



By AMITA KANEKAR

Among the many myths that pass for history in Goa, a popular one is about how Hindus were relentlessly oppressed under Portuguese colonial rule. Not only were temples broken, rituals banned, and conversion enforced, we are told, but Hindus were also humiliated and tortured (via the Inquisition), so much so that everyone had to either convert or flee the Old Conquests. Most Goan Hindus are brought up on stories of religious oppression, along with religious heroism, i.e. of Hindus who had to fight valiantly for their religion and their idols.

The real story is somewhat different. It is true that many temples were destroyed in the 16th century, that there were forced conversions, and that Catholics were privileged. But records show that people also converted voluntarily, either to escape caste oppression, or to retain power, or for spiritual reasons. And locals also helped in temple-destruction, as at Cuncolim where a local Brahmin youth who had converted to Christianity showed the Portuguese the temples to be broken, and was himself murdered along with the Jesuits in the famous 1583 lynching incident (Rowena Robinson, “Weaving a Tale of Resistance”, 1997).

Even more interesting is the fact, rarely spoken about, that not everybody had to convert, even in the Old Conquests. According to a census taken in the early 18th century, the population of the Old Conquests included 12.5% ‘gentiles’ (Angela B. Xavier & Inez Zupanov, *Catholic Orientalism*, 2015), the term used for those following Hindu, i.e. Brahmanical, religious practices.



The complex world of Goa in the 16th and 17th centuries is slowly being revealed by historians, and it turns out that Hindus were not just around—they were prominent collaborators and supporters of the Estado da Índia. The earliest were of course Timoja Nayaka, Mhal Pai Vernekar, and the other upper caste Hindus who actually invited Albuquerque to conquer Goa. Panduranga S. Pissurlencar documents many more, employed in the Estado as diplomats, interpreters, traders, tax-farmers, and in religious institutions (*Colaboradores Hindus de Afonso de Albuquerque*, 1941). Pius Malekandethil points out that, from the 1620s onwards, commerce in Cidade de Goa (today's Old Goa) was controlled by, not the Portuguese, but 'Banias, Konkans, or Jewish merchants', of which the Saraswat Brahmins were the most economically powerful ("City in Space and Metaphor...", 2009), with one Rama Queny (Keni) being the principal merchant. Mangoji Sinay of Salcete, Vitula Naique, Krishna Sinay, and Nana Chati were also prominent merchants, bankers, and tax-farmers of the city at the time.

If Saraswats were so prominent in the Estado, would their worship be far behind? While every Goan has heard of the Portuguese destroying temples, few know that at least some of these institutions began to recover not long afterwards. The Brahmins in Kunshashtali (Cortalim) re-established their matha in the first decade of the 17th century, sent a delegation of mazans to Varanasi to bring back the swami who had fled there following its destruction, and got a new swami trained after the old one refused to return (*Catholic Orientalism*, 2015). In other words, the Hindu religion was clearly being practiced in Salcete at the beginning of the 17th century. This was also, incidentally, the heyday of the Inquisition.

An interesting conflict of the early 18th century further illustrates the openness of Hindu religious practice in Goa. A petition was sent to the king of Portugal by Vaishnava Brahmins in Salcete, Tiswadi, and Bardez in 1725, to request their separation from the Smārta

(Shaiva) Brahmins in Kunshashtali and Keloshi (Quelossim), accusing the latter of ‘stirring trouble against their caste’s political rites’ (*Catholic Orientalism*, 2015). The Smārtas in a counter-petition argued for the unity of Goan Brahmins, and blamed the trouble on one Rama Sinay, a dangerous man who, they said, the king should expel from Goa. A second Vaishnava petition followed, detailing more problems with the Smārtas. Each side accused the other of ‘contamination’, the Vaishnavas by mixing with the ‘whites’, and the Smārtas by mixing with the ‘Narvalhos do Norte’ a Gujarati community that the Vaishnavas claimed were not Brahmin. The conflict continued for many years, with every letter taking months to travel between Goa and Lisbon. The Portuguese king first asked the Viceroy in Goa to solve the problem, then, when this failed, tried to adjudicate himself, long-distance.

It is notable that the Brahmins in Goa took their problems to Lisbon, rather than to a ‘dharmasabha’ (religious gathering) of Brahmins from a place like Varanasi, which would have been the orthodox method. Their preference for the Portuguese king shows, at the least, the expectation of a favourable hearing, also the ‘dependence of ritual power on political recognition’ (*Catholic Orientalism*, 2015), even when the political authority followed a different faith. It also shows a lack of confidence in the dharmasabhas, perhaps because questions were being raised in some dharmasabhas in the nearby Maratha kingdom about whether the Goan Brahmins were Brahmins at all (Parag Parobo, *India’s First Democratic Revolution...*, 2015).

The question finally is: why does the Hindu persecution myth continue, despite so much evidence to the contrary? Why can’t we accept that Goan Hindus—at least the elites—were a part of the Portuguese colonial enterprise, just as Goan Catholics are assumed to have been? Perhaps because this idea, of the persecution of Hindus—especially upper-caste Hindus—by evil, foreign, and non-Hindu rulers, is a fundamental idea for Indian nationhood. Thanks to the myth, the upper caste Hindu becomes one of the oppressed, also a heroic



‘freedom-fighter’ upholding the oppressed religion, and thus worthy of ruling over the Hindu bahujan. The Muslims and Christians meanwhile become one with the evil, foreign, and non-Hindu rulers.

In any case, the real history of Goa is far more interesting than the myths. And it would be good if more Goans got involved in trying to uncover it. Because the truth, as they say, can be liberating.

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