Goa were looked after by the village communities or *gaunkars*. The *gaunkars* protected the interests of these temples, and the income derived from the lands owned by the temples was used for the maintenance of the temple and its personnel⁴.

However in course of time new families migrated into Goa. Although agriculture was the backbone of the Goan economy, no effort was made by the Portuguese Government especially in the early years of their rule in Goa to increase agricultural productivity. The increase in population and the introduction of new families created problems in the social fabric, which resulted in the evolution

of a new regulations called *Mandavoli* to define the powers of the various institutions (*boucos*) affiliated to the *gauncaria*. This made the village communities self-sufficient and self-governing communities.

The Portuguese salaries paid to the Government employees, remained the same from the start of service to the time of retirement. The service conditions were pitiable because the Portuguese never allowed any union or guild to be formed by both private and government employees. The Portuguese imposed their administration on the *gauncars*. They passed a legislation entitling their local officials to overrule the decisions of the *gauncari* if they deemed it necessary. The Inquisition crushed the power of the *gauncars*. Forced conversions led to the depopulation of the villages, triggering the Goan diaspora in which *gauncars* found themselves scattered over several regions.

During the Portuguese rule the Portuguese passed a number of decrees which modified the system of village communities. One such legislation passed was that it was no longer necessary for the *gauncar* to cultivate the land himself and the land could be cultivated by any non-*gauncar*.⁵ However, the *gauncar* was still entitled to his dividend *Jono* from the distributable surplus of the village community. The transformation of the village community enabled the *gauncars* to continue their membership of the community without cultivating the land thereby reducing themselves to the position of shareholders. The attitude of the Goan farmers and the government was instrumental in making agriculture a backward and neglected sector.⁶ The labour shortage in agriculture due to the migration of farm labour to the more lucrative mining sector was also responsible for the fall in agricultural production. This led to social mobility and the Goans could venture out of their homes and still retain the

membership of the large community and were also entitled for *Jono* even after a lapse of five years.

The educated villagers sought employment in British India and other countries and collected their *Jono* after returning to Goa. This led to the cultivation of land by other villagers who were not members of the village community. The Portuguese permitted the village communities to sell land which was the prerogative of the entire community. This led to the rise of the class of landlords in Goa. Eventually, there arose other wealthy classes such as the mine owners, industrialists, shopkeepers, traders, importers, exporters etc. The new structure was competitive, acquisitive and individualistic.

The Inquisition

Due to religious persecution some learned men mostly Brahmins left the city of Goa soon after the destruction of temples. From 1597 till 1603 Christendom suffered a setback due to many scandals, injustice, disorders and ill administration of judges.⁷ There were some unresolved issues regarding ownership rights of disputed lands between the *gaunkars* and non-*gaunkars* and the late Hindu settlers in the villages. Conversions increased tremendously especially in Salcete. The Portuguese administration lured the converts by offering them incentives in the colonial bureaucracy. The *gaunkars* representing the Comunidade took advantage of the opportunities and adopted European lifestyles. The *sossegado* lifestyle of the *bhatkar* was due to the services provided by members of the lower strata of society. The *bhatkar* allowed the *mundkar* to stay on his land at his discretion and in return the *mundkar* provided labour demanded by the *bhatkar*.⁴ But some Christians turned hostile towards the Portuguese. This was because the Portuguese had conquered their lands and the lack of Christian humility among the Portuguese. A

large number of converted people were confused regarding the Catholic faith and did not abide by it.

