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Faith, Nation, Empire

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It would appear that the title for my presentation today is in sync with a time when there are at least two heads of state in America (and goodness knows where else) whose supporters believe them to be leaders or messiahs sent by God. I have to confess that while I phrased the title provocatively I was also aware that the intellectual position I occupy, one which is critical of liberalism and the operation of liberal democracy and seeks to look for alternatives to it, shares a common origin with the global processes that have led to the emergence of the kind of religiously tinged populism that we are witness to today. I would, of course, like to distinguish myself from these larger movements, while maintaining that what we are witness to is a breakdown of the certainties of liberalism, and with it liberal democracy, and that this breakdown is the result of the queries that were being leveled against liberalism for a long time now.

My own journey towards the position I occupy today began sometime in the early years of the millennium when I became a member of The Patna Collective. Named after the city in the north of India where the collective was based, the Collective consisted largely of a group of Muslims who were questioning whether it was impossible, as popular understandings of secular liberalism suggest, for religious persons to be secular. This question came in the context of the operation of Indian secularism, since 1947 which saw the assertion of religious identities as a barrier to a secular Indian identity. While this secularism rhetorically attacked all religiosities, it is a fact that large aspects of Hinduism which could be reconciled with liberal nationalism defined Indian secularism. Thus, it was largely non-Hindu groups which bore the ire of Indian secularists, and foremost among these groups were the various Muslim communities in India, historically crafted as the Other to Hinduism as well as Indian nationalism, which is de facto a Hindu nationalism.

It is not as if Indian secular nationalism did not believe that one could not be a Muslim and a good Indian. Of course one could. But to be a good Indian one had to invariably give up physical markers of one's group identity, and take up markers of secularized Hinduism. Take the following case as an example. Today, an Indian academic, of Goan Catholic origin, is to speak in Lisbon on the topic, "Dharma and Adharma: An emerging contradiction within Indian Democracy". While this is a perfectly good way to examine the problems with the Indian democracy, what is interesting is that I have almost never seen the Indian democracy being discussed along the lines of Islamic or Christian/Catholic theology. One would imagine that both these theologies have more to contribute to republican thinking, given that they theologically recognize, if not demand, the existence of an egalitarian polity, if not on earth, then at least in the eyes of God. This is in contrast to brahmanical theology, which does not recognize egalitarianism. Dharma, crudely put, requires that a king be just, but this justice does not stem from an egalitarian ideal, but rather from a hierarchical one, where it is just to treat a person from a lower caste badly. And yet, we have a Goan Catholic discussing the Indian state in terms of brahmanical theology. I would argue that this is a good example of how the brahmanism, or Hinduism, is actively considered secular, and it is through actively engaging with Hinduism that non-Hindus in India produce their secular selves. To discuss the Indian state in Islamic or Christian theological terms would invite accusations of being non-secular, or in Indian terms, communal, or at the least be dismissed as private matters of theology, and hence not relevant to the public sphere.

In this context, it should be obvious why the Patna Collective should have been constituted largely by Muslims. I was the lone Catholic in the group, and I have to confess that it was while engaging intellectually with my Muslim colleagues that I began to see the value of exploring faith as a space through which one validly participate in the public sphere. This was a particularly useful engagement because it liberated me from the way in which Indian nationalism trapped me into engaging with itself.

