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Beyond silence, beyond stigma: long-term ethnography with Dalits and women in India

Rosa Maria Perez

This study showcases how long-term ethnographic research in India brings marginalized voices to the forefront and uncovers social realities frequently overlooked by dominant narratives. By addressing silence and stigma, it emphasizes anthropology's duty to consider peripheral experiences while reaffirming the epistemological importance of ethnography in examining both continuity and change in social life.

KEYWORDS: ethnography, India, Dalits, women, subalternity.

Para lá do silêncio e do estigma: uma etnografia de longa duração com Dalits e mulheres na Índia ♦ Este estudo evidencia como a investigação etnográfica de longa duração na Índia projeta as vozes marginalizadas e desvenda realidades sociais muitas vezes ignoradas por narrativas hegemônicas. Ao abordar o silêncio e o estigma, ele acentua a responsabilidade da antropologia em integrar as experiências periféricas, reafirmando, em paralelo, a relevância epistemológica da etnografia para a compreensão tanto da continuidade quanto da mudança na vida social.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: etnografia, Índia, Dalits, mulheres, subalternidade.

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To my dear friend Maria João Sequeira, whose vision for women in science and belief in the humanism of knowledge will always inspire me.

DWELLING IN THE FIELD: TIME, TRUST AND IMMERSION

The challenge of narrating 40 years of fieldwork in India goes beyond reconstructing a chronological account of research or revisiting the anthropological texts that emerged from it. It also involves an examination of what has long been an intrinsic part of my subjectivity and life experiences: the shared struggle against marginality and discrimination alongside Dalits and women, especially Dalit women. The field did not merely accommodate my presence as an observer; it required engaged and self-reflective participation, revealing the interconnectedness of method and lived experience, of ethnography and personal narrative. As I write about this journey, I seek to trace both an anthropological history and a personal one – a progression from initial involvement to the complexities of reflexivity, ethics, and shared vulnerability.

From a methodological standpoint, this raises important questions regarding how long-term immersion transforms not only our ethnographic understanding but also the frameworks and standards through which we produce knowledge. By bringing these elements together, I am invited to engage with the foundational ethos of anthropology while also addressing the silences that the discipline has historically left unexplored.



Let us begin at the beginning, during what might be seen as an “age of innocence”: the 1980’s. This was a time when anthropology still heavily leaned on Malinowski’s legacy and the established principles that canonised the profession of anthropologists, particularly the authority of “being there”. It was within this academic context that my research in India commenced. At the same time, the 1980’s witnessed subtle but significant shifts within the discipline. Postcolonial critique, feminist theory and reflexive anthropology began to challenge the previously unquestioned authority of the ethnographer. As questions regarding representation, voice, and power gained prominence, the simplicity of the Malinowskian concept of merely “being there” began to give way to new uncertainties about what it meant to write about others and to voice these perspectives. Entering the field during this period implied navigating the influence of two key forces: the enduring impact of traditional anthropology and a growing awareness that its foundations were neither neutral nor stable.

The decision to conduct fieldwork in an Indian village and to live with a caste of Dalits was determined by a critical awareness of the gaps in the anthropological literature on India. By the 1980's, the so-called "village studies" had already produced a substantial body of literature to illuminate the dynamics of caste, kinship, and agrarian life. However, these studies predominantly favoured the perspectives of dominant groups, particularly Brahmins or locally influential castes. Dalits were often mentioned only in passing, portrayed as marginal figures viewed through the lens of their high-caste neighbours' observations and biases. My project aimed to challenge this inherited perspective. By shifting the ethnographic focus toward Dalits, the intention was not merely to add another viewpoint but to illustrate how the caste system appears from its margins rather than its center, from its bottom rather than from its top.

After encountering a series of incidents and moments of profound discouragement upon my arrival in Delhi, my determination led me to Valthera in Gujarat. Eager to immerse myself among the so-called "Untouchables", I confronted significant resistance from both the dominant caste in the village and the administrative authorities overseeing the *panchayat*.¹ This opposition underscored the hierarchical and authoritative barriers that govern rural life, which sought to control my movements and decisions as an anthropologist. The challenges I faced served as constant reminders that caste relations represent power dynamics that shape what can be seen, communicated, and experienced – even by outsiders. Although I anticipated the hostility that awaited me, I chose not to retreat. In sharp contrast to those in power, I found acceptance among a Dalit family and caste, the Vankar, and began to grasp the lived experiences of silence, stigma, and resistance that would shape my long-term ethnographic work (Perez 2004).

