

Alexandre Moniz Barbosa | TNN

The Goan East African safari of the past century is coming alive in London these days. The city's Nehru Centre has stepped back into history and is exhibiting some genuine Goan gems from Africa unearthed by the Goan Association (UK), that is working on a project to record stories of Goans who lived in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi and Zanzibar. The stories and the exhibition focuses on the displacement, often abrupt, of the Goans in these countries and their resettlement mainly in the UK.

"The exhibition is the outcome of a two-year project in the UK funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which records the oral histories of British-Goans who came from East Africa. The exhibition forms a visual narrative of our Goan diasporic history, which is an integral part of the national narrative both of Britain and Goa," project manager Selma Carvalho said. Carvalho is assisted by Cliff Pereira and Eddie Fernandes in the project.

The exhibits are mainly photographs sourced from the personal collections of Goan families that had once made East Africa their homes. Carvalho points out that some photographs from the nationalist Fitz de Souza's family, that was in Kenya, date back to the late 1800s. "There is also archival documentation, albeit copies, of letters written by Goans in the early 1900s, advertisements of Goan shops opening in Nairobi in 1908, etc, all of which form part of the narrative," Carvalho said.

The first record of a Goan going to Africa dates back 400 years. Domingos J Soares Rebelo who in 1944 wrote the book 'Goans abroad and in British lands', the cover of which features on the exhibition poster, said, "A Goan priest named Belchior da Silva footed from Malindi into the

African wilderness with the plague of insects, feline man eaters, cobras and boas, and primitive African man-eaters and reached the center of Ethiopia with no appropriate clothes, no shoes, only a pair of sandals, a breviary, a rosary, and a wooden crucifix and after months travelling reached his destination in May 1598 to rechristianize the Coptic

Christians and bring them into the fold of Latin Church rites. He is the first and foremost Goan émigré into East Africa who died in or about 1609 in the odour of sanctity, refused the bishopric offered to him and died as vicar-general of the Abyssinian Apostolate." Today at the age of 96, Soares Rebelo is based in Portugal and working on four books that he

hopes to release before his 97th birthday in December.

The major migration of Goans to Africa came in the 1800s and 1900s when people from the Portuguese colony of Goa crossed the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean and landed in the British African colonies. The Goan communities in these colonies prospered in government service

and in businesses until Britain retreated and the African countries gained independence. There was then an exodus of Goans from these countries, and many chose to make a new home in England.

The exhibition has brought back memories of their time in Africa to many Goans. Mervyn Maciel, who was born in Kenya and worked in the

colonial government in Kenya but left for the UK after his post was 'Africanised', said, "I, like many of my vintage, am very much part of the story and many of the exhibits at the exhibition feature photographs I'd provided. I was born in Kenya, went to school there as a child, later in India and finally landed back in Kenya following the tragic death at sea of

my parents, during World War II. My two brothers and I were orphaned overnight."

Maciel's case is not an isolated example. Many like him found themselves homeless after the Independence of the African countries. The most traumatic experiences would have been experienced by Goans who were given three months to leave Uganda by Idi Amin in 1972.

"I never went to Uganda but learned that its dictator had seized the properties of Indians (including Goans), large sugar estates, commercial, agricultural, financial enterprises owned by Indians and some Goans as well. A Goan, Pinto from Mapuca, was stoned and shot with arrows and knives for his Christian faith," Soares Rebelo said.

To them, and generations after them, the exhibition is a way of not forgetting their past. "I think this story is tremendously important not only to those like me who were in East Africa during that period, but more so to the younger generation of Goans, to historians and researchers interested in that part of colonial history. Like many others who visited the exhibition, I was very impressed by the great pains the organizers had gone to, to piece together this whole story," Maciel said.

The story has not ended. As Carvalho summed up, "The story of our intrepid journey to East Africa will continue to fascinate us for generations to come. It is a story of courage, enterprise, romance and perseverance, but more importantly it is emblematic of our collective identity. Sadly, it is very poorly documented and desperately ignored in Goa. Only now have some feeble attempts been made and this has come to the fore of our Goan consciousness. It is my sincere hope, that this exhibition is the beginning of a long dialogue and becomes the nucleus of a permanent exhibition housed in a Goa museum."

Blast From The Past

An exhibition at London's Nehru Centre focuses on the displacement of Goans in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi and Zanzibar, and their resettlement mainly in the UK



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