To appreciate this argument it would be important to attend to Goan history for a while. Starting from 1510 the Portuguese Crown asserted sovereignty over the island of Goa, progressively extending its boundaries until the eighteenth century to form the contemporary borders of Goa. This sovereignty of the Portuguese state came to an end in 1961 when the post-colonial Indian state invaded Goa and occupied the territory. While it integrated Goa into India and gave Goans, until then Portuguese citizens, Indian citizenship, this relationship was not without problems. The Portuguese language in the state was effectively suffocated over

the next decade, and a culture of fear created among Goan Catholics. This state-condoned terror was especially directed those who were particularly Westernised or Lusitanianised – often, but not only, members of dominant castes (or elites) – suggesting that they were less than Indian, or as the delicious phrase so evocatively puts it “Portuguese left-overs”. I would like to offer as an example the anecdote from a cousin, whose parents have Portuguese names, but whose children were all given Hindu names. On asking her father the reason for this name choice, he apparently indicated to her that the old days were now gone and they would have to learn to live in a new environment. And this is not an uncommon feature, even though the logic is not explicitly stated as such. Names are changed, surnames are dropped, or upper caste Hindu titles appropriated from the family’s past. All of this as a way to live within a largely Hindu India. Indeed, names of Islamic provenance are very rarely adopted, and it is largely Hindu names that are taken up.

The tragic bit about the term “Portuguese leftovers”, is that it is often used by Goan Catholics to criticize or insult others in the community, which is to say, that the logic of Indian nationalism has been internalized by Goan Catholics. This produces a certain shame and guilt among Catholics, especially those who have a Portuguese route to the faith, for being Catholic and there is a constant attempt to become more authentically Indian. As in the case of the Goan Catholic academic I cited above, this is a feature of a number of Catholics in India, where the attempt has been, especially after the Vatican Council II, to acculturate the Catholic Church, not just in Goa, but also in India. Acculturation, as you would know, was the attempt by the Catholic Church to move away from the exclusive use of Latin in the liturgy (para-liturgical events invariably used the *lingua franca*) to vernacular languages, and to incorporate local cultural colour. The tragedy, once again, is that this otherwise useful move to recognize locality became a carte blanche for the Catholic Church in India to approximate a national, that is brahmanical, culture.

Thus, in the case of Goa, one had the Konkani language (the language that most Goan Catholics recognize as their own) inserted into the liturgy, but in a form that was substantially sanskritised, actively removing the Portuguese and Latin words that had accrued to the language. Or there were attempts, thankfully not dominant in Goa, of using brahmanical rituals during the Mass.

Another telling example is the words of the Cardinal of Bombay not too long ago in the

context of the attacks that were being visited on churches in different parts of India. At this point of time, in a video address that one can find online, the Cardinal indicated that the people who were mounting these attacks were not in fact real Hindus, because real Hindus would not do such things. What struck me is that a Cardinal who is supposed to be invested in Catholic theology and speak with confidence about what Catholicism means was doing the same about Hindus. This could have been a strategy to have his voice heard in a Hindu majoritarian environment, but it was nevertheless one more testament to the kind of investment of the Catholic hierarchy in India in the national culture. One identifies, almost automatically, with the state definition of Hinduism.

A part of this identification with state Hinduism, or at least the disciplining of Catholicism within India, has been to distinguish ourselves from other minority groups, and especially the Muslim communities. Where these communities are systematically represented as violent and challenging the Indian state project, Catholics frequently represent themselves as the model minority who go about their work without disturbing anyone. Indeed, even though it has not abdicated its call to conversion at an institutional level, on an individual level and lower down the hierarchy the Catholic church has also learned to play soft with conversion. At these lower levels the argument invariably is that it is not *us* Catholics who are engaging in conversion, we are only engaged in social service – referring to the plethora of social services offered via hospitals, schools and the like – it is the evangelical groups who are engaged in conversion. This is in a context where the Indian state sees conversion to Islam or Christianity, especially of the oppressed castes as a threat to national identity.

