

True Christian or True Portuguese ?

Origin Assertion in a Christian Village in Bengal, India*

With the deconstruction of the myth « modern man, civilised and superior », the direction of social and human sciences has changed. From the anthropological perspective of the last decades, the knowledge that the « other » has about her/himself has begun to be considered together with what she/he thinks about « us » and her/his interaction with us, thus enriching the understanding which we have about ourselves and about « others ».

It is following this point of view that we use, in our description of the process of social differentiation of the inhabitants of Mirpur, the referential categories « upper class », « true or pure Christian » versus « converted Christian » and « true or pure Portuguese ». This classification follows the parameters used by the members of the Christian Community.

The knowledge that people have about themselves has become an indispensable factor in the understanding we want to have about them, or the group or the society into which they are integrated. Thus, what we have described here is based on what we heard and perceived while we were living among them.

So, we use the intra-group designation : Mirpur and Mirpurians, and the extra-group designation : Christianpalli and Christians according to the perspective from which we make our study, respectively the perspective of the group studied, the perspective of the groups of neighbours, and our own perspective as an exterior element to the network established between the three religious groups.

The terms used, Hindu, Christian and Muslim, are extra-group and intra-group designations. These are the terms that the groups use when they refer to others as a group or as a whole, in contrast to their own group. The differentiation is fundamentally religious.

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The Interaction of Three Religious Groups in the Villages of Bethkunda, and Suklapur

At the end of sixties, the borders of the Midnapor District were restructured as a measure to help the national integration of India. The Village of Mirpur became extinct and gave place to two new villages: Bethkunda and Suklapur. However, in our study we consider the Christian community and its historical, cultural and affective relation with Mirpur. In these villages, about 100 km from Calcutta, three religious groups interact: Hindu, Christian and Muslim. What differentiates them is religion as a faith and not as a way of life or culture. They participate in each others' religious festivals, and between Hindus and Christians there is intermarriage, though this occurs for preference between families that already have social and/or kinship ties. The social segments referred to in our study are rural workers, small farmers and businessmen, belonging to the « classes » which emerged in the political and social reality of modern India during and after the British administration. They belong to the official category « Backward Classes »¹ and within this, the sub-category « Other Backward Classes » or, in other words, all the groups that are not defined by statute and which do not have a place within the definitions of « Scheduled Tribes »² and « Scheduled Castes »³. In truth, they are not classes but « aggregated groups of very similar social status » (Béteille 1991).

In the social relations of the three religious groups, the caste has lost its exclusive determination as a unit of reference. The rituals are shared and they do not have restrictions in relation to commensality. Between the groups there does not exist a dichotomization of others as strangers to their values and their rules. On the contrary, the social relations facilitate the integration of all the religious groups in a community based on the threefold concept of a « neighbourhood or quarter » where people exchange goods that have been produced for consumption, and maintain their social and familial relations (Hunter, *in* Fried 1983).

The endogamic nature of the religious groups is not strict, though birth is the primary condition for membership. In the Christian community, birth as a determinant condition of belonging, is replaced by the initiation ritual of

1. An officially inventoried category of people (about 30 % of the population of India) on whom is conferred a special status in a variety of contexts. « Backwardness » is not an individual characteristic, but one of social segments, economically heterogeneous, constitutionally clearly defined, whose belonging to the group is defined by birth. Although, theoretically, it is not possible to include people with economic power and higher levels of education, in practice it happens that Backward Classes enjoy special privileges in terms of public employment and education.
2. The term « Scheduled » means, in this context, being included or inventoried in the list of those which need to be preserved and protected. The Scheduled Tribes or *Adivasis* are a sub-division of Backward Classes, and are popularly seen as the true aborigines of Indian society. They live in mountainous regions and forests. It has been a problem to find a collection of criteria to define this sub-category because their political boundaries have been in decline since the beginning of the century. Since then, they have been in permanent social, cultural and political transition. However, the Scheduled Tribes have in common the problem of social, political and economic integration in the wider Indian society. Some of them have been converted en masse to Christianity, and others have been absorbed by Hinduism.
3. Scheduled Castes are *Harijans*, pariahs or untouchables. They live in segregated groups, dispersed throughout virtually all states and districts, and their population is twice that of the Scheduled Tribes. They live in places removed from those of higher castes. Their social condition has come to be ruled by the concept of pollution.

baptism, a second birth. The Protestant sacristan asserted « one is a person only after being baptised ». However, according to this concept of baptism as the starting point for the human condition, any individual who wants to belong to the Christian community can be a member if submitted to the ritual of baptism. Few years ago, no one could enter the borders of the Mirpur village to live there if she/he was not baptised. Today, this is not at all a rigid rule. In one of the Christian families, a young Hindu bride was waiting to be baptised for two months. She had run away from her parents, place and had a « court » marriage. She married for love. In another family, the young Hindu bride waited six months until the priest went to the village to baptise her. Love marriages between Hindus and Christians are frequent and a dowry is not necessary. The lack of necessity for the latter is certainly an incentive in opening up endogamic restrictions.