While the patriarchal structure of the Vankar constrained women's public voices, my consistent presence fostered opportunities for more private forms of interaction. Over time, everyday environments – including the household, domestic tasks, and moments of relative solitude – allowed me to cultivate familiarity and trust with the women in the family, as well as with a group of women from the caste. These relationships developed gradually through processes of negotiation and mutual recognition, where nonverbal cues, such as silence and gestures, often preceded spoken dialogue (see Perez 2022a: 132-146). Yet, I was consistently mindful of my role as an anthropologist, just as the women I observed were aware of my presence. And to this day, I remain

1 The *panchayat* is a local government body that administers rural villages in India, functioning, in theory, as a grassroots democratic institution with elected representatives responsible for managing village affairs and promoting development. Traditionally, it described a council of five (*panch*) elders (*ayat*) selected by the community to resolve disputes and oversee local matters.

uncertain about the extent to which my presence in the field may have disrupted the delicate balance of their lives by implying, through my existence, alternative paths and futures for them (*idem ibidem*).²



The initial outcomes of my fieldwork led to several articles and a monograph, which was first published in Portuguese and later translated into English³ under the title *Kings and Untouchables: A Study of the Caste System in Western India* (Perez 2004). Although the field notes that informed these works are rich in ethnographic detail – many of which I have revisited recently (Perez 2020) – the doctoral dissertation that laid the foundation for the book was composed from an impersonal perspective, rather than in the first-person voice of someone who experienced the fieldwork first-hand. This stylistic convention was inherited from a tradition in anthropology that sought to assert its scientific authority by maintaining distance and aspiring to objectivity, often relegating the ethnographer to little more than a mere signature, as Shore (1999) has observed.

Revisiting these texts after four decades of ongoing engagement reveals not only the silences imposed by disciplinary conventions but also the epistemological consequences of those silences. The voices of Dalits, particularly Dalit women, have always been present in my life and work, yet they were often constrained by the textual forms through which anthropology sought legitimacy at that time. Writing today under the theme of “beyond silence, beyond stigma” leads me to acknowledge that long-term ethnography not only generates alternative archives and perspectives but also compels us to reimagine the forms through which anthropological knowledge is conveyed.

2 As I have noted elsewhere, the question persists: “Privilege remains therefore sheltered in my first-person account, no matter how faithful I want to be to other women’s accounts. To what extent will this text tend to filter cultural and intellectual differences abstracted from unequal relations of power? Will the illusion of shared, even if precarious identities, translate into strategies of identification [...] that will re-embody the distance and the voids between myself and them?” (Perez 2022a: 140).

3 Over the ten years between the publication of the book in Portuguese and its English edition, I committed to two main principles. First, I ensured that the English version would be released only after my interlocutors had reviewed and approved a complete draft, which I also arranged to have translated into Gujarati. After all, what options did I have to protect a community so vulnerable to social and political challenges? Second, even though Routledge invited me to publish the English translation, I insisted that it be published by an Indian press. This decision was made to ensure that the book would reach a wider audience within the very context from which it originated.

WHERE VOICES MEET TEXTS: SUBALTERN LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

My long-term fieldwork revealed caste as a constantly negotiated landscape of stigma, exclusion, and resistance. Yet, Dalits, far from being passive victims of oppression, emerged as active subjects – narrating their experiences of discrimination, interpreting their own histories, and devising strategies for survival and dignity. What previous studies often depicted as peripheral to village life turned out to be central to understanding its social dynamics and, therefore, knowledge produced from elite standpoints was incomplete and distorted, calling for a shift in viewpoint to recover the voices of those who were rendered subaltern, silenced, or invisible (Perez 2004).

While I was conducting fieldwork in Gujarat, the historians of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group began publishing works that significantly influenced my academic itinerary. Over time, I had the privilege of engaging directly with some of the group's most prominent figures, including Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, and Gyan Prakash. My engagement with these thinkers was not abstract but profoundly transformative in how I conceived knowledge: they prompted me to consider not only whose stories were told, but also through which archives, categories, and frameworks of understanding.

