



By AMITA KANEKAR

## Cuncolim was not Goa's First Rebellion against the Portuguese

It's that time of year again. The anniversary of the Cuncolim incident of 15 July 1583, with its regular demands to commemorate the gauncars who were put to death by the Estado da Índia for lynching 5 Jesuit missionaries and several native Christians, provides a great example of the prevailing amnesia about Goa's past. The amnesia is at least partly deliberate, as can be seen from how the popular Cuncolim narrative has been woven to satisfy all the nationalist tropes possible. The Portuguese as relentless oppressors, Goa as a Hindu land, religious conversion as forced and violent, natives as Hindus alone who were united against the foreign Christians, elite Goans as martyrs for Hinduism, and no mention of caste or land relations at all. All of which makes this incident the first 'War of Independence' not only in Goa but also India. What better history can any nationalist ask for?

Alas! The facts of the incident, as examined by various scholars, read somewhat differently. For example, although the nationalists insist that Goa was Hindu before the Portuguese arrived, many Goans of the time were actually Muslim, while many others belonged to indigenous communities with their own unique beliefs and practices. If anything related to today's Hinduism existed then, it was the belief system of only some of the dominant non-Muslim castes.

Further, the village of Cuncolim was not united against the missionaries. For, not only were the elites divided among themselves, but a Christian villager is reported to have rescued one of the Portuguese missionaries attacked on that fateful day (Ângela Barreto Xavier, *Power, Religion and Violence in Sixteenth-Century Goa*, 2010). Perhaps one of the clearest proofs of the divisions within the village was the case of one of those killed, Domingos da Costa: he was a Brahmin youth from Cuncolim studying at Rachol, who had accompanied and guided the soldiers who had destroyed the local temples earlier (Rowena Robinson, *Cuncolim: Weaving a Tale of Resistance*, 1997).

But the biggest casualty in the Cuncolim narrative is the complete absence of Bijapur, even though the region in which Cuncolim was situated was administered by governors appointed by the Adilshahi administration of Bijapur, and was notable for providing soldiers for the

Adilshahi army (Xavier, 2010). Goa of course did not even exist at that time, before the Portuguese welded it together out of many territories, kingdoms and chiefdoms, some of which stretched into today's Konkan and Canara coasts, and also the Deccan. In fact, this incident of 1583, in which a number of gauncars, who had led a group of villagers in murdering the Jesuit priests and the Christians accompanying them, were in turn executed by the Portuguese administration, took place against a backdrop of strife between the Portuguese and Bijapur over territories formerly ruled by the latter.

That's another reason why the demand that the 1583 event in Cuncolim be titled as India's first 'war of independence' and mentioned so in school textbooks, is so ridiculous. It's not just the issue of forgetting history by claiming that India existed in 1583, when it was really born in 1947. It's not just the strange notion that opposition to European colonial rule was automatically a fight for 'independence'. It's also the very simple fact that, if you want to look for the first rebellion against the Portuguese, you should obviously look towards Bijapur.

Because the Bijapur administration rose against the Portuguese much before Cuncolim did, and not just once but many times over an entire century, even succeeded in driving them out of Goa for a while, and finally lost many hundreds of lives in this cause. Afonso de Albuquerque was welcomed by some Goans when he first conquered Goa in February 1510, but opposed by others. The latter, led by the Sultan of Bijapur, succeeded in driving the Portuguese out at the end of May. It was in November that Albuquerque conquered Goa for the second and more permanent time. Thousands of soldiers and civilians perished in the battle and the vengeance that followed. Shouldn't these soldiers and civilians—many of whom were Goans or residents of Goa—be considered as martyrs for the cause of so-called 'independence'?

And the Bijapuri rebellions did not stop here. They and the Portuguese fought numerous battles, small and large, between 1520 and 1583, with some pockets of land—like the Cabo de Rama fort—shifting back and forth between the contending sides.

The Bijapur revolts were of course not a democratically-minded struggle, but essentially that of a king fighting for his kingdom. But the 1857 sepoy mutiny in British India - called a 'war of

independence' by some today – was also about kings, queens, and feudal lords fighting to stay in power, without a single democratic thought in their heads. Cuncolim's rebel gauncars were similarly local landed elites fighting to preserve their traditional lifestyle, including their casteist rights and privileges over the village lands and community. In fact, the Cuncolim gauncars continued to insist on their hereditary pre-Christian and caste-based privileges in land and ritual even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Robinson, 1997).

It therefore makes little sense today to refer to all these elite struggles as wars of independence. Many of the most discriminated castes in Goa and elsewhere in fact saw religious conversion as a way to improve their lives—in other words, for them, it was the Europeans and Christianity which offered an idea of independence.

Many nationalists will not like to celebrate the Adilshahi rebellions the way they do Cuncolim, because their idea of the nation is a Hindu one. But there is no denying that, as a struggle for the freedom of Goan elites, the Cuncolim one was certainly not the first. The Adilshahi revolts were bigger, more expensive in terms of 'martyrs' or lives lost, more successful, and much earlier.

(First published in *O Heraldo*, dt: 27 July, 2017)



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