One of the things I learned through my interaction with The Patna Collective was to take caste seriously. This is, to recognize the violence of caste, and to locate the Indian nationalist impulse in the desire of dominant castes, across religions, but especially among Hindu groups. This Indian nationalist impulse is thus necessarily an impulse of caste oppression. The Indian national project is founded on quotidian caste violence. One way to challenge this violence, I realized in the course of my engagement with the Collective, was for minoritized groups – because groups of people do not naturally exist as minorities but are produced as such – to work together. Thus, I realized that there is a need to form a common response from Dalit, Muslim, Christian and other marginalized groups, and above all to engage with them seriously. A good amount of what I would call my method emerges from this realization. First, to take caste seriously, learn not just about it, but the way in which it viscerally impacts on quotidian life, and read accounts of caste from those at the bottom of the pile. Also, I

learnt to be attentive to the way caste structures Christianity in India, and Catholicism in Goa. Further, a healthy engagement with Islam itself. Christianity in the subcontinent exists and existed with Islam and there were conversations which need to be continued.

In the spirit of this conversation, one of the works that the Patna Collective engaged with was *Politics of Piety* (2005), by the recently deceased scholar Saba Mahmood. The work looks at the piety movement among women in Cairo, where they voluntarily take up the veil, learn the Quran and embody marks of Islamic piety. Mahmood's argument is directed against secular liberal assumptions about women's agency within patriarchy, and seeks to demonstrate how there is space for this agency, or rather for an agency when one inhabits the norm, which creates space for the agent's movement. What I personally took away from the book, however, was the idea of habituation. I was particularly moved by the example of these pious women who, in imitation of the Prophet, seek to cry when they are in prayer. While initially forced, eventually the body internalizes this action such that the tears, or the experience of bliss, are voluntary. While modernist sensibilities, which mark a distinction between the body and the mind, the spontaneous and the performative, might see this as artificial, Mahmood points out that there is a long tradition that recognizes emotions are learned and that one can train the body to emote. It is through the training of the body that the soul/ the interior learns. As I later learned, habituation has a long Christian tradition as well.

Another lesson that I learned was from reading literature that studies the rise of Islamic radicalism, notably Mahmood Mamdani's *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2005). What I appreciated is that Islamic radicalism is not a continuation of an antique Islamic tradition. Rather it is a very modern occurrence, part of the response to the violence of the colonial state, when Islam was used as a tool through which to create a parallel modern state. Thus, Islam is remade to meet the demands of modernity, and in some cases used essentially as an identity to produce an anti-colonial national state.

In this context, I realized that even as that Catholicism is a location from which I can work against the kind of shaming and marginalization that is the Goan Catholic's experience of Indian citizenship, I could not at the same time use Catholicism, or the Goan experience of Catholicism, as an identity marker in a culture war. To do so would ensure that rather than challenge liberal nationalism, I was only reproducing it in another form. Rather, what was

required was a submission to Catholicism, and using its longer history – after all, what is Catholicism if not an engagement with tradition – to create a location outside of liberalism. Thus, in my personal case, this engagement was instrumental not only in embracing the Lusitanian context within which I received my Catholicism, but to also take Catholicism more seriously.

Catholics communities in Goa are often apologetic that Catholicism came to Goa in the wake of Portuguese overseas expansion. In fact, Catholics feel this way because they are made to feel apologetic. As Victor Ferrao, a Catholic theologian and social scientist, has pointed out in his book *Being a Goan Christian* (2011), Goan Catholics are seen as clones of the colonizers and hence held responsible for Portuguese colonialism. However, I need to point out that this apologetic response emerges largely from upper caste Catholic groups. As stated earlier, these upper caste Catholic groups imagine that Portuguese colonialism and Christianity had severed their kinship ties with upper caste Hindu, who are now ruling the roost in the Indian polity. While the trauma of the upper caste Catholics cannot be easily dismissed, factoring caste relations in the story essentially allows us to see how dominant castes across religions build political alliances through a reference to brahmanical theology and culture. What, however, if the response emerged from a position that takes its cue from the experiences of marginalized castes?

