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# Magazine



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HISTORIES

# Our man in Lisbon

Or rather, our three men in Portugal's government, and what it says about Goa's relationship with its former coloniser

**Vivek Menezes**

**E**lection results aren't due for India's smallest State until March 10, but the biggest victory for any Goan politician was announced on January 30. That's when results came out from Portugal's snap elections, validating the go-for-broke political instincts of Prime Minister António Costa. The charismatic 60-year-old leader of the centre-left Partido Socialista had preferred to appeal to voters rather than submit to the increasingly strident demands from far-left parties in his coalition government. The electorate rewarded him handsomely, with an unexpected majority of 119 out of 230 seats.

It's an exceptional triumph, achieved in unusually fraught pandemic times, while nationalist populism surges virtually everywhere else in Europe (and, it should be noted, in this elections the right-wing fringe in Portugal also expanded its base from 1.29% in 2019 to 7% this year). With this substantial mandate, Costa cemented his status in the vanguard of 21st century democratic socialist leadership.

But here's the twist. This famously personable former Mayor of Lisbon, who looks visibly *desi*, is Goan; his father was the anti-colonial Goan novelist Orlando da Costa. One wing of the family remains rooted in Margao. It is an intimate, flourishing connection, which both India and Portugal have been eager to celebrate. In 2017, during the first-ever standalone bilateral visit by any Indian prime minister to Lisbon, the Portuguese leader was embraced by Narendra

Modi, who personally handed him his Overseas Citizen of India card.

The story doesn't end here: Costa isn't the only Goan at the pinnacle of government in Portugal. His finance minister is another – João Leão earned his Ph.D in economics from MIT, where his thesis advisor was economist Abhijit Banerjee. His planning minister is Nelson de Souza (who was actually born in India in 1954, just a few years before Nehru's troops decapitated the 451-year-old Estado da India colonial state in 1961).

**Fascinating alternatives**

How did this happen? How can it be that three Goans are leaders in Portugal's government, and this happenstance is barely remarked upon either there or in India?

The answers to these questions lie embedded in the many significant differences between Goa's experience of colonialism via the Portuguese, and what the rest of the sub-continent suffered under the British jackboot. Insufficiently studied and broadly misunderstood, this wonderfully rich cultural heritage nonetheless remains vibrantly alive and keeps throwing up fascinating alternatives to the ways we are conditioned to think about Indian identity.

"Rather than clubbing them, and analytically treating them together under the single label of 'white' colonisers, it is important to recognize there was a gradation in power



between the European colonizers," writes Jason Keith Fernandes in his fascinating 2020 book, *Citizenship in a Caste Polity: Religion, Language and Belonging in Goa*. "Recognizing the differences in power between the British and the Portuguese, the relations between these two colonial powers, and the implications that this had and continues to have in constituting the experiences of the colonised and the formally decolonised, is critical to [any] project that seeks to be alive to the nuances present in contemporary South Asia and does not wish to blindly extend the frameworks built on the experiences of British India," he adds.

This is one big dissimilarity: where the British became effectively invincible with their ability to project power into Asia, the Portuguese fortunes dwindled very swiftly after their heyday in the 16th and 17th centuries. During the entire latter half of its colonial episode in Goa, Portugal retained its 'possession' only through exceedingly painful concessions to the indigenous elites. By the middle of the 19th century, it was an unusual kind of rout, where 'natives' maintained an upper hand on their 'colonisers' and went on to steadily extend their writ from Macau to Mozambique.

That same historical period coincided with the Pombaline Reforms, originally initiated by the liberal statesman Sebastião

Carvalho e Melo, the Marquis of Pombal, who was chief minister to King Joseph I in the 18th century. Influenced by the Enlightenment, he smashed existing feudal hierarchies and wrought total change in Goa by replacing the entire judiciary and civil administration (which he considered corrupt) and expelling the all-powerful Jesuits. With the old order gone, another decisive shift came in 1820 with a military mutiny in Oporto that propelled the State into a constitutional monarchy.

**Inspired politics**

This new paradigm ushered French Revolution-inspired political thought into South Asia, along with the universal aspiration of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. That is when Goans – not all, but many – became full citizens and the first Indians to vote for their own representatives in Parliament. In his excellent 2015 explainer, *India's First Democratic Revolution: Dayanand Bandodkar and the Rise of Bahujan in India*, historian Parag Parobo explains how this process was strenuously resisted by native Portuguese in Goa: initially Hindus were excluded from the franchise, then a language requirement was imposed, and when both those tactics failed, newly-elected Goans were denied the same rights and privileges as their ethnically European counterparts.

Despite these fits and starts, Portuguese India generally leaned towards equality, which naturally horrified the progenitors of the Raj across Goa's borders. That fear and loathing is most amusingly evinced in Richard Burton's biliously funny 1851 travelogue, *Goa, and the Blue Mountains: Or, Six Months of Sick Leave*. Written when the Victorian imperialist was just 26 – the first of his 40-plus books, including the first translation of the *Kamasutra* into English – this highly entertaining text bristles with umbrage about how badly the Portuguese had 'bungled' race relations, with dangerous implications for other Europeans.

