

By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA



Remembering Dadu Mandrekar

I met Dadu Mandrekar sometime in the late 80s. It was shortly before Dadu along with a group of Dalits converted to Buddhism. I also remember that, although invited for the conversion ceremony by Dalits to Buddhism, I did not go for it. It stemmed from my limited knowledge then. I thought this is yet one more religion, and, if they are abandoning one religion only to join another, I am not going to be endorsing such an endeavor. I was of course pulled up by Dadu in his characteristic way, and that began a decades-long association that had a lasting impact on me.

Dadu indicated how Buddhism was bereft of a caste hierarchy, and how it had a scientific base. He explained the backdrop of what had led the father of India's Constitution, Babasaheb Ambedkar, to renounce Hinduism and specifically choose Buddhism. I can just imagine how he would have slammed (and rightly so!) the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020.

Speaking with everyone he met as of right, and not in any subservient way, Dadu was upfront in challenging people. That is a trait that anyone who knew him would recollect. Why are you not celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti and Savitri Phule anniversary, the way you celebrate International Women's Day, he would nudge us. Have you read Ambedkar's writings? "Listen me", his words echo. But even as he spoke as of right (needless to say, rightfully so), he did not hesitate to acknowledge the supporting influences on his life.

Dadu got his first break in writing, I understood, from the Marathi newspaper *Gomantak*, of which he was at one time the Pernem Correspondent. Its editor then was Madhav Gadkari and together we shared many happy memories of Gadkari, who had incidentally been my cherished neighbor, and from whose family, I picked up Marathi, which enabled me to also understand Dadu's speeches at major public functions which were always in Marathi. Today, I understand that the medium through which Goan Dalits had got access to empowering education and access to empowering Ambedkarite literature was Marathi, and that even if Marathi is not spoken at home, it is the medium of public assertion of being for Dalit Hindus and Buddhists.

It is a telling statement of Goan society that even though Dadu was prolific and powerful in his writing and poetry, he was little recognised in the literary world in Goa. Maybe a telling statement of the art and literature world, be it in Goa or anywhere in the world, that decides what is poetry or art or good poetry and art on the basis of perceptions of the dominant sections of society, and may at best relegate poetry, such as that which Dadu wrote, to 'activist poetry', something on the margins, so to say. What was perhaps Dadu's last poetry recitation was of a long and powerful poem as part of the 'If We do Not Rise Goa' campaign,

calling attention among other things, to the plight of the migrant workers during the pandemic. To quote from the poem, “the funerals of our workers- and the pleas of our sisters - were celebrated on the road itself - by this regime - that wears a cloak of religion”.



Remembering Dadu Mandrekar

DADU MANDREKAR



There was also the artist in Dadu, training his lens on sights that would capture much more in the same picture than one that we may have also clicked – all based on the angle from which it was clicked. I also remember a beautiful bread basket that Dadu wove. This art in communities that is seldom recognised, and only at best used as a weapon of discrimination and ostracisation, needs to get its due place under the sun. It is an irony that a basket weaver’s art is seen as something mundane, but when a person from a dominant community makes the same baskets, the basket weaving acquires a certain glamour which sadly does not even percolate.

Even the Industries Department where he toiled did not recognize his worth, but found reason to harass and transfer Dadu punitively. Happily, this strategy did not work because whichever be the remote place he was transferred to, people found in him eyes and ears to see the injustices of discrimination that they were being subjected to, and also the hands and

heart and mind in him to express these injustices. Could be about their issue of not being allowed to use water from the public well because of being Dalit. Could be about discrimination in cremation grounds. This would unsettle the administration that would promptly transfer him again from there.

What few may know is that Dadu was also into interrogating what passes off as 'development'. Who benefits from development and at whose cost, is something activists often raise, but here was another dimension. He was referring to the development in the name of mining. He would point out that it is not simply an oversight that the impacts of mining are ignored. The adverse consequences of water siltation of Goa's rivers caused due to mining, Dadu said, were borne most by communities - the marginalized communities - that lived by the riverside, and drew immediately on the rivers for their water requirements. The academic world of cost-benefit analysis did not factor implications from these angles and neither do the environment impact assessment reports that pass off as 'professional' reports, being drawn up by consultants.

The condemnation of second class citizenship made Dadu a natural participant or ally in the movements against CAA-NPR-NRC. Speaking to a mammoth anti CAA-NPR-NRC rally at Azad Maidan at Panjim in March this year, Dadu poignantly reminded everyone that we must turn to the marvelous document called the Constitution of India as a reference point for denouncing legislation that is exclusionary and discriminatory. It was also at this meeting that he publicly announced his plan to go to every nook and cranny of Goa to create an awareness and sensitise everyone about the objective and contents of the Constitution. This is unfortunately a dream that Dadu could not bring to fruition because of the intervening lockdown and bouts of illness between then and his death. It is a task that those he has left behind - which includes all of us as those he considered his family - must take forward. Dadu's numerous writings and publications, including the periodical *Prajasatta* that he faithfully brought out every Republic Day, can be a valuable aid in this exercise.

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