Luso-British Treaty

The Luso-British Treaty of 26th December 1878 was signed in Lisbon which commenced the work of expansion and modernization of the port of Mormugao and laid the first track of the Western India Portuguese Railway(WIPR) from Mormugao.⁸ The revenue input doubled but most of it was utilized for the lavish maintenance of bureaucrats. Goans also suffered humiliation from the British agents present in Goan territory. A new currency was introduced, which was a drain on the finances of the Portuguese Government. Teresa Albuquerque opines that the treaty resulted in the moral decadence of the Goans. The colonial policies of the English in areas of trade and commerce adversely affected the Portuguese in Goa. But the Railway ushered Goa in the twentieth century with Goans searching for new avenues to express their intelligence in finding a better life away from their homeland.⁹ With the development of education in British India, Goans of higher castes also began migrating because of poor higher education facilities in Portuguese Goa.

The decolonization and attainment of independence by the Portuguese and British colonies, resulted in Goans seeking new avenues for employment and settlement not only in Portugal and the United Kingdom, but also in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States of America¹⁰. A number of Goans have attained positions of eminence in education, art, industry and commerce.

Middle East

The changes in the political economy of the Middle East due to the presence of the British in 1839 paved the way for white collared as well as domestic staff jobs for Goans.¹¹ The Gulf jobs led to a number of Goans who utilized the services of the clubs in Bombay

as transit points for such jobs. The oil boom of the 1970s provided good employment opportunities to migrate to the Gulf.¹² The price hike of oil resulted in the rise of a large number of job opportunities both for skilled and unskilled workers. The pattern of migration is different from migration to the West. Goans who migrate to the Gulf can hold a work visa which has to be sponsored by a native of that country. People belonging to other countries cannot permanently reside in the Middle East. The rules of residence differ for different countries in the Middle East. In a country such as Saudi Arabia, the rules are very strict, while in U.A.E. and Kuwait they are liberal.

Kuwait

Goans who lived in Kuwait in the fifties encountered difficulties due to the extreme weather conditions. This is the period wherein a large number of male migrants went to the Gulf, who belonged to the economically backward strata of society. The remittances acquired by these families enabled them to educate their children, who usually settled in the Gulf where there was a need for labour. Some Goans migrated along with their families also. The rules for visit visa and family visa were not rigid, hence many families migrated to the Gulf. This was the period of the oil boom and hence the country could accommodate a large number of migrants who were needed as work force in the country.

There are three categories of migrants who live in Kuwait. The top most category comprises of well educated Goans who work in the Banks/Corporate sector as executives. The children belonging to this group study in British/American schools and lead a luxurious life. The second category is of those with a moderate income. In this category the husband has a work visa which is sponsored by a Kuwaiti national for his residence in the country. The husband can procure a family visa, for his wife and children's residence in Kuwait whereas a wife cannot do so. In order to obtain a family visa the

husband should have a sound financial status. And the last category comprises of people who work as maids in Kuwaiti residences and jobs with low technical expertise.

The researcher has collected data for the study from Goans belonging to all the three categories who have worked in Kuwait in the fifties, sixties and are currently based in Kuwait. The data provided by five households, belonging to the top most category, indicate that the number of Goans belonging to this category is negligible. However, these households, due to their strong financial status, have amassed a lot of wealth for themselves and their children.

The second category is of those Goans who send their children to Indian schools. In these households, usually both, the father and mother are working. The children of these expatriate families study in such schools like Indian English Academy in Salmiya, Carmel School in Khaitan, Indian Community school in Salmiya, Indian Central School in Abasiya, etc. Five households in this category also were interviewed by the researcher. The researcher communicated with these Goan parents whose children had studied in Indian schools in Kuwait. After a thorough analysis it was observed that 80 percent of these students have settled in U.K., Australia and in the Middle East.

Goans who work in residencies and in low paid jobs are those who belong to the third category. These people do not have savings and their remittances are sent to their families in Goa. Of the five households studied by the researcher, three were women-headed families as their husbands had expired. The three widows kept their children with relatives in Goa during their stay in Kuwait. From these five households studied, at least one family member is currently based in Kuwait.

Among the fifteen households studied by the researcher, the family members belonging to the first category have completed higher studies and are doing exceptionally well. Some family members of the second category are working as executives and others are working as professionals and skilled workers. A few family members belonging to the third category are also working in Kuwait in similar jobs held by their parents.

