

Roots Unusual Stories from Goa

Frederick Noronha*

After generations of wanderlust, that often snapped ties with their roots, Goans from far and near are returning with renewed interest to trace their origins. And they may be the lucky ones. Goa with well-kept colonial records, still current village gaunkari system and the rural networks of van gods, might be a paradise to those searching for their Goan roots.

*email: fredericknoronha@gmail.com

Tom Fernandes is blond with typically Germanic light eyes. If his accent and appearance suggest he belongs to central Europe, his surname sounds possibly Goan. It is. In fact, he's just one of the many Goans scattered in distant lands, history's most under-studied diaspora scattered far and wide across the globe.

Today, many like Tom, in his early twenties, are returning to their home state... all in a quest to better understand their identity, find their roots, and possibly re-trace their ancestry. Speedy communications over the Internet and closer international links is making all this possible in today's global village.

In the bargain, many are digging up unusual stories about past generations. Strange though it may seem, Goa could be one of the best places in this part of the globe to belong to if you're curious about your roots. Fairly well kept colonial records, the still-existing village *gaunkari* system and the rural networks of *vangods* (extended clans) might make it easy for you too to search for your roots.

Benild (Ben) J. Pires of Victoria, British Columbia in Canada talks about why he has set off in search of his roots: "I have been intrigued about discovering my roots since the mid-1970s. My dad, Dr. Edward A. Pires, now 90, had then retired and began work on the family tree. He has always had an interest in keeping in contact, through his annual Christmas newsletter, with all our relatives he knew."

Pires explains that since his father did not know how to type, he himself took on the task of putting together the tree from the information he provided. "This was in the era before computers and tree-maker programs. (Today, computer software allows anyone to create a family tree with much ease.) But his tree did not go high enough. I wanted to find out when the 'Pires' name began—I presume there was a Hindu name before a Hindu family was converted to Catholicism by the Portuguese in Goa and received the Portuguese name of 'Pires'," says Ben J Pires.

From distant Canada, he wrote to relatives in Goa to find out if there was someone interested in doing some genealogy research. "I was willing to have it done for a fee, but there were no takers," he rues.

In 1992, Pires took his parents to Goa—they figured it was probably their last opportunity to visit their village, Nagoa, in Bardez. He took the opportunity to spend three days at the archives in Panjim. Recalling, he says: "I was truly amazed about the amount of progress I made in such a brief time. And I was surprised that the archives staff allowed me to handle documents as far back as the late 1700s... pages which were practically crumbling in my hands. I did need the help of a relative who could read Portuguese to help me translate documents—baptism certificates—that were useful to me. Perhaps I had some measure of success because my dad's father and grandfather were from Panjim."

Of course, Pires had certain facts to fall back on—his grandfather's details dating back to the 1880s, his grandmum's name, the fact that they moved to Nagoa and built a home, which was recently donated to nuns working there. Two of his sisters are nuns in the order. He also knew his great-grandfather's name and whom he had married.

He made some quick discoveries at the Archives, after estimating that each generation is about 20 to 30 years apart. Finally, he got down to Antonio Pires—his great, great, great, great grandfather, born in 1770. But after that, it was tough. Says Pires: "I reached a blank after Antonio Pires, because he must have moved from somewhere else, because the archives did not have any birth records from the Panjim area before that." Today, he is in fact searching for clues on how to go further.

Others are working on this too. Mumbai-based Valentine D'Souza, originally from Donvaddo in Saligao, has been the Consulting Editor of the *'Express Computer'* magazine in the past. He also published *'Living Computer'* and was at the helm of the *'Times computing'* of the Times of India group.

Says he: "I've barely started getting into this research and so far have only been able to cover about three and a half generations (mostly current). I just did some initial groundwork in Goa and hope to come back again soon and delve a little deeper using the archives department in Panjim, based on advice received."

He suspects that its "going to be quite a difficult task" as his paternal grandfather was born in Karachi and information on his side of the family is sketchy. "I just don't know where to start, but what I'm doing now is to try and muster up as much concrete information as possible right here in Bombay, before venturing into the archives," says he.