"The black Indo-Portuguese is an utter radical," fumes Burton, "he has gained much by Constitution, the 'dwarfish demon' which sets everybody by the ears at Goa. Hence it is he who will take the first op-

portunity in conversation with a foreigner to extol Lusitanian liberty to the skies, abuse English tyranny over, and insolence to, their unhappy Indian subjects, and descant delightedly upon the probability of an immediate crash in our Eastern empire."

It's too much to bear, he writes. "Although poverty sends forth thousands of black Portuguese to earn money in foreign lands, they prefer the smallest competence at home, where equality allows them to indulge in a favourite independence of manner utterly at variance with our Anglo-Indian notions concerning the proper demeanour of a native towards a European."

The sheer temerity of darker-skinned Indians considering themselves the equal of everyone else is, of course, the root of Costa's story, as well as of his two Goan cabinet ministers, and substantial numbers of their compatriots who have historically fought for equal freedoms in at least a dozen countries, vastly in disproportion to their minuscule numbers.

In this category, you have the glamorous Sita Valles, who fought for the independence of Angola, and Aquino de Bragança, the revolutionary ideologue of Mozambique, who perished along with Samora Machel in a highly suspect plane crash in 1986, and also Otelio Saraiva de Carvalho, the military officer who led the 1974 Carnation Revolution that ended dictatorship in Portugal (his mother was from Goa). Another sizeable cohort militated in Kenya, including the visionary Maasai-Goan bridge figure Joseph Zuzarte Murumbi, who was the country's second vice-president, and his close friends Fitz de Souza (who defended the Mau Mau in court, and then helped write the country's constitution) and Pio Gama Pinto, who grew close to Malcolm X just before they were both assassinated.

Of course it is true that former colonies are different. Thus, while there are some scattered equivalents to what has happened in Portugal – such as the triumvirate of Goan women in the U.K. Parliament including Boris Johnson's attorney general Suella Fernandes Braverman – there's nothing quite as epic as Costa's rise, and rise again. This narrative has two equally important dimensions: one man's capacity to bring together the majority of his citizens time and again; and the extraordinary changes within Portugal that have rendered it almost unrecognisable from before it joined the European Union in 1986.

**Indian-friendly**

"Costa's origin has never represented a real problem to him," says Sandra Lobo, 58, whose own family migrated to Portugal from Goa when she was seven. The Lisbon-based historian tells me the racial and ethnic discrimination around her is coded in ways that are not easily deciphered by outsiders, as "Portuguese are very uneasy with the idea of racism, with the idea of being racists or xenophobes, which has much to do with a long tradition of political and social denial." And it's certainly true that an always surprising element to Portuguese attitudes about race is a flat-out denial that the issue exists at all. In fact, until Costa himself started talking about his roots, the standard response to anyone bringing up his ethnicity was, "But he's Portuguese in every way, there's nothing Indian about him."

Lobo says this is because "historically, the situation of Goans is totally different from other migrants. They are associated with middle- and upper-class professionals, liberalism, politics, public service. They are doctors, lawyers, judges, teachers, priests, political leaders, social activists. The society here is elitist, and fashioned with notions of pedigree leaving very little social mobility." Yet, here is precisely where Costa has been most impactful by "actively working against discrimination" and "giving a clear indication to society that people of all origins need to have more access to government, and that they are as Portuguese as any other."

No one can expect any political leader – or even three in the same Cabinet – to overturn centuries of history, let alone end racism. Yet, despite acknowledging that, it's impossible to deny there's something afoot in Portugal that is astonishingly India- and Indian-friendly, especially compared to the burgeoning xenophobia across the rest of the West. After decades of criss-crossing the continent, after my last trip a few years ago, I have to acknowledge that this is undeniably the least racist country I've visited in Europe.

"Portugal has gradually but definitively shifted to a more accepting, more open and multicultural society," says Rahooll Pai Panandiker, the only India-based representative on the Portuguese Diaspora Council. The Mumbai-based management consultant was born and educated in Goa and went to the University of Lisbon after a Ph.D in the U.S. He says, "Since my early days as a researcher and invited professor, I have been welcomed with open arms. The mention that one is of Goan origin makes the arms open wider and the embrace warmer."

According to Panandiker, when Portugal assumed rotating presidency of the EU in 2021, Costa and Augusto Santos Silva were instrumental in using the forum to cement the EU-India strategic partnership. "This has opened discussions and partnerships in business, green technology, science, arts and culture," he says.

Panandiker hopes that this can lay the institutional foundations for a much more meaningful relationship between the countries, beyond individual personas and friendships. "Costa wears his Goan-ness and Indian-ness openly, and has managed to move the needle with India, neither discarding history nor making it the sole anchor of the relationship."

The writer-photographer-columnist is co-founder/curator of the Goa Arts and Literature Festival.



**Past & present** (Clockwise from left) A map of the sea routes used by Portuguese explorers in the 16th century; monument dedicated to the Age of Exploration in Lisbon; Portugal PM António Costa; the Fontainhas quarter in Panjim; scene from the liberation of Goa in December 1961; and the Utorda football ground in South Goa with the Portuguese Football Federation's logo in the background. WIKI COMMONS, JOAQUIM ALVES GASPAR, GETTY IMAGES, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & PRASHANT NAKWE