

Goa As Literature
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It is not only a proud privilege but a great pleasure for me to be a part of the inaugural ceremony of the third Goa Arts and Literary Festival. Pleasure as everyone knows is rarer than privilege!

In asking me to do this, Goa has done what it is best at; making the other its own. For a long time in history, the whole of India was adept at this acceptance of the other. Even though we often rejected and persecuted our own; we accepted and assimilated the others, whether they came as refugees from persecution at home like the Parsees and the Jews or as aggressors and conquerors like the Moguls and the British. We assimilated their culture and language. We did not persecute them or deny them freedom of worship or the practice of their customs. Even though we sent the British back we retained their language and made it our own. Too much our own!

While the rest of India has sadly and madly forgotten its tradition of tolerance and is rejecting those, it had made its own; Goa is still generously accepting the other; new and old alike.

I can be called one of them. I have not lived in Goa for any length of time but after it had gained Independence from a different colonial master than me, I came here at different stages of my life. As a young bride, as a young mother, a young grandmother and now; as an old grandmother and writer. I remember when I came here in the 90's, I left a book of mine as a token of gratitude, on one of the pristine beaches, of which very few are now left.

Goa has changed as much over the years as the rest of the world including India but it has retained its uniqueness. It has changed without allowing the change to become obsessive or its canons dictatorial, which makes further changes deleterious. A new order imposes its own rules and one needs to make choices away from them to retain freedom of choice, which is the foundation of all freedom.

Goa does not deceive. It is frankly an amalgam of revelry and serenity, a paradox of frenetic mining and deep concern for environment, a tourist hub exuding silence or *sukoon* in the midst of hectic, feisty clamor. In fact, recently when someone asked me, what was the English equivalent of the Urdu word, *sukoon*, I

inadvertently said, Goa. Just as the Hindi equivalent for nostalgia may well be Kashmir!

The hoary Persian couplet "gar firdaus roeyzamin ast, hamin asto hamin asto, hami ast"(If there is a paradise on earth, it's, it's here, it's here!) originally said for Kashmir applies equally to Goa.

For me Goa quintessentially is the same as Literature. As is its Art and Literary Festival.

What is Literature but *Parkaya pravesh*; i.e the soul or the unconscious mind entering another body or consciousness? *Parkaya pravesh* means more than being in someone else's shoes. It implies becoming the other. Literature requires that we write the self, as if it was the other and the other, as if it was the Self. And the other is not necessarily outside us. Many live within us. Sometimes, in a blink of an eye, we discover that the someone we thought lay at the extreme end of the margin is actually closest to us; in fact is our alter ego.

That is the point when we begin to create literature or art.

That's why a Damodar Mauzo can write about a Goan boy's life in East Africa in the last century with the same ease he can write about Goa now.

It's important to remember that the margin is not a homogenous space. Within the margin lie, number of invisible margins peopled with dissenters. And each of them is a significant other because dissent is the life blood of literature and social change.

See, the margin is at least visible though its area is circumscribed by the whims of the Centre. But the moment you declare, there is no margin; that everyone is located in the middle of the page; the threat to the power equation gets magnified. The powerful retaliate by creating other margins and pushing you out of the visibility zone. But that's when you create the best, when you are under siege in the invisible margin. You can then be free of barriers imposed by the establishment, literary or societal and roam between margins as an unfettered being. Under pressure, of course! Pressure is good. But not prejudice. Not patronizing benevolence. Not pity. Just similarity of treatment for all.

This applies to writers of Goa right from Dom Moraes to Damodar Mauzo, more than any other region of India. Contemporary Goan writers write in many diverse languages, Konkani, Marathi, English and even Portuguese at one time yet they

can form a Writers Group and bring out an anthology like 'Inside Out' with their own effort, which includes writers of diverse hues. This is something which happens rarely, so is a matter of celebration.

I am deliberately not naming the eminent writers of Goa as the list is so long, it'll take me the whole evening.

Instead let me tell you how I look at the vision of a writer.

I'd describe it thus: "The deconstructed image of every experience, every emotion, every reflection that I have, exists within me. Whatever I say in my text, I may immediately deny, because there are a number of options, known or unknown, real, experienced or imaginary, which are as true for me as those I have just written, spoken or experienced."

That's what the Goa Festival is about: making the other its own: embracing dissent as essential to creativity and social change: bringing the margins to the center, not by creating ghettos but by acknowledging that there is no such thing as a core distinct from the periphery.