An example I never tire of giving, probably because it was one of those key moments for me, is a portion from Aditya Nigam's work *The Insurrection of Little Selves* (2006). In this book Nigam points out that to mark the beginning of the new millennium, the Indian newspaper the *Pioneer* brought out a 12- page supplement titled 'the Dalit Millennium', compiled by some leading Dalit intellectuals. Containing contributions by many non-Dalit intellectuals as well, this supplement carried a memorable list of what can be called milestone events in the history of Dalit liberation. Among the events of the last five hundred years, the chronology begins with the discovery of the sea route to India and the advent of Vasco da Gama in 1498. This event, it is claimed, opened the way for the eventual contact with the West that led not just to the colonization of the country but opened the way for Dalit liberation.

The episode of Vasco da Gama's advent into the subcontinent is invariably seen as marking the start of colonial violence, and relies on the rhetoric that lays the blame for the decimation

of indigenous populations on Columbus's discovery of the New World. I realized, however, that this reading of Vasco da Gama had invariably been from upper-caste perspectives. A Faith, Nation, Empire Dam perspective can see it quite differently. This reading enabled me to look at Portuguese-introduced Catholicism differently. To begin with, while there is no denying the expansionist violence that accompanied the Portuguese colonial enterprise, was this different from the kind of expansionism seen under other rulers in the subcontinent? Further, was the subcontinent unmarked by violence of any kind? A reading of subcontinental history will point out that indeed it wasn't. Not only were there sectarian conflicts, but the life of lower caste persons was perhaps as bad as that of African slaves in the new world, or worse, according to Ambedkar. Lower caste persons were not considered human. Indeed, it is through the language of Christianity (and Islam) introduced by missionaries into the subcontinent that one has the rhetorical possibility to challenge the dehumanizing system of caste. As such, Christianity provided, and – as India proceeds to incarnate a Hindu state – continues to provide, a rhetorical support against the dehumanising tendencies present in Brahmanism. The violence that came along with Christianity can be seen as a necessary violence that allows for dominant caste oppression to be challenged and restructure the social order to allow the oppressed space, even if minimal. IN this context, see the work of Michelle McKinley titled *Fractional Freedoms* (2010), which, while recognizing that the clerical justice system was patriarchal, looks at the tiny freedoms that it made possible to slaves in colonial Peru.

On a side note, following the work of Samuel Moyn (2015) and James Chappel (2012), there is an interesting history to be plotted of the origin of human rights language, and the use of the concept “the dignity of the individual”, in the work of inter-war Catholic intellectuals who spoke of the dignity of the person as a counter to the figure of the individual presented by modernist ideologies.

To return to my narrative, this engagement with Catholicism in the context of Portuguese imperialism also made me aware of another aspect of this history which can challenge the liberal national order.

The incorporation of the natives of Goa into Catholicism, whether forced or voluntarily, also had the effect of creating obligations of the Portuguese crown towards these subjects, laying the ground for their eventual recognition as citizens . This twining of Portuguese imperialism with Christian universalism, of course to aid the universal ambitions of the Iberian Crowns,


also resulted in the incorporation of these native Catholics into the Portuguese polity as rhetorical equals. From within this location the native Catholics could keep demanding greater rights so as to finally be incorporated into the polity as full-fledged citizens.

In an interesting observation in an article published in 2009, Peter R. de Souza argues that the Christian-ness of the Portuguese crown also ensured that, after the 18th-century expansion of the boundaries of Goa, lower caste Hindus could migrate to more Christianised locations, and, while not necessarily converting to Christianity, benefit from a regime that did not follow untouchability and even change their caste identity.

As the work of Ernestina Carreira (2014) indicates, this incorporation of native Catholics, and other Catholic groups outside of the territorial boundaries of Goa but under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop in Goa, under the Portuguese Crown, ensured that these were viewed as part of the *Nação Portuguesa*. Thus, we see here the possibility for reimagining the nation, or more properly going back to its pre-liberal understanding, where a nation is not necessarily a racial group, but a group that is united in a variety of ways, in this case under the jurisdiction of the *Padroado Real Portuguesa*.

