

By AMITA KANEKAR



Caste Atrocities in Goa: Give Us this Day... Our Land!

Gayechi shepdi tumi दौरा, amkaam amchi zamin diya – such is the slogan (translated into Konkani) of the Una Dalit Atyachar Ladayi Samiti, formed in Gujarat after the recent atrocity where 4 Dalit men were tortured by Gau Rakshaks, for disposing of dead cattle. Atrocities on Dalits are of course not new for South Asia; indeed they are the way of life for the brahmanical societies here. But, even as India rang to this new slogan, and other inspiring news from Gujarat where a vow has been taken by Dalit communities to forswear this occupation that they have traditionally been forced to do, leading to the dumping of cattle carcasses in front of government offices, Goa has been mostly silent. There was a small protest on 15 August in support of the Gujarat struggle, but, apart from this, one would imagine that Goa has nothing to do with such atrocities.

But this is not true. Atrocities against Dalits (and others) are part of not just Goa's history, but contemporary culture too. Just a few days earlier, the people of Shahu Nagar wado in Ibrampur village, Pernem, had invited lawyers and others to their village to discuss the serious caste discrimination rampant there. Ibrampur has seven wados with a total population of 1800, of which the Mahars comprise 166 persons. As is the case with most Goan villages, the wados are caste-based, with the Mahars living to this day in a separate wado, known to the village and the government as the Maharwado or Harijanwado, though the residents have decided to change the name to Shahu Nagar. And although they have lived here for generations, toiling on the land and growing many fruit trees and other crops there, the land is not in their name, except for their houses. The rest is in the control of the Comunidade of the village. And this Comunidade is dominated by members of the Gawas community, who consider themselves higher than the Mahars.

The recent grievance of the Mahars concerns the Prime Minister's Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojana, under which Ibrampur is one of three villages selected to become a 'model village'. Funds have been laid out for these villages to invest on various kinds of infrastructure. The Shahu Nagar residents had applied 2 years ago for a community hall and children's park in their wado, individual (private) toilets and water connections, and a proper road to all houses in the wado. The Gram Panchayat apparently said that a No-Objection Certificate (NoC) was required from the Comunidade, which the latter had refused to give. When the villagers



approached the Comunidade, they were told that the NoC would only be provided if the people of Shahu Nagar took up all their old occupations again. They had been permitted to stay on the land, the Comunidade members are reported to have said, only in return for providing 'seva' to the village. In other words, the Mahars had to go back to beating drums at temple festivities, beating the dhol through the village at other times, clearing carcasses, delivering messages, etc, all of which they had given up years ago.

The people of Shahu Nagar protested that many of them were employed otherwise now. The Comunidade however remained adamant. the Mahars had to do the work. Only then would the development of their wado be considered.

Meanwhile, the funds released under the scheme are being utilised in the other wados, where roads, gutters, taps, toilets, and wells are being built. In Shahu Nagar however, even a deep and dangerous hole which has developed in the main road remains unrepaired.

And this is not the only atrocity being faced by the Dalits here. They are not allowed to build new houses, extend their old ones, or even build new sheds or barns; one person was threatened when he tried. And they are, even today, not allowed to enter the village temple. There are some houses, including that of a teacher of the local school, where they are offered water in separate glasses. This school conducts a Satyanarayana puja every year (itself a questionable activity—why should a government school hold religious programme, and that of only some faiths?) in which Mahar students are not allowed to play a role. The villagers say that they have complained about all this to BJP MLA Rajendra Arlekar, who represents Pernem in the Assembly, but to no avail.

And Ibrampur's story is not a unique one. Avinash Jadhav, an activist of Dalit Ekta Samiti, carried out a one-day hunger strike in Panjim on 15 August, in solidarity with the Gujarat movement and also to highlight atrocities in Goa, especially in Sattari. Jadhav described Dalits there as living 'in custody'. They lived, he said, completely at the mercy of the bhatkars, i.e. the Rane family, with no title to the land on which they have lived and toiled for generations, without the freedom to harvest the produce from their own trees, sometimes even with barbed wire fencing put around their houses by the bhatkar's men to prevent them

'trespassing' on the sprawling lands controlled by him.



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In other words, our 'progressive' land of Goa is rife with caste-based atrocities, most of them directly connected to the practices and beliefs of Hinduism, as pointed out ages ago by Jyotiba Phule as well as Dr Ambedkar. And a critical element of this oppression is through control of land. Thus the slogan given by the Dalits in Gujarat, challenging the Hindu obsession with the cow and also focussing on land, is the slogan for Goa as well - Keep the cow's tail for yourself, give us our land!

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