

By AMITA KANEKAR



CAA-NRC-NPR and the Denial of Land Rights  
India annexed Goa in 1961. The argument of the Nehru government of the time was that Goa was an integral part of India that had been colonised by Portugal and thus needed to be liberated. But now, with the enumeration for the National Population Register (NPR) already started, to be followed by the National Register of Citizens (NRC), or, in other words, with Goans now having to prove that they are Indian citizens, isn't the government questioning its own declaration, that Goa is an integral part of India? Or - as is becoming clearer every day - is it only the land that's integral? While the people are another matter, or rather, people don't matter. The land of Goa is deemed unquestionably Indian - even worshipped as Bharatmata - but the people of Goa are not. They may be deemed foreigners, and might even get kicked off the 'Indian' land they have lived on for generations...

What is this if not land-grab? At the heart of the CAA-NRC-NPR is this unquestionable hold over land by the Indian state, but the highly questionable, according to the same state, rights of the people on that land. There are those who think that this is only a Muslim problem, since the CAA provides for fast-tracked citizenship for non-Muslims. What they forget, though, is that this citizenship is offered only to non-Muslims from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. The non-Muslims of Goa can hardly claim to have come from those three countries. So what's going to happen to Goans, whether Muslim, Hindus, Catholics, Adivasis, Buddhists or others, who - despite their voters' cards, AADHAAR cards, PAN cards, ration cards, passports, birth certificates, land documents, rent receipts, school-leaving certificates and every bit of paper they find - are held to have no proof of citizenship? Indefinite incarceration in detention centres? Or a twilight existence outside, without any rights and in constant fear of what tomorrow will bring? This is not a figment of the imagination; it's precisely what's happening in Assam now, and also in Kashmir for decades, where people's rights - human, political, citizenship - are given the go-by at will.

This anti-people CAA-NRC-NPR regime being wilfully imposed on a nation most of whose people are already dealing with decades of miserable governance - including pathetic access to basic facilities like houses and education, crumbling public infrastructure that was never great to start with, growing toxic pollution of all kinds, along with the persistence of traditional hierarchies and discriminations - has rightly ignited a nationwide wave of anger and opposition. One though is hardly surprised to find - unlike the condemnation voiced by many state governments across the country, and also by village gram sabhas and citizens' groups in Goa too - the government and MLAs of the ruling party in Goa passing a congratulatory motion in the legislative assembly on the same regime. It is just one more proof, among hundreds, that this Goa government not only cares nothing for the wishes of common Goans, but is actually committed to land-grab, whether through economic means,

euphemistically called 'development', or through political ones like this. All across the state, land – whether privately owned or commons or fields or pristine forestland – is being swallowed, legally or otherwise, for road-and-rail-widening (primarily for coal transport), bridges and flyovers (for the same), real estate development (mostly for new and fancy housing stock in a state where more than one-fifth of existing stock is unoccupied), and simply speculation for future profit (as around Mopa).

This appropriation of land is criminal, for, as activist and member of the Gauda-Kunbi-Velip-Dhangar Federation (GAKUVED) Ramakrishna Jalmi explained in a recent talk, land is the only hope for vulnerable communities today. Even if caste- and tribe-based reservations were to be extended to all eligible communities who have been denied them so far (like the Dhangars and Vanarmares of Goa), and even if these reservations were then to be actually implemented (something that Goa is notorious for not doing), there are just not enough jobs to provide sustenance to all. The only answer is land. If people were given the opportunity and means to cultivate land, it would not only give them a livelihood but also help preserve the environment that they live in. The recovery of parts of the ravaged mining belt in Sanguem and Bicholim is an illustration, as wherever people had land in their names, they were able to restart farming and orchards, to feed themselves and re-green their villages.

But not everybody has access to land. Adivasis are the worst-off, says Jalmi, for even though pre-1961 Goa did document births and deaths, this almost never reached the distant villages and forest habitats where many lived. Thus, he argues, these tribal communities, who were the original settlers of Goa – the ones who cleared and planted the land, built the khazans and the bunds, only to find everything usurped by educated, dominant-caste and document-holding bhatkars (landlords) while they themselves became tenants – are now the ones who will be completely disenfranchised by the CAA-NRC-NPR combine.

The commoner's right to land was never upheld in Goa or India, even earlier. Not just tribal communities, there are many other mundkar communities living on bhatkar-held land, and sevekari communities on temple-held lands, who were already fighting to prove their right to their homes and fields, even as the powers-that-be have tried to evict them. And this is immoral, as Tamil activist P Sivakami pointed out in her talk at the Ambedkar Memorial Lectures in Goa some years ago: land is not some ancestral property to be held on to for sentimental reasons, or a route for profiteering, or a luxury to be enjoyed by very rich individuals in sprawling resorts – it has to be seen as a means to make a livelihood for ordinary people. Documents are important but they cannot be the sole deciding factor in whether you have a right to live somewhere, whether in a village or a country, because documents are often just a proof of privilege and nothing else.

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