Interview with Canada-based Goan Writer Ben Antao

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Abstract. Ben Antao is a journalist and fiction writer living in Toronto, Canada. His latest novel is *Power and Politics* (2015), published by CinnamonTeal of Margao, Goa. In this interview, he talks about his childhood in Goa, his education, both in Goa and Mumbai, his life as a journalist in Goa and Mumbai and his life and career in Canada as journalist, teacher and writer.

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Festino, Garmes, and Melo e Castro (FGM) – Tell us about your personal history. What are your ties to Goa?

Ben Antao (BA) – I was born in the village of Velim in south Goa in 1935. My father worked as a seaman on British ships, while my mother was a devout homemaker, looking after her family of three kids—two boys and a girl. My older brother attended the Portuguese *liceu*, up to the third year, then switched to English high school. I completed the *primeiro grau* as it was compulsory during the Portuguese regime.

In 1945 my mother moved the family to Margao, a town about 20 km north of Velim, for the sake of our education as there was no high school in the village. In Margao, I attended an English-medium high school, after which I went to Bombay for higher secondary education as there was not a single college with English medium in Goa.

After obtaining my BA in English and French in 1958, I sought to become a journalist because I had a strong passion to communicate with the rest of the world and, hopefully, change it if I could.
After India liberated Goa from the Portuguese rule in 1961, I returned to Goa to work as a reporter for the *Navhind Times* in Panjim, the first English-language daily newspaper which began publication in 1963.

In 1965, I went back to Bombay, did my MA in English, and joined the *Indian Express* newspaper as a general reporter. In 1966, I was awarded a journalism fellowship by the World Press Institute based in St Paul, Minnesota for a year’s study and travel throughout the USA.

In 1967 I came to Canada to write a book about my US experiences (*Images of the USA*). In Toronto I worked as a reporter and editor, and then switched to a teaching career, doing my B Ed from the University of Toronto. In 1998 I retired from teaching English in high school. Since then I’ve devoted my time to writing fiction.

As you can see, my ties to Goa run deep for I lived and worked there until the age of 30. These ties are reflected in my six novels and 30 short stories.

**FGM – What is your memory of Goa before 1961? How do you see Goa today?**

**BA –** Before 1961, Goa was a peaceful bucolic place, with no industries and no higher education. Under Portugal’s Salazar’s dictatorship there was no freedom of expression in public and no political assembly. There was censorship of the press.

I’ve visited Goa four times since 1966, the last being in January 2011. Goa today has changed a lot. It’s a democracy and much progress has been made since 1961—tourism being the largest economic activity. The population has more than doubled from 600,000 in 1961 to 1,600,000 today, with more than half being migrants from the rest of India. Traffic control and garbage collection remain major problems. But education has improved with some 30 colleges of higher education in the state. Arts and literary activities are flourishing.

**FGM –** Is your book, *Images of Goa*, autobiographical? In the narrative “St. Francis Xavier”, is Joe’s sister, who offers to “assume all financial responsibility” for the celebration of St. Francis Xavier feast, actually inspired by your sister? Tell us about the creation of your narrator, Joe, and the different Goan characters that populate the different stories.

**BA –** *Images of Goa* is a memoir, covering the years 1942–1964. Yes, Joe’s sister is my real sister. I visited Goa in December 1973, with my Canadian wife and son. And my sister (she died in 1999) told me that she had sponsored the St Francis Xavier feast in Velim that year.

For my memoir, I created the character Joe for two reasons: First, Joe (José in Portuguese) is a popular name in Goa that the average Goan would easily relate to. Second, Joe gave me the necessary distance to write the book through a 3rd person point of view.

I have also used the character José in “The Landlord’s Son” and “The Guardian Angel”, two short stories. Another character Sebastian Lobo, my alter
ego, appears in four of my short stories, namely “A Madhouse in Goa”, “The Argument”, “Dog Eat Dog”, “The Man from Matunga”, and in my novel The Priest and His Karma. The rest of the characters in my novels and stories are invented, not based on myself.

FGM – Would you agree with the idea that the narrative tradition in Portuguese language from Goa is not dead, but it continues today in the English language narratives authored by Goan descendants, mainly living abroad?

BA – After reading the 45 Goan short stories in Portuguese translated into English by Paul Melo e Castro, titled Lengthening Shadows, I would surely agree. However, my narrative style has been shaped by readings from American, British, French, Irish, Italian, and Russian literatures: Hawthorne, Mailer, Roth, and Updike; Dickens and Shakespeare; Balzac, Flaubert, Maupassant, Proust and Zola; Joyce, Dante, Chekhov, and Tolstoy. Since my understanding of the Portuguese literary tradition is gained from Paul’s translated stories (I’ve also read Pessoa and Saramago), I find these stories hark back to the Romanticism of 19th Century Europe and the journalistic chronicle style of South America. Personally, I prefer the narrative style of ‘Show, Don’t Tell’ for my fiction.

