

Oral History and a Memoir Shed Light on Goa's Tangled Past: Romeo and Juliet in the Shadow of Empire

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Abstract: In the latter part of the nineteenth century, in Socorro, a village in Goa, the prominent landowner Caetano Manuel Ribeiro was pro-Portuguese, while his neighbour, Hipolito Caetano Pinto, was an outspoken nativist who evaded arrest by hiding in a secret chamber under the floor of his home. However, he had to flee to Bombay when the Portuguese accused him of fomenting the 1895 Rane rebellion. Hipolito then swore that no daughter of his would marry a Ribeiro; he had no idea that death and Cupid would mess with his plans. A son-in-law's memoir throws light on a troubled period in Goa's history.

Once upon a time, back in the 1880s and 1890s, when political instability and intrigue in Portugal were matched by political turbulence and intrigue in Goa, there lived in the quiet old village of Socorro two prominent men who could not have been more personally unlike each other: Caetano Manuel Ribeiro was a suave, polished, greying patrician of the old school; Hipolito Caetano Pinto was young, cocky, outspoken, and nouveau-riche. They lived in forced and uneasy neighbourliness a couple of hundred yards from each other in the old ward of Porvorim; but though there was not much love lost between them, they had more than a middle name in common: both were large landholders; both were socially prominent; both were politically active. Unfortunately, they sometimes found themselves on opposite sides of the Portuguese imperial

divide. Caetano Manuel was generally well disposed towards the Portuguese regime; family tradition has it that his fealty to the Portuguese crown led to the offer of a title, which he turned down on the grounds that he could not maintain an establishment on a scale that the title demanded, “since I am only a poor country doctor. Most of my patients are poor villagers and farmers, whom I cannot charge for my services; and those patients who are rich are all my cousins, and I cannot charge them either.”

Hipolito Caetano, on the other hand, was a determined nationalist who believed that Goans should have a say in governing themselves. Fortunately, their political differences did not result in the sound of fisticuffs or shouting matches in the narrow, tree-shaded country lane that linked the two houses. What one heard instead, from time to time, was the sound of horses’ hooves echoing in the valley as Portuguese troops rode over the Porvorim hill from the south or down the Mapusa road from the north to arrest the uppity Hipolito Caetano Pinto. The sharecroppers who lived on his land would run to alert him, saying, “*Bhat-kar*, we hear horses!” He would then disappear, no one knew where, to re-emerge safely at nightfall, secure in the knowledge that the laws and customs in force at the time did not allow any man to be arrested once the sun had set.

If the Portuguese had trouble finding Hipolito Caetano when they wanted to arrest him, he for his part never had any trouble finding the Portuguese. Despite his nativist views, he shared this privilege with Caetano Manuel Ribeiro: their social prominence ensured that they would be invited to official government functions, and they both had open access to Government House. Caetano Manuel had an added social advantage: he had married Malvina Aramita Rangel, of the well-known family with the *Tipografia* in Bastorá. In February of 1873, Caetano Manuel began publishing a paper, *O Paíz*, datelined from Porvorim; the editor was Dr. Aristides Roque da Costa, father of a certain Constancio Roque da Costa whose adventures and misadventures will figure prominently here later. *O Paíz* had a very short life; the last issue appeared on 27 December 1874.

Perhaps hoping to outdo his neighbour, Hipolito installed a printing press in the rear portion of his home, and from there, beginning on 7 August 1883, he produced and edited a weekly newspaper that he called *O Correio de Goa*. From time to time he published items that stuck like a pesky fishbone in the Portuguese gullet. Once, protesting Lisbon’s habit of sending out as governors men who held relatively low-level ranks in the navy—in 1882, it had been the captain of a frigate; in 1886, a *capitão-de-mar-e-guerra*, a post ranking slightly higher than colonel in the army; in 1886, the commander of a corvette—he

published an editorial that said, “If Portugal sincerely desired the prosperity of its colonies, it would not place at their head as governor some petty official [*sargentola*] from its navy. Land of the Marquis of Pombal, in the name of Christ, leave us alone!” That editorial appeared on 10 March 1888. In April, the government shut the paper down. The last issue was published on 14 April; the *sargentola* had struck back.

The government had shut Hipolito down once before, and confiscated copies of the paper; he had then resumed publication within weeks, moving operations temporarily from his home to a new location in the town of Mapusa, four miles to the north. An almost complete file of the *Correio* exists in the Central Library in Panaji; the only missing copies are those that were confiscated. A few issues may still be found in the Torre do Tombo in Lisbon.

