

It is perfectly understandable that everyone is preoccupied with the magnificent banquet of cinema at the International Film Festival of India, but in your off-screen moments, do take the time to consider the extraordinary cultural history of this location on the ancient Mandovi riverfront of Panjim, and especially the Old Goa Medical College precinct at the heart of the festival campus. This is the inheritor institute of the teaching hospital upriver in what is now called Old Goa, which was the very first medical college in all of Asia.

Many great men and women have passed through these halls, including one of the most important Indians ever (even if he is rarely acknowledged as such). This is the story of Francisco Luis Gomes, a genius polymath who first achieved very high distinction at medical college, where he was immediately appointed to the faculty after graduation. Self-taught in the highest traditions of autodidacticism, this brilliant young Goan very quickly started attracting the attention of the world with his profuse, elegant, highly erudite analyses of the social, cultural, historical and economic questions of the day, and at the age of just 32 he sailed off to Lisbon to represent Goa in the Portuguese parliament.

Here's what Aravind Adiga – who won the Booker Prize for *White Tiger* in 2008 – has written about Gomes: “The young man's first day in parliament was a rough one: he heard another member demand that the government rescind the right given to colonial savages to sit in a civilised parliament. The member from Goa, in his maiden speech, counter-attacked. Savages? “In India,” he informed the carnivorous Europeans, “there are no banquets of human flesh; on the contrary, there are sects whose hands are innocent of all blood; who abstain from a diet of meat; who show compassion towards animals.” His parliamentary eloquence won him admirers in Lisbon; Gomes met John Stuart Mill and corresponded with French novelist Alphonse de Lamartine, wrote a treatise (in French) on economic theory, and in 1866 completed a novel in Portuguese—*Os Brahmanes*.”

Adiga says “that few Indians know of Gomes speaks more about the narrowness of our conception of Indianness.” That the country ignores patriots who spoke in Portuguese (or French, or English) is folly: To Goans “this is a bitter irony: their patriotism is being questioned by Indians who speak English, follow every ball of the Ashes and spend their nights reading the Guardian blog. In the early 1980s, a grand statue of Camões, author of the Portuguese epic poem *The Lusiads*, was removed from the square in old Goa, and consigned to a dingy museum. *The Lusiads* does celebrate Portugal's imperial expansion—but it also shaped the language in which Gomes and his peers would assert India's right to self-respect. By dispatching the statue of Camoes from our sight, we are also choosing to ignore one of the most brilliant pieces in the mosaic of the modern Indian identity.”

This is complex analysis, and worth pondering in front of the imposing statue of Francisco Luis Gomes that is the centrepiece of Campal, the genteel neighborhood which punctuates the Panjim waterfront between the multiplex and Kala Academy. Its appeal is undeniable, as was the great man's direct demand: “I was born in India, once the cradle of poetry, philosophy and history and now their tomb. I belong to that race which composed the Mahabharata and invented chess. But this nation which made codes of its poems and formulated politics in a game is no longer alive! It survives imprisoned in its own country. I demand Liberty and Light for India!”

- VIVEK MENEZES

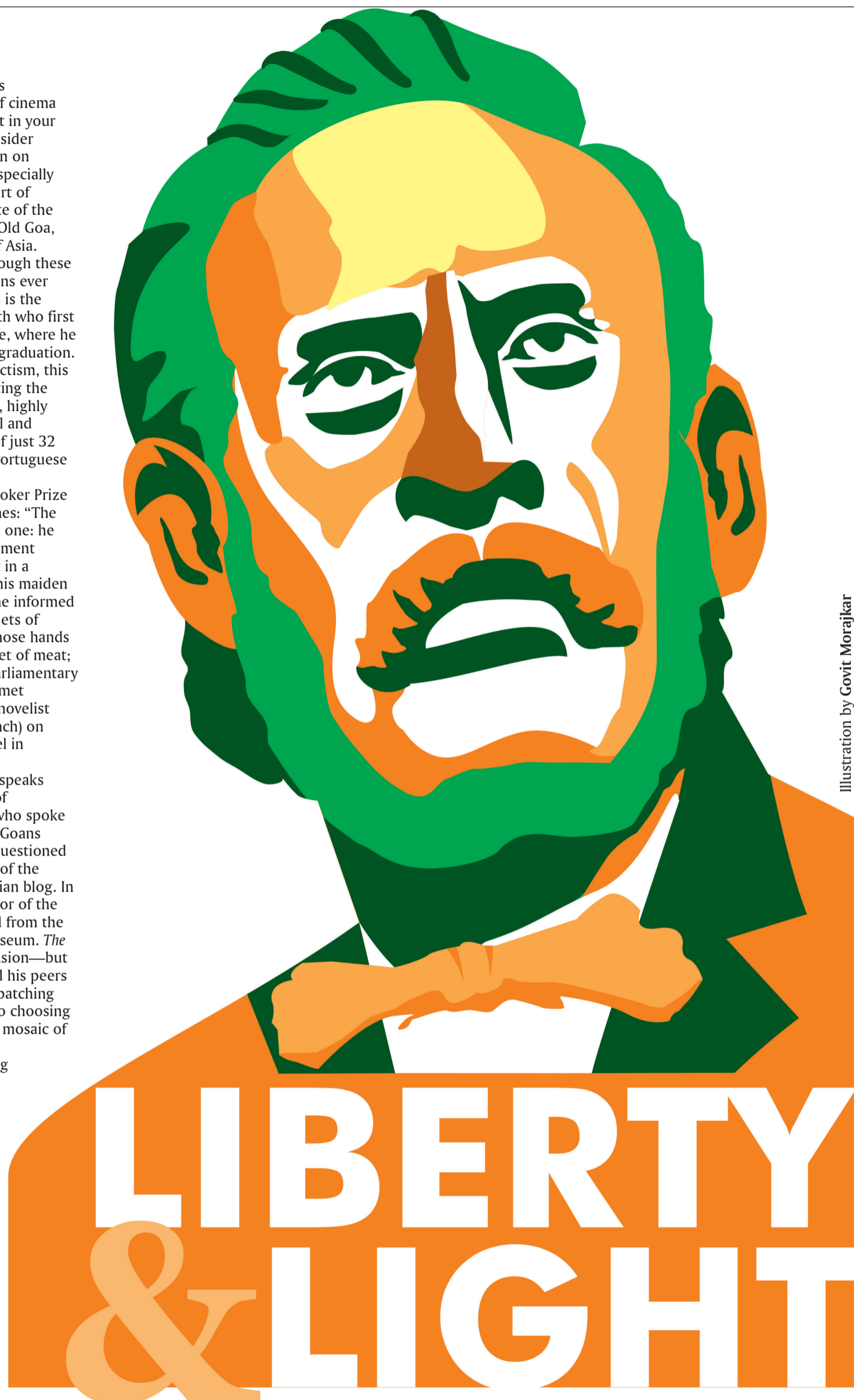


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