This flexibility of marriages between Hindus and Christians is recent. Decades ago this kind of marriage used to give rise to rituals of purification of the whole Hindu community⁴. In fact it is the marriage ritual that unites the three communities. During the three days of the *haldirasma* ritual, the relatives and friends of the engaged couple cover the latter's clothes and skin with turmeric⁵ when visited by them. This ritual is common to the three religious communities. An outsider who does not know which religion the participants in the ritual belong to is not able to perceive differences. On the contrary, one perceives a social process, where borders that mark a discontinuity do not exist. This is only perceived at the time marriage takes place in a church, a mosque or a temple. The Muslim and Christian brides, during their marriages, receive the *sindur*⁶ and shell bracelets, as in Hindu traditional marriages.

Besides marriage, death is also a ritual that blurs the cultural differences between the three communities. The Muslim and Christian disposal of corpses could mark a significant cultural difference, as Hindus cremate their corpses while the others use burial. However, burial is accepted by Hindus as a common practice. In Tarapith, near Calcutta and also near these communities, the Hindus that cannot cremate their relatives for lack of money also bury the corpses (Morinis 1984). Thus, an analogy is established between Christians, Muslims and Hindus of low social status. At the same time, « poor » Christians who are unable to buy a coffin tie the body to two bamboo sticks and cover it with flowers in the way the Hindus and Muslims do.

The relations between Hindus and Christians are much friendlier than between any of these and Muslims. Besides marriage and friendly ties, they have a socio-political association (Mirpur Kalyam Somiti) for the welfare of Mirpur. During the last forty years, Hindus have bought properties inside the domain of Mirpur to build their houses. This has not happened with Muslims.

4. *Pari Bartan*, Calcutta, 24 March, 1982.

5. Yellow *corcuma* powder, a rhizome of the ginger family.

6. A traditional mark painted with red pigment, along the parting in the centre of the hair. It is used by Hindu women as a sign of marriage

Carte

Christianpalli, the Christian Village of Mirpur

The Christian community settlement is located exactly on the border between Suklapur and Bethkunda. This place is known as Christianpalli (literally the Christian village) though, at the beginning of the 19th century, it was known by the same religious groups as *Feringui*⁷ Para (Campos 1919). Today Mirpur is the name used in cartography, in the works of Basu and in O'Malley's census. Mirpur is also used in a very particular and friendly way by the Christian self-styled « upper class » with Portuguese surnames. They have properties and live in houses made of bricks and with electricity. They are also the most highly educated and the religious and social leaders come from among them.

Though Mirpur does not exist as a topographic reality today, it does in scientific and journalistic literature, and it exists, as a socio-historical entity, in the memory of those who claim Portuguese descent. It has already been studied in relation to demography, anthropometry and human genetics by a team led by Basu from the Statistical Institute of Calcutta. It is also an issue in a newspaper in English⁸ and in magazines in Bengali. Calcutta TV has made a documentary⁹ about it. In fact, it is said that Mirpur is a vestige of an important Portuguese settlement called Hijili from where the Moguls expelled the Portuguese in 1636 (according to W. Hedges¹⁰).

At the beginning of the 19th century, the descendants of the Portuguese were registered in the Census Report of O'Malley under two different classifications : Eurasians and Anglo-Indians. Following the typical demographic author's description of the beginning of century, the first were divided into « pure Indians », those who received surnames by baptism, and « true descendants of Portuguese » or Luso-Indians, who were a result of more than two centuries of intermarriage. They kept their surnames and spoke the same Portuguese dialects, which the « pure Indians » had learned to speak. This last group used the traditional Indian *dhoti* and they were known to others as « Kala ferengui » (literally black foreigner). The two groups had in common religion, physiognomic features and the same dialect, already becoming extinct.

