There is no doubt that the issue of the ‘migrant’ in Goa exposes the more significant problem of caste conflicts. Last month the issue of non-Goans changing their names to Goan ones made quite the stir, primarily because of electoral frauds and benefits of government employment are at stake. The blame mostly fell on the Banjaras, a traditionally nomadic community. In recent times, some sections of this community have achieved social and economic mobility. Nevertheless, a large part of this community still fares poorly on many human development indices.

With the inclusion of non-Goans through legal (or at times, an illegal) change of names, many fear that Goans will be marginalized in getting government jobs and in elections. These fears might be baseless. Nowadays, voting rarely has any consequences for government formation, and getting government jobs is a matter of ‘influence’ as a recent news report indicate. However, the noteworthy aspect of the debate was the protest by the Bhandari Samaj against migrants changing surnames.

While clippings of newspaper notices informing the public of name changes, mainly to Catholic surnames, have circulated for some years now, the present issue was about the “misuse” of the Naik surname. The Bhandari Samaj, who are among the Goan users of the said surname, contended that “outsiders” had no right to use the surname. In the debate aired on local TV, a leader of the Banjara Samaj argued that their folklore preserved a memory of the usage of ‘Naik’ as a marker of identity, and hence there was nothing wrong in changing their names to Naik.

Historically speaking, the term ‘Naik,’ which is a rank or title, has an interesting genealogy. In seventeenth-century documents, persons bearing the name or title of ‘Naik’ were usually associated with military service, sometimes even becoming rulers. Thus, kingdoms across the western coast had chiefs or governors or commanders called “Naique,” as they are recorded in Portuguese documents of the Estado da Índia. The Nayaka kingdoms of South India, which were established after the fall of the Vijayanagara empire after 1600s, were originally military commanders in the service of the rajahs of Vijayanagara. From Shivaji onwards, peasant and subaltern caste groups claimed a kshatriya status; their successful capture of state power across the Deccan and South India helped them to claim a new identity and a new way of life.

In Goa, at least since the nineteenth century, many non-Catholic subaltern groups have made claims to a higher kshatriya or particularly a Maratha warrior status. The formation of a group like the Bhandari Samaj, or a conglomeration of subaltern groups like the Bahujan Samaj owes its success to the history of subaltern caste mobilization. Shivaji and Sambhaji, as Maratha warrior figures par excellence, have a deep cultural resonance for these subaltern groups. We also have the example of the Kalavant Samaj that successfully mobilized since the nineteenth century for a better way of life, culminating in the formation of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj. Each instance of upward social mobility shows clear evidence of an adoption of a new group identity, as the scholarship of Anjali Arondekar and Parag Parabo demonstrate.

The Banjara Samaj appears to claim a kshatriya status. Thus, genealogies and folklore that link them to warrior lineages, such as Rajput, are cited for better living conditions, especially education and employment, for its members today. It is not surprising, therefore, that two groups claiming Kshatriya lineages—through the rank or title of ‘Naik’—should come into conflict when the issue in Goa is ostensibly one of ‘migrants.’ Which migrants, one may ask? Apparently, those who are upwardly mobile or at least claim upward mobility!

What the subaltern groups did in the nineteenth century and what the Banjaras are trying to do now is not different at all from upper caste groups. The Saraswat and Kayasth *jatis* mobilized similarly for a higher status in British India in the nineteenth century. The census that the British compiled pitted one group against the other, and not necessarily one caste against the other. Thus, the Saraswat *jatis* were competing with other Brahmin *jatis* in Maharashtra as valuable resources like government employment were at stake, and not just ritual honors in temples. Vaman Varde Valaulikar’s life and writings testify to this internal *jati* conflict.

The issue of name change is also not a new one. For instance, Muslim subaltern groups did the same thing since the nineteenth century. The butcher caste group adopted the surname Qureshi, the name of the tribal group from which the Prophet hailed. These groups adopted new (surname) identities to reclaim their humanity in a society that had marginalized them.

In our past, as well as in our present, we notice claims by several groups for higher status. These claims are tied to a desire for better material conditions in life: housing, jobs, education and so forth. Today we observe the success (however marginal) of many communities who had claimed a higher status and dignity a century or more ago. It takes that long to better one’s condition!

As history shows, the issue of the ‘migrants’ that is currently witnessing heated debates has its roots in claims to social mobility rather than identity. Hence, those who feel concerned with this issue of ‘migrants’ need to think of social justice and mobility more than identity.

(First published in *O Heraldo*, dt: 4 December, 2019)

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