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THE PREFECT AND THE POTATO: BERNARDO PERES DA SILVA AND THE POLITICS OF AGRICULTURE IN THE 'AGE OF REVOLUTIONS'

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ABSTRACT

Medical doctor, liberal revolutionary, parliamentarian, and promoter of new agricultural crops. Born in Goa, in a Catholic Brahmin family, Bernardo Peres da Silva (1775-1844) was the first and only Indian to be nominated as governor of the Portuguese Empire in Asia and a remarkable figure in the global 'Age of Revolutions'. His defence of constitutional liberalism and calls for equality between Indians and Europeans have led C.A. Bayly to compare him with the Bengali reformer Rammohan Roy. Nonetheless, although his career spanned three continents, Peres remains mostly unknown outside the narrow confines of the historiography of Goa. Taking his life and works as a case study, this paper explores the place of South Asia and the agency of colonised peoples in the Age of Revolutions. By focusing on his writings on agricultural improvement and on his appeals for the introduction of new crops in Goa, it argues that agriculture played a key role in Peres da Silva's political and economic thinking and in his attempts to fashion a patriotic and romantic Goan liberalism.

Keywords: Potatoes, Age of Revolutions, Agricultural Improvement, Colonialism, India.
JEL Codes: B10, N55.

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What can potatoes tell us about the history of Portuguese colonialism in South Asia in the 'Age of Revolutions'? At first glance, this may seem like an unusual question. Native to the highlands of the Andes, in South America, potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) were first cultivated by local populations between 8,000 and 7,000 BCE. Providing abundant crops and a relatively high-calorie intake, freeze-dried potatoes (*chuño*) sustained the Inca Empire that dominated the region between the mid-1400s and the early-1500s. After the arrival of the Spanish *conquistadores* in the sixteenth century, potatoes slowly spread to the Canary Islands and mainland Spain and then across Europe.[1] The spread of potato cultivation was, therefore, a part of the global circulation of people, plants, animals, and diseases inaugurated by the expansion of the Iberian empires that Alfred Crosby famously described as the 'Columbian Exchange'. Nonetheless, potatoes tend to play a relatively minor role in most historical narratives of European colonialism, especially when compared with cash crops like coffee, cotton, and sugar.[2]

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, however, potatoes suddenly became a widespread topic of discussion across Europe. From Scandinavia to the Iberian Peninsula, monarchs and ministers issued edicts promoting the cultivation of potatoes, scientific academies and economic societies published agronomical treatises on the best methods of cultivation and awarded prizes for the most bountiful crops, and philosophers and agronomists debated the virtues of the potato as cheap and nourishing food. To enthusiasts like the Prussian king Frederick II or the French chemist Antoine-Auguste Parmentier, the cultivation and consumption of potatoes would not only put an end to scarcity and hunger. It would be a source of 'public happiness' and 'public good'. As Rebecca Earle noted recently, this rhetoric of potato promotion reflected "the advent not of a new foodstuff, but rather of new ideas about the relationship between the health and vigour of the population, and the wealth and power of the state".[3] In this sense, 'enlightened' discourses around potato cultivation must be understood in the context of broader debates about political economy, natural history, and agricultural reform and the reconceptualization of the links between statecraft, territory, and population.[4]

These debates have often been framed through a European lens. But far away from the *salons* of the French *philosophes* and the palaces of

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[1] Earle 2020: 23-24; McNeill 1999; Salaman 1949.

[2] Crosby 2003 [1972]. On the relatively invisibility of tuber crops in historical narratives, see Bray *et al.* 2023: 186.

[3] Earle 2018: 148. See also Id. 2019; 2020: 52-78.

[4] Foucault 2009; Jones 2016; Roberts 2014; Spary 2014.

European monarchs, in the small Portuguese colony of Goa, the liberal physician Bernardo Peres da Silva was also an advocate for the virtues of the potato. The only indigenous Goan to govern the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*, before being deposed by a military coup after only 17 days, Bernardo Peres da Silva is a remarkable figure in the global history of the 'Age of Revolutions'. His defence of constitutional liberalism and calls for equality between Indians and Europeans led C.A. Bayly to compare him with the Bengali reformer Rammohan Roy.[5] Yet he also wrote extensively on matters related to agriculture and argued for the introduction of new foodstuffs and cash crops in the colony. Therefore, Peres's story provides a fascinating case study to explore the entanglements between politics, agriculture, and empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

There is an extensive body of literature on the role that natural history, economic botany, and ideas of 'improvement' played in European colonial expansion.[6] This article builds on this literature to examine how ideas, texts, and plants travelled across an increasingly globalised world, but also how they were appropriated, adapted, and repurposed by local populations. Drawing on Emma Spary's notion that the vocabulary of "medicine, natural history, and agriculture" framed the emergence of a new political language at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, it argues that agricultural reform was central to the political and economic discourses of the first generation of Goan liberals.[7] In this context, questions like what crops to cultivate and how to cultivate them were not lateral to politics. They were decisive in shaping a patriotic vision of the future of Goa within a constitutional empire. The text is divided into four interconnected parts. The first situates Goa in the broader history of the 'Age of Revolutions'. The second and third explore the turbulent career of Bernardo Peres da Silva and the role of agriculture in his political and economic thought. Finally, the fourth part returns to the topic of potato promotion, to examine how the introduction of new crops and foodstuffs fit into Peres's programme of political reform.

