

Deaf to the World

Augusto do Rosário Rodrigues

Heeding the advice of his parish sacristan, Facundo das Angústias Goiaba of the village of São Lázaro resolved to leave for Bombay to gild his family crest . . . Hunting turtledoves and herons and fishing in the *comunidade* paddies had, in any case, long lost their interest.

His father, who died of indigestion one day after stuffing himself with crab and roast suckling pig, had never taken the slightest interest in his son's education. His only regret was not having had more boys, as the income from his *jonos* would have been multiplied.

Like every gaunkar of the *comunidades*, these Goiabas had once been diligent agriculturalists who didn't shun the *langotim*, being indistinguishable in appearance from adventitious journeymen. But the story of just how this particular noble family had forsaken the rice fields is of particular interest. On 15th September 1852, an ancestor of theirs had served in the Viscount of Ourém's thousand-strong sepoy corps that marched against the notorious Dada Rane through the thickets of Satari.

This heroic forbear, by name Gondicalo de São Tiago Goiaba, returned home from the expedition with a red sergeant's stripe and a uniform bedecked with medals. Twice he had saved his Lieutenant from certain death. Once, caught in an ambush, he had beaten a strategic retreat, though not without leaving a good-sized chunk of his ear behind with the rebellious barbarians.

Abruptly promoted to a new social class, this Goiaba soon adopted a suitably imposing demeanour. He expanded his father's shack, adopted the *pacló's* language for domestic use and obliged his poor wife to swap her *capodd* for a dress.

Sargent Can-catro, as he was now known, drifted away from his friends and relatives and began to keep company with the vicar, the doctor and the teacher alone. His megalomania proved refractory to both hoe and harrow. Thenceforward, on the pretext of Gondicalo's new rank, the Goiabas presented themselves as aristocrats, as inheritors of a tradition. More or less identical thinking contaminated the gaunkars of our *comunidades* almost to a man.

Abandoning the fields to newcomers, the *gaunkars* now lived off *jonos*, shares and rents. Lounging on the grimy *balcões* of their respective houses, beside dark groves of palm, they smoked thick beedis rolled with jackfruit leaves. The

most hidebound amongst them spent their days obsessively bemoaning the *comunidade* procurator's sneaky dealings, the vicar's last sermon, or the *regedor's* latest swindle. The odd one managed to become a doctor, lawyer or priest. It was these *gaunkars*, unfortunately, who ushered in a new gentry, whose vast houses always boasted a portrait of the founder in pride of place, sporting his smartest suit.

And so, victims of inertia, allergic to manual work, superficial and effete, the *gaunkars* entered a steep decline. The others, strangers to the villages, dismissed pejoratively as wandering Jews, were more pragmatic. They migrated to Bombay, spread out over the entire world, as cooks, tailors and servants, and managed to put fortunes aside. Now it was these people who controlled the local economy, who owned the fertile lands and comfortable dwellings. The supercilious *gaunkars*, faced with the collapse of their financial supremacy, could only muster a twitchy sneer in response.

After the litany of farewells offered to Facundo as per custom, the old village schoolmaster, in his cavernous octogenarian's voice, proffered the following words as he gestured at the portrait of Can-catro:

'Every happiness, Babá! Don't you forget us old timers. We want nothing but peace and harmony. As a descendent of this great hero you must follow in his footsteps and restore lustre to your house. *Viva!*

'*Viva!*' intoned thirty hoarse voices as they admired the schoolmaster's eloquence and raised thick glass *copinhos* dulled from use to lips thirsting for fenny. The rickety Dona Malaquita and the youthful Teodolinda, mother and sister of the future *bombaísta*, who stood between them, mutely nodded their thanks. Facundo peered glumly around at their dismal mansion, the crumbling plaster of its walls, the loose beams in its ceiling, the gaping cracks in its roof whence tiles were missing. From the depths of his worm-eaten picture frame, Gondicalo de São Tiago, with his bushy mustachios and glowering brow, appeared to sulk at such wretchedness.

In Bombay, Facundo found digs at his village club. For the first few days the noise of the factories and the shrill whistle of the locomotives robbed him of sleep. He missed the silent tamarind trees, the peal of the church bell, the gentle warble of the *murionis* at dawn. But, in every other detail, the atmosphere of Dhobitalao, where he lived, was typically Goan. Konkani was spoken in every nook and cranny. All the day long, old women from Bardez went door-to-door hawking *sarapatel*, *balchão* and *dodol*.

Facundo, with his primary education, didn't have much in the way of job prospects. If he'd learnt a mechanical trade it would have been a different story. But as things stood, he had no work, was beached, and earned very little. He became crippled with debt, and had to go without many things, but never did he fail to send home to his family twenty-five rupees a month.

One day, feeling vaguely off colour, the heir of the Goiabas stayed at home. Perching on his old trunk, he brooded on his life. He had come to Bombay to make money, lots of money, money for his invalid mother, marriageable sister

and tumbledown house, which was roundly mocked by the upstart vulgarians of the *cudd*.

