

By AMITA KANEKAR



December seems to be a month for remembering. There is the feast of Goencho Saib, a man deeply connected to the identity of Goa, and also famous for his connection to the Inquisition, that much-reviled institution which, as scholars have pointed out, was also probably the first systematic codification of crime and punishment in Europe and Goa, at a time of widespread traditional and casual violence. There is the death anniversary of civil rights champion Dr B R Ambedkar, who chaired the committee which produced the Indian Constitution, offering caste society a path towards modern republicanism. The same day is the anniversary of the Babri Masjid demolition, perhaps the biggest moment in the BJP's ride to power. There is also the anniversary of the Bhopal Gas Disaster, still the worst industrial disaster in the world. Finally, we have the anniversary of the Indian annexation of Goa, when the new Indian citizens had to be forced to give up their hardwon Portuguese citizenship, a real loss as can be seen by the many Goans - and neo-Goans - determined to regain it.

Now, of course, it is also the month of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which offers citizenship to non-Muslims from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As many protests, articles, and statements across the country have already pointed out, the new act is against the Constitution of India, which does not discriminate among citizens on the basis of religion. The three countries seem chosen only because they have Muslim majorities; the two large communities that have already sought refuge from genocidal violence in India, the Rohingyas from Myanmar and Tamils from Sri Lanka, are notably excluded from the list of potential citizens. The CAA comes on the heels of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) project, implemented in Assam with 1.9 million (mostly Hindus) declared as non-citizens - and with the BJP declaring that these Hindus need not worry, as CAA will allow them citizenship. The aim of NRC-CAA is thus clearly, say critics, to target Muslims and thus create Hindu Rashtra.

Indeed, there is little doubt that these measures will enormously worsen life - even hasten death, going by examples in Assam - for many across the country, especially minoritised and Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi communities. But can we, for a moment, step back and see what has brought us to this point? Are these really the first steps to Hindu Rashtra - or the final nails in the coffin of the proclaimed modern and federal republic of India? Was India ever a secular and democratic space? Yes, secular and democratic ideas are enshrined in the Constitution, but how much has the Constitution been visible on the ground? Never, said Martin Macwan in Goa last year, except in a limited way in the big cities; what rules everywhere else is caste. Or, in other words, Hindu Rashtra.

And this precedes the BJP. Just check - even in the token media coverage every anniversary - the example of the Bhopal Gas Disaster. Patriotic Indians bristle with rage at the memory of

the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, but do they feel anything similar about that much worse night of 20 December 1984, when thousands of Indians citizens died inhaling poisonous gas spewed from the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal? And this was not the real disaster – the real disaster, as revealed later, was the Indian government’s omissions and commissions: the many cover-ups, the protection of the powerful wrongdoers, the callousness towards the powerless victims, the blatant denial of justice. Whose government certified that the factory was safe, just days before the leak? Whose government ensured that those living next to a dangerous factory were the poor, most of them Muslims, while the elites lived far away? Who ensured a safe exit for just a few from the poisoned city within hours of the leak? Who protected Union Carbide’s office-bearers and shareholders, then and now? Who allowed the company to maintain secrecy about the poisons even after the disaster unfolded, so that the survivors – with crippling and fatal illnesses – received only symptomatic medical care? Who agreed to a minuscule compensation amount? A massive oil spill by Exxon in Alaska four years after Bhopal saw the company having to pay one billion dollars in punitive damages, even though not one single human being had been hurt or injured. Union Carbide had to pay only \$470 million for genocide.

All of this happened under the Congress, with the help of a conniving and casteist bureaucracy. It is perhaps the most searing indictment of the republic ever, and proof that some Indian citizens matter much less than others.

Citizenship is not just about the right to vote; it includes many rights and privileges shared equally with other citizens, including being considered of equal importance. This has always been glaringly absent in India. Look at the recent rape-related news. The public protests following the Hyderabad rape-murder of a veterinary doctor saw some protesters actually shouting: ‘She came from a good family!’. Isn’t that why the many other rapes that took place on the same day – for this nation is RapeCentral – went without protest, because only ‘good families’ matter? The accused in the Hyderabad rape-murder were ‘encountered’ by the police – to public felicitation – but not those in the Unnao rape-murder. No doubt because this time it was the accused who were from ‘good families’.

Such is the ‘Republic of Fear’, as the journalist Sagar described India from the point of view of the poor (The Polis Project, 2019). Only a few have enjoyed the freedoms, protections, and rights guaranteed by the Constitution, and not because we are citizens, but because of our caste privilege.

This is true in Goa too. The liberal and Christianised culture here has ensured better social behaviour, but underneath this can be found the casteist control of land and wealth, and the persistence of untouchability and other atrocities, bolstered by the post-1961 privileging of

Brahmanical languages and perspectives, the denial of citizenship to those working abroad on a Portuguese passport, and the lack of implementation of Constitutionally-mandated caste-based reservations. These are all the foundational building blocks of Hindu Rashtra, without which NRC, CAA, and the whole monstrous edifice taking shape today would be impossible.

REFERENCES:

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