

Saints and sinners

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What a 472-year-old corpse reveals about India

SOME BOW. Others halt in their tracks. But every person in the queue reaches out, palm open, to touch the glass-panelled casket, supplicating before the body and spirit of St Francis Xavier. Reverence for departed religious figures is not uncommon. What is unusual, is that the body of St Francis Xavier is 472 years old. Roughly once a decade, the Archdiocese of Goa organises an exposition of his relics. This is the 18th exposition since 1752, which ended on January 5th. Nearly 8m pilgrims visited it. That is double the number of visitors who came last time, says Father Barry Cardozo. Christians, Hindus, Muslims and others asked for the saint's grace.

Born in Spain, St Francis Xavier was the most influential member of the Society of Jesus (or the Jesuits), second only to Ignatius of Loyola, its founder. He arrived in Goa in 1542 and spent the next ten years evangelising in India, Malacca and Japan. On his way to China in 1552, he contracted a fever, died and was buried on the island of Shangchuan. His grave was opened on two occasions, once for transfer of his remains to Malacca and again some months later. Both times the body was found to be miraculously preserved. He was brought to Goa in 1554 and canonised in 1622.

Today St Francis Xavier is the patron of Goa. His feast day on December 3rd is a public holiday. He is beloved by locals

and is known as "Goencho Saib", or the Protector of Goa. But his influence extends further. In the age of empire, "every year a sizeable number of Jesuits would write to the Superior General in Rome [the leader of the Jesuits], asking to be sent to India," says Fr Charles Borges, a historian at Loyola University in Maryland. "The only reason given was Francis Xavier." Jesuits in India spread agricultural knowledge, popularised the printing press and set up schools.

The most recent census, in 2011, found that 2.3% of Indians are Christians—roughly 32m people today, or half an Italy. Yet they have been increasingly targeted by Hindu-nationalist groups, sometimes violently. In Goa last year a local group installed Hindu idols outside a Goan church, claiming that it had been built on the site of a razed temple. In October a former senior member of a prominent Hindu group caused a fuss by demanding a DNA test of Francis Xavier's relics. Right-wingers portray him as a tormentor of Hindus for his role in the Goa inquisition.

It is undeniable that the inquisition was particularly bloody. But if "for 450 years nothing happened, why now?" asks Mario Monteiro, who has attended every exposition since 1984. Today Francis Xavier is a symbol of Goa's—and India's—syncretism. That is the true target of the new holy warriors.