

Vol 4 Issue 6 March 2015

ISSN No : 2249-894X

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*Monthly Multidisciplinary  
Research Journal*

*Review Of  
Research Journal*

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**RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595**

**ISSN No.2249-894X**

Review Of Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial Board readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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Review Of Research  
ISSN:-2249-894X  
Impact Factor : 3.1402(UIF)  
Vol. 4 | Issue. 6 | March. 2015  
Available online at [www.ror.isrj.org](http://www.ror.isrj.org)



## INEQUALITIES IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: A STUDY OF THE PORTUGUESE COLONIAL SOCIETY OF WESTERN COASTAL INDIA

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**Abstract:-** Inequalities are an inescapable feature of any human society. The bases of such discriminations range from religion, sex, caste, creed to economic, political status, and the like. Such noted differences were remarkably etched in the Portuguese colonial society of western India in the seventeenth century. Since this society was mainly dominated by the 'superior' raced people born and brought up in Portugal, the margins of the aforementioned discrimination can be ably extended to include racism. Marked by such deep lines of divisions, this society saw its own contradictions which appropriately contributed in the slow but definite decline of the Portuguese empire in India.

**Key Words:** Historical Perspective, Portuguese Colonial, Western Coastal, Human Society.

### INTRODUCTION

Inequalities are an inescapable feature of any human society. The bases of such discriminations range from religion, sex, caste, creed to economic, political status, and the like. Such noted differences were remarkably etched in the Portuguese colonial society of western India in the seventeenth century. Since this society was mainly dominated by the 'superior' raced people born and brought up in Portugal, the margins of the aforementioned discrimination can be ably extended to include racism. Marked by such deep lines of divisions, this society saw its own contradictions which appropriately contributed in the slow but definite decline of the Portuguese empire in India.

Before discussing the inequalities, it is important to understand the underlying divisions in the social fabric of the region. M.N. Pearson has divided the Portuguese colonial society according to three "overlapping criteria", namely purity of blood, rank and marital status. To be more precise, the first criterion categorised the Portuguese on the basis of place of birth and parentage. 'Reinos' or the portuguese born in Portugal were considered superior to the 'Casticos' or 'Indiaticos', who were born in Asia to Portuguese parents. These two were considered superior to 'Mesticos' or those born in Asia to Portuguese and Asian parents. According to the second criterion, the Portuguese population was divided into three estates of ecclesiastic, nobility and common people. All these three categories were smitten with intra- and inter-estate rivalries which greatly hampered the overall functioning of the Estado da India.

Further, the third criterion was the division between the unmarried men from Portugal called 'Soldados', and those married and settled in Asia called the 'Casados'. While the former was 'liable to military service until they died, married, deserted or were incapacitated by wounds or diseases', the latter were mostly engaged in trade. These constituted the Portuguese of the third estate, ie the common people. Quite obvious, but all the three categories were not watertight. In practice, a mestico could be a de facto noble, a casado could be a soldier in an emergency or after marriage to a native girl. A consistent and permanent feature of this society was inter- and intra-class rivalries.

A close scrutiny shows that the purity of blood and race and financial status of a Portuguese determined his overall position in the society. The Portuguese had always emphasised on the concept of 'limpeza' or 'pureza de sangue' (purity of blood). The depth of this conservatism could be gleaned from the fact that a mere birth in Africa or Asia affected the status of the Portuguese and made them unworthy of high official or religious posts. Apart from the

Jaya Priyadarshini, "INEQUALITIES IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: A STUDY OF THE PORTUGUESE COLONIAL SOCIETY OF WESTERN COASTAL INDIA" Review of Research | Volume 4 | Issue 6 | March 2015 | Online & Print



mesticos, even the casticos were considered ill-behaved and untrustworthy by the reinos. Such a differentiation centered on a belief that Asian-born Portuguese were fed by Indian wet-nurses and thus their blood was contaminated for life. In the 1630s a determined attempt was made by European born Franciscan friars at Goa to prevent the casticos from holding office in the Asian branches of the office.

