

A series of events are being planned to commemorate the historic Opinion Poll whose 50th anniversary was marked last week on 16th January. Second to the territory's merger into the Indian Union, the Opinion Poll is perhaps one of the most significant events in the history of post-colonial Goa. The Opinion Poll was a referendum held to decide whether to retain the Union territory status of Goa or merge it with the neighboring state of Maharashtra. The majority of Goans voted against the merger and thus Goa retained its status as a Union territory, putting an end to any possibility of the merger with Maharashtra.



Current tellings of the history of the Opinion Poll are centered around two prominent figures, Dayanand Bandodkar, the then chief minister, and Dr. Jack de Sequeira, the leader of opposition. While on the one hand it was Bandodkar's Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP) that rooted for the merger with Maharashtra in post-colonial Goa, on the other it was Dr. Sequeira and the United Goans Democratic Party (UGDP) who mobilized the anti-merger sentiments successfully. But such a

reductive understanding of a complex historical moment ensures that the grey areas that marked Goa's history and the reasons which prompted as well as averted the possibilities of merger are obscured. Recent historical analysis, such as that contained in Parag Parobo's book *India's First Democratic Revolution* (2015), hint that Bandodkar was not keen on merger after he tasted political success. Also, the initial demand for merger dates back to late 40s, much before Bandodkar came onto the political scene. Hence to nuance our understanding of the Opinion Poll, we need to shift away from the sources that only emphasize Bandodkar and Sequeira, and write a history from below.

I was recently recounted an anecdote of a volunteer conducting the proceedings of Opinion Poll in Curtorim. After the polling ended in the evening, the said volunteer visited a nearby cafe where he overheard a conversation between two Catholic gentlemen. One of them

reportedly proclaimed that “if Goa gets merged with Maharashtra, I will not stay in Goa anymore. I will move to Bombay”.



Opinion Poll: Choice or Compromise?

It might seem ironic that, in order to escape the threatened merger with Maharashtra, he wanted to escape to a city that was now claimed to be an integral part of Maharashtra. The city of Bombay had become the capital of the newly formed state of Maharashtra in 1960. However, if we assume that it was not so much the merger with Maharashtra that the gentlemen wanted to escape, but the possibility of further marginalization in a Hindu dominated polity his claim begins to make more sense. For him, the cosmopolitan big city would have perhaps offered hope to escape Hindu dominance. But since the late '60s, spurred by the logic of linguistic nationalism that organized Maharashtra as a Marathi state, cosmopolitan Bombay was also transforming to become the migrant hating 'Mumbai' claimed by the far right Hindu outfit Shiv Sena.

This situation illustrates how marginalized groups are compelled to compromise in order to negotiate their existence with a larger dominant community. Such compromises often come in the guise of political choices wherein, despite making a choice, the marginalized is destined to suffer. The Opinion Poll was one such compromise disguised as a 'choice'. Whether to merge with Maharashtra or to remain as a Union territory were restricting choices. The Indian union never offered Goan citizens the possibilities of self determination. Instead, it obliged them to negotiate their political future within the narrow frames of Indian nationalism. This nationalism, which in hindsight has revealed itself as, in fact, Hindu nationalism has steadily led to the disenfranchisement of Goan Catholics as legitimate subjects of the republic. The recent berating of Catholics as lacking in Indianness due to their leadership of the demand for grants to English medium schools is evidence of such disenfranchisement.

If the Goan Catholics wanted to escape Hindu majoritarianism by voting against the merger, the Hindu bahujans wanted to escape Brahminical dominance by opting for the merger. In retrospect we realize that just as evading merger wasn't a remedy to escape Hindu majoritarianism, merging with Maharashtra wasn't a solution to escape the Brahminical dominance. To escape either of these evils, one must challenge the dominant discourse of Indian nationalism which is inherently infused with Brahminical Hindu notions.



It is only in hindsight that one can feel relieved that Goa did not merge with Maharashtra and was saved from being party to the hyper-masculine Maratha nationalism. However, Goa is far from escaping the ills of Hindu majoritarianism and has seen several native forms of Hindu majoritarianism breeding in the state. One can cite the movement for the official recognition of Konkani wherein the cultural legitimacy of Romi Konkani and the Catholic communities which utilized this script were systematically marginalized as lacking in Indianness as an instance of Hindu majoritarianism at work.

The Opinion Poll could be seen as a mixed blessing; a choice for freedom and independence that was structured upon narrow linguistic nationalism – thus restricting the very freedom and independence that it promised. While we celebrate Opinion poll as a triumph, we should also be aware that it restricted the lives of many Goans.

(First published in *The Goan Everday*, dt: 19 January, 2016)



Share this...



Facebook



Whatsapp



Print



Email



Twitter



Reddit