Almost a decade earlier, Edward Said (1978) had published *Orientalism*, a groundbreaking work that transformed our understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power. My own engagement with Said's work was influenced by the theoretical contributions of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group, which resonated with Said's critique of orientalist epistemologies. This engagement was not purely theoretical. A turning point in my intellectual journey occurred in 1997, when I invited Edward Said to deliver a lecture in Lisbon.⁴ This moment brought his critique into a Portuguese postcolonial context that was marked by unresolved colonial legacies, mass migration from former colonies, and complex debates on race and identity. Said's insistence on what he called "contrapuntal reading" – a practice of understanding the histories of Europe alongside the suppressed histories of its colonies – resonated

4 "I met him in May at his hotel on a sunny afternoon. Despite undergoing several severe medical treatments and a busy schedule in the preceding weeks, I will never forget the striking figure I saw approaching me. He had a shock of black hair mixed with bright white hair, a broad smile, and was dressed in a Harris tweed jacket and an ochre silk scarf. Said believed it was his moral obligation to dress differently from the norm. He looked healthy and handsome. Today, my presentation will not focus on Orientalism, as this forum is already centered around it. Additionally, I will not be synthesizing Edward Said's work, as my talk title may suggest. Instead, I will draw from the topics we discussed during his stay in Lisbon. My paper will primarily cover Palestine and exile, the University and intellectuals, music and musicians, and literature, specifically Conrad." – an excerpt from a keynote I was invited to give at the International Conference of Orientalists, Lisbon, Faculdade de Letras, 2018.

powerfully in Lisbon, where reminders of the empire still linger uneasily in both urban spaces and collective memory (see Perez 2006).⁵

The Subaltern Studies collective progressed Said's critique, underscoring that even counter-hegemonic historiographies can inadvertently reinforce the silences surrounding the subaltern. Ranajit Guha's analysis of colonial and nationalist archives, coupled with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) provocative question – "Can the subaltern speak?" – raised challenging yet crucial issues about representation, mediation, and voice. These insights have shaped my methodological approach, compelling me to reflect on the ethical boundaries of what an ethnographer can genuinely know and highlighting the importance of acknowledging the structural vulnerabilities of the communities with whom I engage. Their work continues to reverberate my own, often through a mode of reading "against the grain", a deconstructive idiom they sometimes invoked. Ranajit Guha's (1983) central insight remains impactful: the subaltern, often excluded from the historical record as a hegemonic subject – whether in colonial archives or in narratives crafted by "educated" native elites – still makes its presence felt in the fissures of hierarchy and hegemony. Therefore, the subaltern is not merely passive or absent, acted upon from above; it possesses agency, creating effects that are not always predictable or easily understood within dominant paradigms or state frameworks.

Said's *Orientalism* and the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group converge on the problem of voice and representation.⁶ Both identify how colonial epistemologies and archives systematically silenced colonized populations: Said highlighted discursive representations that denied subjectivity, while the Subaltern Studies focused on textual and historiographical practices that effaced subaltern agency. Each calls into question the supposed neutrality of scholarship, underscoring how "knowledge" about the colonized was always politically entangled. In each case, critical scholarship became a site of resistance against hegemonic forms of knowledge, raising uncomfortable but necessary questions about who speaks, on whose behalf, and within which discursive frames.

5 Among the various projects that included a trip to Libya, Mariam's (his wife) country of birth, and to India, we had planned what was meant to be a book called *Entretiens avec Edward Said*, a title in French borrowed from Didier Eribon, whom we both admired. "In 2000, I began teaching regularly at Brown University. That year, and the following one, we met sometimes at his house, in New York, to enjoy a cup of Darjeeling tea and listen to music when he felt too tired, or we would walk around the campus and talk until the breeze from the Hudson picked up. He was fighting heroically against his illness through severe and experimental treatments. After he passed away, I returned to Columbia to meet Mariam twice. Until a couple of years ago, she would often write to me, saying that she would visit me in Lisbon when Edward's memory became less painful for her. I knew that she would not. Some memories never die." – an excerpt from a keynote I was invited to give at the International Conference of Orientalists, Lisbon, Faculdade de Letras, 2018.

6 For a development of this topic, see Perez and Fruzzetti (2022), "Introduction".

In distinct ways, both Said and the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group represent intellectual lineages to which I remain profoundly indebted. Said's incisive deconstruction of the epistemological violence inherent in orientalist discourse heightened my reflexive awareness of anthropology's historical complicity with colonial representation, compelling me to re-evaluate the positionality of the ethnographer. On the other hand, the Subaltern Studies collective highlighted the necessity of constructing what could be deemed counter-histories – narratives that are attentive not only to domination but also to the fragmented and often obscure ways in which subalterns resist or avoid incorporation into dominant narratives. The intersection of postcolonial critique and subaltern historiography has become more than just an academic orientation for me; it has shaped the ethical and methodological sensibilities that guide my teaching and writing. I acknowledge my intellectual debts through the questions I choose to explore, the careful approach I take towards the voices and silences of marginalized individuals, and my ongoing concern about how knowledge can be used responsibly and must be held accountable in contexts of vulnerability.

