



The recent renaming of the Government College of Pernem, as the Sant Sohirobanath Ambiyee College of Art and Commerce, throws up several issues. Jason Keith Fernandes discussed some a few days ago ('Sant Sohirobanath and the Secular Death'), including how this use of the name of a Hindu and Saraswat religious figure for a government institution is both an attack on secularism and a continuing of the hegemony of the Saraswat caste in public spaces in Goa, thereby identifying the 'true' Goan as a Saraswat.

But that's not all. Who is this Sant Sohirobanath, in the first place? For those like myself who had never heard of him, an exhaustive internet search does not reveal much; a measly 600 'hits' when I first looked, which jumped up to about 2000 a couple of days later. Most of these led to articles talking about the renaming and the recent festival celebrating his 300th anniversary. There were also two books of a non-scholarly and religious type, one describing Sohirobanath as a Great Yogi and a 'leading luminary' of the Nath Panth sect, while the other just mentions him in passing as a Sant who on being harassed threatens the harasser that he will be burnt alive; the threat is fulfilled. One online article speaks of two books containing his poetry. Besides this are just few mentions in blogs on Marathi poetry.

There is no link to any scholarly book or article on the man. As for Wikipedia — which is not a source of reliable information, but at least reflective of popular understanding — he is not mentioned anywhere on that humongous site, not even on the pages about Hinduism, Goa, Sants, or the Nath Panth.

Enquiries at the history department of Goa University and the Goa Central Library reveal that there are no works of history which mention this supposedly historical figure. All they have are some compilations of his verses, some of which also briefly describe his life.

But what's wrong in being little known, one might ask; there must be millions of deserving people unnamed on Wikipedia. True, but how many have government institutions named

after them? Governments name and rename public institutions usually after people with some public standing, and for a reason. Belatedly remembering Savitribai Phule, more than 60 years after the Pune University was set up, reflects the need of the Maharashtra government to display respect for this pioneering educationist from the Bahujan Samaj, a woman who defied the gender and caste norms of her time as well the idea - still current - that it is only the progressive elements from the dominant castes and classes who found educational institutions. That Maharashtra remains the land of Khairlanjis and other caste atrocities, where Dalit and bahujan samaj women still have to fight for education and dignity, shows that the gesture is only lip-service to the cause.

What is the gesture being made by the Goa government in this renaming? Here we have someone who, from all available sources, was a member of the privileged Saraswat community who joined the religious sect called the Nath Panth and wrote spiritual verses, in which he 'distilled the wisdom' of the Vedas and the Upanishads.

Is this adequate qualification for a 21st-century educational institution being named after one? Perhaps, when you look at some of ours. Not only do most of our schools, colleges and universities fall far short of the touted ideals of education, many already excel at pandering to Hindu religious beliefs, with the organization of brahmanical Hindu festivals within the campus, and upper caste Hindu religious icons permanently installed there. And the less said about their predilection for quietly side-stepping reservation quotas, therein further disadvantaging OBC and SC/ST applicants, the better. This step is in fact an open admission of their quasi-brahmanical tendencies.

And the problem is not only the lack of even-handedness. Would it be all right if the Goa government were to name the next college after a Christian or Muslim religious figure, or indeed a coast guard ship as the Ave Maria-14, as they recently did? India is in fact the proof that overt religiosity does not lead to anything very positive, for this home of 33 crore gods, along with unlimited godmen, shrines, pilgrimages, and rituals, is also the site of the most wretched mass deprivation and casteist violence. One reason for this is that brahmanical Hinduism is one with casteism, as Dr. Ambedkar pointed out so many years ago. But even with the other religions, public religious symbolism tends to caricature local religio-ethnic beliefs in a reductive manner, and strengthen the conservative and regressive sections of the community. True secularism does not mean that the government panders to all, but that it

stays away from all public religiosity.



The Name of Sant Sohirobanath

The government and its supporters are busy congratulating each other for the discovery of their unknown sant. And well they might, for his lack of renown means that he can now be fleshed out in exactly the manner desired. We can expect expanded hagiographies in the days to come, a manufacture of 'heritage' as it were. Already a glorification is on, with the use of the term 'saint' instead of 'sant', even though the words do not mean the same thing. The English word either means a person of high morals, or a Christian spiritual figure who is not just fervently religious but also dead. India however abounds with living sants who are not necessarily very saintly either. The word sant is thus far better translated as devotee, or religious figure, or even god-man. But Sant Sohirobanath was a 'saint of wisdom', we are told!

Projects of renaming are in general about strengthening elite hegemony, without making any change in content, e.g. without improving the quality of or access to education. Sant Sohirobanath may have been one among thousands of sants produced by this subcontinent, but today his name is important for the promotion of Hinduism, and the hegemony of the Saraswats, along with religiosity, social conservatism, and some new history of the made-to-order kind.

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