1. Colonial Goa in the 'Age of Revolutions'

The decades from roughly 1760s to 1840 are often referred to by historians as the 'Age of Revolutions'. This period was marked by a

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[5] Bayly 2012: 46-47. See also Id. 2007.

[6] Arnold 2005; Drayton 2000; Schiebinger 2004.

[7] Spary 2000: 4.

succession of crisis and conflicts, by the disruption of established hierarchies and traditions, by new ways of understanding nature and humanity by the emergence of new conceptions of political community and sovereignty, and in the words of a leading historian by the "quest to create new foundations for social life while old rules and norms decomposed".[8] The concepts and ideas that emerged from this era of turmoil and upheaval were complex, contested, and often contradictory. But, in many ways, they continue to shape the world in which we live. This history is often narrated through the prism of transformations that took place in Europe and the Atlantic world, precipitated by the American (1776), French (1789), and Haitian (1791) revolutions of the late eighteenth century, followed by the generalised warfare of the Napoleonic Wars, and by the independence of the Iberian colonies in the Americas in the 1820s. However, in a recent book, Sujit Sivasundaram convincingly argued that we need to consider the histories of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the role of indigenous people as active agents in the global struggle between revolution and counter-revolution that characterised this period.[9]

The Portuguese colony of Goa, on the western coast of India, is in many ways an ideal place to decentre the established narratives of the 'Age of Revolutions'. The Portuguese conquered the island Tiswadi or Goa in 1510, annexing the nearby areas of Salcete and Bardez in the 1540s. This made Goa one of the oldest European colonies in Asia. Yet by the mid-1700s the colony was undergoing significant changes. At the beginning of the century, it was no longer the "universal fair and emporium of the East" it had been 200 years before.[10] But it was still the centre of an imperial network that stretched from Mozambique to Macau. The following decades saw the slow but terminal decline of Goa as an entrepot in the maritime trade between Asia and Europe, the progressive abandonment of the former capital of Old Goa (*Velha Goa*), after a series of epidemic outbreaks, the creation of a separate colonial administration in Mozambique, and the loss to the Marathas of the extensive territories of the Northern Province (*Província do Norte*), in what is now northern Maharashtra and southern Gujarat. These losses were somewhat compensated by the territorial expansion of Goa to the so-called New Conquests (*Novas Conquistas*), more than trebling the total surface area of the colony.[11] However, by the early-1800s Goa was an increasingly isolated colonial outpost ruling over the dispersed remnants

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[8] Adelman 2006: 2. See also Bayly 2010; Armitage and Subrahmanyam 2010.

[9] Sivasundaram 2020: 1-15.

[10] Luz 1960 [1582]: 6.

[11] Ferreira 2021.

of the Portuguese empire in Asia and facing the growing hegemony of the British East India Company.

This territorial retrenchment was accompanied by the growing interest of the colonial authorities in agriculture. This interest was not entirely new. From the early 1500s, Portuguese officials had sought to gather information about the land and its produce.[12] Yet, for the most part, they were primarily concerned with ensuring a regular flow of revenue, leaving the management of agricultural production to local peasants and 'village communities'. That began to change in the mid-1700s, giving way to a more interventionist approach. In part, this was a response to colonial concerns over the declining revenue of the maritime trade and the loss of the *Província do Norte*, whose rich agricultural lands had provided rice and other foodstuffs to Goa. But it was also a product of broader discourses of imperial reform that were gaining traction in the Iberian courts and their colonial territories in this period. Concerned with the perceived 'backwardness' of the Portuguese empire in the face of its British and French rivals, statesmen like Sebastião de Carvalho e Melo, marquis of Pombal, and his successors in the running of colonial affairs, Martinho de Melo e Castro and Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho, strove to avert imperial decline through a series of administrative and economic reforms.[13] Under the Intendancy of Agriculture (*Intendência de Agricultura*), created in 1776 as part of a larger reorganisation of the institutional framework of the *Estado da Índia*, colonial authorities would therefore attempt (with limited success) to bolster the agricultural production of Goa, reducing its dependency on imported rice and introducing new foodstuffs and cash crops, like manioc and cotton.[14]

Finally, the most wide-reaching transformation of this period was the rise of the Goan Catholic elites in the political and social order of the colony. From the outset, Portuguese rule had been marked by the (sometimes forced) conversion of local populations to Christianity. Over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, conversion led to the emergence of a mostly upper-caste Catholic elite, westernised and often fluent in Portuguese and Latin.[15] The tensions between their aspirations as 'loyal vassals' and the structural asymmetries of their status as 'newly converted' imperial subjects were fraught with the potential for conflict. Yet, to a considerable extent, they were able to take advantage of these cross-cultural skills to

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[12] Xavier and Županov 2014.

