

By AMITA KANEKAR



Caste Atrocities in Goa: A Fight against Invisibilisation

Goa has been making headlines of late for violent crime. But while there has been criticism of the over-the-top way in which many of these crimes are reported and discussed, it is much worse when the violence is not reported at all, when it is in fact 'invisibilised' and thus normalised. Many Goans might not even know that a community called the Wanarmari existed before the recent newspaper reports of an attack on their settlement in Nirakal-Bethoda, Ponda. But this incident was only the latest and most overt form of violence faced by this community, one of the most marginalised in Goa. As the Goa govt danced attendance on BRICS, where Modi swanned around as the leader of the 'largest democracy in the world', not half an hour away is a community of Goans who have never voted, besides being denied basic education, healthcare, jobs and housing.

As the newspapers reported, on 16th October, some 30 villagers of Nirakal barged into the small Wanarmari hamlet, when the adults of the community were away at work. The intruders ripped the roofs - made of palm leaves and plastic sheets - off all the huts, and broke the timber posts of some, sending the huts crashing to the ground. Then they destroyed all the possessions inside, especially the most valuable ones, like the solar panels (the only source of night lighting in the settlement), food stocks, children's school uniforms, stored water (carried manually from a stream one hour away), vessels, along with the vegetable and fruit trees planted near the houses.





One of the destroyed huts of the Vanarmare community. Photo: Amita Kanekar.

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A week earlier, on 8th October, newspapers had reported that some Nirakal villagers had met the District Collector, and also the Industries Minister and local MLA, Mr. Mahadev Naik, to evict the Wanarmari from the village, calling them 'dirty' and 'a nuisance'. Before that, on 2nd October, some villagers had visited the hamlet while the menfolk were away fishing, to threaten the women there that they would burn all the houses down; the women, fearing for their lives, ran into the jungle with their children. Finally, about a year ago, the press had reported that the Bethoda Panchayat had passed a resolution to evict the community from the village.

The Social Justice Action Committee - Goa had actually made a complaint to the Collector about a week ago, chronicling this growing harassment and demanding action before things got worse. However, nothing was done till after the 16th Oct. attack. The police even admitted that, thanks to BRICS, they had no manpower to spare; everything had to wait till Modi left the state. It is taken for granted that security for the PM means unprotected citizens!

But what was the reason for the attack? The victims themselves find it inexplicable. 'Nothing has happened here between them and us. No fights, no problems, no complaints.' They have worked off and on for their assaulters' families over three generations now, they point out. And while it is true that the villagers sometimes take offence when a request for labour is met with refusal - saying: we allow you to stay and you refuse to work for us? - this has never lead to violence.

But the answer can perhaps be found in the changed context. The Wanarmaris, who call themselves Kathkari, belong to a larger tribal group living mostly in Maharashtra, where they are listed as a Primitive Tribal Group. In Goa, however, they do not have even ST status. Traditionally hunters, they were forced to give this up by the forest authorities some decades ago, and thus became wage labourers seeking work on farms, fields, and orchards. And, although they have lived in Nirakal for at least three generations now, it was never a continuous settled residence. 'After we finished a season of work, we would be told to go,' says Gopal S. Powar. 'So we would go somewhere else. There too, we would be driven away

after our work was done.'



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Nomadism was thus not a choice. And, although they contributed to agricultural production in the region, they got little in return. But things changed in the last 4-5 years. Thanks to interactions with social activists, the people decided to send their children to school, and therefore to settle down. The younger children are now studying in Nirakal's government primary school. Today the community has ration and adhaar cards. They were also provided solar lamps in order to facilitate the studies of the school-going kids. Now they have applied for voter's cards.

Thus, they are finally getting the first of their basic rights as citizens. But could this in fact be the problem? After the Sunday attack, a large mob led by the Nirakal sarpanch had the audacity to visit the hamlet in order to remind the community - right in front of the police - that they had been warned to leave the village long ago. From where does this hatred come? There seems to be a resentment of the changing lives of the Vanarmare, a desire for them to remain as they were, i.e. nomadic, ignorant, and without any rights. Behind these sentiments is not just traditional casteism, but also the conviction that development for all is not possible; in such a situation it is easier to demonise and target a weaker group, rather than question the system.

And the same attitudes prevail elsewhere too: high-society murders lead to op-eds about Goa going to the dogs if it can't attract and protect such elites, but sustained cruelty over generations to hard-working and sustainable-living tribals creates not a whimper of disquiet.

The Wanarmari say they are determined to secure their children's right to a decent life. But will the administration - as much, if not more, to blame as all of us- get its act together at least now, to ensure at least basic security and development to all?

With thanks to Gopal S. Powar, Shalan T. Powar, Santosh G. Powar, Anjini D. Nikam, and other residents of the Vanarmare settlement, Nirakal-Bethora.

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