

THE CONVENT OF SANTA MONICA

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Abstract

The Convent of Santa Monica was the first convent built in Portuguese Asia. The Archbishop Dom Aleixo de Menezes was instrumental in setting up this Convent, as he was of the opinion that a monastic way of life would prevent women from going astray and indulging in sin. Initially, admission was open only to European women especially of noble birth, but later the Convent even admitted girls of Jewish origin and newly converted Christians.

The nuns here, strictly followed the vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and led a cloistered life. Apart from religious life, they cultivated various skills such as stitching, embroidery, culinary art, and gardening. Their handicrafts were sold, and the profits from these sales were utilised for running the day to day expense of the convent. Over the years, the convent had a vast amount of resources and assets through various sources, but at the same time it also spent a huge amount on the maintenance of the building and infrastructure. At one point of time, it even became a status symbol for the Portuguese nobility to get their daughters admitted into the convent.

The Convent of Santa Monica did face a setback in the mid 17th century, when the local authorities levelled accusations against them. Yet another blemish to this noble institution was when some of the nuns violated the vows of seclusion and left the convent owing to Church politics.

During its existence of more than two and a half centuries, it has to be admitted that the convent served to bring in high moral standards and strengthen the Christian faith without which the *Estado da India* (Portuguese possessions in the East called State of India) would not be able to survive.

Key words: nuns, Portuguese, foundation, admission, discrimination, skills, revenue

Introduction

One of the well-known ecclesiastical institutions during the rule of the Portuguese was the Convent of Santa Monica; in fact the first convent built in Portuguese Asia, after much opposition from the Crown (Boxer 1965). In fact, when the Archbishop had recommended the setting up of a convent for women in Goa, the King wrote back that an institution of such type, would deter marriages, especially in a place where men outnumbered women, and would thus be a hindrance towards the progress of colonization in India. Hence, in his view it served no advantage to build a convent.

The Viceroy of India spoke on the same lines as the Archbishop, urging the Home Government in Portugal to sanction the establishment of such an institution, as a number of women of noble birth in India, sincerely desired to detach themselves from worldly affairs, dedicating themselves to the will of God. There were others of noble birth who came all the way from Portugal, undertaking risky journeys, with a firm decision to commit themselves to the service of God, in this place. Also leading a monastic way of life would avoid immorality and sinful living, and ensure that women led a life of dignity.

The *Senado de Goa* (Municipality of Goa) agreeing to the Viceroy's contention, persisted in obtaining the King's assent for a convent and sent a letter to the Crown in 1595, to that effect. Opening such an institution would be of great use to women, increasing their faith in the Lord, and also the convent in all its grandeur would become world famous.

In spite of the repeated letters and petitions on the part of the Viceroy, the *Misericordia de Goa* (Holy House of Mercy of Goa) and the *Senado de Goa*, the Crown did not consent to their requests. But years later, King Phillip III changed his views and agreed to the setting up of a convent for women in Goa, in 1599. Probably, this could be because of the intervention of a very eminent personality Archbishop Aleixo de Menezes, who commanded great respect in the Court of the King. This was a time when the Viceroy Martim Castro, had to proceed to Malacca. In his absence, the Archbishop Aleixo de Menezes was asked to take over as the Portuguese Governor of the Portuguese settlements in India, during the period 1606-1609. The latter seized the opportunity to ensure that his plan materialised.

Founding of the Convent

Initially, this Convent was housed in a temporary building and then moved to a new premises, across the road of St. George in the City of Goa, close to the Augustinian monastery.

The Archbishop Aleixo de Menezes, immediately started the work of erecting this edifice. Its foundation was laid by the Archbishop himself on 2nd July 1606- the feast day of the Visitation. In the early stages, the convent faced several difficulties, partly after the departure of the Archbishop to Portugal. Neither the authorities in the City of Goa, nor rich citizens gave financial help to the convent, as had been promised earlier, except for *Dona* (Portuguese term for Mrs.) Catarina Mendonca, who offered a large donation and there by came to the rescue of this institution.