Outside, blaring car horns and the rowdy multitude filled the air with an enervating racket. Inured by habit, Facundo was now oblivious to this din, and his thoughts drifted into the far distance . . . The resigned faces of his mother and sister flitted past his mind's eye in their patched dresses and battered shoes with worn-through soles.

"And all this because that great sergeant decreed we should turn our back on the paddies. In those days I'm sure we lacked for nothing. Today? Today we're tramps in ties", the poor *bombaísta* ranted to himself. His soliloquy was interrupted by the postman with two letters: one from his mother and the other from a friend working in Singapore. His mother sent an urgent request for a hundred rupees. Winter was coming and they had to lay in provisions. Teodolinda had come down with typhus and the pharmacist's bill was still to settle, she wrote trustingly.

His friend wrote telling him to be in Singapore in a month's time. He had found him a fine job with a monthly salary of 600 *patacas*, with bed, board and washing included. On the one hand was the penury of his home and on the other a magnificent opportunity. Magnificent, but unrealisable, as Facundo hadn't four *réis* to rub together for travel.

After finishing the letters, the blood drained from Facundo's slack-mouthed face. On his dark-skinned, heavy-jawed countenance, the only movement was a slight quiver of his broad, apish nostrils. He stared into space, a cold sweat trickling down his shallow forehead.

That night he didn't sleep a wink. He lay awake, picking bugs from his bedclothes. By six o'clock he was already on his feet. As he walked out through the main room of the *cudd*, where a great crucifix hung, he blessed himself and piously bent the knee. His gaze crossed the upturned eyes of Jesus, agonising on his rosewood cross, the pedestal of which was formed by the club's coffers. And that furtive vision of a compassionate God, under whose feet lay thousands of rupees, kindled in his fever-ridden brain the great hope of solving his torturous conundrum with that very money. Christ would forgive him; and later on he'd pay back every paise.

A nail and a length of wire did the job. Facundo, showing a maximum of scruples, took only what was strictly necessary, the sum of 250 rupees.

On Saturday—balance sheet day—the manager noticed the embezzlement, but could find no sign the coffer had been forced. Utterly bewildered, the poor man, hated by the others for his conceit, explained the situation to the members after evening rosary. A dubious smile flickered across the lips of everyone present. "Just how had he been able to buy so much land? Was it with our money?" they all asked themselves.

"I swear I'm innocent", the distressed administrator yelled, getting hot under the collar, before placing his hands solemnly on the wounded feet of their gentle Rabbi of Galilee. In the faint light of four tall candles, one by one the hundred

and seventy boarders of that association filed past the crucifix, repeating the same gesture and the same words. In their midst, Facundo, trusting to the limitless mercy of the Everlasting God, also swore his oath. He swore in an imperceptible yet humble voice:

‘Jesus, it was me. Forgive me, oh Lord . . .’ The manager who, like a Muslim *caid*, had been sure to flush out the thief, was almost driven insane.

A few days later, after a warm send-off, Facundo embarked for Singapore.

Some years ago, visiting a friend in São Lázaro, an unusual scene made a great impression on me. A very respectable man, vigorous looking in his khaki shorts, bare-chested and with a panama hat set on his mighty head, was expertly digging out a paddy like a consummate agriculturalist. It was nine o’clock and the heat was rising, but still the air was suffused with a delicious scent of *vomlax*. This curious tiller glanced up at the sun, clapped the dirt from his hands and tossed his spade back over his shoulder. His work was done.

‘You must be looking for somebody’, he said in splendid English before excusing himself for appearing before me without a shirt, whether Oxford, Oxon. or in any other style.

‘I’d prefer if you spoke Portuguese or Konkani’, I stammered before that impeccable accent and, above all, those powerful muscles.

‘As you wish, and not just Portuguese and Konkani, but even Malay, French or Hindustani.’ Seeing my surprise, and after learning my talent for writing stories, he candidly told me his.

That gentleman out in the paddy was Facundo. He was rich. Having demolished the ancestral mansion inherited from Can-catro, he had built a more comfortable abode. His sons, though fully schooled, laboured beside him in the fields.

‘We work methodically, *senhor doutor*’, he said, perhaps catching sight of my briefcase and the tremendous iridescent tie I wore around my neck. And, before my silent ignorance of farming matters, he went on:

‘Countrymen go out to the fields at six in the morning and return home around now. In the afternoon we go out at five and return at half seven, as October is a hot month. At other times of the year we work different hours.’

‘Quite so’, I replied, just to say something.

‘If all of us were prepared to work in the fields, especially the gaunkars of the *comunidades*, we’d settle a lot of problems. It’s a healthy, profitable occupation, which we should regard today in a different light. We no longer need to wear the *langotim*, a symbol of our ancient system of cultivation. These days plain shorts do perfectly well.’

—Translated from Portuguese by Paul Melo e Castro

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Augusto do Rosário Rodrigues (1910–1999) was a regular contributor of poems and short stories in Portuguese to the post-1961 Goan press and radio. Characterised by the Goan critic Bailon de Sá as displaying a sort of “inside out exoticism”, his fiction, often historical, focuses on the Goan Catholic community and treats themes of decline, re-evaluation and recovery.