



By AMITA KANEKAR

Of Temples, Conversions, and Apologies


The Portuguese Prime Minister should apologise, say the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP) and the Goa Suraksha Manch (GSM), ‘as soon as he lands, for all the atrocities committed on the people of Goa, while the Portuguese ruled Goa.’

Let us leave aside the fact that these apology-seekers have long been part of the present ruling establishment, and thus should themselves apologise first for their failure on every single front—for the freely proliferating casinos, for the mining mess, for the numerous white elephant projects destroying the environment while driving the state into massive debt, for the communities being uprooted right and left, for the lack of decent employment and wages for Goans even as the government prepares to clean out the state coffers to provide the 7th Pay Commission bonanza—to itself.

But let us ignore the fact that this talk of apologies for the past is clearly an attempt to distract us from the issues of the present, and to make some nationalist mileage out of the visit of the Prime Minister of Portugal to Goa. Let us also ignore the fact that it is ridiculous to ask for apologies for past events whose participants are dead and gone. What I would like to look at instead is the history peddled by the MGP and GSM, which, as expected, is both one-sided and brahmanical to the core.

So what are these atrocities that they want an apology for? ‘There was maximum destruction done by the Portuguese by destroying temples and bridges, just as they left Goa in 1961,’ claims former PWD minister Sudin Dhavalikar. Plus there was the ‘oppression under the Portuguese rule, conversions and inhumane treatment’, adds GSM president Anand Shirodkar, not to mention the introduction of the ‘English language culture’.

Now this is the first time one has heard of temples destroyed in 1961, probably because it never happened. There are of course records of temple destruction by the Portuguese earlier. But it is really a question whether this calls for apologies. Because what exactly did these



temples represent? Even today, many Hindu temples across India are strongly brahmanical institutions. Dalits have been beaten, even killed, for stepping inside temples in India not centuries ago but in current times. In Goa, while overt violence might not be heard of, Dalits are still barred from Hindu temples in Pernem. Even elsewhere—as in Marcaim, represented by Dhavalikar in the Goa Assembly—full access is allowed only to certain castes, while every single job, ritual and celebration sees the enforcement of the caste system with its ideas of purity and pollution.

The bahujan struggle at Marcaim to democratise the control of the temple is, not surprisingly, yet to receive a word of support from Dhavalikar.

How would it have been centuries ago when the temples of the Velhas Conquistas were destroyed? These dominant-caste temples were not just the owners of wealth, including lands, gold, and all kinds of slaves, but also the heart and soul of caste society. As Xavier and Zupanov (*Catholic Orientalism*, 2015) point out, the temples were the ‘centre of local sociability, a memory archive of social distinctions, a collective treasury, and the seat of village authority’. This was a society that upheld sati (banned by Albuquerque) and treated bahujans literally like dirt; not even accepting them as animals, forget humans; not allowing them to eat or dress decently—because that was against religion, the religion upheld by the temples. It was a time when Dalits could be killed in religiously-sanctioned sacrifices for the construction of all grand projects, as the inscriptions in Vijayanagara (Hampi) describe.

The destruction of such institutions by the Portuguese would thus surely have been seen as a moment of liberation by many, even though it was probably done not for liberation but as a statement of power.

As for conversions, according to Ângela Barreto Xavier (2007), the untouchables (farazes) were willing converts to Christianity, for they saw it as a chance to escape caste oppression. It is another matter that, thanks to many dominant castes also converting in order to retain power and wealth, caste itself entered Goan Catholicism. Even so, Catholicism still offered the message of equality, at least theoretically. The combination of this theory with the jobs, education, and other opportunities offered by the Estado to Catholic bahujans, meant that

they could leave their former humiliating conditions and seek new opportunities. As Raghuraman Trichur and Peter de Souza point out, this in turn provided an opportunity for oppressed castes in the regions outside the Estado. For the Velhas Conquistas now needed labour; bahun outsiders could find work here and thus escape their old positions and identities.

Conversions to Catholicism were thus a boon for Goans, not just the Catholics but *all* Goans. And the destroyed temples were similarly hardly likely to have been mourned by anybody but the dominant castes whose position they upheld. As for the 'English language culture', only casteists would want to deny this culture to all, along with the social and economic benefits it entails.

So, apologies for what? Vasco da Gama's arrival in the Malabar is in fact considered by many Dalits as a milestone in the history of Dalit liberation (Aditya Nigam, 2006).

It is high time that Goans stop falling for the history narratives peddled by casteist myth-mongers. For them, the only problem in Goan (and Indian) history is the arrival of the Portuguese (and the British); before that, we supposedly lived in a Golden Age. But this was a Golden Age of only the dominant castes, and the sooner we recognise this, the earlier our real liberation.

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