



Chief Minister Pramod Sawant has been the butt of much derision after his statement that he wants to wipe out all signs of Portuguese rule in Goa. People have been asking just how he planned to wipe out everything from the staple diet of not just Goans but all Indians (consisting as it does of vegetables, condiments, and fruit introduced then), to his own wardrobe and a million other things, including, not least, Catholicism and Catholics as well.

The mockery is surely justified. But, at the same time, nobody can deny that Sawant is on the job. It's obvious all around, with the Goa familiar to older Goans, the Goa they knew from the days of their childhood, disappearing at a crazy speed, right before our eyes. Whether it is the unique architecture, the human scale of the towns and villages, the green fields and quiet roads, the many waterbodies, the lush vegetation and equally lush wildlife, the relative cleanliness... all of it is on the way out, or already gone.

This wiping out has always been called 'development' by Sawant, but now it's apparently also to be known as the wiping out of injustice by the Portuguese. Such injustice was, according to Sawant and his BJP friends, only done to Hindus, and, that too, only regarding their religion. Thus, his much-tomtommed twenty crores supposedly kept to rebuild Hindu temples destroyed by the Portuguese, even though nobody, not he himself, nor his Department of Archives and Archaeology, nor even his expert committee set up for the issue, have identified any such temple. The committee, set up for one month, has now got a ten-month extension, just to search for these destroyed temples.

The real issues have, of course, nothing to do with justice. They include the upcoming Parliamentary elections, and the communal atmosphere that he needs to face them. They also include the main focus of this government - unrelenting, destructive, and money-spinning building projects. Hence the importance of destroyed Hindu temples - to communalize the atmosphere and unleash more profit-making construction activity, while destroying the Goan heritage that exists today.

We all know the kind of new temples that this government plans - because they are already cropping up all over Goa. The old shrines, built in the typical Goan style and to a modest scale, are being replaced by a very different architecture: huge, using gigantic amounts of concrete, along with the mandatory granites and other grand finishes, surrounded by manicured lawns and ornamental planting, vast parking lots, and high walls with gates manned by security personnel. Architecture which seems less about devotion or heritage-preservation, and more about real estate development.

Just look, as an example of Hinduism in Sawant-era Goa, to the recent Hindu festival of Vat

*Purnima* (or *Vat Savitri*), celebrated earlier this month. This is a small celebration, but it is common nowadays for even the most minor Hindu religious occasion to be hyped via the print media, television, and social media, along with commercial advertisements, and greetings to the public from members of the government. But this particular festival, which is about women praying for the well-being of their husbands, is also regarded as an example of the closeness of Hinduism to nature. This is because the ritual involves worshipping a banyan tree. What could be more environmentally-friendly than worshipping a tree? This becomes an easy reason for some environmentalists to tell us, directly or indirectly, that only Hinduism, with this clear love for nature, can preserve the environment.

But the reality is a little different. You only have to look at the trees after the festival. The worship includes tying a ceremonial thread around the tree, and every tree is found later very thickly swathed, at human height, in this thread. The reason is not just devotion, but the limited number of banyan trees. The ones we have are all huge, clearly extremely old, or, in other words, dating from Portuguese rule.

How many banyan trees have been planted after the end of Portuguese rule? Or in Sawant's rule? You need not ask. His government is infamous for removing trees instead, and then promising the legally-required afforestation hundreds or thousands of miles away from Goa, in Karnataka or even Madhya Pradesh. If trees are being planted in Goa today, it is through the efforts of concerned citizens, not the government.

Even here though, one doesn't find banyans or any other grand and beloved tree. Because, as commonly asked, 'where is the space?' Today's Goa has no space for trees, for every space not covered by a building (even an empty building like a vacation home) has to be concreted for parking. That is the plan, at least. And even the trees that were planted under Portuguese rule, including those worshipped devotedly, are soon encircled by concrete, if not polished granite, with hardly any space left for water to reach their roots. But Sawant's rule is not satisfied with that - in no time, there comes up a small temple near the tree, replaced then by big and even bigger ones, which however, needs the space occupied by the tree. Bye-bye, worshipped tree.

A student of the Goa College of Architecture, while studying new temples a couple of years ago, received this interesting feedback from a worshipper. The new architecture has changed our use of the village temple, he said. Earlier, locals could gather there to sit and chat, while kids played outside, under the trees. And there were no walls. The new temples are only for worship, he said, after which you must leave.

The picture of the past is somewhat romantic, of course - the old temples may not have had concrete walls, but they did have caste ones. Everybody could not claim the space equally or

even at all. But that is something that Sawant-era temples do not challenge either. For his government, the Hindu past is something to be mythified and glorified, and then used as political and economic capital. Worshipping Portuguese-era trees

In the ultimate analysis, the Chief Minister's statement is meant to provoke a false unity among Hindus by pretending to be a knight in shining armour, rescuing them from the long-gone Portuguese, in anticipation of the 2024 elections. And to distract them from the real and ongoing wiping out, of Goan heritage, environment, and homes.

(A shorter version of this article was first published in *O Heraldo*, dt. 13 June 2023)



Share this...

