

Focus 85 – South Asian Humans of Lisboa (I): What Is To Be Done?

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Abstract

South (and East Asians) increasingly roam the streets of Lisbon. We all share the same spaces, under the same sun – and meet each other on a daily basis. However, we tend not to talk to each other, much less cross stares; there is little to no communication, hence no mutual understanding, much less solidarity... This Focuses series is based on the conviction that things don't have to be that way. Walls can be broken, bridges built; a sort of theoretical background is provided in this article n° 1.

South Asian brothers in Lisbon – A Series

This is a series of SADF Focuses called 'South Asian Humans in Lisbon'. As the name implies, the goal is to focus on the South Asian brothers and sisters anonymously roaming the streets of Lisbon. The main assumption is that there is immense room for greater communication and even perhaps mutual understanding between Western and South Asian civilizations as they cross paths across the hills by the Tejo river.

But before one turns to the specific realities lived under Lisbon's sun, some 'macro data' should be mentioned that is perhaps much relevant to the 'micro' matter at hand. For instance, of the around 8.5 billion people (Roser & Rodés-Guirao, 2023) sharing our earth today, over 2 billion are South Asians (Worldometer, 2023). That's about one in four. India alone is home to almost 1.5 billion people (Macrotrends, 2023) – that's about one in six. Together with China, which also hosts almost 1.5 billion souls... Almost one in each three humans on this earth is either Indian or Chinese *alone*. To say nothing of everybody else down in South-East and East Asia. The numbers are overwhelming: the world we live in is de facto overwhelmingly Asian. And economic trends seem to be catching up fast.

Now. On the other hand, Europe is home to about 800 million people – but only if you count the whole of Russia in... among other dubious choices. By itself, the Europe Union

holds about 450 million people – that’s almost one in twenty! The continent is also facing populational decline (Bello, 2023). And economic trends do not seem to linger much beyond, by the way. As regards Portugal, a small country on the westernmost tip of Eurasia, it is home to a very modest 10 million people (World Population Review, 2023). It’s a quiet little country with a very fashionable capital called Lisbon (Lisboa in Portuguese).

Portugal was the first European country to go out there and discover new worlds during the Renaissance. However, Lisbon had its cosmopolitan heyday many moons ago. Lisbon was both once one of the most culturally varied cities in the world and (much more recently) one of the most closed. In fact, isolation and autarchy are far better remembered by locals – every day in general; especially right now, as the yearly celebrations regarding the end of over 50 years of fascism (in 1974) is coming up on 25 April. Yes, 50+ years of ‘proudly alone’ [in the world; inter alias] are still hard to forget.

Figure 1 – A Poster created in 2007 in answer to an anti-immigration campaign



Note 1: One can read ‘More immigration! The most effective way to annoy foreigners is to make them live in Portugal. Welcome! Portuguese people [alone] just won’ cut it – nationalism is silly.’ A national laughter episode ensued.

Note 2: By Gato Fedorento, 2007, ‘Mais Imigração!’. From Republica e Laicidade, Cartaz xenóforo passou a estar (bem) acompanhado (2007). <https://www.laicidade.org/cartaz-xenofobo-passou-a-estar-bem-acompanhado-2/> In the public domain.

And yet – in turn, almost 50 years have gone by since 1974; today Lisbon hosts African populations, Eastern and South Asian populations, ‘traveller communities’, ‘expat communities’, and an unending ocean of western tourists brought by cheap flights. Lisbon is no longer ‘proudly alone’ – as globalization further and further unfolds, it’s highly unlikely isolation will ensue in the foreseeable future. So, since multiculturalism – multi-

‘civilizationism’! – is a fact of life, shouldn’t we make the best of it? Wouldn’t it be nice if could get all these different universes to truly mingle and truly share what they have experienced in this world of ours?

So an initiative was designed in that spirit – inspired by the wonderful work found in ‘Humans of New York’ (<https://www.humansofnewyork.com>). This is the first text of a series dedicated to understanding Lisbon’s South Asian communities a little better. It’s not an easy task, because despite the frantic contact between locals and South Asians, there is little communication. Which alone is a strong reason why it’s worth making an effort to go out there and make things happen.

The first reason of many.

Because It’s Like That [And That’s The Way It Is]

Figure 2 – a Picture from Lisbon’s 2022 Diversity Fest



Note: By Betzy Arosemena, 2022, ‘Festa da Imigração’. From: Bantumen: Festa Da Diversidade Em Lisboa Com Saberes, Sabores E Sons Do Mundo (2022). <https://bantumen.com/festa-da-diversidade-sons/> Copyright Betzy Arosemena, 2022.