The building was erected over a huge area, which the Archbishop had been able to procure, covering three streets and forty-two houses, worth about 6000 *xerafins* (Portuguese currency) each. These had to be demolished to make place for the huge convent. Indeed, the convent was one of the biggest in the Portuguese Empire, after the one at Odivelas in the outskirts of Lisbon. This huge building was completed after a long period of 21 years i.e. in 1627, at a cost of 2000 *cruzados* (Portuguese currency). Probably, the delay in completing the building was owing to financial problems.

Admission

The convent was placed under the care of an Augustinian (Religious Order) Spanish priest Juan Pinto, who fully dedicated himself to this service. It was occupied no sooner a part of it was completed, in the very year of its foundation. In the 17th century, the admission was given to European women, wanting to lead a religious life, especially to the daughters of the *fidalgos* (nobles), who died leaving them behind, without any financial provision for their dowries.

A large number of girls joined the convent at the very young age of six. At this stage, they were provided with elementary education and singing, while the novitiate began, only after the girls reached puberty. Soon orphan girls who had remained unmarried at the *Recolhimento de Serra* (Recluse House of Our Lady of Serra), were given accommodation at Santa Monica when the Serra was overcrowded. Infact 21 women from the *Recolhimento* joined the *Mosteiro de Santa Monica* (Convent of Santa Monica). Agostinho de Santa Maria- the first Augustinian chronicler, related the details of the ceremony that the new entrants were subject to. A solemn procession was organised, which was presided over by the Bishop, who presented a religious habit to each of the newcomers, as they reached the Church and recited their solemn vows (Gonsalves 1962).

By the second half of the 17th century, the reputation of this convent was enhanced, when the news that one of the nuns by the name of Sr. Mary of Jesus (earlier name *Dona Maria de Crom*)- daughter of a German nobleman and widow of *Dom Manuel de Souza*- had died in this convent on 2nd January 1863, at the age of 78, with scars of stigmata on her hands and breast too, resembling those of Jesus Christ. Her body was dug out on the very next day of her burial, and investigation was conducted by Dr. S. de Azavedo and other medical experts. The portrait of this nun, lying in the coffin, has been framed and is presently exhibited in a passage, which leads from the convent to the church.

Now the convent became well known in a short span of time. According to C. R. Boxer 'it became a kind of status symbol into which, some of the best families of Goa, tried to get one or more of their daughters accepted as novices.' During the second half of the 17th century, there were about 100 nuns, besides the young girls who were educated by them.

Vows and Attire of the Nuns

The nuns of the *Mosteiro* (Convent) took the three customary vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. In addition, they observed the fourth vow to permanently lead a cloistered life. The nuns wore a white habit of rough cotton material in the form of a tunic (a loose dress gathered at the waist with a leather belt). They also wore a scapular.

Initially the convent admitted exclusively European nuns. They were of noble birth and so they wore the black veil over a cap made of white cloth, covering their hair and neck. They were called *Madres* or 'Mothers' or 'Choir-sisters'. At the beginning of the 18th century, when non-European or local women were admitted, they wore the white veil and were called *Sorores* or 'Sisters'. Any suggestion to put an end to the differences were all in vain.

Way of Life

The day of the nuns was well organised, methodical and systematic, beginning very early at 3 am with one hour of prayers, followed by tea. After this, the nuns took care of their personal needs, until the mass, which was held in the chapel of the convent at 7am.

After the mass, the nuns were busy with their studies and other responsible tasks assigned to them. They also educated the other young girls in the convent. It has to be noted that female education in the early centuries of the Portuguese rule, was restricted to the nuns of the *Convento de Santa Monica* and the girls of the *Recolhimento da Serra*.

The nuns also engaged themselves in other tasks allotted to them, such as the cultivation of vegetables, flower-gardening, needle-work, embroidery, making handicraft items, rosaries and pastries. The nuns of the Convent were specialised in many Indo-Portuguese confectionaries.

At noon lunch was served, which comprised of rice, curry, fish twice a week and meat occasionally. On feast days, such as the feast of Santa Monica, St. Augustine, St. Anthony, Christmas, Easter etc, a special menu was cooked. There were many female cooks, along with their assistants who prepared the meals.

