seminar

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THE LUSOSPHERE

a symposium on

India and the

Portuguese speaking world

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The problem

THE story, beginning in the fifteenth century, of the vast spread of Portuguese language, culture and power across the globe, and then its sudden and ignominious contraction in the twentieth century, is one of the great imperial epics. It is a story that has intersected with India’s own history over the past five centuries in complex, sometimes uncomfortable but also innovative and world-expanding, ways. Last December marked the fiftieth anniversary of the departure of Portuguese imperial power from Indian territory – but in this issue of Seminar it is that longer connection, and the new beginnings that that history can provide India as it moves further and more intently towards a place in the world, which we explore. It is not colonial closure, but new cultural, intellectual and economic possibilities that motivate the essays gathered here.

More people speak Portuguese as their native language than French, German, Italian or Japanese. With close to 250 million speakers, it is the fifth most spoken language in the world and official in eight countries across four continents, five of which are in Africa (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, Sao Tome and Principe) and one each in Europe (Portugal), South America (Brazil) and Asia (Timor Leste). Portuguese is also an official language in Macau (China) and is spoken by thousands of people in smaller regions across the world, including in Goa, Daman and Diu.

At the diplomatic level, the language enjoys an official status at several international institutions and regional organizations, including the European Union, Mercosur, the African Union and the Organization of American States. There is also an active movement to make it the seventh official language at the United Nations.

The political dimension of the language is institutionalized in the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), founded in 1996. It is based on the inter-governmental models of the Commonwealth or Francophonie organizations and has all eight Portuguese-speaking countries as its members. Equatorial Guinea, Mauritius and Senegal are associate observers (China and Indonesia have also expressed interest, but India not yet). The eighth summit, held in 2010 in Luanda, marked the beginning of Angola’s first presidency over the organization.

Together, this immense, scattered and vibrant linguistic community is known as Lusofonia, the Portuguese-speaking or Lusophone world. But there is also an important cultural component: all these regions and communities were the sites of a long colonial encounter with Portugal and, even more substantially, with one another. These exchanges produced an impressive constellation of hybrid permutations in the forms of language, food, architecture, and social costumes, but also legal codes and political systems – not to speak of their common passion for football!

To encompass this larger cultural reality, and in line with what the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre called Luso-Tropicalismo, we prefer the concept of Lusosphere. Beyond the challenges of finding a consensual nomenclature, many in Portugal and Brazil have simply defined it as a ‘comunidade de afectos’, a community of ‘common sentiments’ and values anchored in a similar colonial experience and solidarity. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a Portuguese sociologist and co-founder of the World Social Forum, prefers to think of it as a distinct ‘epistemology of the South’, underlining the need to understand its fundamental difference and specificity.
Fifty years have now passed since the end of the *Estado Português da Índia*, the Portuguese precursor and equivalent to the British *Raj* on the subcontinent. No other colonial encounter lasted as long in modern history. Parts of Goa were tied to the destinies of the Portuguese empire for as long as 451 years without interruption. As the political, administrative and religious capital of the Portuguese Orient, the little region on the Konkan coast was thus often at the heart of a vast empire and trading network that spanned two oceans, connecting India to Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Much before the advent of the East India Company and India’s integration into the British imperial context, India had already played a central role in the very first era of globalization, exchanging its man-gooses for Brazilian cashew and chillies, harbouring African slave communities, and sending off Goan priests and Gujarati merchants to Mozambique, Macau and Timor. Portuguese served as the lingua franca for all these movements that persisted well into the twentieth century.

1961 interrupted that colonial chapter and while it brought the vital air of political freedom to Goa, in many ways it also represented an indiscriminate cut with that past as Goa turned inland and towards Delhi, naturally prioritizing its economic, cultural and political integration into India. Excepting for a brief period in the 1950s and 1960s, during which India’s leadership supported the liberation movements in Portuguese colonies such as Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique (many of which were led by Goans), the links to the Lusosphere were partially severed, as were the diplomatic relations with Lisbon until the advent of Portuguese democracy in 1974. At the same time, India’s post-independence Anglophile intelligentsia either ignored or actively despised the different colonial encounter produced by the Portuguese in India and its wider links to the Global South. Political relations with all Lusophone countries remained cordial, but lacked any substance.

