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Bhima Koregaon and Lessons for Goan History

The commemoration of the East India Company's victory against the Peshwas at Bhima Koregaon, and the subsequent violence that was witnessed, provides some pointers to understand Goan history. In recent times, those lakhs of Dalits who congregate at Bhima Koregaon to pay their respects to the fallen warriors have been termed as "anti-nationals" by the Hindu right. The ostensible logic of the Hindu right is that commemorations such as those at Bhima Koregaon signify the celebration of 'foreign' victory over 'Indian' forces. We are thus presented with a history that appears to contain a clear divide between 'us' and 'them'. The 'us' here is a unified political and cultural community called India, and the 'them' being the foreign rulers who did not have their origins in India.

But such logic is not just endemic within the thinking of the right. Even secular liberal nationalism has successfully attempted to project a clear us-and-them divide in the subcontinent's past. New research in history is increasingly demonstrating that this is not the case. Indeed, the past witnessed myriad and complex forms of power struggles that do not fit into the simple 'us' versus 'them' binary. The commonly known and freely circulating facts about Goan history are a good place to start understanding these complex power struggles.

It is well-known that Portuguese sovereignty, which started in 1510 could not have been successful without the help of native elites. While the campaign of Afonso de Albuquerque is etched in the collective memory of Goans due to the inclusion in school textbooks, the fact that native elites like the trader Mhall Pai Vernekar and the naval commander Timoja who helped Albuquerque with intelligence and forces is not interpreted as collaborating with a foreign power. The issue here is not whether a power is foreign or not, but the manner in which nationalist history writing chooses to interpret certain facts. Thus, when elites join forces with foreign powers it is not regarded as aiding colonial power or imposing foreign domination. But the same nationalist history holds it against the subaltern sections if they align with foreign powers.

The truth is that everybody, at some point or the other, aligned with foreign powers in a complex hierarchy of political power. In fact, 'foreignness' wasn't defined according to

modern notions of nationality. However, it was always the elites who were the first to make alliances, and this is true of both India and Goa. Because the history of European rule in South Asia is also linked to colonial rule, the acknowledgment of this history of native or local collaboration becomes all the more urgent if one is not to be misled by naïve readings of history. In this context, we can turn to the writings of the historian Ângela Barreto Xavier, based at the University of Lisbon who has roots in Goa and also holds the J. H. da Cunha Rivara Chair for Visiting Professors at the Goa University. Xavier in her essay, "David contra Golias na Goa Seiscentista e Setecentista. Escrita Identitária e Colonização Interna," (*Ler História, no. 49, 2005*) argues that the contestation of local elites – the Brahmins and the Chardos – within the political system of the Portuguese empire created "internal colonizers".

Within the imperial Portuguese hierarchies, Xavier argues that the local elites competed with each other for entry into such prestigious occupations such as priesthood and military services in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The interesting bit about the local elites was that while they were subject to the Portuguese imperial hierarchy, their bid for power was also tempered by their internal caste differences, conversion to Christianity notwithstanding. The result was that both the Brahmins and Chardos constructed their identity in a particular way: on the one hand, arguing that they were best suited to govern the lands on behalf of the Portuguese Crown; and on the other, trying to defeat the caste interests of their rival group(s). Thus, Catholic Brahmins would write texts that would claim nobility for their lineage; in response, the Chardos wrote texts that countered this view of the Brahmins, making a case for their eligibility to rule the territory of Goa. Hindu Brahmins similarly took their sectarian differences to the Portuguese Crown, asking the king to restrict the power of the rival sects.

The power games of the elites and their successful bid for power in the Portuguese empire – whether through government and/or military employment, entry into the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or maintaining the control over temple management and property – created a group of people, already elites before the coming of the Portuguese, aiding the process of empire-building and colonization. Xavier suggests that such a political process resulted in the native elites increasingly claiming the place of the intermediary between the Portuguese Crown and officials and the subaltern peoples of Goa.

Anjali Arondekar, another Goan scholar at the University of California, Santa Cruz, talks about

how activists of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj in the nineteenth century mobilized themselves in order to liberate this beleaguered community from upper-caste oppression. One of the means that they used was to petition the Portuguese Governor to intervene and alleviate their plight.

Whether all these alliances by different sections of Goan society were successful or not is a story for another day. The commemoration/celebration today is largely linked to groups that are marginalized or oppressed in contemporary political setup. Hence, it is unwise to take a moral high ground in this regards, largely because it enables a misleading belief that there were stark differences between 'us' and 'them' in the past.

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