Strange are the twists of history; where Goa’s interests were threatened, the two families found themselves on the same side. In June 1890, Caetano Manuel’s nine-year-old son Oscar had been sent to the district capital of Mapusa to study Latin with Fr. Gabriel Saldanha, the noted historian; it so happened that Lucio de Faria, a friend of the priest’s who was the Portuguese administrator in Mapusa, lived nearby, and befriended the child. Oscar, who died at 90 in 1971, recounts in his memoirs the events that occurred during a crucial election in 1892:

At that time our cousin Constancio Roque da Costa¹ had won election [to the Portuguese parliament] as a representative from Bardez and the results were going to be announced in the Municipal Chamber. The Government’s candidate wanted to disrupt the process by seizing the electoral results from those who were carrying them. Our cousin Vicente Fontes, who knew that the Administrator liked me, combined with Carvalho [Inacio Caetano de Carvalho, the Viscount of Bardez] and others, tied the lists to my thighs so they would be hidden by my pants, and sent me to the Municipality.

The Administrator, on seeing me there, called out, “*Ó menino, quere entrar?*” I smiled and nodded, so he sent a sentry to take me inside. The Administrator chatted with me for a few minutes and then my cousin Vicente, who had been waiting on the stairs, took me upstairs. They took the lists from my pants and in no time at all Cousin Constancio was proclaimed to be the deputy. It was a surprise for the government faction, who rushed to check the papers they had seized from the messengers, and found that the envelopes contained only pages torn from newspapers. Cousin Constancio lived on the upper floor of Gomes Catão’s² house, and on the evening of that same day some politicians gathered there to congratulate him. At

the same time, a procession moved down the street serenading Pascoal João Gomes, the government's man. Those inside the hall began singing, *Pascoal goddê gal, macê quelim tuca sal*.³

Hearing this, those in the street began throwing stones through the windows; Cousin Constancio drew his revolver and wanted to open fire but was stopped by those around him. Carvalho wanted to know whether one could fire a revolver accurately at so great a distance, and Cousin Constancio then asked that a visiting card be fixed to the far wall, and fired five shots. When the card was examined it was seen that the four corners had been nicked, while the fifth bullet had punched a hole almost dead centre.

A few days later, a Thanksgiving service with Te Deum was held in the Mapusa church at 5 or 6 in the evening. The churchyard as well as the road leading to the cemetery were full of people, both Christians and Hindus. I was standing with Cousin Constancio at the church door. Although the Administrator had prohibited all fireworks, some big rockets were being launched intermittently. I don't know why, but Sergeant Nogar, a tall and powerful man, caught hold of a Hindu, slapped him soundly, and tried to drag him away. Rauji Rane,⁴ who had been standing in our group, leapt down to the churchyard, knocked his own turban to the ground,⁵ seized Nogar by the throat and threw him to the ground, forcing him to beg pardon of the man he had slapped. The Administrator then had a bugler sound the call to arms, summoning the troops who had been stationed near the Azilo [Hospital]; at once one heard the tu-tu-tu of a shinga [Indian trumpet] in the churchyard, and another tu-tu-tu on the hill that rose beside the church, and one could see a large number of armed men on the hilltop; their presence was enough to persuade the Administrator not to bring the troops to the churchyard.

This excerpt from the memoir is notable on three counts: first, it illustrates the desperate measures the government was willing to resort to in order to block the popular will, and the equal determination on the nativist side to frustrate the government's plans; secondly, it records Constancio Roque da Costa's impetuous nature, and his readiness to draw a revolver, some five years before he drew it in Lisbon in self-defence to ward off an attack by Gomes da Costa and the ex-Governor of Goa; thirdly, it may help explain why in 1896 Rauji Rane was shot in the back and killed as soldiers from Mapusa were taking him to prison. Nobody believed the corporal who said he fired the fatal shot because the prisoner was trying to escape; could it have been a revenge

killing, to avenge Rauji Rane's public humiliation of Sergeant Nogar, and of the army as well, four years earlier?