[13] Adelman 2006: 13-55; Paquette 2013: 17-83.

[14] Dias 2004: 210-215; Rodrigues 2006: 452-466.

[15] Xavier 2022a.

enhance their local position and even to subvert what Partha Chatterjee described as the "logic of colonial difference".[16]

In the reformist environment of the 1760s and 1770s, the losses suffered by the *Estado da Índia* and the increasing dependence of the colonial administration on local populations led to the promulgation of a series of decrees that formally extinguished the juridical distinction between the Goan Catholics and the Portuguese.[17] In theory, this granted them equal access to offices, honours, and privileges. In practice, of course, several forms of discrimination remained in place and Goans were barred from the higher civil, military, and ecclesiastical positions. However, local elites became increasingly confident and forceful in the way they articulated their political and social aspirations. Moreover, these began to be expressed in terms of an 'imagined community' of the "natural sons" (*naturais*) of Goa.[18]

The intersection between these local processes and the broader context of the 'Age of Revolutions' is illustrated by the so-called 'Pinto Conspiracy' of 1787. The leaders of this purported plot to "expel the whites" and establish a "new republic" in Goa were Brahmin clerics and military officers, disillusioned with their continued exclusion from the higher echelons of colonial administration. Some, like Father Caetano Vitorino de Faria and Father José António Gonçalves, had lived in Lisbon and studied in Rome. Their aspirations were based on deep-rooted ideas of caste status and local primacy. But they also seem to have been fuelled by a vaguely defined "gospel of freedom" that combined Enlightenment tropes of 'liberty', 'public happiness', and 'public good' and references to the example of the American Revolution.[19] This conflation of the local and the global can be glimpsed in a letter written by José António Pinto, a student in Lisbon and a relative of some of the suspected conspirators, and later apprehended by the Portuguese authorities as proof of the planned rebellion, where he stated that only the Catholic elites could "know the path to the future happiness" of the colony, "because we know Europe and we know Goa".[20]

Amid frenzied rumours of a planned mass poisoning of Portuguese soldiers, the alleged plot was brutally supressed by the colonial government. Some of the leaders were executed, while others were sentenced to prison

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16 Chatterjee 1993: 5.

17 Xavier 2022a: 9.

18 Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Índia, box 110, Câmara Geral of Bardez to D. Maria I (1-1-1778).

19 Rivara 1875; Xavier 2022b: 107-117.

20 Lopes 1995: 253-254.

or exile. However, after more than a decade of British occupation between 1799 and 1813, in the context of the Napoleonic Wars, political and racial tensions were reignited by the news of the constitutional revolution that began in the Portuguese city of Porto in August 1820. Echoes of the new political situation reached Goa in the following year, where they were enthusiastically received by a small cadre of liberal-leaning military officers and colonial functionaries. The viceroy Count of Rio Pardo was deposed, and a provisional junta was established, aligning itself with the constitutional government in Lisbon.[21] The following years saw almost continual political and military upheaval. Pitting moderates against radicals, liberals against absolutists, and indigenous Goans against Europeans and 'Luso-Descendants', these conflicts paralleled the cycles of revolution and counter-revolution in Portugal and across Southern Europe.[22] But amidst this turmoil, the integrationist language of Portuguese constitutionalism, with its calls for legal equality between the different parts of the empire, was soon being deployed to argue for the political rights of the *naturais* within a newly reformed imperial system.

The emergence of "politics as a domain of citizenship" in early nineteenth-century Goa has been highlighted by historians like Sandra Ataíde Lobo and Rochelle Pinto.[23] Less explored, however, is the extent to which the language deployed by the first generation of Goan liberals was infused with notions of agricultural 'improvement' and 'agrarian patriotism'. This entanglement of politics and agriculture in a colonial context was not exclusive to Goa. In Spanish America, for example, ideas of 'enlightened' reform, scientific inquiries into the natural history of the regional flora and fauna, and more or less utopian projects of improving 'wild' and 'desolate' landscapes through agriculture and the acclimatisation of 'exotic' plants were decisive in shaping the development of patriotic discourses amongst the local *criollo* elites.[24] After the revolutionary turmoil of the 1810s and 1820s, some of these discourses filtered into the political imagination of the newly independent states and naturalists like Francisco José de Caldas or José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez would be hailed as national heroes.

