



To take up cudgels against the latest Hindutva offensive against the Catholic community, or why S. Francis Xavier's popular title of Goencho Saib (Lord of Goa) is more deserved by the god Parshuram, is fraught with risk in today's Goa. Because, although one is free to discuss the merits – and even more so the demerits – of the Catholic saint, discussing the Hindu god can, as we have seen, bring down the brute force of the State on you, in the name of hurting religious sentiment. Thus, it has become normal to judge Francis Xavier by the values of today, and therefore to condemn him for advising the Portuguese king to set up the Goa Inquisition. But applying the same modern values to Parshuram is out of the question; the many acts of violence ascribed to him, including against his own mother, are not to be criticised.

Given this context, it is not surprising that most critics of this latest offensive have limited themselves to condemning the 'insult' to the saint. Only a few have tried to address this latest controversy – at once both a superficial diversion and another drop into a growing stream of poison – in more detail, and to connect it to the contemporary context. Perhaps the most interesting argument was that by Devidas Gaonkar (Lokmat, 12 May 22), who said that it was the Gavda-Kunbi-Velip communities who first reclaimed land from the water, using earthen dams (baand) and sluice gates (manas), and who first developed the typical Goan methods of rice-farming on wetlands; it is hence they who created Goa – and not Parshuram – and thus they who should be called Goencho Saib. Gaonkar notably adds that these creators of the land are however no longer Saibs, for their land has been largely usurped by outsiders. (These points were notably also articulated by activist Ramkrishna Jalmi, during the anti-CAA protests in 2020, but were ignored by most of the mainstream media.)

The first part of the claim, that it was the Gauda-Kunbi-Velip who first reclaimed the lands of Goa and started cultivation there, is – as far as I know – yet to be backed by historical sources. But it is definitely a more interesting and realistic hypothesis, unlike the myth of an arrow creating Goa which has been spread by the Hindu upper castes. The second part of Gaonkar's claim is however something that is visible all around – that Goa doesn't belong to the people who have laboured here, whether it is the indigenous peoples or the toilers who arrived later but added their labour in the making of Goa. It was the dominant-caste bhatcars who first enjoyed the fat of the land for centuries, only to be joined now by a host of new Saibs: mining barons, tourism giants, real estate magnates, casino lobby, rich Indians wanting their 'piece' of paradise, all trying to swallow Goa wholesale and all backed by the Saibs in power.

After the extreme inequities of the past, what Goa needed was a modern and equitable

usage of its limited landmass, something that could have been ensured by any genuine democratic and representative government. But this is not the government we have. Thus, instead of being better protected and conserved, the land of Goa is only and always being 'developed', i.e. destroyed. And this is not just settlement zone land in villages and towns, it is also the land that forms part of the invaluable public commons that have been used by communities for ages, like forestlands, plateau, wetlands, and coastal and inland shores. Our elected representatives are so sold out to their own Saibs of the corporate world that it is the courts who have had to come to the rescue of locals from machinations of their own 'representatives', as when Parrikar shifted Goa to the Delhi bench of the National Green Tribunal to make it more difficult for Goans to complain against his projects. The recent Supreme Court judgement on the railway line through Mollem, is another example of this, when a project that Goans had been opposing for two years now without any positive response, or even sincere hearing, from the so-called elected government, was shelved by the court.

Loss of people's lands, but hugely-profitable real estate development; crippling of small-scale farming and fishing and tourism, but encouraging highly profitable industrial fishing, corporate tourism, and other extractive projects, the bigger the better; unaffordability of homes for locals and long-standing working class migrants, but a plethora of second and tenth homes for rich non-Goans to enjoy; public resources like river-ferries and buses diverted for the use of casinos and other private players; all this 'development' without decent modern jobs, but rather an expanding sea of badly-paid ones that primarily employ people migrating here from even worse situations in other states... This is the reality of today's Goa.

Add to this the slow and steady drip of communal poison, or anti-minoritism, so that the anger and frustration will not only get happily diverted, but also provide rich political dividends and further landgrabs. In that sense, S. Francis Xavier is a nuisance for the Hindutvawadis, because, although a Catholic missionary canonised by the Catholic church, he became an interfaith saint who has traditionally been worshipped by people of all religious communities in Goa, and from outside Goa, especially by bahun communities. When religion is seen as a means to hate, demonise and terrorise, the last thing that is desired is a worship that unites. Hence the real unsuitability of S. Francis Xavier to be the Saib of this Goa. The new Goa is for the new Saibs, from real estate mafia to casino kings, and their political-wheeler-and-dealer friends, and nobody else.

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The New Goenche Saibs