FROM GUJARAT TO GOA: CONTINGENCY, VOICE, AND THE REDIRECTION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC TRAJECTORIES

My initial fieldwork in Gujarat vividly revealed the pervasive and embodied reality of untouchability as a daily practice of exclusion, humiliation, and silence ingrained in the smallest details of everyday interactions. However, alongside the intensity of this encounter a noticeable absence persisted: the limited anthropological literature on Dalits. This silence in the literature compelled me to deepen my commitment to Dalit-centered research, aiming to explore their realities in other regions and under new configurations. At that point, my research context made me particularly attuned to Islamic social worlds, prompting me to consider whether the study of untouchability could – and should – be extended into Islamic contexts (Perez 2006, 2020).⁷

It was at this juncture that chance – often underestimated in discussions of academic trajectories – redirected the course of my ethnography. An invitation to collaborate on an exhibition about Goa (Perez 1997) unexpectedly drew me to that state. What initially appeared to be a detour from my focus on Dalits ultimately became the foundation for a new dimension of my research.

7 The assumption that Islam, with its strong egalitarian doctrine, was separate from caste practices had long been prevalent in both public discourse and academic scholarship. Yet, ethnographic evidence, often overlooked or dismissed, indicates that stratification and exclusion existed within Muslim communities, sometimes mirroring practices familiar in Hindu society.

The prevailing assumption – held by some academic voices and echoed in public discourse – characterized Goa as predominantly Catholic, as if centuries of Portuguese colonialism had erased or diminished its Hindu presence. From this perspective, Goa seemed marginal, even irrelevant, to discussions of caste and untouchability. However, this assumption is profoundly misguided. Hinduism has always been and continues to be a significant force in Goa, where practices related to caste and ritual marginalization persist (Perez 1997, 2012).

The issue of untouchability in this state of India requires a more in-depth and nuanced discussion than what can be covered in this overview. It is important to highlight the noticeable discomfort that many Goans feel when engaging with this topic. Within the Catholic community, I often heard that untouchability is nonexistent, as it fundamentally contradicts the core principles of Christianity. Nonetheless, a deeper investigation uncovers a more intricate reality: practices and occupations deemed impure by Hinduism – especially those associated with death rituals, such as the roles of gravediggers – exist in a state of classificatory ambiguity. Moreover, while the presence of Dalits within Goa's Hindu population, particularly among groups like the Mahar and Chamar, is undeniable, their demographic representation remains relatively low.⁸ Only in recent years has the Bahujan movement⁹ begun to assert a meaningful public and political presence in Goa.¹⁰ This limited visibility is further exacerbated by a broader societal tendency to silence or ignore instances of caste discrimination, making it a highly sensitive and contentious issue. Thus, to grasp the complexities of untouchability in Goa, it is essential to examine both its overt and covert manifestations across various religious, cultural, and political spheres – a challenge that requires careful and sustained

8 According to the government census data from 2011, Scheduled Castes (Dalits) comprise approximately 1.74% of Goa's total population. Considering Goa's population was about 1.46 million in 2011, this amounts to roughly 25,000 to 29,000 Dalits in the state.

9 The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is a prominent political party in India, founded in 1984 by Kanshi Ram with the purpose of representing the Bahujans – oppressed and marginalized communities that constitute the majority of the nation's population. These communities include Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and religious minorities. The term “Bahujan” translates to “the many” or “the majority” and is derived from both Buddhist and Hindu texts, highlighting the significance of promoting the welfare of the majority.