FGM – In the closing words of your piece “The Languages of Goa” from Images of Goa you do not mention the influence of the English language on Konkani today, particularly when in the big bookstores in Panjim there is a great number of narratives in English: “Konkani has survived the Portuguese pressures as it will survive the Marathi, or the Hindi or the Kannada influence”. Could you elaborate a bit on that?

BA – That’s because I wrote the memoir Images of Goa in 1983–1985 in Toronto, and the book covered the years 1942–1964 when no English literary works were published in Goa. The only novel published in Bombay in 1955 was Sorrowing Lies My Land by Lambert Mascarenhas. Even in this novel, few Konkani words are used. The books in English that you see in Panjim bookstores today are written mainly by the post-Liberation writers, the new generation of professors teaching in the Goa colleges.

I made that statement because Konkani has survived as oral literature in Goa, through folk songs and dramas like the tiaúr. After Goa became a state in 1987 and Konkani was recognized as the official language of Goa, there was tremendous pressure on Catholics to learn Konkani in Devnagari script loved by the Hindus, whereas the Catholics prefer the Roman script. This script controversy has further polarized the Goan community and created disharmony. Today, it seems to me that Goans will write in Konkani in any script of their choice, and no one script will prevail.

In my bilingual book of short stories, A Madhouse in Goa and nine other stories (2012), I have written the same ten stories in Konkani in Romi script titled Xirap
And I wrote the stories in Konkani because Damodar Mauzo, the popular Sahitya award winning Konkani writer in Goa, persuaded me to do so.

FGM – In Goa Masala. *An Anthology of Stories by Canadian Goans* several of the life narratives feature the narrators’ reminiscences of their childhood days, mostly in Africa and Goa, and deal with customs, death and superstitions. What does Goa mean for the Goan community living abroad, in particular Canada?

BA – A majority of Goans who contributed to that anthology came to Canada from the former British East African countries of Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania in late 1960s and 1970s. Many of them were born in Goa, and they wrote about their experiences based on their memories and visits to Goa.

As far as I know, Goans, mostly Catholic, have put together an archive of their activities in Toronto since 1967 onwards. This legacy will benefit the future generations interested in studying the Goan diaspora and its roots. For most of us settled in Canada, Goa is the place of our origins where our roots lie.

FGM – Who is your public: Goans, the Goan community abroad, an international readership?

BA – My readership comprises all three—Goans, the Goan community, and international readers. Since my fiction focuses on Goan literature, readers anywhere in the world will get an appreciation of the Goan character and his/her way of life from 1942 onwards. Readers in Goa refer to me as a Goan writer based in Canada because a lot of my stories are set in Goa and deal with conflicts and dilemmas peculiar to that place, like caste and religion.

A senior BA student recently wrote to me about my short story collection, *A Madhouse in Goa and Nine Other Stories*, and said this: “My personal opinion on the book is that I really loved it as it’s wonderfully written and it speaks well about our Goan culture”.

A few professors in Goa have taught my novels, *Blood & Nemesis* (2005), *Penance* (2006), and *The Tailor’s Daughter* (2007) and my short stories (*The Concubine and Selected Stories*, 2014) to their students, while they themselves have written critical essays on my works as a Goan writer in the diaspora.

FGM – How do you see the Goan literary scene today? What are the main differences between the literary scene in today’s Goa and the situation when you lived and worked in the territory?

BA – In 1964, when I was working as a journalist in Goa, the city of Panjim went to sleep after 7 pm every day. I was bored as there was no literary culture to speak of, one of the reasons why I went to the big metropolis of Bombay.

Today, Panjim and other places like Margao and Calangute are bustling with excitement in the creative arts—writing, painting, music, and poetry readings. I
am a member of the Goa Writers group, which has existed for the past ten years, and we critique one another’s work, poetry, plays, fiction and nonfiction. The group has about 30 members, including residents in Goa and abroad.

There is a creative ferment with book readings, arts and film festivals. Each December the Goa Writers are involved in promoting the Goa arts and literary fest (GALF) and each September my publisher, CinnamonTeal of Margao, hosts a publishing conference titled Publishing Next.

FGM – While recent books, such as Parag Parobo’s *India’s First Democratic Revolution*, which takes great pains to celebrate the government of Bandodkar and describe the other political actors in terms of self-interests that continue the injustices of colonialism, your recent novel takes quite a different tack. What do you think the gap between those two images of post-colonial Goa says about the development of Goan society?

