

Earlier this month, Goa Government's Department of Information and Publicity held a 'Konkani Kantaram Utsav', a *cantaram* singing competition in which the participants were asked to sing about the achievements of the current Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government. This competition attracted a lot of criticism, noticeably from the *tiatr* community, questioning the government's intentions behind organizing such a competition. *Cantaram* competitions are usually held without any pre-decided themes and certainly not with a rule that prohibits participants from criticizing the government. On the contrary, one of the several requirements of a *cantar* and *cantorist* is that of political sharpness. *Cantorists* ranging from Conception-Nelson-Anthony (famously known as the Trio kings) and William de Curtorim in the past, to the current sensation Francis de Tuem, have been famous for their radical political positions. *Cantaram* carry a huge affective magnitude for the Goan Catholic communities and it has played a key role in influencing public opinion at various historical junctures in post-colonial Goa. The concerned department, in its official press release, stated that "[s]ong and drama is one of the medium used to propagating various policies, programmes and the schemes of the Government [sic]". While using traditional cultural practices to propagate government schemes is not unheard of, there is more to the said *cantaram* competition than meets the eye.



*Cantaram* are an indispensable part of the *tiatr*, a theatre form that is popular largely among the bahunan Catholic communities in Goa. Audio CDs of *cantars* have brisk sales across Goa and is one of the most consumed form of Konkani music. In digital space too, a *cantar* shared on YouTube would have an average of 25,000-30,000 hits, a popularity that no other Goan cultural form enjoys. But the potency of *cantar* form lies in how, over the years, it has become a medium of formulating a discourse about the Catholic communities in Goa, wherein they retain their own agency. *Cantaram*, beyond its appeal as a form of entertainment, are employed to narrate and remember

Goa's history from the perspective of bahunan Goan Catholics. For instance, it would be helpful to look at two Goan political leaders, Dr. Jack Sequeira and Dayanand Bandodkar and their respective portrayal in *cantaram* and popular history. The popular narrative of Goan

history escalates Bandodkar as a leader of masses while Sequeira's role in Goan politics is inadequately discussed. But in *cantaram*, one finds an inversion of this narrative where Sequeira is celebrated for his definitive role during the Opinion Poll in 1967 while Bandodkar is subjected to sharp criticism for wanting to merge Goa with Maharashtra.

Such popular commentary on the state of Goa, emerging from a marginalized community poses a significant discursive threat to the regimes in power. Almost a year ago, the current BJP led government was exploring possibilities of setting up a censor board on *tiatrs*. However, the popularity that *tiatr* enjoys in Goa is far too powerful for the censors. Following a backlash over this move, the BJP government had to retract its decision. Having burnt their fingers once, this time the BJP led government saw it fit to organize a *cantaram* competition, with a clause that no adverse remarks could be made on the government, effectively imposing the censorship.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmgTL0TPdwk>

While the BJP draws its support largely from its anti-minority rhetoric in rest of the India, such stance hasn't proven to be a success in Goa. In fact, any political outfit in Goa cannot afford to neglect the bahunjan Catholic voters that until recently, could make or break governments. This is not to reduce the bahunjan Catholic communities in Goa merely to a vote bank but to point to their acute political awareness, which marks them distinctly from the rest of the Goan population. The manner in which the Indian state has been rendering the Goan Catholic communities as dispossessed citizens, for example, by the denial of official recognition to Romi Konkani or the recent uproar over state grants to English medium primary school, makes them confront the state machinery in a manner which often proves to be litmus tests of Indian democracy in Goa. *Cantaram* and *tiatr* are central to the production and distribution of the discourse that makes this political awareness among the bahunjan Catholic communities possible. By organizing the *Cantaram* Utsav, the BJP government precisely wanted to seek control of that discourse.

However, the *tiatr* community almost boycotted this event as a mark of protest. A collective that identifies itself as "Musical Warriors" gave a clarion call to Tiatrist and cantorists to

gather outside the competition venue for a parallel *cantar* singing competition. This competition aimed at bringing forth the truth about the last four years of BJP governance and their anti-people policies and schemes. Singers Francis de Tuem, Lawry Travasso, Marcus Vaz among others, gathered outside the competition venue and singing critiques of the BJP-led Goa government in a sharply satirical *cantar* titled '*Acche Din Aane Waale Hai*'. This performative protest was sheer brilliance on the part of these singers to indicate that they will not compromise their political position for state patronage. While one fears that *cantaram* would lose its radical potential owing to attempts of appropriation by the state such as the said Kantaram Utsav, the tiatr community, through this protest kept alive the tradition of political dissent.

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