It seems the colour of the skin was one of the most important determinants of one's superiority in society. Based on such criteria, undoubtedly the mesticos and the natives held the second and third positions respectively. This is quite evident from Linschoten's account<sup>3</sup> --

*The children of those casticos are yellow and altogether like the mesticos, and children of mesticos are of colour and fashion like the natural borne countrimen of Decaniins of the countrie, so that the posterite of the Portingales, both men and women being in the third degree doe seeme to be natural Indians, both in colour and fashion.*

Such a colour and race centric bias determined the profession and status of a portuguese. Unnecessary to say, but the Eurasians stood poor chances of getting high official or religious offices. This was evidenced between 1574-1606 when the priesthood to the Jesuit Order was made open for the Japanese, Chinese, Indo-chinese and Koreans (all fair-skinned races), and it was still undesirable for the Eurasians. The explanation given for this is as follows -

*Both of these dusky races are very stupid and vicious and of the basest spirits, and likewise because the portuguese treat them with the greatest contempt and even among the inhabitants of the country they are little esteemed in comparison to the portuguese. As for the mesticos and the casticos, we should receive either little or none at all, especially with regard to the mesticos, since the more native blood they have, the more they resemble the Indians and the less they are esteemed by the portuguese.*

This racial discrimination was so acute that for the appointment of a Portuguese to a post, contamination of blood and race meant more than the contamination of morality and character. There were honest portuguese in the lower services of the Estado who could not do any good to the company due to lack of opportunities. The rampant practice of racism in the colonial society gave ample avenues to those officials and ecclesiastics who came to India exclusively for making profits rather than serving the crown and the church. This could be clearly assessed from the fact that in the long run, the Estado officials and ecclesiastics became notorious as ones 'who live only for pleasure and luxury' respectively. In fact, this intermingling of god and mammon defamed the Portuguese seaborne empire in Europe and contributed to its decline in a slow but definite way.

Further, even the economic status of a Portuguese determined his position in the society. Indubitably, the Europeans of the nobility or religious classes topped the social ladder. As stated earlier, their 'pure blood' gave them the opportunities to amass as much wealth as possible. That is the reason why all the high ranked bishops and officials were rich and full of avenues to an extent that even in the dark century of the Portuguese seaborne empire (ie., mid 17th century) they were not short of getting 'an outdoor relief' in the Estado da India. An example of their affluence and influence in the colonial society is known from many sources. For example, undoubted magnificence of the Jesuit Convent of Diu even after its ransacking by the Arabs in 1669 is known from the accounts of Abbe Carre. Similarly, even Tavernier and Fryer talk about the grand monasteries of the Carmelite and Augustinian orders respectively in Goa. It is to be noted here that all these travellers had come to India in the second half of seventeenth century when the Estado was in the process of a steady decay.

The hypocrisy of the Portuguese colonial society is worth mentioning when the economic status of the different estates/classes is taken into consideration. While the higher classes earned enormously even in the mid 17th century, the third estate, especially the soldados struggled to keep themselves alive in an alien land right in the 15th century. Even the soldados were born in Portugal, but they were devoid of a chance to earn as well as maintain the purity of their blood. In India, their extremely penurious state coaxed them to marry native Indian girls and settle down in India itself. This shows that while on one hand the Portuguese social system believed in the purity of blood and race, on the other it forced the poorer subjects to get 'contaminated'.

The economic and political status of soldados was incomparable to that of the casados. While the pure blooded soldiers had to rebel to get their voices heard, due to their commercial interests the casados had representation in the municipal council. This way the latter could even be heard by the crown in extreme crisis situations where they felt their rights were being infringed upon. In fact, the economic status of even the natives was seen to be better than that of the soldados. On their part, the soldados always awaited the benevolence of the fidalgos till they finally decided to get married to native women.

It could be said that the portuguese colonial society was a class based one, where the status of a constituent of the third estate was incomparable to the first two estates. Undoubtedly the nobility and the bishop classes were far ahead of them and were continuously found using their official and racial status to deepen their pockets. 'The mania for fidalguia or the conviction that only gentleman of blood and coat armour were fitted to exercise high command'



proved to be harmful for the society. While the upper classes could misuse yet retain their power and position, the penurious state of the lower compelled them to take to corrupt means. Consequently, rampant corruption had become a characteristic feature of the colonial society. The sense of oneness among the classes was lost due to inter-state rivalries and differences. The only commonality between them was that of the greed for money and it cost the Estado da India's commercial, religious and political interests in the Indies.

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- 10.Linschoten, p. 2001.
- 11.C.R. Boxer, ibid., p. 6.



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