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historical explorations



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Castes, Social Mobility and Politics in Goa

Many Goans, otherwise well informed, still guide themselves by some unquestioned myths. One such myth is about the fourfold *varna*, better known in Goa as *zati*, to which the Portuguese lent the designation of *casta*, and the English translated and perpetuated it through their gazetteers and censuses as caste.

The Goan village communities were caste-based oligarchies. The dominant castes were not always of Brahmins. While Brahmins held greater or exclusive power in the villages of hinterland where river irrigation permitted to developed fertile *khazan* lands, the villages closer to seashore with less productive sandy lands were largely dominated by the Chardo *ganvokar*. The upper level of administration at the *desha* or district level was directly responsible before the State administration, and there the Brahmins monopolized more power with their intellectual skills and social influence.

The mythical part of the *varna* system is that one is condemned to die in that structure, privileged for some and damning for others! It is cleverly cemented with the doctrine of karma, which in itself leaves open the

chances of change for better in future lives through reincarnation. As Jawaharlal Nehru puts it, karma doctrine is not about fatalism. A clever player can win with hopeless cards, while a careless player can lose the game with the best of cards.

In the traditional society when technological evolution was slow, social mobility was slower, and life expectancy was low, future lives did not appear to be a hopeless perspective as it does to our society anxiously devoted to the progress of individuals during their life time. Denial of change of living conditions in one's life time is now viewed as a violation of human rights.

In times when there were no schools for professional skills the caste system permitted the improvement of occupational skills as caste secrets transmitted from generation to generation. The traditional *barabalutedar* or 12 professions (the number varied according to the needs of a village economy) exercised by sudra castes served the upper caste hierarchy of the village and were paid from the village budget in kind or cash.

It was never true in Goa that Brahmins served as priests and Chardos exclusively as military

personnel. Temple priests were always brought from outside. Goan upper castes were always suspected as polluted due to possible contacts with foreigners passing by the sea-coast. Hence, Goan Brahmins and Chad'de followed diverse occupations, but not those assigned to shudras. Goan Saraswats were involved in small business, and as State interpreters and tax-farmers, before and during the Portuguese colonial rule. Had not been their collaboration, the colonial rule could have been short-circuited.

The classic studies of the Indian society were largely guided by the classic Hindu vedic traditions and writings, such as *dharmastras*, which sought to defend a static view of the Hindu society. That is what suited the traditional caste-based leadership, particularly in the wake of the foreign powers taking over the Indian Territory, be they Muslims to start, and followed by the Europeans.

It is only by taking seriously the non-literary sources and religious myths that it is possible to analyse, the dynamics of the social mobility, resulting from the economic and political power shifts. Closer at home, we have an historic case of the

coronation of Shivaji, who looted the European trade counters of Surat to pay handsomely Gagabhatta and nearly 50,000 Brahmins to declare him in 1674, a fully qualified and consecrated kshatriya ruler, and not any ordinary Maratha upstart.

While the colonial policies and the missionary activities dented the caste system by playing upon the caste rivalries to divide and rule, the post-independence Indian democracy transformed the traditional castes into valuable vote-banks that have permitted non-brahmin castes to achieve political leadership in several States, particularly following the politics of reservation recommended by the Mandal Commission in the 1980s.

To conclude, following the *mandalisation* of castes we are witnessing a new phenomenon of the class-isation of caste. The economic and political power has brought about a secularization, whereby the castes survive as kinship-based communities, not as status groups of ritual hierarchy. This emerging new middle class groups are usually made up of several older sub castes which share socio-economic disabilities. This is true of Goa, just as of entire India.