



By AMITA KANEKAR

From Sateri to Navdurga, and Worshippers to Sevekaris

At the foot of the entrance stairway to the Navdurga temple of Marcaim, a banner waves in the wind. On it, in Nagri-scripted Konkani, is:

Amchi murti, amkam zai!
Mullchi murti amkam zai, hich amchi vhadlikai
Ganvkar saglle ek zavya, amchi murti ami rakhum-ya

(We want our idol!
We want the original idol, for it is our pride
Unite Gaonkars, we have to protect our idol!)

The temple has been in the news of late for the dispute between the GSB Mahajans and the bahunjan villagers, which began over the temple idol. The Mahajans, who wanted a new idol, claim the temple is theirs and built when they migrated to Marcaim. The villagers say that the Mahajans are Mahajans only because they were able to use their privileged caste position to register under the 19th century Lei das Mazanias. The temple, they say, actually belongs to the village. The villagers also took over some rituals that were earlier the privilege of the Mahajans alone, like the palaki procession in which the idol is carried through the village along a specific route. The Mahajans responded by declaring all rituals cancelled till further notice.

The dispute is before the courts. But a visit to Marcaim reveals a many-layered worship, which is at once deeply connected to the bahunjan communities and non-brahmanical deities, but in a casteist fashion.

The temple itself is built in the syncretic style of many Goan shrines of the 17th-early 20th centuries and still retains some of this distinctive old ambience, including the basilican (i.e. church-like) plan, arched windows, and a Renaissance dome over the sanctum, along with pitched roofs elsewhere. Much of this has however been rebuilt in concrete and altered in the process, either subtly (like the roofs), or crudely (like the large ugly window-eaves), or even 1

completely (like the new secondary buildings).



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The syncretism in any case is limited to the temple's architecture, for its functioning is as brahmanical as ever. All the functions and rituals of the temple need bahujan participation, the villagers say. But this participation is never equal or free but always based on caste. There are drums in the temple lobby, beaten only by the Gomantak Maratha Samaj caste. There are the gold- and silver-clad inner doorways, created by the Chari caste. The priests all belong to the Bhat caste. And only they and the GSB Mahajans enter the sanctum, even today. In fact, the bahujans who contribute to the temple's functioning are called sevekaris (servants).

The temple's influence extends through the village in many ways, but always hierarchically. E.g. rituals like the First Harvest, for which rice is specially cultivated near big *tallem* (pond) known as the Tallembandh, see the harvest offered first to the temple and the Mahajans, and only then other houses in the village.

Anthills, known as *roin* or Sateri, have long been considered sacred by the indigenous communities of Goa. There are two Sateris in Marcaim, in different vados. One is near the Tallyambandh, on a GSB-owned property. Nearby is a Sateri temple and another to Vetal, another non-brahmanical diety. This Sateri and its temple used to be frequented by villagers earlier but have now been walled around, making public access difficult. The second Sateri is located with its own little temple at Tallyamkhol, another *tallem* at the foot of a hill in Parampaivado. This Sateri remains accessible to all, for the land here belongs to a Christian bhatkar. This is where Navdurga's palki procession ends, to return over the hill back to the temple.

There have been attempts to change things, as when a grand new gateway was recently built along the palki route in the village. Funded by bahujan devotees from one of the village vados, it carries a plaque naming the vado. There are similar new gateways at the temple proper which also prominently bear the names of funders—GSB ones—which have not caused comment. But here the palki route was apparently altered, to avoid passing through the bahujan-funded gate.



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Curses are now being put on older ways of participation, probably as a result of these challenges. E.g. the bahunas would put up decorations at the Tallebandh for the yearly Sangod ritual, but now a new metal fence prevents their entry.

All in all, it is clear that the Mahajans are fighting to maintain their privilege and power, in the face of a growing bahunas challenge. The real question is about the focus of this challenge. Marcaim's worship of the goddess Navdurga appears to be an overlay on the bahunas Sateri and other non-brahmanical gods, co-opting these and their worshippers into the brahmanical world but as inferiors. The bahunas stand however seems to be that this brahmanical temple, with its 'original' idol, is native to the village and belongs to them; only the GSBs are outsiders. The problem with this stand is that it challenges the Brahmins but not brahmanism. For, can a brahmanical temple—which is casteist not just in practice but also theory, being backed by all the casteism of the Shashtras, Stutis, and Smritis—ever oppose brahmanism?

The real need is not to fight Brahmins, but to challenge Brahmanism in every form. Otherwise faces will change, but nothing else. This is going to be a long battle, but one small step in it could be to put up another banner outside the temple with the same slogan in, not the *baman bhasha*, but Romi Concanim, or Marathi, or English.

(With thanks to Ashwinkumar Naik)

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