BA – I am glad you raised this issue. I’ve read Parobo’s book, which is mainly one-sided and designed to celebrate the emerging Goan Hindu society of lower castes that the first chief minister of Goa, Dayanand Bandodkar, promoted to the exclusion of the welfare of Catholics. It is true that Bandodkar, himself of a lower caste, supported and promoted the lower caste Bahujan Samaj followers. But Parobo bases his conclusions on research from newspaper articles in the Marathi papers favorable to his thesis and adopts as the truth what the Bandodkar adherents promoted. His history of this period (1963–1973) is one-sided, heavily tilted towards the Hindu Goans, as if the Catholic Goans did not exist.

For example, Bandodkar and his MG party (Maharashtrawadi Gomantak) fought the first elections on two issues: to merge Goa into Maharashtra and to give land to the tiller. The Opinion Poll of January 1967 went against the merger option, and Goa has remained a separate state.

The land to the tiller law of 1964 was not evenly and fairly applied. The MG legislators from the districts of Pernem and Sattari, north and northeast, who themselves were large landlords (Rane and Deshprabhu) were exempted, whereas all the Catholic landlords in the south lost their holdings to the tillers. By doing this, Bandodkar drove a wedge into the Hindu-Catholic harmony that had existed until then. He and his daughter and their henchmen are responsible for the caste and religious disharmony in Goa today.

My new novel *Money and Politics* (2015) deals with this era of politics and how Bandodkar cast the dice against the Catholics. This book could only have been written by me because I was a reporter covering the elections and the subsequent government formation. I had a ringside seat in the legislature and witnessed firsthand what was going on. Parobo probably was not even born then. I hope he reads my novel for it would be an eye-opener for him.

My short answer to your question: The images of post-colonial Goa are steeped in corruption; money and politics are wedded together, as discussed in my
novel. It seems the self-interests and injustices of colonialism are perpetuated by
the new masters from New Delhi. Development activities and tourism are fostered
with the agreement of the local government whose members are largely Hindus.

FGM – As a Goan Catholic who was educated within an English-language system,
what was your relationship to Portuguese language and culture?

BA – I had not expected this question, but it is both relevant and insightful. I
guess one cannot escape one’s past. So, believe it or not, Destiny has played a
decisive role in this answer.

Although I attended the Catholic Educational Institute (Instituto de Educação
Católica) from 1946–52, an English medium high school in Margao, its principal
was Roque Santana Almeida, a lifelong bachelor and a martinet whose passion for
Mocidade Portuguesa was so great that it even surpassed his love for the students. To
him Mocidade Portuguesa was synonymous with education and Portuguese youth
culture. Naturally, he received tremendous support in cash and kind from the local
Portuguese administration.

Our school with an enrolment of 100 or so, the principal often boasted, was
Centro Numero Uno in Mocidade Portuguesa in the whole of Goa. And to achieve that
distinction, the students—both boys and girls—performed drills twice a day in the
red rectangle of the Holy Spirit Church, often in the 33C heat. After a year of such
rigorous and disciplined training, we looked smart as we paraded through the
streets of Margao, via Rua Padre Miranda to the Camara building and headed down
past the Quartel and the post office on Rua Abade Faria and on back to school.

Because of Mocidade Portuguesa, I was able to sample youth culture such as
our principal was able to provide. Dressed in khaki shirts and shorts (green shirts
for the commandants) and skirts, boys and girls were put on display for the
viewing pleasure of the Portuguese visiting dignitaries in Margao and Panjim. In
Grade 5, I was among a group selected to sing over Emissora de Goa at Altinho
in Panjim (Heróis do mar and other songs). In 1950, during the Marian Year, our
school participated in the concelebrated Mass (150 priests) in Old Goa in the
square across from the Basilica of Bom Jesus. We were billeted overnight in the
convent of Santa Monica on the hill. In 1951 we participated in the Rosary Year
in another concelebrated Mass in the municipal rectangle of Margao.

The local colonial administration supplied army trucks and jeeps for
transportation. Thus, in army trucks we went on a picnic to Calangute beach,
singing as we went along It’s a Long Way to Tipperary. We paraded on the Afonso de
Albuquerque Boulevard in the capital and executed smart salutes to foreign
dignitaries in white uniforms as well as in the quadrangle of the police station in
Panjim. A week before Christmas, we would put on a Marche Flambeaux, parading
at night with our colourful candle-lit lanterns and singing carols from our school
to Borda and back.
However, by June 1952, I had had it with *Mocidade Portuguesa* and the principal’s strict discipline, which I felt was stifling my creativity. In my final year, I switched to another school, New Era High School, which was run by a trio of Hindu administrators. In September, the principal Mr. Alvencar asked me a favour.