After lunch, until 2 o'clock, complete silence was maintained. Even life in the kitchen came to a halt, with the servants retiring to their quarters. At 2 o'clock, the bell would ring for two hours of prayer. After prayer, until the 'Angelus' (a Roman Catholic devotion commemorating the incarnation, said in the morning, noon and at sunset), the nuns continued their work. At 7 in the evening, the nuns took a stroll in their garden, enjoying the cool breeze and refreshing themselves, before retiring to their rooms.

At night, they would meet at the chapel for night prayers. On feast days, the nuns sang the vespers (a service of evening prayer) in the Convent chapel, to the accompaniment of the organ, violin and guitar. Dinner was served at 8 o'clock, followed by community meeting. The nuns fasted twice a week and more often, during the Lenten and Advent seasons.

According to the rules, the nuns had to confess and receive the Eucharist twice a week. During illness they would confess every day, including on feast days of saints and festivals like Christmas and Easter. The nuns also entertained themselves occasionally. For eg. On Christmas day, they even danced, but all fun was modest and decent. Some nuns spent their time composing verses that were very sentimental and graceful (Kloguen 1910).

By and large, the nuns were not allowed to speak privately with one another, except with their Superior. Visitors were permitted once a month, except during Advent, Lent, Sundays and holy days. These visits were restricted only to parents and immediate family members and that too they could speak only through a small *locutorio* (visiting space) known among the nuns as *purgatorio* (purgatory). Another nun would stand close by and listen to the conversation. Other outsiders were not allowed, except for doctors in times of illness -and that too in the presence of the Superior- and the priest for confessions and to administer the Sacrament to the sick. The Archbishop would visit the convent every year, along with two or more priests.

The cells of the nuns were plain and had the bare minimum, a bed, a crucifix on the wall or a statue of the Virgin Mary, a table and chair and a container of holy water. So it was a modest room, without much comfort.

Regardless of the routine and monotony of convent life, yet a number of women were inspired to join the convent and gave up their worldly life. The Convent of Santa Monica provided them with an honest alternative to marriage. Hence the number of women wishing to dedicate their life to God, went on increasing, and it was difficult to accommodate them in the said convent.

Now letters were sent to the local authorities, requesting to establish yet another convent. Even rich people were ready to erect convents dedicated to Santa Clara or St. Francis Xavier, because of their intense devotion to these saints, and in the belief that this would save their souls (Silva Correia 1951). One such lady was *Dona Catarina de Mendonca*, baptised in the Church of Our Lady of Light, married to a nobleman. She became a widow at a young age. Her only child- a daughter expired at the age of ten. She then renounced the worldly glamour and channelized her wealth towards the construction of the convent. Her aim now on, was to dedicate her life to Jesus Christ, whose love she believed was true and unconditional.

Work of Art and Skills

The nuns at Santa Monica had a busy day, always occupied in the various tasks assigned to them. Apart from their religious life, they engaged themselves in stitching and embroidery. Intricate designs were embroidered on altar cloths and church vestments. Infact, at one point of time, when the Viceroy Joao da Silva Telo de Menezes urged the nuns to pray in a special way, to safeguard the Portuguese against the Dutch, who had invaded the harbour of Mormugao in 1643, the nuns not only offered prayers, but artistically stitched a banner with the symbol of Portugal, and the portrait of *Immaculade Conceicao* (Our Lady of Immaculate Conception) on one side, and the miraculous cross on the other side. This banner was hoisted on the Mormugao fort, which gave courage to the soldiers, and emboldened them to fight the enemy and win their cause. The nuns thus served as a driving force towards the entrenchment of the Portuguese rule in Goa.

Yet some other specializations of the nuns were making artificial flowers, rosaries, scapulars, colours from dyes and ink from black pigments called carbon blocks and black soot. A pointed wooden pen called stylus was dipped in this ink for writing purpose.