In June 2022, there was yet another beautiful event in Lisbon – Lisbon’s Diversity Fest. Diversity, hence difference, hence novelty and so much to learn - of course we’re in! We do have so much to learn in this first proper summer since Covid ... Also, June in Lisbon is pure Joy – so what’s new under this sun?

Specifically, one was hoping to learn tons about an enormous elephant in the oh-so-narrow-streets of Alfama: Lisbon’s South- and East-Asian communities. For in Lisbon we see our Asian brothers (more than we see sisters), of many types and colours, every single day

and every single where – yet we know them not, much less understand at all. East Asians (in our infinite ignorance, we can only say they do all look Chinese) have been around for a longer time; whole families run various restaurants and shops across town. However, not only do they not mingle, it almost seems like these brothers-in-soul do not even roam the streets like the rest of us. South Asians are of more recent arrival, and quite different as well; almost all men, they keep shops and restaurants downtown, tech spots a bit all over – and they're everywhere, very conspicuous (even more nowadays on bikes and cars working for various 'Bolts' and 'Glovo's'). Not a day goes by that we fail to meet several South Asian brothers out there. And yet, even as one can cross path with ten such souls an hour, one dares you to try and establish eye contact with any – it just won't happen. The wall in between is mighty indeed.

Hence the Diversity Fest, a place where all such ignorance ceases to be. One imagined the glory of new worlds to be endeavoured: the stands with 'Asian' paraphernalia, the brochures, the smiling faces and eagerness to share, the universes unknown to be discovered about 'both communities' (yes, that is how westerners perceive the multitude of human groups from this 'part of the world')... well. Maybe you've guessed: it was not to be. Lisbon's true diversity was just not there. Instead, the stands represented left-wing social action communities, African and Luso-African communities, and the gay community. Which of course was awesome, and a lot of fun; that's not the point. There was obviously a concert, which again reflected these three communities alone, and there was... wait for it... yes, a joyful and oh-so-happy march, with singing and dancing and all that is best in humanity. Only there was not a single yellow-beige-or-brown brother to see.

One asked at the SOS Racism stand – So, what about our Indian friends? Our Chinese brothers? The answer was swift (a municipal election had just taken place, and a right-wing figure had won): we are lucky enough we can mount this little gathering at all! A million obstacles were laid down by the city council, new times are upon us, and they are not a pretty sight, and please do take note of all this crucial information regarding the number of fights we do undertake, and...

And yes that's exactly what one did, learn about the many and so honourable fights, thank the beautiful girl for her dutiful service, and go check out those awesome African dresses a few stands further.

And that was that.

And that was that; that's still it – almost a year in, and still no sign of Asian representation in our mainstream [white] social groups and organisations.

Things Are What We Make of Them

What can be done to increase communication and understanding between Portuguese Lisbonners, Westerners, and our South Asian brothers?

It's not obvious. Plus public opinion is not as clear cut as it recently was. Most unfortunately, perhaps of course, in Portugal today we do have our significant share of retrograde xenophobes – unlike what was the case in 2007. They're loud; the media doesn't help, and the circus goes on. Our 'ultra' right-wingers, like all 'ultra' right wingers, blame their own and the nation's problems on ethnic and cultural minorities – unless there aren't any such communities, as is the case for example in the Azorean islands; the proverbial 'materially poor' then become the main target. It is likely that, if and when bridges begin to be crossed regarding our Eastern brothers on a collective basis, some fury will be publicly expressed. Could the scandal be exploited so as to unite the country's progressive forces (much stronger in numbers) and face all obstacles together, as a multicultural whole capable of cooperating beyond borders and indeed beyond civilizations? Probably. But the first step – something to get retrogrades furious – has to occur. How? It's not obvious.

On the other hand, something should be mentioned upright: Portugal's Prime Minister is himself of Indian descent (from Goa). He's been Prime Minister for almost a decade (since 2015); that is, he got elected when this was not in European fashion at all – although also before the Portuguese 'ultra' right wing (very suddenly) 'emerged' on the Portuguese political scene in 2019. And, equally importantly we think, his skin 'betrays his origins'. And – one believes this is the best part – no one ever mentioned the obvious fact at the time. At least not in the media or so that anyone would notice. No one mentioned our new PM was 'coloured' because it was irrelevant – most truly irrelevant, not just Public-Relations irrelevant. Hence a great, great source of hope in the nation's morals – and future.

So one cannot provide the how – at all, right now. But one can think of the why.