Goan Identity vis-a-vis migration

Goans working under varying socio-cultural and economic conditions preserve and promote their rich cultural traditions and values in the countries they emigrate. The Goan identity is basically preserved by the older generations who have established a number of associations in the Gulf which organize events depicting Goan culture. But the audience, for these events, is of those who belong to the upper two categories, who relive the nostalgia because of their financial status. These events are usually conducted at venues where public transportation from the workplace of the Goans who work in Kuwait may not be available and they do not have their own vehicle. Travelling from workplace to attend such programmes is time consuming, and also work related stress and the expenditure incurred, may demotivate people in participating in such reunions.

Post colonial literature depicts how Goans have toiled hoping for a better future. After the political liberation of Goa there was a renaissance of Goa's native culture. Dr. Manohar Rai Sardesai's writings although written humourously, depict his fascination for the village life in Goa.¹³ R.V. Pandit could not tolerate the social injustice done to the poor and the marginalized which is emphatically reflected in his poems. Bakibab Borkar's poem '*Sasay*' contains hope for a better future and faith in Goans to forge their destiny. In "*Dhvajachi zagvonn*" (Invocation to the Indian Flag) he pleads for the rescue of Goans "*Dhav Begin Pav Ulia*" (Hearken to the call) is a

fervent appeal to his brethren to come and help the land of their birth in the hour of her agony.¹⁴

Literature both fiction as well as non-fiction reflects the longing of Goans to return to their ancestral home. But the younger generation accustomed to a cosmopolitan life dread the thought of living in a village.

Goans who have migrated to the West have transformed their ancestral homes into massive villas, but these villas are not inhabited by them and are maintained by caretakers. Majority of Goans working in the Middle East could not afford to take their wife and children and have wasted the prime years of their life –away from home. They have learned to live disconnected with the soil and have not been able to spend time with their families in Goa.

Conclusion

According to World Population Review, in 2016 expatriates accounted for 70% of Kuwait's population. Kuwait considers this high level of non-nationals as a problem and has announced plans to reduce this number. The minimum salary for acquiring visa is raised to KD 450 a month for an expatriate who wants to sponsor members of his family.¹⁵ The oil recession since 2014 have affected the families in all the above three categories. The Kuwaiti Government also intends to impose taxes on expatriates' remittances. The motivation for emigration being weakened, Goans will be forced to return back to their motherland. In this challenging scenario, the Government would do well to create the necessary infrastructure that would facilitate these ex-Middle East Goan employees to sustain themselves and their dependents in Goa.

END NOTES

1. Carmo Azavedo, "The Goan Diaspora" in *Profiles of Eminent Goans*, p.30

2. R.S.Trichur, "Politics of Goan Historiography" in *La Chronique des Levres*, p. 640.
3. T.R De Souza, *Goa to me*, p.35.
4. Delio de Mendonca, *Conversions and Citizenry*, p.70.
5. *Ibid.* p.267
6. *Ibid.*
7. R.S.Trichur, "Politics of Goan Historiography" in *La Chronique des Levres*, p.639.
8. Luis de Assis Correia, *Goa through the mists of History*, p.277.
9. *Ibid.* p.281
10. Stella Mascarenhas Keyes, "International Migration" in *Goa through the Ages, vol II, An Economic History*, p.245.
11. Karin Larsen, *Op. Cit.*, p.285.
12. Fatima da Silva Gracias, "Goans away from Goa: Migration to the Middle East" in *Lusotopie 2000*, p.426.
13. Clement, J. Vaz, *Profiles of Eminent Goans, past and Present*, p.273.
14. Manohar Rai Sardesai, *A History of Konkani Literature (1500-1992)*, p.143.
15. Habib Toumi, 'Kuwait raises minimum salary requirement for visit visas', in *Gulf News*, November 19 2016.

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