Goan 'hegira'

Some who are embarking on the search are those whom you might not remotely connect with people linked to the great Goan 'hegira'—the flight or exodus to more desirable places. John Hancocks writes in from Canberra in Australia: "I too am a de Mello(w) on my mother's side. I have traced our ancestors to an Edouard de Mellow, he was married in 1873, but I have no date of birth. I believe his father was an exiled Portuguese going under the name of Francis Thomas de Mello who fathered three children by a Goan woman before vanishing in about 1843-4 to leave two boys with the Christian Brothers." Bitten by the 'roots' bug, Hancocks says he suspects the true identity of Francis Thomas and has even have a photo of his 'wife' but needs much more information.

Hancocks and Dr. Ian De Mellow, the nephew of the famed late broadcaster Melville De Mellow, have been researching elements of the De Mello family in Goa. "We have reached a seeming impasse," says Hancock. There appear to be no records of any sort relating to Francis Thomas, who they believe departed for Paris in 1843-4 with his daughter, leaving the boys with the Christian Brothers, possibly under the guardianship of one Ivor Yates.

Giving a hint of the detail they've been through, Hancocks says: "We have no date of birth for Edward although we do know he married in 1873 a Lucy Elizabeth Marshalsay after serving on Perim Island off Aden. We know that Edward joined the Railways at a later date and was murdered, allegedly by his workers—possibly around 1910? It would obviously be of great help if some friendly soul(s) were to point us in the right direction."

Hancocks is curious to find out if in the archives of the Convent and Church of St Francis of Assisi in Goa is any record of the birth of Edward (Edouard) Francis De Mello between 1843 and 1849. "I realise we are in murky waters here and am convinced that the name 'Francis Thomas' De Mellow was a pseudonym. For one thing, it is not a Portuguese spelling of first names or surname. I have a copy of Edward's marriage certificate of 1873, which depicts the above version but does not give Edward's date of birth. It is possible that: (a) Edward knew his father's real name and for reasons of personal safety did not want to reveal it; and (b) Edward did not know his father's real name. Any information at all is most welcome and could lead to a very interesting story!," as he puts it.

Mysteries popping out from the pages of the past!

Cliff Pereira from the UK and Tivim (Bardez) has an interesting story on how he got involved in the search for his roots. His late grandmother told the family about her grandfather, who was a 'shippey' in World War I. Apparently, the family thought he was dead, and then he actually turned up for a mock funeral.

"I was about nine at the time and the memory remained with me. As the years went by, we had to leave Africa for Europe. I found myself not British—in the sense of a shared history. This is hardly surprising, given that Goa was a Portuguese colony. Neither was I African, despite being third generation Kenyan nor speaking Swahili. Not Indian either, as I did not speak any Asian language and was not Hindu, Sikh, Moslem, Buddhist or Jain," Pereira puts it.

It was this lack of an identity that made "me search for my roots", says Cliff Pereira. Many questions puzzled his mind. On whose side was his great grandfather—the Germans or the Allies? Was he really in the War? As time passed, Pereira heard of Goan cooks on cruise ships and in the Merchant Navy. He began interviewing family members—parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, grand uncles, and so on.

"By the time I was at University, I knew my great-grandfather's name and approximate date of birth and place of birth (Tivim). I then found an old photo of him with his medals. I enlarged this with a photocopier and went to an antique medal seller. He confirmed them as three British WWI Navy medals and one other. I then contacted the (British) Ministry of Defence. And they later phoned me to say that they had some details, which were passed on to me," recalls Pereira with nostalgia.

He managed to piece together parts of the story of his great-grandfather's life. The local (English) History Society asked for a copy of his findings during the 1998 Black and Asian History Month. The Institute of Commonwealth Studies printed his article on the historic voyage in its newsletter last year.

While all this went on, he returned to Goa to "search further back". By searching graveyards, he found another side of his mother's family, by way of tombstones and niches. He found an old birth certificate in Portuguese, which "tied very well with the grave inscriptions". Says Pereira: "I did try to do some research at the church records in various villages in Goa. I still have not used the State Archives in Panjim. I do not know how to get in there. Do I need to make an appointment?"

From distant Malaysia, Anthony Morris has a peculiar story. Says Morris: "I'm trying to trace records of my wife's forebears (from Goa). I've found a few photos but no names. Do you have any idea where I can search on the Net? I know church records could be found, but where on the Net?" Morris himself traces his roots to Kerala, while his wife's are in Goa.

Morris says he has a "number of photos" of people from Goa, but "no clues". Says he: "I may put them up on a web page later for anyone who may recognise and identify them. I do not like to discard photos which may be valuable to another person."