Within the category of Anglo-Indians, other « true descendants of Portuguese » were described. They were children of marriages between British descendants and Portuguese. They had Anglicized surnames, therefore making an individual social extinction of connections with their origins. We find Correia transformed into Currie, Leal into Lea, Silva into Silver, Sousa into Sauseman, Rocha into Rotha, Teixeira into Tesra. Some of them changed their surnames into a completely different one : Pereira into Johnson and Gomes into Fitzpatrick (Campos 1919).

7. A term of Arabic/Persian origin to designate a European Christian. The French Crusaders were called by Persians and Arabs « firanji » or « ifranji » as a corruption of « Frank ». When the Portuguese arrived in India, the Arabs proceeded to designate them, and later Indo-Portuguese and other Christians, by the same term, which is found in the Bengali vocabulary as « ferengui » (Dalgado 1983).

8. Shyam Sundar ROY, « The Forgotten Portuguese of Midnapore », *The Statesman*, 19th May 1990.

9. Made in 1988 by B. SAHÁ, News editor, « The Calcutta Duradar show ».

10. Quoted by R.B. SINGH (1979).

The Goans, though they were integrated within the category of « the true descendants of Portuguese », were described as « "pure Christianised Indians" with Portuguese surnames and European customs and manners ». O'Malley included them in this category using, as criteria, the fact that they were living in « a European atmosphere for more than four centuries ».

Father Bower visited the village in 1830, and described the inhabitants of Mirpur as « nominal Christians, with scarcely any sign of Christianity except a few images of the Virgin Mary and saints. The other communities did not have a good impression of them, as they were Portuguese and descendants of pirates »¹¹.

In another description of the Mirpurians, also made by a protestant priest, Peter Thorman, they were considered « untouchables » :

« If they touched the Hindus, the latter had to go through purification rituals. When the English missionaries went to live in the village, some Hindus converted to Christianity and came to live in Mirpur. The Christians of Portuguese and Hindu origin have very good relations, perhaps because both of them are marginalised by other castes. [...] They are also positively differentiated from the neighbours because they do not have "regional linguistic traits", dress better and are more disciplined than them » (*Pari Bartan* 1982).

The Portuguese ancestry of Mirpurians made them case studies of demography that revealed they were in decline due to bad nutrition and parasitic infections. These in interaction had affected the fertility and mortality parameters (Basu *et al.* 1980). The indication of total selection, a measure for the capacity to survive, is the lowest among a group of neighbouring communities. This datum and the drastic population decline between 1891 and 1911 reinforced the forecast of Mirpurian extinction made by Basu.

However, since that drastic population reduction, Mirpur's population has been increasing. It appears that they have had a notable capacity not only to survive but also to increase the population in spite of migration to the industrial towns like Tamluk, Haldi, and Calcutta. According to the data available, we have to conclude that the recent increase of population is due to the arrival of families with Portuguese surnames, and other converted Hindus from Bangladesh, and also to the constant conversion of Hindus from low-status castes that came to live in Mirpur.

Another study, made by Bharati (1980), concludes that Mirpurians can be genetically differentiated from the Hindus and the Muslims. The conclusions are based on blood analyses of certain enzyme systems present in the erythrocytes without any kind of group control. These kinds of very ambitious generalisations can reactivate old and false notions of ethnicity based on genetic traits.

Identity, Identification and Identity Strategies of Mirpurians

By identity is meant here an identity that can be broken down into several identities. Mucchielli (1986) looks at identity as a set of criteria to define individuals or groups, and a set of criteria to define inner feelings. On

11. Quoted by CAMPOS (1919 : 201).

the other hand, the feeling of identity is a combination of several feelings (unity, cohesion, belonging, value, and coherence) organised by a determination to live. For Lévi-Strauss (1977), identity appears as a combined and unstable function and not as something that never changes. It depends upon the power of nature and historical occurrence and is subordinated to changes and conflicts.

Identity is, thus, conceptualised as a whole. However, « it is only an identity that is manifested in a crisis situation » (Lipiansky in Camilleri *et al.* 1990) and it is only possible to become an object of study when some of its components emerge from the whole, i.e. the identity itself. Erickson (1966) saw this crisis situation as a conflict that was a result of a double cultural reference¹². Lipiansky and his team (*ibid.*) tried to find an identity concept that could be a synthesis of all the perspectives of human and social sciences that have been studying the issue of identity.

The definition of this concept is intended to be an operative one for all disciplines. It involves a more dynamic and social perspective ; thus it is more inter-active. This perspective stresses the process more ; therefore it considers identity as « strategies of identity ».

