

By AMITA KANEKAR



The declaration by Chief Minister Pramod Sawant during the Independence Day celebrations, Independence as a long work-in-progress, that the Portuguese looted Goa for 400 years, surely counts as a self-goal, with many Goans retorting that the real loot of Goa only began in recent times, especially thriving under Sawant's own government. But there is no point in wondering where Sawant gets his ideas from, nor indeed in informing him that, while historians have criticised the Portuguese empire and its rule over Goa for many things, 'loot', or economic exploitation, is not one of them. History lessons from Sawant will not stop so easily. He was not even embarrassed when his big plan - and budget outlay - for rebuilding temples destroyed by the Portuguese, turned out to have no data on such temples to back it. Who cares about the facts? The point is just to continuously raise distracting non-issues, the more communally divisive the better, so that real issues get ignored. Bashing colonial rule is the easiest option, with Independence Days and Liberation Days providing a golden chance to indulge in this to the maximum.

But the question I want to ask here is, shouldn't we start looking at independence in a more realistic way, rather than the simplistic idea that the end of colonial rule is equivalent to independence? What exactly is independence? People working for human rights have pointed out, time and again, how this word has been empty of meaning for many Indians, given the fact that decent jobs, education, health care, justice, and even dignity remain distant dreams for so many in this country. What independence can a country boast of when a child gets beaten to death by his own teacher in his own school, apparently for the 'crime' of drinking water - and does not even get mentioned in Independence Day speeches the next day? How independent can women feel when convicted gang-rapists and mass murderers - whose crimes against women and children can hardly be described - walk free on Independence Day, and are greeted with garlands, sweets, and praise (as 'brahmins' with 'good sanskaar') by the local MLA, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and other worthies close to the ruling BJP party?

The validity of such questions cannot be denied. But it cannot also be denied that, if India's promises of independence to its citizens are still to be completely fulfilled, even the partial independence that has been achieved so far was not actually born at 'the stroke of midnight'. Claiming that Indians and Goans were slaves under colonial rule, and abruptly freed of all shackles in 1947 and 1961 respectively, just serves to glorify Indian and Goan politicians. But it is not really true. The gaining of independence has been an extended and uneven process, which began long before those dates.

Yes, it is true that substantial human development happened after the end of colonial rule, like the advancements in mass education in Goa. But there were big developments before as well, many of them. In fact, mass education began under colonial power, with many,

including the freedom-fighters celebrated today, first hearing about liberty, equality, and fraternity in colonial-era schools. Can we imagine Jyotirao Phule and Dr Ambedkar becoming the radical political thinkers and pioneering social reformers they were, if the colonial rulers had not started schools open to students of all castes?

Sawant himself boasts of Goa's uniform civil code, and how it is superior and more egalitarian than the civil codes in the rest of India; this Goan code is Portuguese-era legislation. And if independence means good public infrastructure, one can compare (as indeed many did, after his '400-year-long loot' statement) the many-centuries-old Portuguese bridge between Panjim and Ribander – surely the greatest engineering marvel in Goa, and still doing its job today – with the BJP's brand-new Atal Setu, which is always being closed for repairs.

And who can deny the gain in human rights sought for and even achieved by religious conversion under colonial rule? These conversions are a crime in the eyes of many Indian politicians and even a section of the public today, thanks to the focus on forced conversions. But historians have pointed out that there were many willing conversions too, especially of the so-called lower castes and women. These may not have ended caste or patriarchy in Goa, but it surely disturbed the old hierarchies, while opening up new avenues for advancement for the people involved.

Even the concept of elections, of ordinary people being represented in power by persons of their choice – the very basis of democracy – is an idea that entered Goa and India under colonial rule. In Goa, electoral politics expanded through the 19th century, so that, by the end of the century, the law held that the head of every family, including women, and whatever their caste, class, or religion, had the right to vote and to stand for elections. Of course, there were flaws in the implementation of this law, just like there remain flaws in the election process even now.

Basically, we should stop seeing the past as black and white, the way politicians want us to. The achieving of independence has a long and uneven history that begins much before the end of colonial rule. And it remains a work in progress, an ongoing struggle. If there were people earlier, both here and abroad, who opposed the end of colonial rule, there are also Indians today who oppose the independence of other Indians. It was recently reported that a draft constitution being prepared for a future Hindu Rashtra had laid down that Muslims and Christians would not be allowed to vote; it went uncondemned by those singing paeans to the greatness of independence. Meanwhile, a Muslim man in Goa was arrested by the police because there was a religious flag flying higher than the national flag at his house; this 'insult to national honour' merited immediate arrest. But demanding an end to voting rights for Indians does not apparently insult our national honour.

Wouldn't it be ironic if the voting right first introduced by the colonial powers, which was expanded to become universal adult franchise after the end of colonial rule, is now taken away during the 'amrut mahotsav' of independence? There is no doubt that independence remains a work in progress, which can sometimes even mean one step forward and two steps back.

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