



By AMITA KANEKAR

The Bahujan Challenge to Goa's Brahmanical Shrines

Goa's old temples need change, but they also need to be protected from change. There is no contradiction here: the change – or even revolution – they urgently need is in the realm of the social, political and economic; but connected to this is the issue of their unique Portuguese-era art and architecture, which needs protection. And the solution to both problems might be the same: the bahujan take-over of these currently savarna establishments, as is being attempted with the Navdurga temple at Marcaim.

Looking at the second problem first, there is no knowing what to expect at any of Goa's old brahmanical shrines nowadays. A recent visit to the Mangueshi temple at Priol is an example. It was part of a trip to show some visiting students the syncretism of Goa's early modern architecture, which included visits to Old Goa and Ponda's Safa Masjid. At Mangueshi, however, we found that the old Mulkeshwar temple had been completely rebuilt. The new temple is certainly grander (though somewhat like an upmarket Udipi restaurant), but is that a good reason to demolish an old structure, along with all the local history it contained?



But this is what is happening to old temples across Goa. What comes up in their stead are forms like those of the brahmanical temples in India, described by laypeople as 'more Hindu'. This is precisely the reason for the replacement, although the official one is usually the need¹

for expansion. Goan temple forms are indeed not Hindu, or rather brahminical, enough; they are brilliant examples of the European-Islamicate encounter. They often also show some pre-brahmin roots; Mulkeswar, also known as Rakhandar, is supposed to be a non-brahmin or bahunjan diety.

These temples thus can tell much about Goa's rich cultural past, which however does not sit well with brahmin nationalism. Replacing them is good business of course; it provides the chance to create larger and grander Indian-style temples which attract the moneyed Hindu tourist eager to 'consume' religion (Meera Nanda, 2010). But replacing them also serves a political purpose: to erase Goa's Portuguese, Islamicate, and bahunjan past, along with its syncretic architecture and working traditions (Catholic artisans are supposed to have built these temples). And thus to invent a Goa that was always brahmanically Hindu.

It was just such an attempt, to change the old idol at the Navdurga temple, Marcaim, which has now blown up into a struggle demanding a different kind of change. Because the temple managements, so eager to demolish old architecture, art and icons, are the opposite when it comes to their own social, economic, and political privileges. For example, even today, none but the 'mahajan' families - all savarna - are allowed within the sanctum sanctorums of these temples. Prohibited from entry are even those members of the bahunjan communities who work for the temple, doing everything from daily maintenance to playing the music during rituals; they are treated as 'temple servants'. The same brahmanism prevails in rituals outside the sanctum. Along with this, menstruating women are denied entry anywhere inside the temple, as were foreigners some time ago. When questioned about all this, the temple managements claim that the temples are privately owned and thus free to limit public access.

But savarna hegemony over temples is not just an issue of religion. Some of these old temples are also landowners (bhatkars) who control vast immovable property as well as the lives of those who live and work there. Many of the latter have been unable to get their land deeds in their name to this day, with the result that they can be pressurised to continue with their humiliating 'temple servant' roles, using the threat of eviction.

Bahujan communities in Goa are unwilling to accept all this any more. The villagers of Marcaim have demanded that the Goa government intervene to ensure that the old idol is not replaced. They also want to know, they say, why the temples in Goa are considered the private property of savarnas, when temples in India are public temples. Their demand is that all who work for and worship at the temple should enjoy exactly the same rights and access.

This will not be an easy struggle, given the brahmanical nature of the Goan and Indian authorities. For example, the Supreme Court of India recently overturned the policy introduced by Tamil Nadu's former DMK government to allow persons from any caste to apply for employment as priests. The court ruled that appointments should be according to the old 'Agama Shastras'. With the brahmin-composed Agamas not surprisingly preferring brahmins, the ruling will preserve a brahmin monopolisation of this job. Would this court support a bahujan takeover of brahminical temples?

The other question though is, even if the savarna mahajans are defeated, will these temples really change into non-hierarchical and completely public spaces? Or will the only change be the replacement of savarnas by the more powerful among the bahujans? Let us not forget that Dalits are still barred from many of the 'public' temples in Maharashtra; people have even been murdered for entering. It was not for nothing that Dr Ambedkar advocated leaving Hinduism altogether; that is what some dalit-bahujan communities in Goa and India still opt for today.

For the moment, though, a good struggle is on, and one can only wish it well.

(With thanks to Ashwinkumar Naik for information on the Marcaim struggle.)

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