10 The Bahujan movement in Goa has had a distinct and significant impact, particularly since the region's liberation from Portuguese rule in 1961. Inspired by Jotiba Phule's broader Bahujan ideology, the movement initially gained political traction through the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP), founded and led by Dayanand Bandodkar, a leader from a lower caste background. Bandodkar and the MGP championed the rights of the Bahujan. This advocacy reached a pivotal moment during the first state elections in 1963, when the MGP secured a decisive victory, leading to Bandodkar's appointment as Chief Minister. This marked Goa's Bahujan movement as the first of its kind in India to hold governmental power. In recent years, despite encountering challenges and fragmentation, the Bahujan movement in Goa has preserved its social and political significance.

scholarly attention, which until now has not been addressed, the exception being the work of Parag Parobo.¹¹

At the dawn of this century, I had the extraordinary privilege of meeting Dadu Mandodkar, a prominent Dalit activist, poet, author, and intellectual from Goa. Mandodkar, who hailed from the Mahar caste, devoted his life to combating caste discrimination and fostering the social, cultural, and political empowerment of Dalit populations. Profoundly influenced by the ideals and writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Mandodkar embraced Buddhism and became a passionate advocate for disseminating Ambedkarite thought among Goa's marginalized communities. His works, including *Bahishkrut Gomantak* ("Untouchable Goa", recently translated into English), powerfully articulated the pain and struggles of Dalit life. Our extensive conversations significantly enhanced my understanding of untouchability in Goa; furthermore, Mandodkar introduced me to individuals from the Chamar and Mahar castes, thereby expanding my perspective on their lived experiences. However, two key factors prompted me to explore a different intellectual direction. In my quest to gain a thorough understanding of Dalits, most of my other interlocutors often guided me to the *devadasis* of Goa's Hindu temples and their children – a marginalized and frequently overlooked group within caste studies. More critically, I became aware how, during this time, Dalits in India were increasingly asserting their political and civic agency, articulating their demands for representation. This awakening raised an important ethical and academic question for me: what right did I have, as a scholar and outsider, to appropriate or speak for these voices now that they were claiming their own?



Two decades later, a new opportunity – the invitation to serve as a visiting professor at the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar – redirected my ethnographic focus back to the Dalit community, specifically to Dalit women in an urban setting. The resulting research project, titled "Of sandalwood and women: an interdisciplinary approach to technology and health," was conducted over three years in a slum in Ahmedabad, concentrating on Dalit women employed in the informal economy of *agarbatti* (incense-stick) production. This study highlighted the interconnected systems of women, caste, and

11 Parag D. Parobo's work, especially his book *India's First Democratic Revolution: Dayanand Bandodkar and the Rise of the Bahujan in Goa* (2015), presents a pioneering re-evaluation of Goan history by centering the Bahujan, rather than adhering to the conventional elite narratives. Parobo questions the dominant historiographies of Goa – those that focus on elite perspectives of colonial Portuguese rule and nationalist ideologies – by highlighting the political and social advancement of the Bahujans during and after the 1960's.

social oppression, illustrating how these women's labour existed within frameworks of precarity and invisibility that perpetuated historical marginalization.

My fieldwork revealed practices that emphasized the contradictions between constitutional guarantees and the realities faced by these women. Despite child marriage being formally illegal in India, early marriages and premature motherhood remained prevalent social norms (Perez 2022b). The intergenerational cycle of illiteracy, particularly the exclusion and early drop-out rates of young girls from education, further entrenched cycles of dispossession and marginalization. My research also uncovered how girls entering the wage labour force during adolescence normalized child labour within gendered and caste-based economies of survival, blurring the lines between domestic responsibilities and (poorly) paid labour (*idem*).

The physical impacts of these intertwined systems manifested through the chronic suffering experienced by women workers. Many faced orthopaedic disorders caused by the repetitive and harmful postures required in incense rolling, along with severe respiratory illnesses resulting from long-term exposure to dust and poor-quality chemical oils. In spite of these occupational hazards, women were excluded from any form of state-sanctioned medical care, even though article 9 of the Constitution recognizes the right to health as an integral part of the right to life. This exclusion underscores the persistent gap between constitutional rights and social realities, wherein gendered labouring bodies are both heavily exploited and systematically omitted from institutional frameworks – be it educational, medical, or political.

Notably, unlike other extensive ethnographic studies that produced written material such as articles and monographs, this project remains largely unwritten. There is a partial exception in a text titled “Bhavan” (Perez 2022b), which narrates my relationship with one of my women interlocutors. This lack of written documentation is not incidental; it stems from the methodological foundations of collaborative ethnography on which the project was based. The women's illiteracy necessitated a halt in the writing process, emphasizing the epistemological and ethical responsibility to ensure their narratives are not recorded without their active involvement. As a result, the project remains in a state of deferred writing, waiting for the right temporal and relational conditions before I can once again enter their small “houses” in the slum and fulfil my role, both literally and methodologically, as a scribe who translates their voices into written form. Simultaneously, these voices serve as an expression of subaltern agency, fostering empowerment not only within the caste but also in the broader social landscape. They will align with the voices of Dalit across India, who collectively reframe their identities as a political subject in the ongoing struggle for rights and recognition.