Goans have migrated to all parts of the globe. They are still to be found across many continents, even if this diaspora remains largely under-studied, excepting by rare scholars like the UK-based Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes.

While discussing Brazil, Cliff Pereira says he has an uncle in Itabuna, Bahia who is "possibly the world's leading authority on cocoa, rubber and coffee diseases". He has two cousins in Sao Paulo—one doing his internship as a doctor, and the other working for Mercedes SA in their computer-design section. His uncle was born in Cunchelim, near Mapusa, and cousins in Nairobi, Kenya.

Pereira says he came across an interesting piece of folklore in Bahia. Some people hint that the sugar lords of Salvador and the Cacao Barons of Ilheus used to "import" Goan women as cooks and child minders. "While I haven't researched the story, I have been informed by the London-based Black and Asian Studies Association (BASA) that in the 19th century there was some trafficking (slavery) of women from Asia via Macau to Brazil. It would be great if someone could research this," says he.

Cliff Pereira, currently 41, has been working on his family's history since 1984. This has really picked-up momentum over the last three years, as he was recovering from a serious chest illness and had time on his hands, located a useful new Internet cafe in his town, and also experienced part of the growing interest among younger people in the 25-40 age group in Canada in their heritage and family history.

How do you trace your roots?

Former director of the XCHR, now a professor in Lisbon, Teotonio R de Souza says: "I advise people always to start with oral traditions kept in the family or in the village. They often provide many clues for further research on family links." Souza is arguably one of the most prominent Indo-Portuguese historians of Goan origin.

According to Souza, Catholics, if they are *zonnkars* (members or shareholders) of some comunidade or another can always discover which *vangod* (roughly, clan) they belong to. It is possible then to check other families linked to the same clan or *vangod*.

“Their family links could be common families. The same *vangod* families can today have different surnames as Catholics, but *vangod* determines the original common clan,” says Souza.

Hindu Goans are connected with some temple deity, and it is possible to check who are the Mahajans and other connected clans.

There are other records available too. Says Dr Souza: “Judicial records are very useful, especially the ‘inventXrios’. The priestly ordination records also contain indications of parents and grandparents that can provide many other useful leads. The land registers (called “forais”, “tombos”) are also very important sources for checking the families that owned lands in various villages of Goa at various times, right from the 16th century.”

He points out that civil registration records are the other important sources. Many of these records are available in the civil registration offices in the respective talukas, but most of the older ones are in the Goa Historical Archives.

Church records are useful too. “Records in the Archbishops archives do not go beyond 18th century. But some parishes still keep older archives,” says the former XCHR director. He has himself done work on this subject, and his own chapter in John Correia-Afonso’s book *Indo-Portuguese History: Sources and Problems* (Oxford, 1981) contains more details on church records.¹

Says Panjim-based historian Fatima Gracias: “Goans, if Catholics, who want to find their roots should check Parish Registers of birth, marriage and death at Patriarchal Palace, Altinho or the Goa Archives at Rua de Ourem.”

As Gracias points out, before 1914 births were not registered at the Civil Registry in Goa. The Civil Registry Code 1914, made it compulsory to register births in all communities within 30 days. Members of the Hindu community generally did not register their birth before this date. But before this date, births, marriages, and deaths among the Christians in Goa were registered at the Church.

Gracias says that many of the Parish Registers are—or were until some three to four years ago—at the Patriarchal Palace, Altinho. At that time, a decision was taken to transfer them to the Goa Archives-Panjim, which had already some volumes of Parish registers. There are registers for over two centuries. The Goa Archives also has registers from Government Civil Registry for the period after 1914.

Understanding local customs also plays a key role in helping to trace one’s roots.

It is necessary to find out where the person was born. It was a custom for women of all strata of the Goan society to go for their delivery—at least in the case of the first child—to the home of their mother. So, the first-born and many times a few other children too were born in the home of the maternal grandparents.

¹ Details are available at http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/1503/teo_publ.html

“In many instances the residence of maternal grandparents was different from the place where the mother of the new born normally lived or was married. However, in some cases, due to distance, lack of transport, other facilities or superstitions, girls were married within the village or neighbouring villages,” says Gracias.

When a child was born in the home of maternal grandparents the child was usually baptised there as the mother and child stayed at the maternal home for at least for month if not more after the delivery. The birth was registered at this Parish and not in the Parish to which the parents or father of the child belonged.

