

Vishvesh Prabhakar Kandolkar
**GOA'S BOM JESUS AS VISUAL
CULTURE: THE BASILICA'S
ARCHITECTURE, IMAGE, HISTORY
AND IDENTITY**

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This book focuses on the cultural and visual history of the Basilica of Bom Jesus, one of the few monuments that survived the decline of Old Goa, the former capital of the Portuguese Estado da Índia. The author, Vishvesh Prabhakar Kandolkar, an associate professor of Architecture at Goa College of Architecture (Goa University), explores the visual culture of this Catholic religious space. He presents the Basilica of Bom Jesus not just as a historical monument but as a symbol deeply intertwined with Goan regional identity and cultural politics. Kandolkar critically examines the ways in which colonial power and visual culture have shaped the building's legacy, enabling it to evolve into a cultural cornerstone for Goa that extends beyond its religious purpose. By reimagining the Basilica as a symbol that transcends religion, Kandolkar positions the Basilica of Bom Jesus as more than just a Portuguese colonial church or a place of worship; it has become a potent emblem reflecting centuries of Goan history, adaptation, resilience, and enduring significance.

The author reveals how colonial photography and visual culture portrayed

the Basilica as a timeless icon of imperial power, detaching it from its social and spatial context. He argues that this representation was part of colonial power strategies that obscured the lived realities and layered histories associated with the church. By prioritizing elite, sanitized, or official versions of history, dominant accounts severed the connection between heritage and everyday lives, collective memories, and ongoing cultural practices of Goan communities. This erasure undermines the recognition of the church as a product of local history and agency, rather than a mere colonial import. To counter this perspective, Kandolkar advocates for decolonial approaches to engaging with these sites, emphasising the significance of local collective memories, indigenous agency, and evolving cultural identities to fully reveal their lived and contested histories. Through these strategies, Kandolkar's work endeavours to decolonize the visual history of Goa's churches by challenging colonial imagery and narratives, ultimately fostering a critical engagement with local history and cultural identity.

One key aspect worth discussing is the methodology employed by the author, which provides a robust foundation for the work. The research weaves social science methods and adopts an interdisciplinary approach, wherein architectural, historical, ecological, and social perspectives converge for holistic research outcomes. This interdisciplinary analysis enables Kandolkar to navigate the complexities of different disciplinary paradigms and ensures meaningful integration

across various fields of knowledge, treating architecture and visual culture studies as deeply embedded in historical, social and political, contexts.

I would like to highlight another crucial aspect that contributes to the academic innovation and impact of this book. Indian religious architecture has been studied in relation to visual culture, encompassing Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, and Christian structures. This body of research often analyzes various architectural styles, including Nagara, Dravidian, and Vesara temples, as well as Buddhist *stupas* and *viharas*, and Indo-Portuguese church designs. Scholars have specifically explored how religious beliefs and rituals influence architectural forms and visual representations, emphasizing that religious architecture functions not only as physical structures but also as culturally and visually significant spaces. Of particular note is George Michell, whose extensive documentation and research on the architecture of Hampi focuses on the temple complexes of the Vijayanagara Empire and their rich visual and cultural symbolism.

Some scholars have specifically examined the relationship between visual culture and Catholic religious architecture in India. Among them is Jose Kalapura, who, through extensive research on Indian Christian art and architecture, has documented the evolution of architecture in India by incorporating multiple influences, including local Indian traditions and Western European styles. While there is a substantial body of research on Indo-Portuguese architecture in Goa, primarily authored by Portuguese historians and art experts, there remains a notable lack of consistent and original studies in the realms of visual culture and architecture. This book aims to address that gap, providing a unique and innovative contribution by delving into a largely uncharted area of study.

Unlike traditional academic histories that often prioritize colonial or elite viewpoints, Kandolkar advocates not only for a decolonial but also from a bottom-up perspective. His approach critically re-examines visual and textual archives and re-centers local Goan histories, identities, and craftsmanship that academic histories often downplay or ignore. He illustrates that conventional academic histories are incomplete or partial, shaped by colonial agendas that marginalise important aspects such as caste, gender, and socio-political dimensions of the churches' heritage. Kandolkar critiques these narratives for presenting the past as settled and coherent, whereas he foregrounds its fragmented, palimpsestic, and contested nature. Therefore, this book disrupts the power structures behind the production of academic history and calls for a more critical, reflective, and inclusive methodology that acknowledges the complex, dynamic realities of Goa's colonial churches within their local social and political milieu. Such reframing invites historians, conservationists, and audiences to reconsider who writes history, whose voices are amplified, and how cultural heritage is represented and preserved.

In essence, Kandolkar's research offers a fresh perspective on Basilica of Bom Jesus, and, by extension, on Goa's colonial churches, challenging conventional views that regard them as static artifacts of colonization or simple tourist attractions. Instead, he portrays them as vibrant, contested cultural symbols that actively shape and reflect Goan identity, colonial history, and postcolonial realities. By combining thorough historical research with artistic practice, he revitalizes the understanding and preservation of this iconic site. This new perspective is essential for architects, historians, conservationists, and the local community, as they engage with the layered histories and futures of Indo-Portuguese

churches in Goa. Kandolkar links the architectural legacy to broader cultural and political changes over time, shedding light on the ongoing challenges of preserving these churches amid colonial decline, climate change, and postcolonial politics. His work encourages conservation approaches that view these churches as living heritage with complex meanings, rather than merely as museum pieces.

In concluding the book, readers are presented with a compelling invitation – potentially a call to the author – to revisit

some chapters in future inquiries or volumes, widening its constellation of sources and, therefore, keeping alive the critical and analytical dialogue that this work so powerfully inspires.

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