

OP-ED



German was already being spoken in Goa five hundred years back

Goa goes German



A view from afar

Constantino Xavier

This weekend Goa will, once again, go German. The sixth edition of the annual German Cultural Week starts features a variety of cultural, culinary and entertainment programs, including an Oktoberfest with the typical teutonic sausage and beer.

At first sight, this may seem odd because Goa and Germany are so far apart in so many ways (disclaimer: my father is Goa-born and my mother a German, and they are part of the organization). Most would believe that Germany's first direct appearance was only during the Second World War, in 1943, when a few Nazi spy vessels anchored in the Mormugao Bay were sunk by a British commando force. Some of the crewmembers then chose to settle in Goa, among them Fritz, the once famous German watchmaker of Panjim.

Germans had, however, stepped foot in Goa much earlier, some of them having played a vital role in fostering sixteenth century global trade between Europe and Asia. After expelling Lisbon's influential Jewish community, Portugal's King Manuel was forced to alternatively court the German trading companies from the cities of Nuremberg and Augsburg, and their respective family enterprises, in order to finance Portuguese colonial expansion and trade with Asia.

In 1505, a major expedition of twenty vessels led to India by Francisco de Almeida, who would become Portugal's first Vice-Roy in Asia, was therefore almost exclusively financed by six German trading companies (the Welser, Fugger, Hoechstetter, Imhoff, Gossembrot and Hirschvogel). Subsequently, the first German trading post in India was started in 1505 on the Goan island of Anjediv, near Karwar. It is this little-known historical fact that prompted the German Government to celebrate, in 2005, the 500th anniversary of the establishment of Indo-German trade relations.

One particular example attesting to the intensity of these early relations is given by the experience of German entrepreneur Ferdinand Cron (1559-1637) who represented the Fugger trading company. It was in their service that Cron travelled to Goa, from where he developed his huge commercial pepper empire reaching Kannur, Kochi, Malaca and Macao. In 1592 he became a full citizen of Goa. There are many more examples testifying to the influential commercial presence of Germans in sixteenth and seventeenth century Goa and to the fact that German was already being spoken in Goa five hundred years back.

Moving forward to more recent times, there is a sizeable Goan community living in Germany today. One of the early Goan migrants was scientist Agostinho Vicente Lourenco (1822-1893) who worked with Germany's reputed chemist Robert Bunsen at the prestigious Heidelberg University. Then, in the 1960s, many young Goans came to the automobile town of Russelsheim, where some hundred Goan families still celebrate the annual St. Francis Xavier feast. Many others came to study at German universities in Cologne, Munich, Berlin etc., and then opted to permanently settle there. In 2003, the Goan Association Germany was founded in Frankfurt.

There have also been important flows in the reverse direction. The German hippies were the first to rediscover the overland route from Europe to India and, driving their colourful Volkswagen T1 minibuses, they arrived on the beaches of Goa in the 1960s. With the establishment of direct air charters from Germany, in 1985, Goa witnessed the arrival of a new era of mass-tourism, in which German tourists play an important role. They currently represent the third largest group of foreign tourists (30,000 arrivals in 2012) and one of the largest expatriate communities. The consequent cultural influence can be measured not merely in the number of popular "German bakeries", but also in the increasing number of NGOs, health, musical, artistic, and cultural institutions which have recently been set up by Germans, or with their assistance, in Goa.

With strong historical roots, the current Indo-German rapprochement has all the potential to blossom into a strong, future-oriented and mutually beneficial partnership with a strong contribution from the small Konkan coastal state. As Goa goes German once again, it also celebrates its historical identity as one of the subcontinent's most diverse, cosmopolitan and innovative hubs that thrives in bringing India to the world and the world to India.

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