Is the March over?
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RELIGION

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A Hindu renaissance has slowly swept the former Portuguese colony of Goa since its 1961 liberation by India from 400 years of foreign rule.

Mario Cabral e Sa, Goa

In 1567 the Captain of Rachol Fort in South Goa bragged to his Portuguese king back home, "For nights and nights went on the demolishing, demolishing, demolishing of 280 Hindu temples. Not one remained in the happy lands of our division." Jesuit historian Francisco de Souza jubilantly praised the feat, "It is incredible--the sentiment that the gentile were seized of when they saw their respective temple burning." The astonishing but true fact is that every temple was soon relocated and rebuilt by my countrymen; the murtis, and in some cases the sacred fire, were heroically rescued and reinstalled. Chandrakant Keni, a leading Goan poet, says that although Goa's Hindus were put to severe tests as conquerors marched over their lands, they had the resilience to convert "temporary setbacks into permanent victories."

Goa is located on the southwest coast of India between Karnataka and Maharashtra states. It remained a Portuguese colony until forcibly taken by India in 1961. The "Christian presence in Goa"--an expression very much in vogue during the evangelistic fury of the Portuguese rulers and padres (priests), particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries--is more visible than vital today, 35 years after liberation. For example, Rodale's Guide to Places of the World describes Goa as "predominantly Catholic," when in reality Hindus, 66% of the 1.2 million populace, far outnumber Christians of all denominations.

The first missionaries realized early on that despite backing of the state ("conversions were made," wrote contemporary Portuguese chroniclers, with "the cross in one hand, the sword in the other"), it was difficult to wean Goans from their primal Hindu beliefs and traditions. I will share a traumatic and rancorous twist of this Hindu stalwartness that involved the splitting up of my ancestral family. They took a calculated risk: half the family would convert, and the other would escape to Karnataka where other Goan Hindus had settled and been welcomed by the Ikkeri king. The half that remained would safeguard the estate and assets of the migrating half. The calculation was that the Portuguese wouldn't stay in Goa for long--just trade, make money and go. That didn't happen. By the 1800s it was clear the Portuguese would remain. By then, too, the converted half of my family was forced to eat beef and pork and felt they could not return to their primal Hindu faith. They had by then appropriated the estate and assets of the migrated half, rather than lose it to the Inquisition, as the law then stipulated properties belonging to the "heathen" be confiscated.

Noted India cartoonist/illustrator Mario De Miranda confirms his family's fidelity, "I am a Saraswati Brahmin, originally named Sardessai. My ancestors were forcibly converted to Christianity around 1600 and renamed Miranda. We still belong to the Shanta Durga temple and yearly present prasad--oil and a bag of rice--a tradition in my family all these years."

Early European travellers, like Venetian epicure Pietro Della Valle who visited Goa in the 1700s, denounced in their travelogues "unChristian" practices in Catholic churches and shrines in Goa. Rather than create for themselves insurmountable trouble, the padres, particularly the Jesuits, reluctantly rewrote Christian liturgy. For instance, they enthusiastically adopted the Hindu tradition of yatra--in the Goan sense of "procession." Neophytes, according to chroniclers, paraded to their new Catholic shrines, singing as they moved and showering their paths with leaves and flowers, just as they had done only a while earlier as Hindus. To this day kumbhas are used for Catholic processions. At one stage, even the Vatican tersely censured those "gentilic practices" and proliferation of icons in churches. No where, lamented Della Valle, had he seen as much idolatry as in Goan churches. But evangelists, many of them foreigners--the most successful was Saint Francis Xavier--convincingly argued that without ethnic accommodations they were doomed to failure.

Other concessions included retainment of social structures. In 1623 Pope Gregory gave sanction for converted Brahmins to continue wearing their sacred thread and caste marks, and Catholics to this day maintain the Hindu caste system. Till recently, inter-caste marriages among Catholics were frowned upon both by families and the religious establishment, and though love marriages are increasing, arranged marriage is still preferred. Only Catholics descending from brahmin families were admitted to seminaries until the 17th century.

