

Exposition's Recollections

**A devotee's tribute to
the Apostle of the
Indies**

**BY MARGARET
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St. Francis Xavier belongs to Goa's soil. He is one of us, revered yet intimate, ever reigning and watching over Goa. The trail of events of his sacred remains offer us a glimpse into the enigma of life and death, and the hereafter, whatever be our religious orientation.

For Goans, even those away from home, a visit to beautiful Goa beckons us to include Goencho Saib's shrine in our itinerary, drawing us into a commitment to him; those who don't or can't attend an exposition will at some time suffer sorrow, disappointment or guilt for failing to make the sacrifice when Indians from remote villagers who earn so little, travel the miles to adore him as he lies in serene benediction.

My family begged Venerable Father Angelo, St Jude and St. Anthony for innumerable favours, but we honoured the pioneer missionary, St. Francis Xavier, in prayer and reverence, respected him as the patron saint of Goa, visited him at Bom Jesu and bowed in awe before his exposition.

My indoctrination to St. Francis continued from kindergarten to graduation at St. Francis Xavier's High School, with religious attendance into adulthood at the eponymous named church in the Bangalore Cantonment area.

St. Francis eschewed the ancestral military profession and education marked his métier. He collected souls for Christianity, chastised Portuguese decadence and exploitation, and in the epitome of devotion to God struggled for the spiritual and physical uplift of those he considered lacking, while wading through the intricacies of local languages with self-education, and an interpreter.

This article materialised through his intervention which also allowed me and those persons participating with me to explore our legends and connections.

My sister claimed a miraculous cure for her asthma when she touched his body in the '50s. She wondered how a postcard of the saint in his coffin soothes her when on the other hand she gets tremulous at the photo of our father in a casket.

Another sister, privileged to pray at many expositions, exalted at the contagion and the colossal devotion of the faithful. A third sister evoked fond memories of the annual celebration of the Tailors Association in Dar-es-Salaam and the Goan Overseas annual feast of St. Francis with holy mass, dance, *vodde* and *sorpotel*.

Legends, like parables, introduce children to religion and my early memory is that related by my parents: that of the saint's lost-and-then returned crucifix carried on the back of a crab, whose sign of the cross is impressed on its shell. Kottar, in the district of Kanya Kumari, claims this rare crab which is called *Siluvai Nandu*. Other legends relate to the saint's growth of hair and nails after death; and that of a barber who cut the saint's finger and took it home to heal his family, but since the finger bled continuously he returned it to the church where it was simply "replaced" back to its erstwhile

perfection.

Then again, St. Francis Xavier who sought land for a church was eventually promised a plot, the dimension of the skin of a goat. The goat skin, however, spread beyond its meagre earthly dimensions to cover many acres on which now stands the Cathedral Church of the Diocese of Kottar. This relates closely to the mythology of Lord Vishnu's fifth incarnation as the dwarf Vaman who asks for "three paces" of the king, which when granted first envelopes the sky, then the earth, with the dwarf's third pace stepping on the head of the king whose pride is then submerged. Such analogies unify religious cultures and rituals into community faith practices.

Sharing a plethora of recollections with Gaonkars and others, took me on a pilgrimage where no miles were traversed, but where fervour, faith, legend and tradition were shared, as if in continuous and living group prayer. This exchange catalysed me and the others to reflect on our connections to St. Francis and Goa and allowed me to synthesize my spectrum of religious beliefs.

The Indian priests (two Goans, the third from Tamil Nadu) who conferred with me spoke in images powerful, perceptive and modest. They acted as conduits for the message of devotion to the Almighty, of sacrifice and love for one another. They empathized with our fragile need for intercessions and novenas but also explained that while we may not encounter spectacular miracles, we can certainly learn to discern our accumulated blessings, redemptions and personal miracles in our ordinary lives.