ITINERARIES OF MARGINALITY:

WOMEN DANCERS FROM A HINDU TEMPLE OF GOA

I will now return to Goa. It was there that I encountered the *devadasis*, a term that literally means “servant of God”. In Goa, they are called *kalavant* (from *kala*, “art”),¹² whom the Portuguese called *bailadeiras*, a broad Portuguese colonial term used for these dancers and performers. The figure of the *bailadeira* emerged as an emblem of the “otherness” of Goan society, symbolizing a combination of eroticism, moral laxity, and perceived female oppression. The *bailadeiras* became focal points of colonial anxieties and were frequently depicted as morally suspect or labelled as “public women” in colonial discourse.

The portrayal of *bailadeiras* in Portuguese colonial rhetoric was inherently ambiguous and contradictory: colonial writers frequently shifted between fascination and condemnation, simultaneously eroticizing the dancers while regarding them as threats to Christian values and social order. These representations can be contextualized within a broader framework of orientalist stereotypes, highlighting a recurring pattern in which gender asymmetry acts as a central metaphor in imperial encounters. This inherent ambiguity embodies what I refer to as “erotic exoticism”, or, if we prefer, “exotic eroticism” (Perez 2005).

However, it is important to recognize the difference between how the representations of the *devadasis* were articulated under Portuguese colonial rule in Goa and those defined by the internal frameworks of Hinduism, even if these discursive constructions cannot always be regarded as entirely independent of one another. Historically, the term *devadasi* refers to a woman who dedicates her life to the worship and service of a temple or deity, often performing ritual dances and ceremonies. The ethnographic research I carried out at the temple of Manguesh in Priol revalidated, in a broad sense, this conceptual orientation and, from an anthropological standpoint, simultaneously displaced it into a different epistemic register, thereby expanding its analytical scope and interpretive potential (Perez 2012).

The *devadasis* of the temple were ritual specialists intricately woven into the temple’s religious, social, and economic networks. They primarily served as ritual singers,¹³ essential to the worship of Manguesh (a form of Shiva). They performed classical and devotional arts during festivals and processions, enjoying a relatively protected social and ritual status. Their responsibilities included various ceremonial acts, such as lighting lamps, crafting floral

12 For the specific group of women in my fieldwork, I use the term *devadasis*, to enhance academic communication and understanding.

13 As I noted in a different context (Perez 2012), my research at the temple of Manguesh revealed that the *devadasis* were singers rather than dancers. Some had studied music under *ustads* from northern India, as they had formed “matrimonial” relationships with certain Brahmins who supported their musical training.

garlands, and fanning the deity, symbolically caring for the divine presence as if it were a living being. Their contributions were essential for sustaining the temple's sacred atmosphere and ensuring the continuity of rituals, merging aesthetic, devotional, and social functions that anchored them firmly within the spiritual and cultural life of the temple.

Symbolically wedded to the deity, the *devadasis* were supported by affluent Brahmins, often forming lifelong “monogamous” relationships with them, which sometimes resulted in children. This connection enabled them to achieve a relatively higher social status within the temple gender hierarchy (see Perez 2012), thereby challenging the oversimplified view that *devadasis* represent a uniform group with fixed status rankings.

I have illustrated that a hierarchical structure exists among women within the Manguesh temple complex, with the *devadasis* occupying the highest position in this social order (Perez 2012). This internal stratification, evident in this context and others like it, emerged through extensive ethnographic fieldwork. Such immersive research enabled me to critically assess the stark contrast between the social representations and perceptions of *devadasis* in Goa and their actual status within the temple environment, as well as within the broader scope of Hindu religious practice. Notably, while *devadasis* enjoy a prestigious position inside the temple, their social status is significantly diminished outside its precincts and the surrounding landscape of Hinduism. This devaluation is enduring and often spans multiple generations, despite the considerable efforts made by these and other *devadasis* to invest in the education of their children, many of whom pursued professional careers in fields such as law and advocacy.