In Brazil, too, the role of "natural philosophy as a form of politics" is illustrated by the career of the Coimbra-trained naturalist José Bonifácio

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21 Abreu 1862. On the Portuguese revolution of 1820 and the meanings of the terms 'liberal' and 'liberalism' in the wider iberoamerican world, see Cardoso 2022; Fernández Sebastián 2009.

22 Isabella 2023.

23 Lobo 2013; Pinto 2007. See also Silva 2009.

24 Brockmann 2020; Cañizares-Esguerra 2006; Lafuente 2000.

de Andrade e Silva, who would later become known as the 'patriarch of independence'.[25] It's not surprising, therefore, that, in his previously mentioned letter, the young Goan student José António Pinto remarked on the "many utilities" that could be brought about by the improvement of agriculture, referring to the cultivation of the vast properties of the family and the introduction of new crops as "the greatest honours we can claim". Returning to Goa in the 1820s, after fleeing Lisbon for Paris and Rome to escape the repression that followed in the aftermath of the 'Pinto Conspiracy' and spending some years as an officer in the Maratha armies, José António dedicated himself to agriculture, "about which he had particular knowledge and selected books", introducing the cultivation of sugarcane in his estates in Bardez.[26]

2. "The fruits of the constitutional tree"

The interconnections between politics and agriculture are particularly evident in the case of Bernardo Peres da Silva. His trajectory from local revolutionary to deputy to the constitutional assembly, from deputy to exile, from exile to government, and then back into exile again is suggestive of the possibilities unleashed by the 'Age of Revolutions'. Yet, ultimately, it also points to the limits of indigenous political ambitions under colonial rule. Born in 1775 to a Catholic Brahmin family in the village of Neurá-o-Grande, on the island of Tiswadi, Bernardo Peres da Silva was still a child when the Portuguese authorities suppressed the alleged conspiracy of 1787.[27] Orphaned early, he was educated in the former Jesuit seminary of Rachol, then run by the Italian Vicentine Order, before obtaining medical training under the colony's chief physician and serving intendant of agriculture, António José de Miranda.[28] His political career began at the municipal senate of Goa, where he appears to have become known for his liberal ideas and staunch defence of the rights of the *naturais*.

In 1821, after the news of the liberal revolution reached the colony, Peres took part in the movement that deposed the viceroy and proclaimed the provisional junta. It was in his home that some of the first clandestine meetings took place, and it was also partly through his contacts with the

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[25] Pádua 2002: 63-67, 130-159; Silva 2024. For a comparison between the Portuguese and Spanish imperial contexts, see Cañizares-Esguerra and Safier 2023.

[26] Lopes 1995: 253-254; Rivara 1875: 153.

[27] For a biographical sketch, see Lobo 2016: 303-313; Oliveira 2020: 72-148.

[28] Bastos 2007: 108-109.

Goan community of Bombay (modern Mumbai) that the conspirators kept informed about the events that were taking place in the metropole and in other parts of the empire.[29] Early in the following year, he was elected as one of three delegates to the Constitutional Assembly (*Cortes Constituintes*) in Lisbon, along with two of his closest collaborators: the Brahmin lawyer Constâncio Roque da Costa and the Portuguese physician and freemason António José de Lima Leitão, a veteran of the Portuguese Legion that had fought alongside the French *Grande Armée* during the Napoleonic Wars.[30]

The journey to Lisbon across an empire in disarray was arduous. Briefly detained in Brazil, which had proclaimed its independence from Portugal in September 1822, the delegates only arrived in Lisbon in May 1823, when the first Portuguese constitutional experiment was on the verge of collapse.[31] Shortly after their arrival, the *Cortes* were dissolved and D. João VI was reinstated as absolute monarch, following an anti-constitutional uprising led by his younger son D. Miguel. Peres spent the following year and a half in Lisbon. During this time, he wrote a series of letters to the king and his ministers proposing political and economic reforms for Goa and, according to the reports sent out by informants to the Portuguese government, read several books on the "disorganising principles" of constitutional liberalism.[32] He returned to Goa in early 1825, accompanied by secret instructions ordering that he should be kept under close surveillance due to his "sinister" political opinions and connections.[33]

Two years later, during the brief constitutional interlude that followed the death of D. João VI and the promulgation of the Constitutional Charter (*Carta Constitucional*) granted by his eldest son D. Pedro IV (emperor D. Pedro I of Brazil) in the name of his daughter D. Maria, Bernardo Peres da Silva was once again elected as deputy to the *Cortes*. Yet, once again, he arrived in Lisbon to find the assembly dissolved and absolutism reestablished under D. Miguel. With the country heading into civil war between the remaining supporters of the constitutional cause and the restored 'legitimist' regime, Peres left for exile in England and later in Brazil, joining the 'liberal international' of political *émigrés* created by the counterrevolutions of the mid-1820s.[34] This South American exile shaped his later career and left its mark on his political thought. And it is also

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29 Abreu 1862: 42-45, 52.