All this changed abruptly over the two last decades, during which India reactivated its latent connection to the Portuguese-speaking world. Three factors explain this transformation. First, Goa attained statehood in 1987 and thereby consolidated and closed its larger political integration into India—allowing it to feel more comfortable in reorienting seawards, towards its southern and Lusophone dimension. There are now even proposals for the state to host a regular strategic dialogue between New Delhi and other Lusophone governments, as the Chinese have done since 2003 in Macau.

Second, a new generation of Indian historians that had been exposed to European continental thought and sources started to liberate Indian historiography from the myths and prisms inherited from the British, thus learning to appreciate rather than just deride the specific Portuguese, Dutch and French experiences in South Asia and its global ramifications. This paved the way for Indian scholars, writers and artists to study and represent Goa’s social and cultural singularity.

But most importantly, India’s newly opened economy and consequent quest for natural resources and markets forced New Delhi to diversify its foreign policy and look beyond the Anglophone world it had focused on for so long. Brazil, Angola and Mozambique now assume a strategic importance and the legacies of history offer an immense potential to be explored to foster closer links with these resource-rich, strategically located and high growth countries that speak Portuguese.
For example, India’s trade volume with the Lusophone countries in Africa experienced more than a twelve-fold increase in the last five years. The figures for Brazil are equally impressive, enhanced by an extraordinary growth in investments, including Embraer on the Brazilian side and Tata Consultancy Services on the Indian. Whereas a few decades ago one might have found a handful of Goans in São Paulo, it now now hosts hundreds of Indian expatriate workers, mainly investors and entrepreneurs.

The ‘new’ Lusosphere presents itself to India as a space of historical and varying cultural connections, and certainly now also as an arena of economic dynamism and rivalry over resources and markets. It’s time for India to leverage these connections with the non-Anglophone worlds, and to use them in relation to present purposes and future objectives. Instead of feeling hard done by the colonial past, if India can now present itself to some extent as also part of the Lusosphere, it will be able to not only pursue its interests, but also build important bridges for its future stakes in South America, Africa and the Indian Ocean region— all important spaces for India’s further strategic engagement.

More Indians than ever are now studying Portuguese, adding to the several thousands in Goa, Daman and Diu who are proficient or conversant in the language often named after Camões, who wrote The Lusiads, the epic sixteenth century poem depicting the making of the Lusosphere. While the days of Lusophone printing presses and literary societies in Goa, Karachi, Bombay and Calcutta are long gone, the language is now experiencing a dramatic revival across India’s language institutes and schools, where it is seen as a professional asset for those who wish to work in a call centre serving Brazilian customers or apply for positions with Indian mining and trading companies in Angola or Mozambique. The irony is that Portugal, the failing little southern European economy which started it all five centuries ago, is left out of the picture in this Lusophone South-South axis between Bangalore and São Paulo or Mumbai and Luanda.

This issue of Seminar seeks to contribute to this rediscovery and lay the ground for a deeper engagement between India and the Lusosphere. This requires a look at the past, recovering the forgotten links, as well as a look forward to evaluate how to strengthen India’s future expertise on, and presence in, these countries. The fact that India is now an associate member of the Organization of Portuguese-speaking Olympic Committees, and that it also agreed to host the third edition of the Lusophone Games in 2013, are welcome signals that the country is ready to move beyond its Commonwealth and Anglophone focus and make use of its diverse historical linkages with the Lusosphere. But there is much more to the Lusosphere— and contemporary India’s emergent forms of culture, the arts, music and knowledge innovation stand to be much enriched by engagement with this neglected dimension of our past history.

SUNIL KHILNANI and CONSTANTINO XAVIER