At the outset, there are significant parallels between the Dalit women I lived with in a village in Gujarat and the *devadasis* at a temple in Goa, particularly in terms of stigma, social devaluation, and the resulting experiences of discrimination. However, the contexts in which these similarities are situated differ markedly. In Gujarat – whether in rural or urban areas – British colonialism maintained a relatively distant presence, leading to the marginalization of Dalits as deeply embedded in the internal dynamics of the Hindu social order. In contrast, Goa experienced a long and pervasive Portuguese colonial rule, which significantly contributed to the stigma associated with the *devadasi* institution. This comparative approach is particularly valuable, as it encourages us to explore how experiences of discrimination are localized and historically mediated.

This mediation became particularly pronounced during my ethnographic fieldwork with Dalit women and *devadasis*. As a white European woman, I

evoked a sense of profound strangeness and curiosity among the Dalit women, as they had never seen a white person before. This unfamiliarity was due to the village's lack of electricity – a situation that persisted long after my arrival, with television only reaching the community years later – and the limited mobility of its inhabitants. Although my solo travel went against local norms – where women are typically identified in relation to men as mothers, wives, or daughters – I did not experience any rejection. Instead, from my very first day, I was greeted with considerable warmth and hospitality.

My encounter with the *devadasis* of the temple of Manguesh stood in stark contrast to my experiences with Dalit women. Despite my initial assumptions – which, in hindsight, were both uninformed and presumptuous –, I was met with clear rejection. Although I stayed with a close friend who is a Brahmin and whose ancestors had maintained relationships with *devadasis* and fathered children with them, my identity as a Portuguese woman, and, for them, a Catholic (Perez 2014), positioned me within a community that continued to stigmatize them, albeit often in a discreet manner. Furthermore, this identity connected me to a nation with a long history of devaluing the *bailadeiras*. Unlike the Dalit women of Valthera, who welcomed me with a meal upon my arrival, it took considerable time and effort to navigate different barriers before I was extended an invitation for even a cup of tea. This experience illustrates the intersection of fieldwork positionality and the steadfast boundaries upheld by a historically marginalized community. It also highlights how identities shaped by history, culture, and religion can influence access and relational dynamics within ethnographic research.

FROM RELIGIOUS LEGACIES TO POLITICAL RESISTANCE: WOMEN NATIONALIST IN GOA

Like many anthropologists, I hold that serendipity is a vital aspect of the fieldwork process. Unforeseen encounters and contexts can provide fresh perspectives, lead to surprising insights, and significantly shape the trajectory of research. As I reflect on my journey in anthropology, I recognize the important role that serendipity has played. It highlights the dynamic and fluid nature of my ethnographic fields, where research sites and questions often evolved through new experiences rather than conforming to rigidly predetermined plans. Thus, serendipity has served as both a creative and epistemic force, enriching and broadening my understanding of anthropology, enabling me to transcend initial hypotheses and discover new dimensions in my research.

As my fieldwork with the *devadasis* at the temple of Manguesh advanced and my relationship with them deepened, I gained access to remarkably rich life histories. Some of these narratives were rooted in the temple and the broader religious context of Hinduism in Goa, while others extended into wider social

realms. One of my most significant engagements was with a woman who was the daughter of a *devadasi* and had herself been initiated into temple singing and rituals, trained to live as a *devadasi*. She left the temple at a young age and had a relationship – never openly discussed during our visits, including my stays at her home – that resulted in two children who studied in the United States and built their personal and professional lives there.

One monsoon evening, while sharing a cup of *chai*, she revealed a fact that challenged my previous assumptions about the nationalist movement in Goa, which I had believed to be predominantly, if not exclusively, male. She spoke of her active participation in this movement. Initially, I saw her involvement as that of an occasional participant – an inspiring woman who, at the time of our acquaintance, had dedicated her life to meditation and solitary reading in her small white house, where she lived until her death. However, she corrected my perception, disclosing that there was a significant movement of women, originally from Goa and, in some cases, from neighbouring states like Karnataka and Maharashtra. These women, including her, defied familial and societal expectations that confined them to domestic roles. This encounter ultimately led me, a few years later, to connect with these women who collectively challenged restrictive social norms and made meaningful contributions to Goa's anti-colonial struggle.



The dominant historiography of Goa has long characterized Goan society predominantly as Catholic and Portuguese-speaking. This scholarship has focused primarily on male experiences while marginalizing or entirely excluding women's perspectives. Furthermore, Goan society has often been examined through the narratives of dominant, privileged groups, whose accounts, despite being hegemonic, are neither fully consensual nor universally accepted. Indigenous viewpoints have been systematically omitted from Portuguese colonial descriptions and subsequent analyses, as have women's voices in both colonial and anti-colonial histories and ethnographies. Women's representations have frequently been neglected, relegated to marginal archives, or irretrievably erased.