30 *Ibid.*: 83-88.

31 Lobo 2016: 306-307; Paquette 2013: 178-180.

32 Oliveira 2020: 77-78.

33 AHU, Índia, box 462, Joaquim José Monteiro Torres to D. Manuel da Câmara (30-3-1825).

34 Isabella 2009; Lobo 2016: 309-310; Paquette 2013: 291-300.

likely that his experience of a newly independent nation, where projects of economic development through the exploitation of its vast natural riches were widespread, resonated with his vision of a Goa made prosperous by agricultural improvement.[35]

It was also in Brazil that Peres wrote his most important work, *Diálogo entre um doutor em philosophia e um Portuguez da India na cidade de Lisboa sobre a constituição politica do Reino de Portugal* [A dialogue between a doctor of philosophy and a native of India in the city of Lisbon on the political constitution of the kingdom of Portugal]. Published in 1832, this short pamphlet extolled the virtues of the *Carta Constitucional* granted by D. Pedro IV and its moderate brand of constitutional liberalism.[36] More than in the theoretical discussions around the different types of constitutions, however, Peres was interested in highlighting the possibilities of constitutional government as a vehicle for the political ambitions of the Goan elites. At the core of the *Diálogo* was a narrative of Goa's past and future where the "despotism" that had marked the first 300 years of colonial rule could be redeemed by the "generous gift" of the constitution. In the words of a later Goan historian, writing two decades after his death, Peres "believed in one deity: the constitution; and in one redeemer for Goa: the future".[37]

In a moment when, as Linda Colley observed recently, texts and discourses circulated widely across borders through printed material, the *Diálogo* was influenced by the works of Enlightenment authors, such as Abbé Raynal and Montesquieu, and by constitutional thinkers like Jeremy Bentham.[38] And Peres was careful to situate his proposals in a transnational context, referring to examples of constitutional government like the United States of America. But he was also preoccupied in showing how these could be adapted to the local circumstances of Goa. His arguments focused, therefore, on representative government, the expansion of education, the establishment of a free press, and equal citizenship as the necessary conditions that would allow "Goans and Portuguese" to "benefit as brothers from the fruits of the constitutional tree".[39]

Bernardo Peres da Silva returned to Portugal in 1834, after the liberal victory in the civil war that had raged since 1828, and immediately attempted to reestablish himself as the legitimate representative of Goa in

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[35] Lustosa 2013; Silva 2024: 213-250.

[36] Silva 1832. For an analysis of the *Carta* in a transnational context, see Paquette 2013: 196-234.

[37] Miranda 1865: 87.

[38] Colley 2021: 127-154; Oliveira 2013: 522-527.

[39] Silva 1832: 66. For an analysis of the *Diálogo*, see Oliveira 2020: 118-148.

the metropole.[40] Soon after his return, he was appointed by the victorious D. Pedro IV to the newly established position of prefect of Portuguese India, which was supposed to replace the office of governor. He arrived in Goa on the 10th of January 1835 and assumed his position as prefect four days later, becoming the first and only native Goan to govern the old *Estado da Índia*. His prefectship was marked by a series of sweeping political, social, and economic reforms. However, after little more than a fortnight, he was deposed by a coup led by Portuguese and 'Luso-Descendant' military officers, who denounced him as an "implacable enemy of the whites" and accused him of seeking to reenact the "infamous project of 1787" to proclaim the independence of Goa.[41] Fearing for his life, Peres fled to British-ruled Bombay and later to the small Portuguese enclave of Daman, where he established a rival government. The former prefect only returned to Goa in 1837, with the arrival of a new governor sent from Portugal. In the following year, he was once again elected as a deputy and sailed to Lisbon, where he was finally able to take his seat in parliament until he died in 1844.

3. The politics of agriculture

One of the few constants in Bernardo Peres da Silva's turbulent life was the centrality of agriculture in his political and economic thought. Like many Portuguese and European liberals in the first decades of the nineteenth century, Peres devoted particular attention to agriculture as the "truest source of the wealth of a nation, of its physical and moral strength, and its prosperity".[42] In the letters and memorandums that he wrote during his first sojourn in Lisbon in the early 1820s, in the aftermath of the dissolution of the constitutional assembly, he insisted on the improvement of agriculture as the "only means to save Goa from its current misery" and compensating from the loss of revenue from commerce, that had become even more acute after the independence of Brazil.[43] He also successfully petitioned to be nominated as intendant of agriculture, claiming that as a "native of the country" (*natural do país*) he had the necessary local knowledge

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[40] Lobo 2016: 310-312.