The identity strategies of the Christian group are defined, following Lipiansky (*ibid.*), as mechanisms (conscious or unconscious) developed by an actor (individual or collective) to reach an aim or aims (explicitly defined or lying at the unconscious level). These have always envisaged « the self-existence of the author of the action », « recognition in the eyes of the other » (Kasterzetein in *ibid.*).

These mechanisms are « elaborated in the function of the different socio-historic, cultural and psychological determinants of the context » (Lipiansky 1990), in order to solve « the inner crisis » originated by external determinants. This crisis creates a threatening feeling of the social extinction of the group.

These mechanisms allow Mirpurians to place themselves in the encompassed society and also help to organise them inside the group in differentiated ways. In this way they can keep their social cohesion.

As external factors of the crisis we point out (a) the scientific studies, articles in newspapers and reviews and TV documentaries about Mirpur ; (b) the political position of some parties in India ; (c) the administrative extinction of Mirpur ; (d) the interaction of the neighbouring community ; (e) our presence and their confrontation with an ideal.

Picture 1 — Protestant sacristan

Picture 2 — Funerary monument built in 1974 by the Catholic social leader to his Portuguese ancestors

Picture 3 — All Saints Day : Catholic group in foreground and Protestant group in background

Picture 4 — Religion icons and family photographs

Picture 5 — Haldirasma ritual : the groom spread with turmeric accompanied by his kid brother

12. Although this perspective can reflect the situation of the author himself, it invalidates neither his basis nor his scientific reference. The study of mankind, of societies, of cultures is not the « Utopian maxim » of analysis, free from any values or judgements underlying ideologies. Rather, these studies are, above all, studies in which the researcher involved makes transparent the individual characteristics which, as in any other social individual, are influenced by the processes of socialisation and acculturation.

We consider as inner factors the migrations and the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants.

According to oral tradition among the Mirpurians¹³, the land where Mirpur is settled was a reward from the Maharaja of Mahisadal to a group of Portuguese gunners. They helped the Maharaja to fight against the Barguis. Thus are rooted some characteristics of the original group : protector heroes and brave fighters. These are also the same characteristics transmitted by the Mirpurians and by their neighbours. During the struggle for the independence of India, the older Mirpurians were freedom fighters. During the Pan-Indian movement in 1942 and in earlier anti-British movements, the Christians fought alongside the Hindus against British rule. The Muslims in the district allied themselves with the British, hoping that such an alliance would ensure the creation of Pakistan (Chakrabarty 1992). The Hindus frequently evoked the anti-British struggle of the Christians as a very important affinity that united them, as opposed to the Muslims, who has fought against them on the side of the British forces.

This social manifestation rooted in a *historical past* and in a *mythic origin* had the opportunity of being updated again. It also reinforced the identity nucleon of protection and martial characteristics, and had a structured and cohesive function, as it gives a feeling of union and belonging when it recreates the primordial time of their origin. At the same time it gives a new status and social prestige among the other communities. In this way they are repairing the negative and anti-social image (identity) of being descendants of the Portuguese. When families from other communities have problems, Mirpurians with Portuguese surnames are required to help to solve them. This present aspect of their social life is also a characteristic that belongs to the « Portuguese ancestry » identity : peace mediators.

Therefore, they use a kind of mechanism of sublimation. From pirates they become protector heroes to restore their out-group image and status. The analogy between the peace mediator role and the physical space they occupy between the two villages is also very interesting. It is a space and a place of intersection.

The association of the Portuguese with piracy, murder, assault and rape is very common in Bengali popular literature, and it is also frequent in the oral stories parents and grand-parents tell to their children.

The paradigmatic part of the Mirpurians' myth of origin can be resumed as follows :

— They are descendants from a Portuguese group who were awarded a large property as reward for their action.

— The primordial group were outlaws. According to Catholic myth, they were prisoners from Goa. In the Protestant version they were pirates brought from Bandel.

We can say that the elements of the socio-cultural reality that have more importance are, thus, solved at a symbolic level. We mean that the conflict related to the double origin (protector heroes, a symbol of courage and strength, a positive identity, versus pirates, rapists and murderers, a symbol of destruction and immorality, a negative identity) can be solved on the level of social reality : outlaws became protectors and allies of the Raja of Mahisadal, a symbol of power and prestige. « Negative identity is, in turn, a bad feeling, a feeling of being impotent, a feeling of being thought badly of

13. Recorded by Rev. Bower in 1838 and later by O'Malley in the census of 1911.

by others, of activities and actions and the self being misrepresented. The feeling of negative identity provokes suffering, especially when one's image does not depend upon one's actions » (Malewska-Peyre 1990).