Hindu influence is also evident in Goa's Christian art. Icons of Christ have the angular and emaciated features of a Himalayan sadhu, and statues of Mary contain the features of Parvati, Lakshmi or other Hindu deities. Many angels and cherubs sculpted on altars and pulpits of Christian shrines resemble apsaras and gopikas.

At times, the zeal lead to humorous situations. At village Moira, in north Goa, a Siva temple was destroyed and replaced by a church dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Apparently, the builder had found the tripartite Sivalinga of the original temple and not knowing its symbolism but realizing its artistic value, used it as a pedestal for the holy water basin. And there it was, from 1636 to 1946, when German indologist Gritle V. Mitterwallner noticed it during a monument survey. He decided to move the Sivalinga to the Museum of the Archaelogical Survey of India in Old Goa, and paid for a masonry pedestal for the basin.

Obsessed with quick results, Portuguese evangelists brainwashed with a singular lack of concern for substance and almost psychotic emphasis on form. Numbers mattered, not quality. They force-fed Goan converts beef and pork declaring--incorrectly--that the neophytes could never return to Hinduism. They also forced converts to change their lifestyles, but never really thought of teaching the natives basic Christianity. So much so, in the early 1990s Goa Catholic leaders admitted that fundamentalist Christian sects like the "Believers" (akin to Liberation theologians), then on the upswing, were infiltrating the mainstream Catholic community precisely because the community lacked adequate religious foundation. It was realized that only a few had actually ever read or studied the Bible. In fact, the Old Testament had never been translated into Konkani, the mother tongue of

Goans and spoken by over 90% of them.

Perhaps this accounts for a current trend, since Goa's liberation, of Catholics' reverting to Hindu practices, seen in several arenas. Many offer prasad at Hindu temples like Fatarpa. Fisherfolk celebrate Nariel Purnima to begin the fishing season and propitiate Samudra Gods with coconut offerings. New babies are given Hindu names, and some adults are now shedding their Catholic names to adopt Hindus ones. Some Catholics observe the 12th day samskara after birth and death. Many women now wear the mangalsutra and forehead bindis, and use mehndi to embellish palms and soles. Indian dress is more fashionable (kurtas, saris, etc.) and rotis (flatbread) are a Catholic staple.

Hindus are culturally strong, but understandably influenced by Christianity. Goans of both communities celebrate together socially at festivals like Divali and Christmas, though essential religious rituals are attended separately. Hindus do not attend Christian churches, though quite a few, particularly of lower castes, in a crisis or in gratitude for favors perceived as granted, propitiate Catholic "miraculous saints." Influence also occurs educationally. The majority of colleges are Catholic and in them Hindu students outnumber Catholic students. Unfortunately, Hindus attending these schools are often subtly weakened in their beliefs.

Having failed to change the Goan psyche, the Portuguese developed a paranoia for appearance. In the 1700s Captain Alexander Hamilton counted eighty churches in the capital alone, and 30,000 priests. "Each church's bells," he wrote, "continually rang with a peculiar power to drive away all evil spirits except poverty in the laity and pride in the clergy." Today, there are 6-700 priests, many churches are closed except for festivals, and old chapels are in disuse.

In contrast, Hindu temples are flourishing. The Bhahujan Samaj, disadvantaged until 1962, is socially and politically powerful. They have established a non-brahmin prelate at the Haturli Mutt (monastery), and the temple under construction there may be worth Rs. ten million (US$290,000)

by completion. Other thriving mutts are Partagal and Kavalem. Modern Hindus feel duty-bound to restore their heritage, exemplified by Damodar Narcinva Naik who owns Goa's largest car dealership. Besides starting a movement to popularize Sanskrit, he had the Veling temple and Partagal Mutt rebuilt according to old Hindu architectural norms. And Dattaraj Salgaonkar, a young entrepreneur who recently helped restore the Margao Mutt in South Goa says, "This mutt was demolished by invaders in order to exterminate the Saraswat community and eliminate its influence over many followers."

Curiously, when Goans part company with friends or relatives we say "Yetam," which means "I'll come back," not as elsewhere, "Vetam," "I'm going." It's our way of expressing hope and optimism.