And that's what literature is about too. IT cannot write the other unless it brings the periphery to the centre and recognizes that the so-called margins are the very nucleus of literary activity. It is not the prerogative of the Centre to make them the nucleus. It does not have the power. The literary genius of the writers of the margins often exceeds that of the denizens of the so-called Center.

The tragedy of those who operate in the margins is that they have to constantly prove that marginalized though they have been; they are by no account marginal.

After all, which is the margin and which, the Center?

It depends on the way you look at the page. Look at it from the side of the margin; it will look wider than before. Give it some space, a little more width and you'll find it expanding till it has spilled over the whole page, leaving perhaps just a small margin at the end for the former core to slide into.

It is by looking at the page in this way that volunteer writers like Vivek Menzies, Damodar Mauzo and others, dedicated to organizing this non-brand Festival without big sponsors, help the margin. They ensure that together they become the page; the periphery no longer needs to prove its intrinsic worth. The reason this

Fest has grown over the last 3 years is because it has earned the trust of the readers born of a genuine love of literature and art.

Let the readers decide whom they want to read again and again; whom they want to assign to posterity and whom to oblivion. And that too may change from time to time. Oblivion may rise like a phoenix and topple the icons of yesteryear, consigning them to the ground or the sea here in Goa.

Have we not seen enough examples of Literature from Latin America, Black America, Africa, Japan, China, East Europe and other locations take center stage as West Europe and White America is pushed to the margin?

It is no contradiction to say that the periphery is both more rooted and more accommodating of change. When you are sure of your roots you accept change without feeling threatened. It is the uprooted who cling to defunct rituals and customs to retain a phantom identity. Look at the Indians in USA.

It's time also that we realized that the more rooted a piece of art or literary work; the more universal is its appeal. So, on both these counts, the writers and artists of the margins are more likely to move towards the Central point in the space occupied by world literature and art.

Very aptly, then, this year the Goa Festival is focused on Kashmir, whose Gyanpeeth Awardee writer Abdur Rehman Rahi was associated with the Communist party but whose poetry shows the influence of the existentialists like Camus and Sartre. What can be a greater example of accepting diverse philosophies? Earlier modern writers like Ghulam Muhammad Mahjur and Deenanath Nadeem their poetry of protest, revolution, and reassessment often invoked 'Kashmiriyat' as the relationship of Kashmiris to Kashmir's historical and cultural past. They used local idioms yet opened the path for literary modernism in Kashmir.

What Goa has done is to provide a stage for the dissenting Kashmiri voices. We hope that this exposure to Goa will bring back the acceptance and tolerance of dissent to the valley, whose poetics was once known for the most lyrical nonconformist voices in both spiritual and temporal spheres.

Who can forget the legendary Laldeed and Nund Rishi, who revolutionized the Kashmiri language and led a dialect based revolt against the hegemonic religious

and literary culture of medieval Kashmir, through their *vakh* compositions, rooted in Sanskrit tradition yet daring to use the local language deemed as vernacular.

The poetry of Habba Khatoon and Arnimaal transcended the division between the secular and the religious. There are attempts to revive *vakh* by people like Bimala Raina in recent times.

Vicious events of history brought Kashmir to a point, where it got caught in a morass of taboos, preventing the practice of traditional art and music and throttling dissent and creativity. But we are already looking forward to a strong literary resurgence, equally conscious of its roots and the need for change, in the writers present here.

We are used to saying India extends from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Now perhaps we will say India extends from Kashmir to Goa and mean it as the natural corollary to the emergence and acceptance of variegated strands in literature.

One final comment. One writes because one has a vision of an alternate world, substantially different from the given one. But disillusionment with the outer world remains a farce unless one is disillusioned with oneself. One may make a well-intentioned activist or reporter but not a writer. The catalyst for all social change is the initial change in the image people have of themselves, of others and of the value system. Literature and art persuade them to make this change; that's why they often evoke violent reactions from the establishment and even the people.

Who are you to make us feel uncomfortable, to force us to question what we were content to accept and suffer so far?

Interestingly, when a writer creates non-conformist characters, their actions force him to change too. Otherwise he may write subversion but conform to all social norms and aspirations, like the rest of the middle roaders in real life. Sometimes after he has written of particularly daring behavior, he is forced to reflect; ok if my character could make that choice, why can't I?

When we look at it this way, we realize that it's not only people belonging to different cultures, who are outsiders. Each one of us is an outsider. Probing different personas within us can take us on a journey of re-discovery of the self as the other and the other as the self. In other words it can take us on a journey of Goa or Literature and Art. Because as I said before; Goa, like Literature, makes the other its own.

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