While not necessarily related to faith, this historical context of the entry of Catholicism into Goa has also recently made me contemplate the imperial model as a way to think of options in the face of the breakdown of liberalism. As you can see, from the position in which I stand – that of a Goan Catholic – the concept of empire, which has been the bane of bourgeois and nativist intellectuals is not necessarily a complete evil, rather one can still find something challenging in it.


All too often, the colonial models – where a nation-state appropriated resources of another territory, while providing little or no legal rights to the residents of those territories – and I am thinking especially of the 19th century European expansion notably that of Britain, have been called empires. But I believe that there is a need to distinguish colonialism from imperialism, and empire from imperialism.



Following the work of a variety of scholars, especially Josep Colomer, I would suggest that a characteristic of empires is to have uneven levels of formal integration and diverse degrees of people's allegiance to the centre. In his book *The European Empire* (2016), Josep Colomer suggests that the EU is a good example of an empire that is not imperialistic, but expands through consensus. In his definition, "Empire means a form of political organisation for a vast territory which is based on a variety of formulas to link the units to the centre, and, as not having fixed borders it is also open to changes in membership." We can think of empire especially when we abandon the model of the (nation) state - with its idea of a single identity to which we give allegiance, and attempt to have complete control over a given territory. I would especially like to propose that the nation-state in fact is a colonial model, given that it is very often formulated for a distinct set of citizens, and the rest exist in a colonial relationship with this state. This can be seen in the case of India, but I would argue could be usefully used for Brazil as well, where indigenous groups are a classic example, as they are in India, of how they are dragged into a polity whose rules are not made for them and are forced to participate in the model, disrespecting their agency as well as their rights.

In an article titled "Christian Reflections on Roman Citizenship (200-430)" that was part of the collection that reflected on the Roman empire's extension of citizenship to all residents of the Empire, Hervé Ingelbert (2016) argues that St. Augustine disapproved of Roman imperialism, but not the Roman Empire." While convinced of Roman superiority, and the benefits of the empire, Augustine mourned that the extension of the empire and citizenship did not take place via negotiation and mourned that route for its spread was imposition and war. In other words, while Augustine approved of empire, he disapproved of imperialism. I think that this is a useful distinction that can be made, where imperialism is the aggressive act of extension, whereas empire can in fact be something that is much broader and embracing.

The imperial model allows for us to think outside of liberal formulations, outside ideas of sovereignty, of a single formula for citizens, think outside of liberal frameworks of equality, and instead look at hierarchies and egalitarianism, which one could argue has become, if not always was, an eminently Catholic pre-occupation. In the context of rethinking hierarchies, I would only like to point in the direction of the work of the Mary Douglas, *A Feeling for Hierarchy*.



I would like to also point out to the way in which an imperial framework may have been the ideal post-colonial response to the colonial European polities of the 19th and 20th centuries. If one has a look at *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (2015) the recent work by Gary Wilder he argues that African thinkers like Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire did not make unequivocal demands for national independence, but desired continuing relationships with the metropole, in a kind of imperial federation. Indeed, I have often made the argument, based on the experience of Goans, but one that can be extended to colonized persons in various parts of the world, that the hegemonic model of decolonization, that gave rise to independent nation-states is in fact an option that consolidated racism in the world and gave it new life. Now, especially in polities that had an early modern imperial tradition, those that followed the Roman, and Catholic, model, one was no longer allowed to ask for justice within the empire. One was prohibited from being Portuguese – in the Goan case – and obliged to be Indian. Had Goans (of any religion) been able to uncomplicatedly assert a Portuguese identity it would have had a variety of radical implications. It would have interrupted the racist tendency to identify Portuguese with just persons who are “white” and simultaneously interrupted an Indian nationalist narrative which excludes the same “white” people from being considered Indian (or Goan). Such pluralism of identities is what imperial formations offer, something the liberal nation-state model categorically does not.

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