

The Argument

Ben Antao

There is no right time for an argument. Or is there?

It was 3 am. Another two and half hours to go for the flight to Goa. To say that Sebastian Lobo was exhausted would be an understatement, like saying the marathon runner felt tired at the finish line. He had landed in Mumbai at 10:45 pm from Brussels on Jet Airways, after an eight-hour flight from Toronto to Brussels. Another nine hours from there to Mumbai. A few persons lay slumped in the terminal area at that ungodly hour, waiting for the connecting flights to their home destinations.

Lobo, a Canadian Goan writer, was visiting Goa after seven years. His initial surge of excitement of seeing his family and friends had plunged and now mingled in a miasma of lethargy, a listless state of boredom incomparable to any he'd experienced in his travels. He looked about him, uncertain what he aimed to see. A white man with a knapsack was lounging in a black chair three vacant seats from him. When their eyes met, Lobo asked, "Are you also waiting for the flight to Goa?"

"As a matter of fact, I am." He adjusted to a sitting position.

Lobo dragged his carry-on bag and moved near him. "Have you been to Goa before?"

"No, this is my first visit."

"I'm a Canadian citizen now, but I was born and raised in Goa. If you need any info on Goa, you can ask me."

The man who appeared to be in his early 50s smiled; then he pulled out a wallet from his back pocket. He picked out a card and said, "I am going to a house in Ca-ve-lossim. A friend of mine has rented this place for the winter."

"Oh, I know where it is. It's in south Goa. I'm going to Margao, midway from the airport to Cavellossim. My brother will come to Dabolim to pick me up. If you like you can come with me to Margao, and from there take a taxi."

"That's nice," he said, "thank you."

"No problem. Cavellossim has a fine beach. The seven-star Leela Hotel is located there."

"My friend's place is called a posada," he said looking at the card. "He's rented a room there."

"I know what a posada is. It is an inn. A number of Goan families close to the beach have turned their homes into inns for the tourists. They're a whole lot less expensive than the five-star hotels."

"And I am on a tight budget. Because my friend said I could share his room, I decided to come down for a couple of weeks."

At this point the Canadian Goan extended his hand. "I am Sebastian Lobo. Nice to meet you."

"Same here. I am Richard Osborn."

A pause. "My guess tells me you're British."

He smirked. "You guessed right. Originally from Yorkshire, but now live in Liverpool."

"Some twenty years ago my family did a tour of England. In the county of York we stopped at a pricey hotel. It was Sunday and we dined on a dish of superb roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. And Liverpool of course is the home of the Beatles."

Osborn smiled again as if impressed. "You seem to know more of England than I do. Actually, I haven't travelled much."

A pause ensued during which Lobo decided not to talk too much, sound like a bore to the Brit who might simply wish to be left alone. Yet Lobo was trying to keep awake in the vast rectangular terminal, well lit but sparsely peopled at that midnight hour. The near exhaustion from the jetlag had sunk him into a mood of lassitude, a fatigue of the mind, such that he wondered how he'd remain alert until the flight was called for Dabolim.

Abruptly, either to keep the conversation going or out of genuine curiosity, Osborn turned his face to Lobo. "This is my first visit to India. I don't know much about India except what I read in the papers." He paused as though thinking to say something interesting. "India is making great progress; economic progress I mean, a good thing for the country."

"Yes," replied Lobo wearily, "but the progress has not percolated down to the poor. It's the middle class that's benefiting

from the market economy. The poorest of the poor, some 300 million of them, are struggling to keep body and soul together. The lower caste Dalits and the Adivasis are kept down by the upper castes that comprise the rich and the middle classes.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Osborn.

“You may have heard of the Indian writer Arundhati Roy. She won the Booker prize in 1997 for her first novel *The god of small things*. She alone is writing and speaking for the poor in India. ‘I give voice to the voiceless,’ she says. But what do the government and the politicians do? They put her in prison and silence her voice. But she is a very liberated woman who knows she’s fighting an uphill battle. Last year she took up the cause of the Adivasis in central India. The Adivasis live in the forest, but the government wants to remove them from the forest because the forests are rich in mineral deposits and big business wants to cut down the forests so they can mine the underground ores to make more money. Even the media are criticising her and call her a communist and what not, for taking the side of the helpless and speaking up for the exploited poor. It’s a crying shame what’s happening in India.”

