

By AMITA KANEKAR



Sardesai and the Progress of Casteism

Flinging some rice around is a practice fairly common in South Asian weddings. But recently at a GSB wedding in Goa, I was witness to a new and bigger ritual of waste, in which rice was repeatedly poured over the heads of a number of GSB couples seated in a line; the poured rice resulted in messy heaps trodden underfoot all around. When I expressed disgust at the waste of grain, a GSB friend was quick with reassurance: don't worry, the sweepers will take it home later. It's never wasted.

So, another Indian tradition. Just like the *made snana* of Karnataka where lower castes are expected to roll in brahmin left-overs, or the old tradition in some Maharashtra villages where the wedding feasts were followed by the remaining food being heaped on leaf plates and thrown out of the gates; the lower castes were expected to wait outside and pick up the leftovers from the mud (Namdeo Nimgade, *In the Tiger's Shadow: the Autobiography of an Ambedkarite*, 2011), this is another of those great caste traditions where brahmins emphasize their superiority by forcing others to eat their dirt.

And this is the same 'highly progressive' GSB community that prominent journalist Rajdeep Sardesai has been tweeting about. For those not in the know, Sardesai's tweet, after Parrikar and Prabhu joined Modi's cabinet, went like this: 'Big day for my Goa. Two GSBs, both talented politicians become full cabinet ministers. Saraswat pride!'

The negative feedback this attracted did not deter him, and he went on to write a piece in the Hindustan Times defending his position, which is that pride in caste is not casteism. It is worth quoting that piece here.

“GSB”, explains Sardesai, ‘refers to the Gaud Saraswat Brahmins, a tiny, but highly progressive community of fish-eating Brahmins that I belong to which nestles along the Konkan coast, across Maharashtra, Goa, through to parts of Karnataka. In his valuable book *Saraswats*, Chandrakant Keni traces the history of the Saraswat community, of the migration

from Kashmir, of how they faced oppression from the conquering Portuguese, how they zealously held onto their family traditions and village deities, and placed a premium on education as a path to upward mobility.’

Sardesai then goes on to speak of how GSBs have ‘contributed enormously to the country’ despite their small numbers, and concludes by saying that the induction of Parrikar and Prabhu shows that is now ‘space for merit in a caste-driven cabinet’

So we have it on the authority of a GSB himself that GSBs are progressive, meritorious and pro-education. And what is the criteria for this judgement? That they eat fish, marry other brahmins, and ‘contribute enormously’ by holding most of the top jobs in Goa? Or perhaps, looking at the field of education, it is their silence while laws on reservation – i.e. on affirmative action to create a more inclusive society – are flouted? We have had numerous worthies from the GSB community sitting in high places in Goa’s education system, not just professors and top University officials, but also the last Chief Minister, also the Education Minister, even as reservation rules are being brazenly flouted all around. The result in Goa University, where faculty reservations are supposed to be close to 50%, is that out of more than 150 existing teaching posts, not even 5 are reserved. The situation appears no better in most colleges. But perhaps that is what Sardesai means when he says that the GSBs used education for upward mobility?

Because otherwise, as Kaustubh Naik asks, ‘when you are the only community having access to education and knowledge systems and thus denying the right to education to rest of the communities, aren’t you the only one who’s going to ride on the path of upward mobility? It’s like running the race alone or with fellow racers who are handicapped by social structure which you’ve ensured remains intact for centuries and then claiming victory?’

And oppressed too – isn’t it nice to learn that those at the top of the caste hierarchy, those who dominated the village communities, controlled the most fertile lands and the biggest money-spinning temples, employing bonded tenants, servants and also hereditary slave labour (D D Kosambi, *Myth and Reality*, 1962), were also oppressed by the Portuguese?

Unfortunately though, this is contradicted by the historical record which shows that the biggest GSBs in fact prospered under the Portuguese. According to Raghuraman Trichur Sardesai and the Progress of Casteism (Renguring Goa: From Trading Post to Tourism Destination, 2013), it was in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that the GSBs consolidated their position as the dominant economic class in colonial Goa, many being actively engaged in trade, creating great individual fortunes and even financing the colonial government. 'Prominent business families in Goa such as the Camotins, Dempos, Naiques, Navelcars, Kenis, etc., some of whom are business leaders today, accumulated their fortunes during this period. The relationship between the Portuguese Estado do Índia, the native merchants and the landed gentry was such that one could not survive without the other' (page 37). Some GSBs, with the family names of Sinay, Prabu, Pai, Shet, and Gad, were also important state revenue farmers for generations.

According to Sardesai, caste pride is not casteism; the first is harmless, while the second means discrimination and atrocities. But caste pride of the upper castes is actually the blatant falsification of history and the twisting of contemporary realities, all in order to pretend that caste privilege and oppression do not exist; it is the fuel for discrimination and atrocities.

Sardesai's opinions may be dismissed as arrogant foolishness by some. But the fact that he is speaking not in his living room but in a national newspaper is a sign of the wretched backwardness of India. Here the savarnas can rewrite history and re-invent the meanings of words like 'merit' and 'progressive', even as they continue to trample food into the ground and expect others to eat it.

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