Hipolito's nativist stand was not the only reason why the Portuguese were wary of him. Along with the Viscount of Bardez, he was also a close friend of the Ranés, the restive clan that occupied the mountainous and heavily forested north-eastern section of Goa, breaking out in rebellion every time their interests were trampled upon or even threatened. Family tradition has it that when one of the Rane leaders was imprisoned, Hipolito crossed the Porvorim hill, took a canoe to the opposite shore of the Mandovi, and strode into the Governor's palace. When his plea for the Rane's release was turned down, it is said that he shook his cane in the Governor's face, prophesying: "There will be trouble, all over Goa." The startled Governor, rendered speechless by such effrontery, eventually shouted, "Arrest him!" But by then Hipolito had rushed out of the palace and was in the canoe, being paddled to the northern shore.

With the Ranés in revolt, the Portuguese were once again anxious to get hold of Hipolito Caetano. On one raid, the officer in charge caught hold of Hipolito's younger daughter, then just five years old, dandled her on his knee, and asked, smiling gently, "Child, where is your papa?" Her mother's heart froze, but the little girl truthfully replied, "*Senhor*, I don't know." After a futile search of the entire house, they left frustrated. A hill stream, or *nullah*, ran through eight-foot-high banks hugging one wall of the house, so they might have figured that their prey had escaped along that route. They did not realize that a secret hiding chamber existed beneath one section of the house; aside from Hipolito's young wife, nobody else knew either of its location or even of its existence.

The campaign of intimidation intensified even after the Infante had offered the rebels amnesty. Acting on a false accusation that the Visconde was harbouring armed men in his home, Portuguese troops surrounded his house in Mapusa. Another column went to Rauji Rane's house and took him prisoner. The Viscount at first refused to yield, but with his family and servants in danger if an attack were launched he eventually surrendered. He dressed himself in his ceremonial clothes, prayed at the family oratory, then emerged, head held high, while the women and servants of the household ululated. Oral tradition has it that Rauji and the Viscount were being marched over the hill when Rauji Rane was treacherously shot in the back by a noncom. His last words, as he collapsed by the roadside, were, "*Doutor, mataram-me!*" The Viscount was set free a day later.

Hipolito realized then that even the secret hiding place would no longer serve him. When the Portuguese commander, Gomes da Costa, accused him and his young brother-in-law, the brilliant lawyer Mariano Vaz from Anjuna, of having instigated the rebellion along with the Visconde de Bardez, all three fled to Bombay, in fear of their lives.

The Lisbon incident that followed within months needs elaboration. The newly re-appointed Governor-General, Rafael de Andrade, had joined hands with Gomes da Costa, the recently appointed military commander, to terrorize the people and mount a witch-hunt of Goan intellectuals, on suspicion that they were supportive of the rebels. These events in Goa spilled over into the newspaper columns and periodicals in Lisbon, where Constancio Roque launched a spirited defence of his compatriots in the columns of *O Universal*, a paper he edited. A series of seven powerful articles also appeared in the *Jornal do Comercio* under the guise of being "Letters from a Portuguese to His Highness Dom Affonso on the most recent happenings in India"; the complete set was published in Lisbon by the Antiga Casa Bertrand in 1896. Though the writer remained anonymous, the force of his rhetoric, the intimate knowledge he displays of the physical layout of Panjim, and also of the key players in the drama, all lead me to believe that Constancio Roque might well have been the author. Such was the impact that de Andrade as well as Gomes da Costa were sacked and shipped home by the Infante on the same warship that had taken him to Goa.

Imagine now an April evening in Lisbon, certainly a fine time of year to be there. It is 26 April 1896, and Constancio Roque da Costa is taking his habitual stroll down the Avenida de Liberdade. As he approaches No. 11 he sees two men advancing towards him. He recognizes them as Rafael de Andrade and Gomes da Costa, but even though he prepares himself mentally for a verbal confrontation, de Andrade's mad rush takes him by surprise. The ex-Governor hits him over the head with a walking stick, but fortunately Constancio Roque's top hat deflects the blow. He backs up against a tree, to prevent Gomes da Costa from tackling him from behind, but the army man wrests his walking stick away from him and tries to pull him to the ground. Out comes Constancio Roque's trusty "Bulldog" revolver; Gomes da Costa, shot in the knee, falls to the ground. Rafael de Andrade once again lifts his stick; to ward off the blow, Constancio Roque raises his left hand at the same time that he fires off another shot. This time his marksmanship is less accurate than it had been years earlier in Mapusa; he shoots himself in the hand instead. A third shot also misses its target.

