



In Hoc Signo Late Post Collective
Last month the leader of the RSS Mohan Bhagwat affirmed that all persons living in India are Hindus. Given that this assertion is a core part of the RSS imagination, he has not been the only person to say so, with one of our former Chief Ministers having also stated that Catholics in Goa are culturally Hindu. At the time a number of Goan scholars jointly offered a nuanced response to this latter assertion, indicating that, in fact, Goans were culturally Catholic. It would be fair to say, however, that while many Goans were culturally Catholic, nowadays, with the rise of Hindu nationalism, this cultural constitution is changing, and with scary consequences.

We need to take a rather large detour to appreciate this suggestion.

It is commonplace, both popularly and in scholarly discourse, to declare that the crosses that one finds by the wayside, and other locations, especially in the *Velhas Conquistas*, were placed there by European missionaries to displace the deities and spirits that the local population, now converted to Catholicism, used to worship earlier. This assertion always carries with it the suggestion that this missionary act was one of violence, or an attempt to trick people, over generations, to worship a foreign God.

What no one seems to consider, however, is that the locals who had converted to Christianity may have been the ones to erect the cross or request the erection of a cross in those locations. The ignoring of this possibility is not surprising, since as Aditi Shirodkar demonstrates in her doctoral thesis, there is never any attribution of agency, or self-determination, to the locals. There is just an assumption that the locals followed the missionaries as if they were Mary's little lambs.

But the fact that the erection of crosses was not a single act, but a continuous one, carried on over time, and following an ancient logic, but within a Christian meaning system, or world view, became obvious to me a few weeks ago. Travelling from Britona to Salvador do Mundo I came across a cross on the khazans that I have seen multiple times, but this time something clicked. The cross was erected to the memory of a young man who reportedly met with an accident and died there, at what was once a very lonely spot. The logic for erecting this cross can possibly be traced to an ancient pre-Christian logic, which says that persons who die violent deaths become restless bloodthirsty spirits. As I have discussed elsewhere, this belief is also the origin of the Zambaulim Damodar temple, which was originally built to satiate the spirit of a brahmin groom Damodar, killed on the edge of the village as his wedding party returned to his home. According to this belief, the restless spirit could be appeased by a blood sacrifice - whether animal or human - once a year.



It is at this point that Christianity offers what was possibly a welcome relief to those who had earlier followed these pre-Christian beliefs. For the logic of the cross is that Christ has offered the one and single sacrifice through his death on the cross. There is no more need for any bloody sacrifices. I have no doubt that this was a welcome news to the neo-Christian communities in Goa, especially those from the working castes who were the ones most in contact with the spirits that ruled pre-Christian Goa, and from whom sacrificial victims would most likely be chosen. These blood-thirsty and violent spirits lived on the borders of, and outside, the safe environs of the village and were known to cause harm to innocents straying into their territory. For these working persons, it made sense to erect a cross, sign of the great sacrifice that abolished all others. All one now needed to do was pray to Christ, vanquisher of the greatest of evil spirits and death itself. For those who died violent deaths, bloody sacrifice could now be replaced by prayers for the soul of these persons. The Roman Emperor Constantine reportedly saw a vision of a cross surrounded by the words “In Hoc Signo Vinces” (Under this sign you will conquer) prior to the battle which won him the title of Caesar. Our convert ancestors too would have realised that they would conquer a malign spiritual world under the sign of the cross. If, therefore, we today encounter crosses at various places, like at the sluice gates of the various *manos*, or in fields, or hillsides, it is because the cross was possibly erected there by the native peoples who embraced Catholicism, since it liberated them from the blood thirstiness of the *ancien regime*.

The capriciousness of this ancient regime was substantially visible more recently when the switch from one party to another was justified by reference to the time-honoured practice of *kaul prasad* – divination by consulting a deity. The MLA who so justified his switching of electoral parties has been mocked substantially, but it is important to believe him, and take his action at face value, in the process respecting not just him but also the divination practice that he used to arrive at a decision. Indeed, if one looks at the way in which his actions were received in the media, one can discern that he was being judged – both by Christians and Hindus – according to Christian standards, suggesting he had spoken to the one God, rather than any one of the multiple deities that are peculiar to the non-Christian world the MLA belongs to.

If we mock his decision it is because, contrary to the assertions of a number of contemporary ideologues, we have all – regardless of the religions we profess – internalised Christian values which demand a certain ethical rigour. To such a mind, the fickleness of a yes today, and a no tomorrow, even from a deity is not well regarded. But this erratic behaviour was the nature of the pre-Christian ethical world, which was marked by a range of belief systems, many of them being substantially capricious and beholden to unpredictable deities.

The flip in the decision of this elected representative was not the last example of the dark

possibilities contained within a non-Christian worldview. Some days after the departure to the ruling party, two individuals visited the temple of Bogdeshwar in Mapuça and offered the deity the bananas, betel leaves and areca nuts with a prayer that the deity teach the eight defecting MLAs 'a lesson'. This request for 'a lesson' sounds suspiciously like a curse, and is unknown to the Christian ethic - which commands that we love and pray for those who do us evil and persecute us.

With the rise of Hindu nationalism, ably assisted by the scholarly project of postcolonialism and all manner of woke politics, the Christian worldview that was dominant not just in Goa, but to some extent in (British)India as well, has gradually started being eclipsed, such that we are able to see pre-Christian worldviews re-emerge. These worldviews are not necessarily benign, which, interestingly, shows us why our first-Catholic ancestors would have gladly taken to Catholicism, and actively embraced the worldview taught to them by the European missionaries.

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