[41] Pereira and Menezes 1835: 21, 83; Oliveira 2020: 78-79.

[42] AHU, Índia, box 204, Bernardo Peres da Silva to D. João VI (28-8-1823). For the prevalence of agrarianism in the discourses of early Portuguese liberals, see Câmara 1989: 21-25; Nunes 2001: 79-111.

[43] AHU, Índia, box 204, Bernardo Peres da Silva to Manuel Marinho Falcão de Castro (30-6-1823).

to understand the particular social and environmental conditions of the colony.[44] Barred by the colonial authorities from exercising the office, which would be held on an interim basis by his colleague Constâncio Roque da Costa, he nonetheless presented a memoir on the agriculture of Goa to the governor D. Manuel de Portugal e Castro.[45] And he continued to write extensively on agriculture in the following years.

How to explain the role of agriculture in Peres's proposals for the regeneration of Goa? In part, this reflected the reality of a colony where the overwhelming majority of the population depended on the cultivation of the soil for its livelihood and where most of the upper-caste Catholic elite families derived their wealth and status from their position as landholders (*bhatkars*) and members of the village 'community' (*gaunkars*). In this context, Goan liberals were prone to embrace a language of 'agrarian patriotism' that harked back to classical models of civic virtue.[46] In his address to his compatriots before leaving for Lisbon in 1822, Constâncio Roque da Costa assured them that after serving as their representative in the constitutional assembly he would "return with pleasure to the kingdom of Ceres, like Cincinnatus to the plough".[47]

At the same time, the significance that Peres attributed to the improvement of agriculture was also influenced by broader debates around political economy, natural history, and statecraft. Much like constitutional ideas and texts, printed material about agriculture circulated widely in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[48] These texts discussed questions like the advantages and disadvantages of particular types of tenure, the virtues of different crops, or the best methods and techniques of cultivation. In the Portuguese context, these discussions were reflected in the scientific production of the Academy of Sciences of Lisbon (*Academia das Ciências de Lisboa*), established in 1779, and in the publication programme of the *Casa Literária do Arco do Cego*, which operated between 1799 and 1801.[49] Peres's engagement with this literature was somewhat utilitarian and unsystematic. But we know that he read and cited the works of French political economists like Antoine Destutt de Tracy and Jean-Baptiste Say. He also seems to have been familiar with the *Dicionário de Agricultura* published by the liberal physician Francisco Soares Franco

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44 AHU, Índia, box 462, Bernardo Peres da Silva to the Overseas Council (7-1-1825).

45 AHU, Índia, box 471, Bernardo Peres da Silva to D. Maria II (19-2-1827).

46 Bayly 1989: 121-126; Livesey 1997.

47 Miranda 1865: 91.

48 Jones 2016: 58-64; Roberts 2014: 134-138.

49 Campos 1999; Paquette 2013: 41-42.

between 1804 and 1806, which was largely based on the *Cours Complet d'Agriculture* written by the French agronomist François Rozier.[50]

At the broadest level, Peres's proposals stuck relatively close to the script of 'enlightened' agricultural reform that had framed the initiatives of the *Intendência de Agricultura* since the 1770s. His writings combined an enthusiastic (and often overblown) appraisal of the bountiful fertility of Goa with a critical assessment of the "decayed" state of the colony's agriculture. "Goa has vast fertile lands capable of producing foodstuffs to sustain its people, cotton to dress them, and pepper and coffee to export", he wrote in a letter addressed to D. João VI in August 1823, "but unfortunately the food only lasts for six or seven months, and there is no cotton, coffee or pepper for exportation".[51] This wasted potential derived, at least in part, from the "entrenched customs and prejudices" of the local population who, "blinded by routine and timidity", continued to work the land in much the same way as they had for centuries.[52] Moreover, the disease-ridden undrained wetlands and the prevalence of communal forms of tenure provided further obstacles to the "progress of agriculture".

However, while the officers of the *Intendência* tended to frame their initiatives within a racialised discourse that emphasised the inherent 'indolence' and 'profligacy' of the local populations, Peres argued that part of the blame lay with the colonial authorities themselves. It was the lack of security of property, the unjust laws, and the extortionate tributes that impeded improvement. This was particularly evident in the case of the New Conquests, whose "immense fertile lands" lay depopulated and uncultivated due to the numerous abuses perpetrated by despotic or corrupt officials. He compared the situation of these provinces to that of the nearby region of Malvan, which had grown increasingly prosperous under the British East India Company despite being much less naturally endowed, attracting the migration of many Goans.[53] Freed from the "iron yoke" of despotism, he assured, Goans would not fail to show "that they are the descendants of the first inhabitants of this land, who in ancient times, without help or protection from any government, transformed vast wetlands into rice fields and thick jungles into palm groves". In the present, government support was necessary to remove some of the obstacles that impeded improvement. But, soon enough, "new habits would create new demands" and lead to the progress of agriculture.

