



The recent defection of ten MLAs from the Congress party in Goa to the BJP has sent shock waves not just through the political establishment in Goa, but throughout the country. For those who believed that one could not plumb the depths of cynical politics any further, the Goan defection indicates that there is always further disappointment waiting. But, while most commentators were appalled by the situation, they have, unfortunately, failed to recognize the importance of caste in the recent political maneuverings, with all its implications.

We do not suggest that factors such as money changing hands, either from the BJP High Command to the MLAs, or vice-versa, and the threat of cases (false or otherwise) slapped on the non-conforming MLAs, are not part of the latest defection. But one should not ignore the dynamic of caste which is also embedded in the current defections – a factor that otherwise gets subsumed in the deluge of defections to the ruling party taking place all over the country.

Indian political analysts have suggested that the Goa defection indicates India's entry into ideology-neutral politics. Such sweeping generalizations treat the entire country as a monolith, and, in this case, reveal more about the commentators' Goa- and caste-blindness than they do about the political situation, given that caste *is* an ideology, and has manifested itself pre-eminently post the current 'horse-trading' episode in Goa. A closer look at the defection and the events that followed, throw up an unimpeachable argument against such views.

The first point to be noted is that, perhaps for the first time in decades, there is no GSB minister in Goa's cabinet. The two GSB ministers, one belonging to the Goa Forward Party and the other an independent, were asked to step down in the cabinet reshuffle that followed the defections.

And, in fact, well before the defection occurred, there were rumblings in Goa that Chief Minister Pramod Sawant was turning out to be more than the humble protégé of his mentor, the departed Manohar Parrikar. It was said that (the non-Brahmin) Sawant was asserting himself in ways that Parrikar would have disliked, especially when he started replacing Brahmin officials appointed by Parrikar with non-Brahmins. An example is the replacement of the recently-appointed Dattaprasad Lawande as Attorney General, by Devidas Pangam. This appointment has since been followed post-defection by the removal of another GSB and close aide of Parrikar, Atmaram Nadkarni, as the legal representative of Goa in the Supreme Court and National Green Tribunal. Others pointed out that Sawant, a Maratha, made Babu Ajgaokar, an SC, deputy chief minister, just to spite Vijai Sardesai, a member of the Gaud

Saraswat Brahman caste which is by and large aligned to the BJP.



**The Defectors and the Details: Understanding the Recent Exodus from Second the defection of 10 Congress MLAs and the internal caste rivalries within Goa BJP has compromised its ideological purity – a fact becoming increasingly clear with the loud laments of hardcore BJP supporters, especially Brahmins who control the BJP and RSS in Goa. These laments have gone so far as to call the defectors ‘filth’ – a reference that may ambiguously refer to the criminal accusations against some of the defectors, but also echoes typical brahmanical aesthetics that despises non-brahmins as ‘low’.**

Indeed, there appears to be a substantial demoralisation within the party and one wonders if the BJP will split just as it did with Subhash Velingkar’s rebellion. Velingkar’s left the party after accusing it of a moral slide under the leadership of Parrikar. But even he did not leave the party when Parrikar first became chief minister, albeit for a short period in 2000, on Atanasio (Babush) Monserrate’s support. Compromising ideological purity for power has thus been a tradition that Parrikar himself began in the party, and it can also be argued that BJP is retaining Parrikar’s legacy. The reaction now to Monserrate joining the BJP this time around, is, therefore, hypocritical.

Third, even if the defectors are now members of the BJP and would be unable to mastermind a similar defection out of the BJP and threaten the government, the fact is that these MLAs are hardly loyalists of the party. If anything the alliance merely demonstrates that the defectors are confident in the knowledge that their supporters will re-elect them into power come what may.

Once alert to the possibilities of caste in the contours of contemporary Goan politics, one can see the defection in a completely different light. Given the facts that we have presented, it seems somewhat predeterministic to suggest that it will always be the BJP that will win. On the contrary, the apparent scenario of the BJP consuming the Congress might be better understood as the swallowing of a little puffer fish. For it might be only a matter of time before it destroys the BJP from within.

Of course, it is too early to predict the political future of Goa. After all, if the BJP is in power in the state of Goa, it is because it was led there first by the alliance forged by Catholic elites like Francisco Sardinha and then sustained by the support of Catholic elites like the late Mathany Saldanha. If Parrikar was able to represent Panjim for twenty-five years it was because of the support of the middle class and dominant caste Catholics. It is on the back of elite Catholic support that the BJP has managed to emerge as a major player in Goan politics. Thus, it may be that the BJP will yet emerge the winner, as it continues to infiltrate various governmental bodies, insert seemingly innocuous policies within governmental practice that the defecting MLAs, evidently concerned only with their short-term gains, may not see as

detrimental to the larger public interest of Goa.



But one can begin to understand the changing Goan polity only if one abandons the indignation of the morally outraged, and analyses the larger context with close attention to the details.

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