Figure 3 – South Asian Presence in Downtown Lisbon



Note: On the left, one of the countless mini supermarkets downtown, this one near Lisbon's Cathedral ('Sé'; the owner slipped out of the picture); on the right, Sumon from Bangladesh with his tuk tuk at Praça do Comércio reluctantly accepted to be photographed...

Pictures taken by the author, April 2023.

One has mentioned the population numbers – which alone very, very strongly suggest the need to build bridges with the much-more-powerful-than-us potential ally. But Asians today are not strong only in populational numbers, impressive as these may be. Another very big thing South and East Asians have going for them is, well, their money. The multitude of commercial spaces across town won't rent themselves (neither will tickets from Bangladesh, India or Nepal buy themselves). Such Asian money is an integral part of the new dynamics in Lisboa's old city centre (so profoundly derelict just a decade ago). Asian financial proactivity and dynamism – Asians investments – are crucial. So there's a very material, or 'un-spiritual' way of seeing things which would also advise greater communication and cooperation between civilizations in Lisbon. Now – would we rather prefer Portuguese to invest in these areas? As Portuguese ourselves, of course we would. Would property owners rather lease to Portuguese? Probably. The reason they don't is also probably because there is no Portuguese demand. So Asian immigrants, like all immigrants, are filling economic gaps the Portuguese cannot fill right now – and helping the country develop along the way. Regardless of what one believes the Big Picture to be – although lack of money is never a good sign, while abundance of money always tends to always be a good sign indeed – it's no one's fault that Portuguese demand in the area is lacking; it's certainly not the fault of people from half-way across the world. Yet we can still be thankful our Asian brothers are helping

out – and we can reach out. Because, as we know so well in Portugal & in Lisbon, isolation is not a successful option. One may add – especially not in globalization times! Well.

So. Asian money, Asian numbers, Asian futures... What about Asian spirits? This argument for increasing communication and understanding with our Eastern brothers is probably the strongest. The only humans not deeply impressed by South-Asian, South-east Asian, and East Asian millenary cultures are those ignorant regarding said cultures. Which in fact most westerners are – including we, who despite over a decade of anthropological learning and research feel infinitely more ignorant than all Socrates combined when the Buddha or even Yoga (not to mention the Vedas, or Confucianism!) are mentioned. One must read, one must read more, one must learn, learn forever more, and learn again! Yes, indeed, or perhaps. However, ‘civilization’ from books is never exactly ‘actually lived civilization’; a conversation with an actual Hindu, or Buddhist, or Confucianist in a downtown café about what he/she deems her culture’s main philosophies can probably teach more than many a hundred pages or even the very best academic material... or at least as much.

Things are what we make of them. There are some obstacles to increasing cross-cultural dialogue – but is there life without obstacles at all? Further, political trends – both historical and contemporary – can perhaps be counted on to surpass such initial animosities. And on the other hand, there is every reason – populational, economical, spiritual, just plain ethical – to foster greater communication and cooperation. Finally, everyone involved, from Lisbon to the Maldives and much beyond, has, in our times of globalization, everything it takes to understand each other much better.

Let’s make the most of all these factors?

Conclusion – What Is To Be Done?

As Tolstoy so liked to ask, ‘What Is To Be Done?’

What is to be done? How to increase our communication and cooperation with our South Asian brothers? It is not obvious. And that’s a good thing, because ‘Obvious Plans’, those pristine strategies, always tend to turn out ‘not at all like planned for’ when they hit actual facts (and real people, and all the rest).

So, something to be done, but no Grand Plan. More of a step by Step, adapting to what happens modus operandi. It’s a series called ‘South Asian Humans of Lisbon’; it’s based on illustrated interviews with South Asian brothers and sisters around Lisbon. It’s a bottom-up, street-based endeavour; as the name suggests it’s based on person-to-person interactions

and mutual understandings. Many options are available: there's a 'Hindu Centre' uptown, founded by Portuguese returnee immigrants in the 1970s, quite posh and all (don't return emails though); there are clearly several more 'popular' community centres downtown, especially along Avenida Almirante reis; and of course, there's the Martim Moniz square, where Asian communities (some African brothers as well) are quite simply the resident/present communities. Although one would like to start with people on the street, all universes will be covered.

Do you think the project 'South Asian Humans of Lisbon' will work out? Provide useful information, contribute to meaningful understandings, create new bonds across town? We do hope it will, sooner rather than later – it's just not obvious how yet. Needless to say, we're starting anyway – and right away. Write you soon!

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