But it does not matter. There's panic in the Avenida; Rafael de Andrade backs off, and the police arrive. A crowd gathers and Constancio Roque is arrested and jailed. The next day *O Seculo* publishes a lengthy report that identifies Constancio Roque as being the victim of an unprovoked attack, and gives as reason the fact that the editor of *O Universal* had strongly criticized both de Andrade and Gomes da Costa for their terror tactics against loyal citizens. When the case came before the Supreme Court in July, Constancio Roque defended himself so capably that not only was the case against him dismissed, but the judge praised him for his courageous stand under very adverse and trying circumstances.

Back now to events in Goa. Sometime in the mid 1880s Hipolito had married Julia Vaz, the petite but very lively daughter of a prominent family in Anjuna, a seaside village some ten miles west of Porvorim. Like Caetano Manuel's, it had been an arranged marriage. Julia, cherished by her parents, had been born after four sons—and so was considered a “bad luck child” according to some local beliefs; Hipolito did not let that get in the way. Julia was only thirteen when the marriage took place; naturally, when she came to join her husband in Porvorim she brought her dolls with her, and played with them in the branches of a chikoo tree that a full century-and-a-half later still grows proudly in the front garden. Her mother-in-law was dismayed. “You are an educated young woman,” she told the young bride. “Why don't you put your time to better use? There are young women in this village who have never been to school. Why don't you teach them to read and write?”

The child-bride promptly took up the challenge. Thus, Porvorim came to have two home-run schools: Julia, wife of a rich man, began teaching the poor in the village, while Malvina Aramita, wife of a poor doctor, ran a boarding academy for the daughters of the wealthy.

While his young wife was thus engaged in social uplift, Hipolito began to be known for throwing lavish balls and parties. His newspaper venture, too, brought him prominence, because he continued to publish the *Correo* for five years, even though other similar papers were notoriously short-lived. Unfortunately, he also began to drink heavily, and died in 1898 at an early age of cirrhosis of the liver. Before he died, however, he made an emphatic declaration: “Never will a rose of mine marry a son from that house!”

Who were the roses Hipolito was shielding, and to what son and to which house was he referring? His daughters Estela and Pulqueria were just nine and seven at the time of his passing, and they seldom had any contact with

Caetano Manuel's two sons, Florencio and Oscar, who were much older. Why then was Hipolito so worried? Partly, I think, because the Ribeiro family in those times, though land-rich, was seeing very hard times; three of the daughters had married, and the dowries had plunged the family into debt so steep that the land revenues could no longer cover the interest payments. Hipolito, on the other hand, was rich, and he knew what the matchmakers must be thinking: what better match than a patrician name marrying new money? Both sides would surely benefit!

Unfortunately, his sudden death left his widow defenceless. A stream of visitors came to the house, claiming Hipolito had owed them money; they took away precious belongings, furniture, large Chinese vases, rare porcelain, anything they could lay their hands on, while the grief-stricken widow could only watch, and weep. Mariano Vaz in Anjuna heard what was happening to his young sister and came over in a towering rage. The looting came to a stop.

Estela and Pulqueria were shipped off to the care of a paternal uncle in Bombay; they called him "Papagrande" and under his protective eye grew in age and in wisdom and in relative calm, until one day, when Pulqueria was sixteen and back in Porvorim, a new and unexpected sound shattered the calm of the morning. A large mill that ground sesame seeds to extract their oil had been brought for the first time to the village and installed in the Ribeiro mansion, and when Pulqueria ran to look at this clanging, roaring curiosity, who should be supervising the extraction but handsome young Oscar!

Their courtship was beset with problems, largely because Papagrande, who was Pulqueria's guardian, not only remembered those fateful final words, but had already arranged a marriage for her with a cousin from a nearby village. Pulqueria swore she would rather become a nun than go through with that match; to distract her she was sent back to Bombay, to art school and other distractions; she remained steadfast, and it was the uncle who finally had to yield. Which proves what we have been taught since childhood: that love conquers all, and it obviously did in this case as well, or I would not be here writing this piece. And we also know that Oscar and Pulqueria, that couple divided by politics but united by love, lived as such couples do in fairy tales—happily (and also sometimes unhappily) all their lives, till death came to claim her in 1954. Oscar, heartbroken, survived her by seventeen years.