At the end of the 19th century, when a Protestant priest visited the village, the major part of the inhabitants converted to Protestantism. Although they were Catholic they had not had a priest for more than fifty years.

In the 1940s, a Roman-Catholic priest from Holland went to the village and a major part of them reverted to Catholicism. They were in this way socially divided into Protestants (31,8 %) and Catholics (58,2 %).

Supported by the Dutch Church, the priest built an attractive church in Mirpur with an image of the Virgin Mary. It is in this place that the kindergarten for all the children of Betkunda, no matter their religion, functions.

Besides the division into Protestants and Catholics, are found other social discontinuities, either in their social and affective inter-actions or in their discourse. Inside the two subs-groups, Protestants and Catholics, we find families who say they are the « true Christians » as opposed to those who are converted Hindus. The families Pereira, D'Cruz, Rotha, Rosario, Nunis, Isac, Southa, Lobo and Tsera affirm they are « true Christians » and differentiate themselves from the Sardar, Mondal, Haldar, Doldoi, Makal and Mitra families, the « converted Christians ».

The division between Protestants and Catholics is a religiously-based differentiation and a division of power that is reflected in the socio-political and cultural life of the Christian Community and in the relations between its leaders.

In interviews with the men, very often represented by the leaders of the Protestant and Catholic groups, two levels were in evidence, manifest and latent, with internal differentiation having as its reference purity/religious truth and true origin/pure, with an ultimate religious reference. The Catholics spoke of themselves as being true Portuguese, because « Portugal is a Catholic country », and they are the true Catholics because they have been so since the beginning : the primal group in the myth of origin was Portuguese. The Catholic/Portuguese equation functions as an identity strategy which the Catholic group presents to differentiate itself as a group and to legitimise its prestige and its power. The social leader of this group, in yet another identity strategy, ordered a funerary monument to be built in the cemetery, to his own design, in honour of his ancestors, symbolising, in the monument, his own status, his different origin and his power. Among the Catholics there is a current practice of marriage with individuals from the « converted Christian » group and from the Hindu community.

To restore his « betrayal », the leader of Protestant Church, accused of being a traitor because he and his family did not revert to Catholicism, declared that his family represented the most pure segment of the descendants of the Portuguese because they marry into families with Portuguese surnames, while Catholics marry Hindus. Endogamy is, for the Protestants, a mechanism whereby prestige is preserved, providing identification for marking the frontiers of social differentiation.

The recourse to the past, the affirmation of ascendancy and Portuguese identity and the struggle to return to legitimacy emerge as strategies for intra-group differentiation which allow the stratification of the Christian community. This allows a social stratification based on the concepts of

« true » and « pure ». « True » is associated with birth, even though indirectly, to origins, to the past, to being of Portuguese ancestry and to being Christian. « Pure » is equally connected to birth in the Protestant group. This group, through an endogamic strategy, claim they are « pure Portuguese descendants ».

The leaders of both sectors (the Catholic sacristan was not the leader of his group) were concerned with what we were going to write about them. They requested us not to write « bad things ». It was in this context, and in social intercourse with various families, that we came to know about the studies on them already completed and published. They had in their possession the study conducted by the team of Basu, comparing contrasting habitation ecosystems, Mirpur in Bengal and Echay in the Himalayas.

Through their own interpretation of the scientific language, extremely technical and outside their experience, they concluded that they suffered from a major infestation of intestinal parasites and, for this reason, they were labelled with the classification « backward », which they completely rejected. They protested, arguing « it is not true, because we take every care hygienically, more than in neighbouring communities ». In the study referred to, the infestation by parasites was correlated with the fact that the groups under comparison had different dietary regimes and inhabited different ecosystems, a fact that those who read the study in the village did not understand. Indignantly, they showed us another article in Bengali, from the magazine *Pari Bartan* (1982). They complained about it, reading us the part concerning « the Hindus who consider us impure, untouchables ».

These written documents have, decidedly, a great importance when communicating the image which the wider society has of them. It was, however, with the Hindus that they maintained their most friendly social and familial relationships. The television documentary, according to them, showed them, to other groups, to be descended from a valiant group who aided the Raja, and not from pirates. This, consequently, restored their extra-group image.

Everything that social communication revealed concerning the Mirpurians emphasises two characteristics: their Portuguese origin, and their low social status or backwardness. The first is considered positively, and embraced by the leaders of the two religious groups to be displayed as their dominant symbol and to validate their myth. The second is held a dishonour to which they react, trying to find elements which place the Hindus in an inferior and unfavourable position: « They are pagans, primitives, who worship many demonic gods and goddesses ».

