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An executive summary of the final report of the work done on the Minor Research Project of Dr Sylvia Rego, entitled “The Works of Joachim Alvares, V.J.P. Saldanha and Charles Francis D’Costa: A Gender Study”, sanctioned by UGC, wide sanction letter No. MRP(H)-0813/13-14/KAMA002/UGC-SWRO dated 28.3.2014

### The Works of Joachim Alvares, V.J.P. Saldanha and Charles Francis D’Costa – A Gender Study

The writings of V.J.P. Saldanha, Joachim Alvares and Cha.Fra. D’Costa have a lot to offer to Konkani literature and theatre. The world explored in their works is fascinating for the exploration of norms of sexuality and formation of a social identity along the axis of Christianity. The finding of the current research is that while there is some convergence in the historical novels of Khadap and the social realism of Jo. Sa’s fiction with regard to gender normativity and religion, Cha.Fra’s plays do not posit the same ideology. Khadap’s novels jostle with the traumatic past of a Catholic community facing upheavals and dislocations in the form of the Goan Inquisition, massive migration, deportation to Srirangapatna by Tipu and back as a beleaguered lot. His novels show the need for imagination, fantasy, wishful thinking, utopian hopes and literary tropes that could help negotiate the past, purge the present and offer hope for the future. The longings of a rudderless community in despair and in need of strong military role models like Shivaji are eloquently articulated by Khadap. This vacuum is sought to be filled by the creation of larger-than-life characters like Sardar Simon Prabhu. A regional as well as trans-national need is fictively satisfied such that an emasculated community regains its virility, masculinity and power through such figures. Martial valour is wedded to spiritual dynamism. The shame attached to the community with the rape of its women and their helpless status as the property of the sexually predatory Muslim enemy brings out the alterity of the ‘other’. ‘Our’ women and concurrently the honour of the community is to be salvaged by defending the womenfolk and forming martial groups to do so. The fear of conversion and thus the diminishing

of the self is sublimated in literature by wishful thinking. Christians are vindicated through literary interventions like positing a change of heart in the Muslim 'other' and a desire for accepting Christianity that the writer manages to weave in as a narrative closure. While cross-dressing, horse-riding, wielding a sword when needed – in short being a veritable Veerangana – is what is scripted for many of Khadap's heroines, norms of femininity are still to be upheld – the heroine has to be chaste, modest, sacrificing and pious. All charges of male weakness in Christians are deflected by taking recourse to a spiritual explanation of the same and martyrdom is a choice to celebrate and the battered body does not matter in the world of the inviolate and invincible spirit where heavenly rewards await the faithful. Thus a brilliant closure is sought in the works of Khadap, steeped in a distinct Christian ethos where gender is harnessed to religious liberation. While the gender stereotypes are evidently there, the overarching identity of the entire community and its spiritual survival becomes the dominant trope here. Joachim Alvares' world of fiction also reveals a distinct working out of the ideology of gender in consonance with religion. Governing, regulating and when needed repressing the female body and sexuality is of paramount importance in his world of fiction. Warding off unsolicited male attention and hanging on to Christian notions of chastity in order to uphold the sexual prerogative of the absentee husband is a patriarchal anxiety in his literary world. The dichotomous pair of Mary and Eve is often set up to discipline Christian women into adhering to sexual stereotypes of the chaste, modest and motherly as opposed to the deceitful, covetous, disruptive and transgressive. The didactic tone continues to emphasise the relative insignificance of bodily pleasures and temptations of the devil when compared to the disciplining and repression of the female body to ensure the joy of the soul in the life hereafter. The dire economic straits of dependent women, lacking the wherewithal and the resources to lead a life of comfort and dignity is also highlighted. There is also a deep fascination for the alluring mystique of the heathen woman, whose alterity with the Christian woman is starkly brought out. The beautiful, demure, industrious and resourceful Hindu woman is the object of the Christian male gaze that is voyeuristic, while the educated, disorderly, slovenly and sexually permissive Christian woman is to be studiously avoided for the moral repugnance she evokes in men. The man as saviour, as hero, on a quest, acting, rescuing and restoring – this is a recurring pattern in the literary works of Jo. Sa. that are discussed here. The Christian longing for heathen souls is wedded to saving Hindu women like Sushila in *Servant Chedunani Sairik* and the eponymous *Sundari* from their

wretched life and including them within the fold after conversion. There is a simultaneous anxiety of preventing the fragmentation of a minority Christian community by the irresponsible and flirtatious educated Christian woman who marries outside the fold. 'Our' women then are not in need of the corrupting influence of too much of education and need to marry only men from the same community. The shallow and idle English-spouting Christian then becomes the anti-heroine and needs to be sculpted into normative femininity. The church with its panoptic control of the laity through various conduits of graded power is another aspect that is reflected in these novels. Christianity as an all-embracing, forgiving religion is shown in the act of receiving and rescuing errant heathen women. Gender, community and religion are thus intricately enmeshed here. Cha. Fra's plays do not follow the pattern seen in the other writers. He is irreverent and irrepressible towards the clergy and exposes the very material nature of spiritual life governed by expedience and compromise. The sacral and the erotic are interwoven and sexual fantasies are symbolically hinted at through acts of concealment, dissembling and disrobing. There is no trace of the anxiety to foster a spiritual, if gendered consciousness among the Christians. No models of feminine piety, sacrifice and Christian modesty are offered through female characters for emulation. Male proprietorial attitudes and feelings of entitlement towards women and the latter's objectification are explored deftly by the playwright. He has created fiery feminist characters who announce the arrival of the independent woman and denounce male-domination and stifling marriages of convenience. The male dread of female sexuality and the impossibility of either repressing it or channelising it only through socially approved heterosexual monogamous unions is presented in several plays. The paramour from pre-marital days is eternally lurking around to torture the jealous husband whose violent streak then erupts on the body of the transgressing wife. Children who uncannily resemble the male lover subvert the idea of the legitimacy of fatherhood. Sanctimonious father-figures are exposed and societal surveillance of the sexuality of women through busy-bodies and local gossip is demonstrated amply in these plays. The degraded, reviled and exploited figure of the house-maid crops up often enough in his plays to warrant the suggestion of sympathy for the marginalised woman in the playwright. Inegalitarian social power structures that privilege some and debase others are decried. Dysfunctional marital relationships that are otherwise seen as stable are shaken up here. There are no docile female bodies here that are passive recipients of male largesse. Manipulative, vituperative and abrasive female characters rub shoulders with the assertive and the independent.

The plot usually unfolds through misrecognition, conflict, concealment, discovery and realisation. The precariousness and volatility of socially mandated roles is exposed in these plays. The plays refuse to offer the comfort of either social or religious certitude and stability and refuse to be judgemental. They question normative ideas of sexuality and instead throw up multiple possibilities.