

Empire at work

**GUTS, GLORY AND EMPIRE:
THE EPIC STORY OF GOANS IN
ZANZIBAR, 1865-1910**
By Selma Carvalho.
Speaking Tiger, ₹999

We are used to empire arriving in two forms: the coloniser and the colonised, and we always know which is which. Selma Carvalho's book takes that tidy scheme and ruins it. Her subject is neither the British nor the Arabs nor even Zanzibar alone, but a community that stood uneasily between worlds: the Goans of Zanzibar.

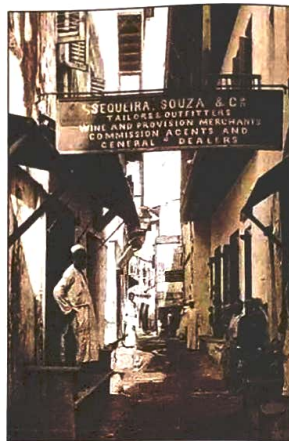
The book tells the story of Goans in Zanzibar between 1865 and 1910, a period in which a small group of sailors, cooks, clerks, doctors and shopkeepers transformed themselves into merchant princes, philanthropists, interpreters, musicians, consular officials, and civic actors. This is not a familiar story of colonial victimhood. Carvalho is clear from the beginning that her Goans were not merely subjugated people. They arrived as colonised subjects, but in Zanzibar they acquired wealth, status, confidence and, most importantly, agency. The result is a fascinating and morally complicated history of a community that was both acted upon by empire and actively

participated in its theatre.

The central insight is that Zanzibar altered the political imagination of Goans. In Goa, they lived under Portuguese colonial rule. In Zanzibar, they entered a more fluid world, shaped by Arab sovereignty, British ambition, Portuguese jurisdiction, Indian Ocean commerce, and African labour. This gave elite Goans room to manoeuvre. They could be Portuguese subjects before one authority, Catholic parishioners before another, useful intermediaries to the Sultan, and indispensable clerks or merchants to the British. Their very ambiguity became their power.

The book is particularly strong in showing how Goans occupied a strange racial location in the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean. To the British, they were often "half-caste Portuguese", a phrase that reveals more about European anxieties than about Goans themselves. They were Catholic, Lusophone, often Western-educated, and eager to claim proximity to Europe. Yet they were never quite accepted as European. They existed in a nebulous zone between India and Portugal, and Carvalho uses this ambiguity to ask a larger question: what did it mean to be European in the colonies? Was it blood, language, religion, dress, wealth, manners, or power?

The answer, of course, was never



A view of Portuguese Street in Zanzibar, circa 1905 with a signboard for Sequeira, Souza & Co. © Yale Archives

stable. In Zanzibar, elite Goans acquired many of the external markers of authority. They bought houses on important streets, built businesses, advertised in newspapers, funded churches, formed associations, organised dances, contributed to charities and inserted themselves into the civic life of the island. They helped run the post office, the government press, pharmacies and retail establishments. They

shaped the public square through music, commerce and philanthropy. By the late nineteenth century, they were no longer transient migrants, but part of Zanzibar's national character.

Yet Carvalho is too honest a historian to turn this into a sentimental story of diaspora success. The book's moral force comes from its refusal to let Goans remain merely enterprising or admirable. Their fortunes were often built on the labour of poorer Goans, contracted workers, servants and Africans. The chapters on fractured humanity are among the most unsettling in the book. Carvalho shows that Goans, themselves subject to European condescension, could reproduce the same hierarchies against those below them. They could be caste-conscious, exploitative, violent, and racist. Their desire to be recognised as almost-European often required distancing themselves from Africans and from poorer Goans.

This is where this book becomes more than community history. Carvalho is interested in people who did not command armies or draw borders but nevertheless helped make empire work. Goans were small in the great machinery of empire, but not insignificant. Their lives show us how imperial systems depended on minor actors whose importance has been obscured precisely be-

cause they were neither rulers nor rebels in the conventional sense.

The achievement underneath all this is archival. Almost nothing here comes from secondary sources, because there were almost none to draw on; the history of Goan Zanzibar had simply never been written. Carvalho assembled it from scratch, baptism certificate by baptism certificate, in cursive, nineteenth-century Portuguese, across the archives of Lisbon, Kew and Edinburgh. The reconstruction is patient and, at its best, novelistic. She will tell you the colour of a man's horse and the contents of his drawing room.

The story ends, as these stories do, in diminishment. As the British closed their grip, the merchant prince gave way to the clerk, and the clerk to "empire's faceless workers" — loyal, honest, hardworking, and stripped of everything that had once made them dangerous. The book takes its leave with the old bandmaster, Isaac, sent home to Goa with a purse of 722 rupees and twenty-eight years of Zanzibar evenings behind him. The era was over. What Carvalho has done for us is refuse to let it stay forgotten. For anyone curious about how empire actually worked, not at its core, but at its restless, compromised edges, *Guts, Glory and Empire* is essential reading.

Aditya Prasanna Bhattacharya