From the beginning of our time in the village, we explained that we had come because of an article in *The Statesman* newspaper, which had aroused in us a curiosity to get to know them and a wish to live with them for a time. Naturally, the fact that we were Portuguese, and that they knew that the article which we had read spoke of them as descendants of the Portuguese, not only activated in them the mechanisms connected to the strategies of identity which involved their origin, but also confronted them with some of their ideas concerning « being Portuguese ». These ideas, projected in their expectations concerning us, represented us as Catholics and « guardians of the Christian faith ». We were, for a long time, thought of principally as Catholics, like « Church Inspectors » who had come to verify whether they were « practising the faith adequately ». They wanted to know what we thought of them and whether we considered them to be good Christians,

trying to justify or even hide the ritual practices associated with Hinduism. In death rituals they cut their nails, and individuals of both sexes with family connections with the deceased, even though distant, refrain from using cosmetics during the week of mourning after the funeral. The Protestant sacristan became very worried when he learned that his own family had not kept these facts from us. The women, as opposed to the leaders, acted normally, making no distinction between what there was in their culture that was Christian and what Hindu.

In confronting us as Portuguese they frequently included themselves in a larger group as a strategy of collective identity: « They say that I am Portuguese ; I can be Portuguese Indian ; but I don't accept any culture other than Indian ». The effects caused by the articles of Basu *et al.*, and by the magazine *Bartan*, which they gave us to read, manifested themselves in their concern to know if we were going to write that they were Portuguese only in name, and were underdeveloped. Our presence was, without doubt, an opportunity for the leaders of the two religious sub-groups, Protestant and Catholic, to score victories over each other in a battle to win our sympathy.

The change in administrative boundaries was interpreted by the inhabitants of Mirpur as a destructive attitude to which they reacted with paranoid mechanisms, natural in view of the fear of annihilation and separation. Declarations by some political leaders that « India is for the Hindus » contributed to reinforcing this feeling further.

The dispossession of their own lands (loss of cohesion, disintegration) and their division, and separation (fear of being cut-off, the threat of auto-extinction) unleashed a latent crisis, creating the need to belong, to be enveloped by a concrete group. They looked back to their past, to their history, returning to the « myth of blood » in order to feel protected, and members of a larger family with the same origin, becoming again a group of Portuguese descendants, in a differential category between the Christians of Bethkunda and those of Suklapur.

A Universalistic Portugal or a Mirpurian Portugal

The writing of this study, in the context of a meeting on « Asiatic Lusophonies » requires certain considerations. Recourse to the past and an exaltation of warrior and protector characteristics in relation to ancestors on the part of Mirpurians with Portuguese ancestry, brings to mind, as analogy, Portugal's perception of itself in recent years. Through massive publicity about the Time of the Discoveries and the times of splendour, Portugal has set out on a quest for a past which restores its identity, each time more undifferentiated, owing to the process of Europeanization to which it has been exposed. By this strategy, it seeks to bring itself back, even if illusorily, to a position of prestige in Europe and in the world. Let us then reflect on the proliferation of historical studies in relation to the Portuguese and the Discoveries. They are our deeds set against our ignorance of the « Other » with whom we interacted, and of what the « Other » thought of these deeds and of us. The meagre knowledge and interest we show in the customs, languages and ideas of other cultures and societies is almost a scandal. India, for the majority of Portuguese, continues to be Goa. Even for the more informed, India continues only to be seen from the perspectives of the 17th and 18th centuries as a pagan people who worship a multitude of gods and

live in misery ; or « the country of a thousand and one nights », with fabulous palaces ; or, following the orientalist's maxim of the 19th century, the country of « exoticness and spirituality, with a disdain for material goods ».

With all these deeds of glory, there remains for us the poverty of being convinced that we know everything. We persevere, like the Christians of Mirpur, surviving on past achievements and approaching India as an underdeveloped country with an idolatrous people. No-one pays any attention to the advice given by Vasconcelos Abreu, at the end of the last century : « We risk losing India, and with shame », when he tried, in his reports, to draw attention to the importance of Indian culture, to its philosophy, to its religions and to its languages.

I end with this question : How is it possible to understand this ethnocentricity in a nation that sees itself as people who travelled to the four corners of the world, uniting all of humanity by sea, mixing with all races and leaving behind linguistic and cultural vestiges, but who nevertheless have cast into oblivion the image that others have of them ?

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