“Herculano, I need a big favour. You are the right person for it. And I know you can do it”, he said. (Herculano is my baptismal name that I stopped using after becoming a journalist.)

“What is it?”

“We have been asked to send a group for the *Mocidade Portuguesa*. The governor wants our school to participate in the parade in Panjim to welcome the minister from Lisboa. It’s in January. There’s lots of time. I want you to be in charge. You have the best experience in this. Please do me this favour. You’ll get my full support. You organise everything. I know you can do it”.

I was 17 years old and when I told him that I’d let him know the next day, he said in a voice both earnest and pleading: “Please, I’m counting on you. Don’t let me down”.

I liked Mr Alvencar’s approach. He was polite and friendly in contrast to Mr Almeida who was conceited and autocratic. Compared to Catholic schools, the Hindu schools paid lip service to the Portuguese authorities and *Mocidade Portuguesa*. They bowed only when a specific demand was made.

Although I’d done only primeiro grau, I knew the drill commands in Portuguese by heart after many years of habit and practice. So, starting in October, I coached the boys—the girls were excused from participation—and by December, I had 60 boys (5 platoons of 12 each) all ready to make the trip to Panjim in January. As commandant of the group, I was obliged to wear long khaki pants and a green shirt with epaulettes, a white cord and the crest of the Portuguese flag on the left breast pocket. Mr Alvencar gave me 100 rupees for my clothing expenses.

January 1953 arrived and the army trucks picked us up in the morning. There were several schools from all over Goa, all lined up in single and double formations, first inside the quadrangle of the police station. We marched out and halted on the main boulevard by the Mandovi River. When my turn came, I gave the order to my group to stand at attention and execute the salute to the visiting dignitary. I was nervous and self-conscious to notice the contingent from my former school. After three hours and lunch, we returned to our school, joyous and excited by the trip. Mr. Alvencar shook my hand and congratulated me. He gave the students the next day off.

So that was my long relationship to the Portuguese language and culture.

FGM – In your review of *Lengthening Shadows*, by Paul Melo e Castro, you observe that “. . . one’s past cannot be erased from one’s present, however distant it feels. The Goan colonial literature is a mirror through which the present and future
generations can see themselves, whether or not they like what they see”. At another point you observe, “Could such stories happen in Goa today? I can’t say for I’ve been away from Goa for 50 years”. What differences do you see between the Goa that emerges in this literature written in Portuguese in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the literature written by descendants in English?

BA – If Paul had not published *Lengthening Shadows*, the Goan literature in Portuguese would have remained in some pure limbo of my imagination. Reading closely those 45 stories by 14 authors has opened my eyes and energized my mind as regards the cornucopia of literary output produced by my fellow Goans in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Now Goan literature in English began arriving on the scene only during the past 20 years, beginning with Lino Leitao, Victor Rangel-Ribeiro and myself, all three Goan writers working in the diaspora.

FGM – Why is it that, after fifty years of living abroad, Goa goes on being one of the main topics of your literature? I think it is also the case with many writers who live in the diaspora but go on writing about Goa.

BA – I think it has to do with one’s childhood experiences, the growing up in a certain place and time. These experiences shape a person’s character and outlook on life, so when that person goes on to become a fiction writer, he digs deep into that past to create stories and give meaning to his existence.

Now I have also written short stories and novels that are set in Toronto, but the themes in these narratives spring from my adult experiences in Canada.

In Goa, there is a book reviewer and critic named Jugneeta Sudan, a non-Goan from northern India. She wrote a long review of my short story collection *The Concubine and Selected Stories* (10 of the 20 set in Toronto) in the *Navhind Times*. She’s also a member of the Goa Writers group and wrote the following in August 2015.

Dear Writers
It is indeed an intriguing phenomenon that Ben churns out a book rooted in the Goan experience every other year.

He moved to US-Canada in the 1960s and yet the umbilical cord connection remains intact, nourishing his soul and creative output.

I replied to her as follows:

It’s an interesting observation you make about people—those who become global citizens and others who are drifters!

It seems to me that one’s place of birth or residence doesn’t seem to be an issue for nonfiction writers.

However, to write fiction and root it in a setting that gives life to a story, one feels compelled and drawn to a place that one knows well and intimately. That is, if literature springs from a life lived and known, the writer has to reckon with his roots. Otherwise, the story will be merely entertainment.

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