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50 Câmara 1989: 27-53; Nunes 2001: 85-86.

51 AHU, Índia, box 204, Bernardo Peres da Silva to D. João VI (28-8-1823).

52 AHU, Índia, box 462, Bernardo Peres da Silva to the Overseas Council (7-1-1825).

53 AHU, Índia, box 204, Bernardo Peres da Silva to D. João VI (28-8-1823).

In keeping with his broader political programme, Peres's appropriation and reconceptualization of some of the main topics of enlightened agrarianism and liberal political economy focused on empowering the *naturais* (or at least the Goan Catholic elites) as active agents in shaping the future of their homeland. In the memoir on the improvement of agriculture that he presented to the colonial government in 1827, he called on "300 or 400" enterprising Goan landowners to take the lead in this task that would bring about "many utilities" to the people and the state.[54] In this context, agriculture was not only deeply entangled in politics. It was the key to the regeneration of Goa within a constitutional empire.

4. "These precious plants"

It was this project of political and economic regeneration that fuelled Bernardo Peres da Silva's interest in the humble potato. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Portuguese authorities in Goa had considered the prospects of different foodstuffs as possible replacements or complements for the chronically insufficient rice production. In the 1740s, for example, an anonymous memoir suggested wheat, sorghum, and pearl millet as crops that could be cultivated in the colony to feed "not only the natives, but also the white people". These foodstuffs would free the colony from its dependence on imported rice and make its population "healthier and more robust".[55] After 1776, the promotion of manioc cultivation as an alternative to rice would likewise be one of the most sustained projects of the *Intendência de Agricultura*.[56]

Although potatoes were not unknown in Goa, where they were sometimes referred to as *batata de surrate* (Surat potato) or *batata inglesa* (English potato) to distinguish them from the more common sweet potato, they were not widely cultivated.[57] They also failed to attract the attention of the officers of the *Intendência*, who don't seem to have considered it as an adequate replacement for rice. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the transnational discourse of potato promotion was becoming increasingly influential in Portugal. In the early 1800s, the *Casa Literária do Arco do Cego*, which during its short existence was the main vehicle for the dissemination of agronomical knowledge in the Luso-Atlantic

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[54] Biblioteca da Marinha, Arquivo Histórico, box 1340, doc. 19, Memoir on the Agriculture of Goa (1827).

[55] Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal, cod. 4180, fl. 271-280v.

[56] Rodrigues 2006: 500-501.

[57] Dalgado 1898: 133; 1913: 24-25.

world, published several texts about the cultivation of potatoes, including a translation of the *Tratado sobre el cultivo, uso y utilidades de las patatas* published in Spain by the Irishman Henry (or Enrique) Doyle.[58] The usefulness of the potato was also highlighted in the first volume of Soares Franco's *Dicionário de Agricultura*, which detailed the different varieties and the best methods to cultivate them.[59]

To Bernardo Peres da Silva, therefore, potatoes were among the most promising of foodstuffs. While in his 1827 memoir on agriculture he recommended the acclimatisation of various foodstuffs in Goa, including maize and beans, it seems that it was the "notably useful potato" that most excited his imagination. Citing the words of Antoine-Auguste Parmentier, the most celebrated panegyrist of potato cultivation, Peres remarked that "these precious plants" were "the greatest gift that the New World gave to the Old".[60] Among their many advantages, potatoes were hardy and easy to cultivate, thrived on all types of soil, and provided a healthy and nourishing diet that could sustain a growing population, as the "exceedingly high number of children" born in Ireland attested. Moreover, they could even be profitably used to feed the livestock.

In presenting potatoes as a solution to Goa's deficient food supply, Peres drew on what were by then well-established ideas about the links between agricultural improvement and economic prosperity, eating habits and health, population growth and national strength, and ultimately the well-being of individual households and 'public happiness'. Yet feeding Goa was only half of the question. Even if the colony became self-sufficient in terms of its alimentary needs, there were "other necessities that the current state of civilization makes indispensable" and that "only industry can provide".[61] In a similar vein to Adam Smith, who as Rebecca Earle has shown also had a keen interest in potatoes, Peres argued that a larger population fed by a steady supply of potatoes, maize, and beans could be usefully employed in the cultivation of new crops, like cotton, pepper, and citrus, which could unleash the necessary development of "commerce and manufacturing".[62] "As the population of any country is proportional to its production", he insisted, "in a few years the population of Goa will grow, and by applying itself to agriculture will triple or quadruple its produce.