The nuns excelled in culinary art. Their recipes combined both, the Indian and the Portuguese cuisines. They made excellent fruit preserves, syrups, pastries and sweets, to name a few *bebinca* (layered cake), *bolinhas*, *dedos de damas* ladies fingers), *doce-bhaji* made of wheat and coconut, *fios de ovos*, *petas das freira*, *queijadinhas de conde* etc. The recipes of these delicacies were well guarded secrets with the nuns.

In addition to the above activities, the nuns could get their stock of fruits and vegetables, from their very own vast gardens and orchards, which contained beautiful flowers, fruit- trees and vegetable plantations. The gardens were well irrigated with water from the tanks and the twelve wells in the Convent campus. The wells were given biblical names such as Jacob's well, the Good Samaritan well etc.

The surplus produce, handicrafts and confectionaries produced by the nuns were sold in the market by the slaves. The profits acquired from these sales, were utilised for the day to day expenses of the Convent. The Viceroy- Count of Linhares, by his letter dated 4th February 1630, approved of such sales (Gray 1888).

The nuns were assisted by the servants and slaves, because there was always enough work to be done at the Convent of Santa Monica, which required extra hands. The male labour would often do the outside work in the compound. The Convent had a work force of 120 servants and slaves. Historical records mention that the nuns of Santa Monica lamented about the shortage of slaves for such a huge convent, when there were some others who owned a huge number of slaves including the *Juiz Ordinario* (cadre of a judge) who had eighty-five slaves, while an average lawyer of the King known as the *Disembargador*, owned over sixty slaves (Boxer 1881).

Education

The Convent of Santa Monica was a very important institution imparting education, though it was restricted only for the nuns here, who were leading a secluded life-called *voto perpetuo da clausura*. However, there were occasions when the nuns were offered opportunities to display their talents to outsiders, and this won for them the admiration of one and all.

Novices at Santa Monica were taught to read and write in Portuguese, as well as the Latin language. Further, they were taught needle-work and to sing and play a musical instrument. Most often, the nuns were good in reciting poetry.

There were educational institutions affiliated to this convent. To the west, there was the School of the Saviour- *Aula do Salvador*, also very close to it were the School of Mother of God- *Aula de Madre de Deus* and School of Santa Clara- *Aula de Santa Clara*. Different subjects were taught in these schools for different age levels. But all said and done, the education was restricted to the residents of the nunnery (Souza 1990). Through this education, the nuns were far from ignorance and superstition, which dominated the 16th and 17th centuries.

Sources of Revenue

The main sources of revenue were:

1. Agricultural Income: the convent possessed a number of rich-yielding paddy fields in Bardez taluka, in the areas of Mapusa-Corlim, Ucassaim, Nachinola, Aldona, Assnora, Guirim, Sangolda, Calangute. Besides, it also received income from the palm-groves in the City of Goa, island of Chorao, Siolim, Marna, Verem and Malim.
2. Rental Properties, Shops as Dowries:
The convent received rent in silver, from the villages of Marvor and Dalvora, situated in Daman. Rent amounting to \$60,000, was received from the estate of Cruvinel in Lisbon, in the early years. However around 1874, this was discontinued.
During the second half of the 17th century, there were about 100 girls at the convent, who carried a large dowry. When a girl joined the convent, she brought along *dote* (dowry) in cash and kind. It was meant for her maintenance. For eg. Sr. Ilena da Madre de Deus was given as dowry, five rental properties on the Rua de Cedas. Sr. Catarina de Jesus received as dowry, rent from three shops in Chorao, four shops in Diwar and one shop in Jua. Rent from a commercial building on the Rua de Baneanes was the dowry acquired by Sr. Maria do Salvador.
Incidentally the collection of land from these properties was entrusted to Hindu renters-*arrendatarios* Guiba S. Virlicar and Purisrama Sinai, who would then hand over the rent to the convent.
From the property in St. Estevam, the convent received income by way of *jonos* (shares). The bakers from the City of Goa, would pay an annual rent to the convent for utilising the shops of the convent.
3. Houses- bought, gifted or received as dowries:
The convent purchased a number of houses in the City of Goa. Eg. Three houses on the Rua dos Xerrefos, three double-storeyed houses on the Rua dos Chapeleiros and elsewhere in the City, some more houses. Houses were not only bought, but also built by the Convent on the land that it purchased from the sons of George de Lemos.
Other houses were acquired by it, as a dowry given to the nuns.
Some two storeyed houses behind Bom Jesus were gifted by people, in exchange for prayers and masses, to be recited for the departed members of the donors.
4. Other Sources of Income:
The nuns sold in the market their handicrafts- such as embroideries, artificial flowers, rosaries, scapulars, colours, ink toys, bead necklaces, pastries, preservatives, sweets, syrups, fruits and vegetables from their kitchen- garden. The income that they acquired from the sale, was used for their sustenance. Yet another source of income was the donations and gifts in cash or kind, for the prayers offered by the nuns.
In addition to the above, those who held responsible offices in the convent were given a grant of forty-four *xerafins*. Further, they were provided with seven and a half *candis* of paddy, eleven hands (the unit of measure 10.16 cms.) of wheat, seventy-five *xerafins* for their clothes, forty *xerafins* towards feast expenses and seventy-five *xerafins* for other miscellaneous expenses. This was utilised for the upkeep and maintenance of the convent, as well as for the wages of the domestic workers.
With all this dowry, as well as its own assets, the convent acquired a large *cabedal* (funds). Hence very often, it played the role of money-lender, lending substantial sums to private traders. There were some occasions however, when the convent refused loans to the State, portraying itself as poor.