A Rather Personal Note

Goa's history may be diligently mined from its public records and its archives, but a significant part of it also lies buried in an oral tradition that is fast disappearing as older generations wither and die. Of the key participants in the events that took place in Goa in the 1890s, not one is alive. Many of their descendants have also perished, if I may use so harsh a term. Only three of Oscar and Pulqueria Rangel Ribeiro's five children survive, my siblings Oscar and Lyra are in their nineties, and I am in my eighties. All of us heard the stories our grandmother Julia told us; we also heard those that my father incorporated later in his memoirs. We can therefore certainly vouch for the consistency of his memories, but to vouch for their authenticity, we must seek corroboration from outside sources.

Sometimes, corroboration comes providentially and when least expected. For example, on 15 February 2008, having completed this article, my wife and I visited our cousin and attorney Mario Bruto da Costa in his Panaji office for a legal consultation. That transaction completed, the talk turned to elections in Goa and I mentioned Constancio Roque da Costa. Mario became very animated and said to me: "Do you know that in the election in Bardez in 1892, where Constancio Roque was the winning candidate, your father or your grandfather played a role in it? The government men wanted to steal the election, and the contents of the ballot boxes, but they were tricked into grabbing the wrong stuff. Somehow the results were smuggled into the hall, and either your father or your grandfather had a hand in this." The details may be blurred, but the story is essentially the same.

My father often told how, after some of the Portuguese officials had fled in 1895 and the city of Panjim had been left defenceless, a group of high court judges had been asked to defend the bridge leading to Ribandar, and he as a young cadet had been posted to the team, which was assigned the afternoon shift. He names some of the judges in his memoir; what is more telling is that for decades many of our cousins have spoken of the bridge as "Tio Miru's bridge" (the family had nicknamed him Miru because his second name was Teodomiro).

My father also told us of events that took place when the Infante was with his troops in the forests of Satari, incidents that, although they are not mentioned in the history books, I feel influenced the Prince's decision to break off the fighting and return to Portugal, offering amnesty to his recent enemies. When in 1988 we visited the family of the Desai of Lamgaon, who had been with D. Afonso on that expedition, their recollection of the Desai's stories matched my

father's own accounts. The Desai and my father had become friends during the campaign and continued to be fast friends until their passing.

Social change has come to Porvorim, which years ago I portrayed in a novel as the sleepy, mythical village of *Tivolem*. Commerce and industry have come as well. A new township has sprung up on the vast plateau where snakes and jackals once freely roamed. Down by the fields, Caetano Manuel's once imposing house became a heap of ruins, but Hipolito Caetano's old house still stands a furlong to the south, with its hidden chamber lovingly preserved. The lane has been widened by a metre and a half to accommodate the compact cars that have replaced the *machilas* (sedan chairs) and bullock-drawn wooden carriages of Hipolito's day. His grandchildren are no longer *bhatkars*, the former *mundkars* now own their own homes, and the *mundkars'* children all have college degrees, and no longer stand to one side to let us pass. The chikoo tree in whose low branches young Julia played has grown into a tall-limbed giant whose luscious fruit hang so high that now only the bats can cull them. For four months in the year, monsoon waters still rush and tumble down the *nul-lab* that runs by the house, but at other times the stream is dry; yet, a lonely blue-winged kingfisher sits keeping watch in a bamboo clump on its west bank and waits patiently for the months to pass and the fish to return. Fish continue to live and wiggle in the kingfisher's memory, breeding desire and keeping the bird alive, as history continues to live and beckon in ours, breeding nostalgia and keeping historians alive and at work.

Historians, too, know the value of patience. They wait, they watch, and when the time is right they pounce. That is why history lives.

Notes

¹ Constancio Roque da Costa, born in Margão, Goa, in 1858, distinguished himself in Portugal at an early age, but most of all during the Sepoy mutiny and Rane rebellion of 1895-96. He was the grandson of Constancio Roque da Costa, who decades earlier had himself been a deputy to the Portuguese Parliament and Secretary of the Prefecture. Luís de Menezes Bragança, another Goan patriot, wrote of Constancio Roque, junior: "in the hour of our troubled history, the life of this very public man was the most brilliant page."

² Simão Vicente Gomes Catão, prominent resident of the city, who had compiled *Almanach luso-indiano*, published in Mapusa in 1880. His son, Francisco Xavier Gomes Catão, became a prominent church historian.

³ "Pascoal, go play with marbles; I get the bananas, you get the peel."

⁴ A prominent leader of the martial Rane clan.

⁵ A traditional gesture of defiance, akin to throwing down the gauntlet.

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