

By AMITA KANEKAR



Twenty crore rupees of public money has been set aside in Pramod Sawant's state budget for 'reconstructing and restoring temples and heritage sites destroyed by the Portuguese'. The words "and heritage sites" sounds almost inclusive, like the government is actually thinking beyond Hindu temples - except that this is the party that itself campaigned widely and violently against the historical site of the Babri Masjid. What heritage would such a party reconstruct? But let us, for a moment, give them the benefit of doubt.

Goa was a prominent Bijapuri settlement at the time of the arrival of the Portuguese, most architectural monuments of which were soon obliterated. So, how about also taking up the many mosques that were destroyed by the Portuguese long before any temple? And what about indigenous heritage? Given the RSS claims that the indigenous communities are all originally Hindus, shouldn't the loss of their sacred sites worry the BJP? Leave aside the countless such sites destroyed in the past, many more are under threat today, like the sacred groves of Mopa. But even they don't count. Victimhood - and reparations - belong solely to the Brahmanical Hindu world.

Even here, though, for all the talk about restoration and reconstruction, they are least interested in the actual physical heritage of any temple. Goa has a distinctive and unique Hindu temple architecture, a creatively heterogeneous style that drew inspiration from the Goan churches as well as the Maratha-Mughal world. But this architecture is disappearing today under the onslaught of rebuilding. Old temples, some more than a century old, are being pulled down almost every day, and being replaced by new ones that are double the size and resemble the ancient temples of north or south India. The reason is that the heterogeneousness of the Goan temple form is no longer considered suitable for a Hindu temple. And many of these rebuilding and 'beautification' projects have taken place with the support and blessings of successive Goan governments. Where the first post-1961 decades under the MGP and the Congress saw the replacement of Goan temple forms by modest imitations of Indian temples in cement concrete, the BJP era has served up huge extravaganzas, but with a few supposedly Goan touches - for the consumption of the tourist sold on 'Indo-Portuguese' architecture. These faux-Goan pitched roofs and strange domes will soon be all that will pass for Goa in its temples.

Except, of course, for the caste culture, which is as strong in the new temples as in the old. The scholar and activist Bharat Patankar recently made an interesting distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva, describing the former as never hiding (even promoting) caste and hierarchy, while the latter tries to hide caste, to pretend caste doesn't exist, and that Hindus are one. This is where the importance of the temple lies for the BJP. The Congress has also



used temples for politics, while, in Goa, the first post-1961 government was led by Dayanand Bendothkar, an ardent champion of temple construction and reconstruction. Temples have thus been a part of Goa's and India's politics for a long while. What is different now is the centrality of their importance, to unite Hindus for the Hindutva project. The attempts to ignore caste could be seen in the early days of the Ayodhya agitation, when Dalits were given prominence, even ritual prominence. But how far can this go? Can Goa's restored temples abjure caste? Will they allow all castes inside the garbagriha? Will Brahmins beat the drums and Dalits become the priests? All this would mean upturning religious tradition, something that many BJP supporters would hardly support.

So, if the restoration of temples is not about their architectural heritage, nor can it create a more inclusive Hindu society, what is it for? In the recent election season, when every non-BJP candidate was a fiery warrior against the government, we had the MGP's Sudin Dhavalikar questioning whether there was a communal agenda in this particular election promise by Pramod Sawant, given that the destroyed temples were rebuilt during the Portuguese regime itself.

Sudin has now, of course, swallowed his questions in return for a ministerial chair. But he was right - it's all about targetting the minoritised communities, and thus also creating a good diversion. Twenty crores is not about the money - it's actually a very modest amount these days - but to emphasize the message. Don't forget the temples destroyed by the Portuguese 500 years ago. Forget the destruction of today: the groves and orchards at Mopa, the forests of Mollem, the heritage trees of Colvale, the rash of construction destroying every plateau and shoreline, not to mention the destruction of small farming, mass education, survival-level jobs, and public health... forget all that, but not the temples destroyed by the Portuguese. It's the need of the hour. Not the need of Goa, but of the BJP.

'I said Hindi should be national language. Now they won't even notice the next price rise,' says a familiar bald silhouette to an even more familiar bearded one, in a recent Angela Ferrão cartoon. Yes, distraction is vital, especially of the aggressive kind. Like the hijab ruckus in Karnataka, followed by the ban on non-Hindus doing business near temples; the ban of an atheist dancer at a Kerala dance performance; the violence following Ram Navami celebrations in many places, including Goa; the ban on meat and fish imposed in some places on the excuse of Navratri; the unrelenting hate speech, etc, etc.

But temple reconstruction is the best. At one go, so the BJP hopes, the colonial past will be targetted (diverting from the colonialism of today), minoritised communities will be blamed for the actions of long-dead co-religionists (diverting from government failures of today), and - if all goes really well - new land-grabs and construction projects can be launched. Just

bread and circuses – bread (or dough, rather, and plenty of it) for themselves and their corporate patrons, and circuses, the more violent the better, to occupy everyone else.

Temple reconstruction: A gift that keeps giving



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