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[58] Doyle 1800. See also Earle 2020: 76-77; Neto 2018: 120-124.

[59] Franco 1804: 365-385.

[60] BM, AH, box 1340, doc. 19, Memoir on the Agriculture of Goa (1827). On Parmentier's career and ideas, see Spary 2014: 61-88.

[61] BM, AH, box 1340, doc. 19, Memoir on the Agriculture of Goa (1827).

[62] BM, AH, box 1340, doc. 19, Memoir on the Agriculture of Goa (1827); Earle 2019: 23-24.

Goans will no longer be forced to migrate for lack of means and people from neighbouring regions will come to live among us, enlarging our number and strengthening our industry. Landowners will have enough to live happily, to educate their children, and to contribute without vexation for public expenses".

Peres expanded on this connection between an improved agrarian landscape and a transformed social and political order in the most often quoted passage of his *Diálogo*. In this passage, the character of the "Indian" (standing in for Peres himself) described a dream he had after he dined out in Lisbon and discussed the political future of Portugal with like-minded friends. Visited during the night by the "tutelar spirit of Portugal", he was magically transported to the top of mount Chandranath, in the middle of Goa, from where he was shown "my homeland, as I wished it to be".

> I saw the immense and fertile lands of Goa, particularly those of the so-called New Conquests, planted with coffee, cotton, oranges, sugarcane, pepper, millets and maize (that sustain most of Africa and a large part of Europe), potatoes that nourish all of Ireland and most of England, etc; and an immense population devoted to its labour, showing in their faces the signs of happiness. I saw lands that were once abandoned, now covered with houses; villages that neglect had left deserted, now thriving as in their most flourishing times, with no trace of the wetlands and paddy fields that once made the climate unhealthy. I saw buildings with signs that said: 'school for boys' and 'school for girls'; colleges and public establishments where Arts and Humanities were taught; sugar and cotton mills, etc. […] The familiarity between the people revealed that there was no memory of ancient prejudices between Brahmins, *Chardós* [Kshatryia], and Sudra, nor between *Mestiços* ['Luso-Descendants'] and *Canarins* [indigenous Goans].[63]

Written during his Brazilian exile, this passage is reflective of the romantic and utopian dimensions of the political projects that emerged from the global turmoil of the 'Age of Revolutions'. In this context, Peres and his writings are part and parcel of what the historian C.A. Bayly described as the "dramatic emergence of modern Indian liberal thought during the 1810s and 1820s".[64] This process took place in an environment shaped by the transnational circulation of ideas of constitutionalism, representative government, separation of powers, and freedom of press. But, in establishing a direct link between the transformation of the

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[63] Silva 1832: 56-58.

[64] Bayly 2007: 25.

agrarian landscape by the cultivation of potatoes and coffee and the "material and moral civilization" of Goa brought about by population growth, the expansion of education, and the erasure of caste differences, this passage highlights that the political and economic programme of the first generation of Goan liberals was also framed by changing ideas about nature and improvement and by the appropriation of the languages of natural history and political economy.

Conclusion

Potatoes never became a staple crop in Goa. Ideas of agricultural improvement and largely unsuccessful plans of introducing new foodstuffs and cash crops continued to shape the political and economic discourses of and the local elites throughout the 1800s. But Goa continued to depend on imported rice to feed itself and coconuts remained the main article of export. By the end of the century the growing stagnation of the local economy led to increasing migration to Bombay and East Africa. Moreover, after Peres's short stint as prefect, no other Goan would govern the colony until its integration into now-independent India in 1961. And while Goa continued to elect deputies to the Portuguese parliament, the structural asymmetries of colonial rule never dissipated. As a result, Peres's programme of political emancipation within a constitutional empire remained largely unfulfilled.

Yet this failure should not detract from the significance of his vision. Peres's dream of a potato-fed, coffee and cotton-exporting Goa reflected ongoing debates about agriculture, political economy, and governance that traversed the frontiers between the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans and between metropoles and colonies. As a result, it suggests that if, as C.A. Bayly and Richard Drayton have argued, notions of 'agricultural improvement' and 'agrarian patriotism' could be employed to consolidate colonial rule, they could also be used to promote an agenda that, while not explicitly anticolonial, aimed at empowering local indigenous elites. His appeals for the acclimatising of new foodstuffs and cash crops and his programme of political and economic regeneration would continue to resonate in the emerging Goan 'public sphere' until the early twentieth century. In some cases, they would even be used to argue for the internal colonisation of the New Conquests by the Goan Catholic elites. Moreover, on a broader level, they invite us to consider the long-term history of the entanglements between agriculture and politics in colonial contexts, and the ways in which these entanglements influenced the political and economic projects of later Asian and African anti-

colonial thinkers, such as the agronomist and revolutionary leader Amílcar Cabral.[65]

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