

By AMITA KANEKAR



Thinking BLM, Thinking India, Thinking Goa  
The widespread protests that have rocked the US and other places, following the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police, have given the world a lot to think about. Disbanding and de-arming of the police, and even replacing them by citizens' forces, are issues that are being seriously considered in the US today. Not just racist violence, but everyday racism is also being called out, as also racism in all kinds of popular culture, including the continued celebration of well-known slave-owners and slavery-supporters in public statues, with the consequent result of great many of them literally losing their pedestals.

It is pretty obvious that many Indians, especially of the Dalit, Adivasi and minoritised communities, face similar problems that blacks suffer in the US, and in fact much worse. The horrific torture that killed two men in a Tamil Nadu police station recently showed the world that India is second to none when it comes to police brutality. As Sumeet Samos points out (*How does Black Lives Matter translate into India?* Makdoom 29/6/20), violence by the state against the most vulnerable is routine here, whether in custodial deaths, unlawful arrests, encounter killings, et al, or in places like Kashmir and the North-East, and under draconian laws like AFSPA and UAPA, or just casual, public, everyday violence, as was seen in Goa too, where the extreme distress of jobless and homeless migrant workers during the lockdown was compounded by police beatings as a daily affair.

But in India, direct state violence is only one side of the picture, for this is a society where caste, along with the slavery that is an inherent part of it, are still alive and kicking. So state violence is compounded by social violence, in caste occupations like manual scavenging, in honour killings to finish intercaste love, in relentless harassment leading to student suicides, in the routine denial of basic human rights and means of survival to so many.

Even the psychotic murderousness of the Tamil police, as Umar Nizar explains (*Discipline and Punish...* Round Table India 6/7/20), stems from this history of gruesome violence targetting the 'lower' castes, whenever they opposed the authority of the dominant. It is part of South Asian culture, which is why such police violence continues to be celebrated in popular films. Thus, although police reform in India is an urgent need and has been demanded for decades by human rights groups and others, there are many other reforms and public education necessary before daily and casual violence comes to an end.

The toppling of statues, as part of a wider criticism of racism in popular culture, is another issue where the caste character of society here complicates the issue. There is little doubt that India needs to re-look at what and who get celebrated, and even immortalised, in public life. There has indeed been such talk following events in the US, and even before, but the target is usually only things connected to European or Mughal rulers. When will we be ready <sup>1</sup>

to accept criticism that goes against the caste hierarchy?



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Because, this society has millennia of oppression and injustice behind it, going back to much before the Europeans and Mughals arrived, for which no recompense has even been offered, ever, even in words. Thus, staying with Tamil Nadu, the celebrated Tamil poet, N D Rajkumar whose hometown is also the site of the famous Padmanabhapuram palace, has expressed deep unease at how this palace is today considered a national treasure that has to be protected, when, for him and his people, it has a completely different meaning (*Give us this day a feast of flesh*, Navayana 2010). The official narrative about the palace talks of brilliant vernacular architecture, cultural heritage and tradition, and fascinating royal histories, but Rajkumar's counter-narrative is about slavery, concubinage and vicious local violence. But this story is ignored, while the first is widely propagated.

If you look at Goa, there is no dearth of ancient caste oppression which continues in contemporary forms today, from the denial of land-rights to the enforcement of caste occupations. The dominant narrative however blames the Portuguese for all Goa's woes, while clamping down on attempts to even discuss alternate ideas. Thus, for some ideologues of Goa's dominant castes, the presence and veneration of the body of the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier in Goa is offensive, but for some others belonging to Goa's tribal communities, the continued prevalence of the Brahmanical Parshuram myth in Goa, which validates the pre-eminence of the Brahmins here, is offensive. The Adivasi activist Ramkrishna Jalmi gets arrested for deconstructing the Brahmanical myth of Parshuram in a public speech, though he was only following in the footsteps of Jyotiba Phule of more than a hundred years ago. Phule was neither punished or criticised for his words, neither by the then British Raj nor by the succeeding Indian republic. In fact, India officially calls Phule a Mahatma and lauds his revolutionary educational work, of which his biting criticism of Parshuram was surely a part.

Jalmi however was arrested and suspended from his job in today's Goa, for hurting religious sentiments. But when Francis Xavier, considered a saint by Catholics and others, is publicly accused of inciting violence in his efforts to convert people to his faith, isn't this also hurting religious sentiments? But here the accusers do not get arrested.

Let me make it clear here that one is not calling for the arrest of those criticising Xavier. Nobody, including Jalmi, should be punished for raising or discussing any issue, even if connected to religious beliefs or nationalist sentiments. The point, however, is that these critiques of European rule, so-called 'foreign' religions and 'forced' conversions, are just smokescreens. They are nothing but attempts at gaslighting the fact that the local elites of today, and their ancestors, are and were responsible for a lot of violence. This is precisely the

lesson that #BLM teaches us.



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