As if he heard more than he wanted to, Osborn shifted in his leather chair. “I appreciate what you’re telling me.”

“I could tell you a lot more.”

Osborn remained silent, a gesture Lobo interpreted as giving him an okay to continue ranting.

“Recently a district court sentenced a human rights activist by the name of Dr. Binayek Sen to life imprisonment. He was found guilty of treason for helping Naxalites in the state of Chhattisgarh in central India. The Naxalites are communists who are fighting on behalf of landless labourers and tribal people against landlords and the rich. The verdict has aroused outrage and shock in legal and civil circles. In 2007 when he was arrested, some 22 Nobel laureates had condemned Dr. Sen’s incarceration. It is insane how democracy is being thwarted in India. The corrupt politicians supported by big business are trying to influence the judiciary.”

Osborn stood up as if he had heard an earful. “I’m going to the washroom,” he said.

A wearied Lobo raised his eyes towards the wall clock that showed 3 am. Then feeling languid and sluggish from all that negative talk about India, he rose to stretch his legs. While rotating his head, his eyes felt, as though stung, the sharp stare of unmistakable malice of another man standing behind the block of chairs that separated his section.

“I heard what you said.” The man spoke in a clear commanding voice. He was obviously displeased. His continued staring spelled confrontation.

Lobo’s first reaction was to aim at etiquette. “It’s not good manners to eavesdrop.”

“It’s not good manners to criticise another man’s country.”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard you talk about Arundhati Roy.”

“I think she’s one of few Indians to plead for the poor, when everybody else seems to focus on his own self-interest and advancement. Who cares for the poor in India? Arundhati Roy says she’s giving a voice to the voiceless, even though she knows she’s not going to succeed.”

The man’s moderately fair complexion darkened to reveal a stern exterior, a reflection of his inner annoyance. “Do you know what she did in Kashmir recently?”

“No, I don’t.”

“She went there and made a speech. She said Kashmir belongs to Pakistan. I am a nationalist, and I tell you that Kashmir belongs to India.” His voice took on an aggressive tone, bred no doubt from material success and confidence of an educated middle-class Indian. “I will never let anyone take Kashmir away from India. Those who talk like this are not Indians. Arundhati Roy is not an Indian.”

Suddenly Lobo now faced a chilling realisation that he was in the presence of a diehard fundamentalist. Anything more he says in support of Arundhati Roy would probably provoke a conflict leading possibly to a physical confrontation. He changed

his tack. "What about the poor then? Who fights on behalf of the poor?"

"We know about the poor. They will make progress as India makes progress. We don't need outsiders to lecture us about the poor," he said.

"Binayek Sen is not an outsider," said Lobo holding his ground. "He's fighting for justice. Look what the authorities are doing to him."

"That's a different case," he said. "It's still under investigation."

Lobo now understood that the moment had come to let go. He turned his head to see if Osborn had returned. He hadn't. "I see," he said. "I've got to visit the washroom. Have a pleasant flight wherever you're going."

The man made no answer but stood there, obviously still smouldering beneath the embers of his resentment.

Lobo lingered in the washroom, unable to shake off the dust of his unpleasant encounter that put him in a bad mood. He refreshed himself by dousing water on his face and eyes. The mirror reflected the image of a sleepy, scowling visitor. He took his time drying his hands with the paper towels. Then donning his dark cap he came out.

Two men met him outside. "Are you going to Goa?"

"Yes."

"Please come with us. We need to check your ticket."

"Why? I've already checked my luggage to Goa."

"Please follow us, won't take a minute."

A wave of trepidation washed over Sebastian Lobo. He dragged his bag on the wheels. He couldn't see Osborn anywhere. Passing the point where his earlier exchange had taken place, he saw no sign of the nationalist either.

At the far end of the terminal, one of the two men opened the door to an office. "Sir, this is the man."

"Stay outside while I am talking with this gentleman," said a tough-looking, middle-aged man in khaki uniform. "Please sit. May I see your passport?"

"Who are you?"

"Security."

Still standing, Lobo reluctantly fished out his passport from the bag. As the other was examining it, a niggling suspicion grew on him that foul play might be afoot.

"You're a writer?"

"Yes."

"You see, a complaint has been made against you. You have been bad-mouthing India."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I see you are originally from Goa, but now a Canadian citizen."