Parish registers of births provide the following information -- name of the child, date of birth, place of birth, name of the parents, place from where they come, names of god-parents, at times name of grandparents, date of baptism etc.

Gracias has herself waded through a whole lot of Parish registers in some other context, while researching for her Ph.D. thesis and subsequently, about three to four years ago. At times she found the same names and surnames being repeated from generation to generation, only the birth dates are different.”

To find a birth certificate from the Church Register one has to know when the Baptism (christening) ceremony was held. Normally the ceremony was held on the eighth day, or after eight days.

In case the infant was born very sick, the infant was immediately baptised at home by the midwife or any other person and subsequently, usually within a month, the birth was registered at the Parish.

Marriage certificates hold another clue. Marriages were held at the Parish of the groom. Such registers give the full names of the couple, date, and place of birth, name of the parents and name of witnesses. Death certificates also provide besides the name of the person, the name of the parents, spouse in case he or she was married, occupation, age, and cause of death.

Says Gracias: “So if one knows the name, place and date of birth of a grand parent say Mr.X, they can start looking for his birth, marriage or death certificates which in turn will provide information about Mr.X’s parents and grandparents. From there, one has to move backward and follow the same procedure. Sometimes one can even find about the siblings of say Mr. X if one goes through the records for a period of 10-years before or after the birth of Mr.X.”

Today many families in Goa—whether Christian or Hindu— have their family trees and these too can provide lost connection. This is particularly among the upper crust of Goans who, in many instances, are inter-related.

“It was also a practice among educated Goans during the Portuguese period to keep some kind of records about the their family with details of the birth of their children-time, day of the week or month, year, day of the baptism and details of the health conditions of the infant at birth. Very often the child was named after the saint of the day or this was given as middle name,” says Gracias.

She said that she has a young Goan friend who was born and brought up in Portugal, and who is now at Sao Paulo, Brazil. Pedro do Carmo Costa, this friend, has made a huge family tree connecting various Goan families of Salcete.

The librarian at the Xavier Centre of Historical Research in Alto Porovirm, Lilia Maria D’Souza mentions that scholar Forjaz’s research study on Indo-Portuguese families is about to be published. Says she: “We have a couple of books on Goan genealogy... (collected) whenever Goans choose to write about their

ancestors. There are also some works on the Portuguese who came to Goa during the colonial rule.” D’Souza suggests that visitors can check out the material available at the XCHR, preferably in the mornings.

Wills, property deeds, and comunidade records (of *jonoeiros* or *zonnkars* and *gauncares*) could also provide some information. Some temples also offer valuable details, as Gracias points out. Suggests homeopathic practitioner Sushruta Martins, whose family has also been keenly keeping records of its roots:

“One can simply find out to which Comunidade the individual belongs. Try to find out which are the temples that come under the Comunidade’s jurisdiction. You will get the surnames of all those who are mahajans of the temples. Based on this information and the caste of the person in question, roots could be determined by deduction. There are some records in the archive department too. Based on this information and the list of the ‘zonnkars’ one can arrive to a conclusion.”

William R da Silva, formerly Reader at Goa University’s Sociology Department, explains: “At the turn of the twentieth century family tree and tracing it back to Goa was a craze of legitimacy (in Mangalore) specially in the Bamon, Chad’ddo line”. Others didn’t want this or care for this, he says, suggesting that the stigma of caste might have been the discouraging factor there.

Says Silva: “(Common people) did not generally trace beyond three generations. But the landed-people generally did. So did people receiving *zon* in the *ganvkari* or *ganvponn*. One family was Vaz-Naik, another Lobo-Prabhu, another Fernandes-Prabhu. And so on.”

Silva, who is himself from Mangalore, recounts how in the 1980s Professor Wilfred R. D’Souza of Udupi traced back and wide his Souza-Mudarta family. He came to north Goa several times, and met the retired author of *Goa and The Continent of Circe*. From there went to coastal Maharashtra or northern Konkani and returned to Goa with an elderly Mudra-member of his Souza-Mudarta clan, to let him narrate the past— property, gods, members and occupation and wrote a book on this in time for a silver jubilee in the family.

Why search for roots?

Does searching for one’s roots really make a difference? Is it important, after all? Is it just a backward-looking perspective? Or is it also important to understanding why we are like we are?

