While reading *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics* (2005) edited by Mushirul Hasan and Asim Roy, which aimed to problematize concepts like syncretism and communal harmony, I first encountered the metaphor, *living together separately*. Perhaps, it is an apt metaphor to think about Goa's encounter with communalism.

The vandalism of Christian religious structures – especially crosses in cemeteries – in the last few weeks have shaken Goan society. Even before this began, Goans had become fearful that communal tensions would rip the fabric of its society – especially since the desecrations took place after the virulent hate-speech by Sadhavi Saraswati, who called for beef-eaters to be publicly executed. It did not help matters much that the law and order establishment in Goa, in the name of a fair investigation, staged a farce for public consumption. The response, by and large, from many Goan public figures was to assert Goa's 'age-old' communal harmony; indicating how Hindus and Catholics have lived in perfect harmony despite all odds. In other words, they stressed *Goemkarponn* as a bulwark against the RSS/BJP-type of Hindutva.

Goa's Hindu-Catholic model of communal harmony is similarly structured as the Hindu-Muslim unity propounded by Nehruvian Indian nationalism. In this sense, Goa's model of communal harmony tends to reproduce many problems associated with Indian nationalism and secular liberalism. To assert Goa's age-old communal harmony is to assume that there was a pre-existing *religious harmony* – in the sense of 'unity in diversity' rhetoric so common in India. This religious harmony is assumed to be centuries old and under growing threat due to the recent rise of Hindu fascism. In other words, the problem of communal disharmony appears to be recent one.

However, this assumption of Goa's eternal communal harmony ignores many of the events in the past that have led (or are leading) to the present situation of uncertainty and fear. For instance, almost all would scoff at the suggestion that the rise of Hindutva in Goa predated the rise of the BJP. But if one looks at how Hindu nationalism was actively promoted by many Goans in the past, even under the Portuguese rule and ostensibly against the same Portuguese rule, one can see a longer process of communalization at work. The erstwhile

| 1

weekly, *O Bharat*, published in Portuguese, Romi Konkani, and Marathi editions, contained many articles in its Marathi edition that encouraged cow-protection. Many of the articles published in *O Bharat* in the 1930s suggested that Goans should stop the consumption of beef, as Hindus considered cow to be sacred; additionally, the cow provided with food items like milk and hence it was too valuable to be simply consumed for its meat only. These facts should essentially make us question our beliefs about our own communal harmony.

Connected with the idea of Goa's ancient communal harmony is the idea of religious syncretism. We have the very well-known instances of the *zatra* of the Goddess Shantadurga at Fatorpa and the feast of Milagres Saibinn at Mapusa where both Hindus and Catholics throng. However, this cross-religious devotionalism or syncretism is not something that affects the course of communal politics. It doesn't affect politics in Goa precisely because, barring a few exceptions, communities divided by caste and religion tend to keep to themselves. If observed closely, one can see that this cross-religious devotion is largely led by bahujan communities within Roman Catholicism and Hinduism from which the elites within these two religions keep their distance.These are the groups that are, by and large, marginalized in politics as well; another reason why a bahujan-led cross-religious tolerance has very little effect to stop the increasing communalization in Goa.

Underlying this so-called religious syncretism are fractures of caste and class that manifest in various ways. For instance, the first election held in Goa after the end of Portuguese sovereignty is a good measure of how deep these caste and class fractures ran in Goan society. While the MGP's stunning victory was due to the consolidation of various Hindu bahujan groups against Hindu upper-castes (and also against their *bhatkarshahi*), it did not mean that a political system was created which protected the interests of various marginalized groups. What followed this initial victory were not just internal schisms in the bahujan movement, but also the marginalization of the Catholic and Muslim voices as well as the many Hindu bahujan communities that had once propelled the Dayanand Bandodkar-led MGP to victory. Where was Goa's communal harmony when the divisions between various communities were systematically being further encouraged?

Another problem with the idea of communal harmony is the visible exclusion of Muslims, leaving only a false Hindu-Catholic binary and subsuming several communities within the rubric of 'Hindu' and 'Catholic'. Goa's 'age-old' communal harmony can be said to

foundationally exclude members ostensibly of the same political and cultural community. Why should we settle for an ideology that often misguides and offers very little in return? Why should we settle for less? The possible way out would be to reject these false equations that straightjacket Goan identity and culture.

There is no doubt that Goan history contains evidence of many progressive values, however, it is equally true that oppressive cultural practices and divisiveness also reside within Goa. This hasn't been tackled adequately and a superficial reiteration of Goa's communal harmony whenever dastardly acts like the desecration of crosses occur wouldn't make the problems go away. It would profit us much to start from the fact that we live together, but separately.

(First published in *O Heraldo*, dt: 16 August, 2017)

Share this...

Facebook

Whatsapp

Print

Email

Twitter

Reddit