"That's right."

The man rotated his head as though to exercise his thick neck. His face was dark with a smooth skin and a full moustache. "India welcomes visitors, but we are not welcoming your criticism."

"Are you speaking for India now?"

"Yes."

Lobo decided to go on the offensive. "Do you know that India is a democracy? That its constitution guarantees freedom of speech?"

"I know that. But it is giving you no freedom to criticise us."

"I see. Just spend our dollars here and keep our mouth shut. Ignore the wretched beggars; hold our noses at the filth and roadside garbage; breathe in the dust and pollution."

The man abruptly rose and made to the door.

"Can I have my passport back?"

"I am coming back, in a minute," he said and was gone.

Lobo couldn't believe what a pickle he got himself into. Anxiety stirred the bellows of his sighs as if calling for spiritual aid. The phosphorescent lighting in the room made him blink. He checked his wristwatch. Still another hour to go for the flight. Now turning the folding chair around, he sat facing the glass door. Finally, in submission to prolonged fatigue, he closed his drowsy eyes. He must have dozed off for quite a while, for when

he checked his watch again, it was five o'clock. Sluggishly he stood up and opened the door. The two men eyed him curiously.

"Where is your boss?"

"Sir, he went to his boss. You wanting us to check?"

"Yes, I've to catch the plane in half an hour," Lobo said in a voice quite resigned now to the inevitability of his fate. He returned to sit. He closed his eyes and tried to pray. It finally came to him like a voice from the past, a revelation of what to do. There was a Konkani saying for it, *Zorr roddta pejek*.

One of the two opened the door and said, "Sir, the boss shall come to office, at six."

"Which office? This office?"

"No, his office."

Deeply upset, Lobo felt he was at his wits' end. Heaving a huge sigh, he went outside. He could hear the boarding call for passengers travelling to Goa. Instinctively, he opened his wallet and took out a 20-dollar bill. "Take this and bring your boss back."

Five minutes later Lobo saw the three men turning the corner. Without a word, the man in khaki entered his office. Lobo followed him. "Where is my passport? I want my passport."

"My boss is reporting for work at six o'clock. I am reporting your criticism to him."

"Oh, for God's sake, what criticism! I don't believe this!"

The man lowered his eyes. His jaw was skin-tight. After a long silence that Lobo feared would never end, he stood up.

"If you want your passport, I have it here." He held the passport in one hand and extended the other palm up, in a universal gesture of solicitation. He looked solemn.

Without further argument, Lobo opened his wallet again and took out a 100-dollar bill. "Here, be happy."

With passport in hand, Lobo wheeled his gray bag in a hurry and headed for the departing passengers area, like a man suddenly given a reprieve.

O Brother, Where Are You?

Sehdev Kumar

Garcia Lorca was a legendary poet; in 1936, during the Spanish Civil War, he was summarily executed by anti-communist death squads. His books were burnt, and no one knew where his body was buried. Over the decades, however, Lorca's poems have found an abiding place in the hearts of millions of people all over the world.

In the brutal Spanish Civil War, an estimated 500,000 people died, with both sides committing gruesome brutalities. In 2008, a Spanish judge, Baltasar Garzon, opened the first formal probe into murder and repression during country's fascist era by ordering the immediate exhumation of 19 mass graves, including one that is believed to contain the remains of poet Lorca. The judge's order cited 114,266 people as missing or 'disappeared' under General Francisco Franco, declaring the repression and systematic extermination of political opponents during the Franco era as 'crimes against humanity.'

Stirring the past – revisiting it, re-membering it, acknowledging it – is never easy, whether the past relates to a family, or a community, or a nation. With each body that is exhumed there are a million slithering worms waiting; with each pyre that is turned over, there are a thousand sparks threatening to ablaze yet once again.

Like the tongue that keeps stroking the aching tooth, for the sake of justice, truth or sheer revenge, or to 'set the historical record straight', we keep on exhuming the bodies, or turning the ashes over. Recently it was announced that the body of the Chilean president Salvador Allende will be exhumed to determine whether he committed suicide on September 11, 1973 as the military coup raged on, or if he was murdered.

In our globalized world, lies, half lies or half truths, historical evasions and national grand-standing are now increasingly coming under public gaze. For over fifty years, for instance, all successive governments in Poland had persistently echoed the lies of their