



Every few months the issue of identity emerges in Goa, and vociferous debates and discussions undoubtedly follow. One can observe a certain tendency wherein political issues are reduced to issues of Goan identity. This is done by emotionally appealing to the masses that their existence solely depends on protecting an abstract idea – the Goan identity. This abstract and loosely-defined idea assumes different forms around events, symbols, and objects as the political and ruling classes see fit. One way in which these emotional appeals are made is through the idea of 'mother'.

In the last couple of months, one such issue where 'mother' was invoked was the diversion of the waters of river Mhadei. In these debates, one of the statements claimed that the river Mhadei is the "mother" of Goans. The logic, one presumes, is that the Mhadei river forms a crucial, life-giving link for Goans. Without the river feeding its waters to the Mandovi in Goa, it was argued, there would be no Goans, and Goa will turn into a parched desert. As such, Goans need to band together to halt the developmental plans of Karnataka. Although it is true that the river might undergo drastic changes – or even disappear – if the waters are diverted away in other parts of Karnataka, the logic of the opposition discourse elevates the physical existence of the river to an abstract idea. The point is that those who are trying to mobilize Goans against the proposed plans on the Mhadei are using an emotional appeal to drum up populist support, rather than ensuring that the legal, technical, and environmental arguments are strengthened and due process followed.

This is not the first time that politics in Goa has been defined through the metaphor of 'motherhood'. The debates surrounding the Konkani language and Goan identity are the best examples of how political discourses in Goa are couched in terms of 'motherhood'. From the '60s one witnessed an emerging view that Konkani was Goa's sole language. In these terms, the relationship of Goans to the Konkani language was projected to be one that a mother and child shared. To not protect (and therefore not be loyal to) one's mother was a betrayal of Goan identity. At this point one needs to pause and ask: which communities have benefitted from this kind of politics? Has the politics of 'identity through motherhood' enriched the political discourse in Goa? Arguably, not. One can observe that no proper resolution of Goa's identity issues has ever come about in the last 50-odd years. On the contrary, one witnesses

ever more contestations regarding Goan identity.



The 'Mothers' of Goa

The identity politics surrounding the 'Konkani mai' or 'mai bhas' – the Konkani mother – benefitted only a few. The votaries of Romi Concanim have been left out in the cold, as the Official Language Act of 1987 only recognized Konkani in the Nagri script as official. This is not to argue that the language politics has turned out what it is today only because Konkani was elevated to the status of a 'mother'. However, it can be observed that casting Konkani in a singular notion of 'mother' to Goans led to the exclusion of the other languages of Goa.

And this probably is the problem with identity politics that has a narrow focus on one particular event, symbol, and object while excluding other similar objects, events, and symbols. It is through this kind of politics that one section of the Goan people is pitted against another. If some years back political parties and cultural institutions claimed that Konkani was the defining element of Goa's identity, in more recent times the people of Goa are being rallied around such symbols like the coconut tree, the coconut, and now even a river.

A couple of years ago, Kaustubh Naik, a research scholar, called for an "unburdening" of Goa's language politics from the notion of 'motherhood' precisely because of the current exclusive nature of the language politics in Goa. With the political discourse around the Mhadei issue being framed in terms of 'motherhood', one wonders if certain patterns of such politics will also repeat as they did in the Konkani movement. For one, we can think about how the masses will be emotionally rallied, while the rights of many communities that directly depend on the river for sustenance will be systematically compromised. One is not clear why the Mhadei issue is tethered to Goan identity. Why it isn't simply an issue of the right to water of the people of Goa and Karnataka? Or an ecological issue wherein diverting the courses of rivers can have drastic impact on the environment and therefore on the present and future generations of people?

The pattern of identity politics in Goa's recent history in fact indicates that the mobilization of the masses for the purpose of safeguarding identity – often by the political and dominant classes – does not transform into a concrete action for securing rights of non-dominant

communities. In this conceptualization of the 'mother' the issues of life and livelihood are divorced from the political discourse.

The 'Mothers' of Goa



What is worse is that in this manner the masses of Goa are lead from one identity crisis to another. The actual problems are not addressed and the social, economic, and cultural realities of many sections of the Goan population are erased or elided. We must, therefore, be on our guard against such tendencies of misusing identity politics.

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