The Fading Away of the Glorious Santa Monica

With the decline of the City of Goa, the Convent of Santa Monica began to lose its prominence. The City faced its decline, as it was plagued with epidemics, which occurred as a result of sewage water, sipping into the wells of drinkable water, including the wells in the premises of the convent (Fonseca 1879).

In 1606, when the convent was founded, it had 661 nuns, coming from different parts of the world including Portugal, Macau, Mozambique, Mombasa, Malacca, Ormuz, Ceylon and India. Out of these 661, 494 nuns who were considered of higher rank wore the black veil, while the rest 167 nuns used the white veil.

In 1804, the convent had sixty-one nuns and four novices. By 1827, the number of nuns came down to thirty, and by 1834, the convent had only six nuns. The following year 1835, the Religious Orders were banned by the order of the government, as a result of which, all the convents were closed down in Goa, with the exception of the Convent of Santa Monica. Hence now, the convent decided not to admit anymore novices, so the number of nuns dwindled to four. The last nun to die in the convent was Soror Maria do Espirito Santo, daughter of Aires Jose Gomes, from Cavelossim Salcete, Goa, on 20th March 1885.

Thus the parting words of Archbishop Aleixo de Menezes –while leaving Goa- to the first Prioress *Dona Filipa* regarding the future of the convent, had come true. He had said at the time ‘ Sister, the roots of the Convent are in heaven’.

Conclusion

During the 276 years of its existence, about 661 nuns had taken vows in the convent. It has to be admitted that the Convent of Santa Monica had helped many women to realize their aspirations through the monastic way of life, in order to attain the more noble values of life, where their dignity and worth could well be upheld.

The Royal Ordinance of 29th December 1873, stipulated that the Convent of Santa Monica together with its properties, be handed over to the Archdiocese of Goa. On 19th December 1961, the Portuguese left the convent and the Indian army overtook it. By the end of the year, the Indian army vacated the convent premises.

At the same time, there was a need to have a Formation House, to conduct courses for young nuns. The Internuncio of India (Representative of the Pope in India) Archbishop Monsignor J. R. Knox, chose the Convent of Santa Monica for the purpose. It was in a miserable condition, in ruins and uninhabitable. But no one had the heart to raze down this once upon a time grandiose structure.

Now funds had to be acquired to undertake its renovation. Fortunately, a generous donation was sanctioned from the German Bishop’s Fund, which was well utilised towards this cause. The Santa Monica Convent, now renamed as Institute Mater Dei, was ready on 5th June 1964, as the country’s pioneering Sister Formation Centre.

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