



By AMITA KANEKAR

## When the Lion has its Say: A Review of Parag Parobo's New Book on Bandodkar and the Goan Bahujan

Parag Parobo, the author of *India's first Democratic Revolution: Dayanand Bandodkar and the Rise of the Bahujan in Goa*, says that although the two scholarly narratives about Goa—Goa Dourada (the idea of a happy, or golden, empire) and Goa Indica (the nationalist idea which sees Goa as intrinsically Indian)—are commonly understood as conflicting, they actually have one fundamental thing in common: they both are the views of the Goan elite. Parobo's own book, formally launched on Sunday 15 November in Panjim, breaks with the past for this very reason, that it looks at Goa from the point of view of the Bahujans, the many communities that make up the region's so-called lower castes.

The point of view changes everything, turning much 'common sense' about Goan history on its head. Goa's difference, or strangeness, has been noted ever since it became part of India, by Nehru among others. While this is usually put down to Portuguese rule, Parobo argues that it was actually the rise of the Bahujans in the 1960s that created a society that remains head and shoulders above most of India in education, health and other human development indicators. The end of Portuguese rule in Goa, though officially portrayed as a liberation, was hardly a liberation for the Bahujans who remained under the oppression of the upper castes. It was only after the 1963 elections, in which a new and Bahujan-based party, the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP) led by Dayanand Bandodkar, a low caste capitalist and philanthropist, swept to power, that things changed.

Portuguese rule was elitist, according to Parobo, benefitting mainly the upper castes, both Catholic and Hindu. And although it is popular wisdom nowadays to say that the Portuguese oppressed Goan Hindus, he claims the opposite: the Saraswats, the dominant Hindu community of Goa, not only thrived economically but also became more socially dominant under the Portuguese by taking advantage of the new laws, educational infrastructure, regulation of temples, voting rights, and other interventions. British rule in India in contrast provided more opportunity for Bahujans (probably because of the difference between an expanding industrial economy and a stagnating mercantile one).

The book traces the fascinating formation of modern caste identities in Goa, beginning with

the Saraswats in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when they comprised many disparate communities on and around the western coast. Although many GSBs outside Goa today claim to have left Goa due to Portuguese persecution, Parobo points out that they were already outside, working as traders and scribes, before the Portuguese arrived in South Asia. But their claims to brahminhood were challenged by Brahmins in Maharashtra, which led to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century 'discovery' of the (apparently fabricated) Sahyadri Khand, with its authentication of their brahminhood, its provision of a glorious origin myth starring Parashurama, and its addition of Gaud to their name, creating a link to the northern meat-eating Gaud brahmins, which also however necessitated a story of migration to Goa; Parobo says that although even much-respected scholars (and GSBs) like D D Kosambi have tried to historicise this migration, there is just no proof. The same period of the 1870s-1920s sees the Marathisation of many Bahujan communities, like the Kharvis, Bhandaris, and Gomantak Maratha Samaj, all of whom identified with the non-elite and warrior image of Shivaji.

In a gripping account of the post-1961 period, Parobo speaks of how the upper caste social location of the freedom-fighters of Goa (and India) ruled their approaches to the post-colonial project. When it came to economics, for example, their focus, right from Nehru in India to the Congress' freedom-fighter-led Farmers' Committee in Goa, was on modernisation, industrialisation, and big dams, rather than lower rents or mundkar rights. Nehru's education policies similarly privileged higher education over primary education. The MGP had a different vision, and it was their candidates, farmers and tea-stall owners among them, who won definitive electoral victories over "weighty" candidates like the Deshpribhus and Dhempos. The years that followed saw not just legislation on, but also implementation of, land reform (unlike in India where the tendency was to neglect the latter). Schools went to the villages, along with a relatively (compared to India) holistic education approach that included grants-in-aid, integration of gram panchayats into the education system, playground development, midday meal schemes, frequent inspections, etc. A network of public health care institutions was also set up across the region, the biggest in India.

The book does not deal much with the post-Bandodkar era, but it is ironic to see how Bandodkar's party has declined today, into little more than a powerbroker in the state, amidst a resurgence of the upper castes. This is visible in its distance from Bahujan aspirations in education, where it supports the Congress-BJP's brahmanical medium-of-instruction policy, in which the demands of the Bahujan students for state-supported education in English and Marathi is opposed by the bamon bhas, or Nagri Konkani, lobby,

even as upper caste students happily study English in private schools.



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According to a saying from Zimbabwe, only when the lion tells its story will the true picture of the hunt be known. The lions have begun to speak. Everybody else should sit up and listen.

Parag Parobo, *India's first Democratic Revolution: Dayanand Bandodkar and the Rise of the Bahujan in Goa*, Orient BlackSwan, 2015.

Also see Kaustubh Naik's take on Parag Porobo's book, [here](#) and [here](#).

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