My research revealed a significant group of women who actively participated in the nationalist movement in Goa and faced severe repression for their involvement. These women were detained under harsh conditions, worsened by the lack of dedicated female prisons in Goa. They were subsequently tried by the Tribunal Militar Territorial ("Territorial Military Tribunal"), the colonial court established by the Portuguese regime to prosecute anti-colonial activists.

The historiographical silence surrounding women in the Goan nationalist movement dissipates when secondary archives and subaltern voices are

explored. Therefore, archival research must extend beyond canonical texts to include colonial periodicals, bulletins, records, and local oral histories, each offering fragments of women's experiences, encouraging strategies that can center women's agency and resistance within historical narratives, challenging hegemonic historiographies and amplifying the voices of women whose histories have remained in the shadows for too long.

To analyse this women's movement, I employed three fundamental methodological approaches. First, I conducted a detailed examination of the trial records from the Territorial Military Tribunal. These documents provide essential insights into the legal mechanisms of colonial repression and the narratives constructed to criminalize women's political activism. Second, I analysed newspaper articles documenting these women's roles in the liberation movement. This included regime-affiliated publications such as the *Diário da Noite*, as well as opposition newspapers published outside Goa, particularly in Bombay, which offered alternative perspectives on the nationalist struggle and female participation. Research into women's portrayals in colonial periodicals reveals their voices – often only alluded to, occasionally recovered from the silence of non-canonical archives, and sometimes produced by Catholic authors.

Most crucially, I utilized an ethnographic approach that involved interviewing some of the surviving women, who are now advanced in age, as well as engaging with family members and close friends of those who have passed away. The vivid and detailed memories preserved within these individuals illuminate the lived experiences of these women in ways that official documents and the press cannot capture.

This realization encourages us to reconsider the role of women in the anti-colonial struggle, highlighting their emancipatory actions under colonial and patriarchal constraints that limited their political and civic participation. A thorough examination of their lives reveals the significant impact these women had on the Goan political agenda during the final decades of Portuguese colonial rule and in the post-colonial period (Perez 2018).

Such a triangulated methodology allowed me to access memories and narratives that were systematically suppressed or erased within colonial official records. The ethnographic approach, in particular, was instrumental in preserving the personal and collective histories of these women and providing a crucial counter-narrative to dominant historical discourses that have marginalized female agency in the nationalist struggle. Together, these sources and methods reveal the formidable resilience and contributions of Goan women nationalists. Despite facing physical and psychological torture, imprisonment, and legal persecution, these women actively resisted colonial rule and challenged the patriarchal structures that sought to silence their political and civic participation. Their stories deserve recognition not only as a testament to their courage but also as an essential dimension of Goa's anti-colonial history.



A book has been patiently awaiting completion at the conclusion of this extensive ethnographic journey. Some chapters have already taken shape, crafted in fragments over the years. Yet, the finalization of this work – now in progress – has frequently been interrupted by various commitments and urgent matters, serving as both diversions and justifications for what has always been a demanding endeavour. Unlike my previous works, this book cannot seek the approval, nor risk the disapproval, of the women whose lives, stories, and memories initially infused it with meaning. Their voices, once so present, can no longer guide my writing; instead, I bear the responsibility of memory and the task of honouring their presence in their absence.

In this light, the book represents not only a continuation of ethnographic inquiry but also an act of return – to those who shaped my understanding of reciprocity, resilience, and belonging, even though they can no longer speak for themselves. To write this book is to celebrate Goa,¹⁴ while also recognizing that celebration is inherently intertwined with loss. Thus, in all its incompleteness and interruptions, this book marks both an ending and a beginning: it endeavours to carry forward the voices of others within the fragile medium of memory, and to discover, through writing, a means of keeping alive the shared world that first inspired it.

14 In the meanwhile, I have aimed to celebrate Goa – and inscribe them in these celebration – through alternative media, particularly film and photography. This endeavour is demonstrated through the documentaries *Outra Goa* (Parts 1 and 2), 2024 (available at: <<https://www.rtp.pt/play/p14202/outra-go>>) and the exhibition *Goa, Photography and Memory: Photo Art Ganesh* (<<https://www.foriente.pt/home.php>>), which is showcased at the Museu do Oriente in Lisbon (June – December 2025). Accompanying the exhibition, I edited a catalogue published in both Portuguese and English (Perez 2025).

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