Tom Fernandes of Germany, whom we met, has a Goan father. Recently, he was in Goa, on a mission to know more about a distant place his father called home. But, after a longish visit, he says: “I didn’t have (enough) time to check my roots (and trace the family-tree this time). I won’t take the time to do so until I’m certain that I will stay here for a long time.” Unfortunately, his visa expired, and in spite of his Goan lineage, he had to leave the country to get it renewed.

Many of those who have scoured the globe have done so in circuitous routes. Tom’s is a classic case. Tom’s father’s parents moved from Goa to Tanzania “a long time ago”. So, he was born there but grew up “amidst Goan culture”. About 30 years ago, Fernandes Sr. met Tom’s German mother there and, after a few years, they moved to Germany.

“I was born and grew up in Germany under the German culture. Still I never felt like a German or “home” there. And I never really understood my father’s mentality,” says this young man, who made a whole lot of friends in computer and other circles during his recent visit to Goa.

Tom found his dad had a “very relaxed mentality and stuff like that”. In India, people face a lot of basic problems— no water, power failures, phones not working, yet they keep on living and smiling. This intrigues Tom, who came down to Goa to find out more.

Says he, after his recent stay here: “I think Indians are very creative in solving problems. I understand my dad in some ways much better now and really wished to spend some time here with him. I never knew who I really was (“what I consist of”) until I learned about the other side of my origin. I really want to check my roots in Candolim one day, ask if there are some distant relatives still living here— most of them are spread over the globe or have gone to Bombay. I’m really sad about not speaking Konkani or Hindi and I won’t be able or have time to learn it in the near future.”

Tom’s elder sisters also spent some time of their life in Goa. “It gives you some answers on some questions you never asked or thought of before, but which are ‘just there’ somewhere in your sub consciousness. I tell you I feel better since I came here which doesn’t mean I felt bad before. It’s just like the more you know about yourself the ‘stronger’ you get,” he says, not without a touch of nostalgia.

Tom Fernandes says he really loves “the Goan way of live”. Excluding, of course, the gossip which means people have “an eye on everything and talk about everything with everybody”. He also dislikes the inequality between men and women.

Perhaps it’s more than just nostalgia. Finding out who you are, and where you come from, could lend a sense of perspective. Even if without the largely negative risk of carrying with it feelings of superiority or inferiority linked to institutions like caste, which cut across religious lines in Goa to affect almost everyone.

Cliff Pereira, who is one of those searching for his roots, outlines the broad picture. “Much of our Goan history (especially of the diaspora) has not been documented. Caught between two empires, Goans have been dubbed Asian, Eurasian, Mixed Race, Canarian, or Portuguese and have been conveniently omitted in British as well as Portuguese histories, and also that of the newly independent countries (e.g. Uganda and Pakistan). This needs to be corrected,” Pereira argues strongly. He quotes the Swahili saying: when two elephants fight, it is the grass that is trampled upon.

But now, he feels “quite proud” to be a Briton of Goan origin “with a shared history in Goa, British India and colonial Africa”. For, he says, his identify is “embedded in a colourful mosaic of history covering three continents”. This, he feels, is something to be proud of. “If only I knew what I now know in my teens, I would have had the drive that I so needed,” he regrets.

Back in the UK, Cliff Pereira stores his ‘family databases’ on a computer floppy. He now has access to the British Library and its Oriental and Indian Office Collection, which, he says, has uncovered a whole generation of Goans who lived in Aden and worked for the British East India Company, the Bombay Presidency and the Royal Navy.

In Malaysia, Morris’ own desire to trace his ancestry is two-fold. Firstly, he wants to see how far back he can trace the lineage of both his wife (a Goan) and himself (Malyalee). His wife is a Fernandes, and he

found a family tree drawn by her uncle, which traces her father's side to around 1839. That family tree is peppered with typically-Goan surnames—Rodrigues, Fernandes, Dias, Monteiros and Furtados.

In addition, Morris has a long-term goal of converting existing Catholic Church records into digital format, so that anyone wanting to trace their lineage can do so easily. This, he suggests, may be in the form of actually scanning Church records, which would end up as a very-large computer file. Alternatively, it could be a simple record, stating births, marriages and deaths. Further details could be made available with a Web-master, he suggests.

Says he: "One person cannot possibly maintain such a website. My idea is a link between different records. Do you think such an idea is feasible? From my own search, I know that there would be people looking for such links."

Goa Archives does have copies of wills and property deeds. But, says Gracias: "I don't think there are any short cuts if you are looking beyond four generations. The work is time-consuming but interesting."

eSocialSciences