

The untouchable New Conquests

Amita Kanekar

KANEKAR, Amita (amitakanekar@gmail.com) – visiting faculty at Goa College of Architecture. ORCID: 0000-0003-2169-8180.

THE CHIEF MINISTER OF GOA, PRAMOD SAWANT LIKES TO TALK ABOUT how the Portuguese committed atrocities against Goans during their rule. Recently he made the same point while speaking about how they did not rule the whole of Goa for 451 years, but only the Old Conquests (Tiswadi, Bardez, Salcette, Mormugao); with the New Conquests region (Ponda, Bicholim, Pernem, Sattari, Quepem, Canacona, Sanguem) coming under Portuguese rule only much later. This, according to him, was thanks to the Maratha king Shivaji. As a result of this delay, again according to Sawant, the New Conquests were saved from the atrocities perpetuated by the Portuguese, including religious conversion.

These claims come to my mind while reading the late Dadu Mandrekar's *Untouchable Goa*, the English translation of his well-known and award-winning 1997 book *Bahishkrut Gomantak*. Translated from the original Marathi by Nikhil Baisane, *Untouchable Goa* has been recently published by Panther's Paw Publication, Nagpur.

Of course, it does not take much to see that Sawant's claims – of Old Conquests being more oppressed under the Portuguese yoke, and New Conquests being much better-off – are laughable. Even a superficial glance today is enough to convince anyone that the Old Conquests – ruled by the Portuguese for 451 years – are better off than the New Conquests, which joined Portuguese Goa only in the 18th century. Both urban and rural areas in the Old Conquests are more urbane, with older and better infrastructure, including roads, houses, and institutions (educational, healthcare, and others), and with more educated and better-off Goans. Sawant should also check with non-Goans in Goa – both tourists and settlers – about which part they prefer: the “oppressed” Old Conquests, or the New Conquests? Everyone knows, from the footfalls, the real estate prices, the fancy restaurants, hotels, and retail establishments, and the colonized and gentrified villages, that the answer by far is the Old Conquests.

So, what exactly is Sawant celebrating about the New Conquests? Just one thing, the one and only thing that matters to him and his friends: that religious conversions did not happen in the New Conquests to the extent in which they did in the Old. One consequence of this is that the population of the New Conquests is largely Hindu today, with many of their old temples and rituals intact. Like, for example, the fire-walking at the Shirgao temple zatra [annual festival] that recently, in the absence of proper planning and crowd management by temple authorities and the government, ended in a stampede in which six persons died and scores were injured. (Here, incidentally, is another difference between the New and the Old – safe and efficient management of much larger crowds, as during the regular Expositions at Old Goa.)

Now this Hindu dominance of the New Conquests region may be something to celebrate if you are a Hindutvawadi. But perhaps not for any normal person. And certainly not if you are a committed activist for social justice, and

a tireless investigator into the social conditions of some of the poorest communities of Goa. Which is exactly what Dadu Mandrekar was. His book was the result of his travels across Goa in the 1990s, especially the villages in the New Conquest regions of Pernem, Bicholim, and Sattari. He wanted to learn more about the Mahar community, perhaps one of the most ill-treated communities in Goa's caste system.

And what he found was atrocities. Everywhere he went, he found the community impoverished and isolated; with emaciated bodies that spoke of generations of malnourishment; living apart from others in the village, sometimes separated by rivulets or jungle; in the poorest possible quality of housing (despite government housing schemes, clearly just namesake); and afflicted by lack of education, decent jobs, and healthcare. Not only this, he also found them living at the mercy of unspeakable, and unreadable, atrocities in the name of religion, custom, and tradition.

Here are some examples. In Vinorda [perhaps Vinorda] in Pernem, the annual Dussehra festival included a grand procession during which a Mahar man was required to actually slash his own thigh with a ritual sword and then dance frenziedly with the open wound so that his blood rained down over the crowd. In many villages, the Mahars were tasked with playing music during weddings and funerals; they had to lead the wedding processions with their music but, when it came to the wedding feast, they were expected to wait till everyone else had eaten and then scavenge among the leftovers. In another common festival custom in many villages, Mahar women were expected to go begging door-to-door for alms after the celebrations were over. It was common, he found, for local tea stalls to refuse to serve Mahars or to serve them in separate utensils. The list can go on. Dadu blamed all of this on the Brahmanical mindset, rituals, and institutions of the people of these villages.

Besides the appalling living conditions of the Mahars, he also lambasted Brahmanism for other divisive and violent superstitions, like ill-treating women (treating them like untouchables, actually) during menses or after childbirth; or cutting trees down for burning during the Holi festival (he likens the ritual sacrifice of all-giving trees to the sacrifice of Jesus who also gave his life for the common good).

Dadu Mandrekar's book was published in 1997, and I am not sure whether all the atrocities that he documented then continue today. But I can certainly vouch for the fact that untouchability is still practiced in many villages in the New Conquests, at least with respect to Hindu temples. It is absolutely normal to find, even today, Mahar communities who have never ever entered the biggest temples of their own village, despite being expected – even pressurized – to beat the temple drums during processions and festivals. Instead, they are supposed to worship at their own Maringan shrine, usually a tiny and poor-quality construction even when situated in the vicinity of rich temples.

All of this, the ban on temple-entry, the temple-drum-beating, and the state of the Maringan shrine, are justified as tradition.

You don't see such happenings in the Old Conquests. It is not, of course, that casteism is not to be found there. Casteism is very much to be found there, just as it is found all over India. But blatant untouchability along with casteist atrocities? Expecting an impoverished and malnourished community to literally offer their own blood as a religious ritual, and to beg for leftovers during festivals? No, you don't find this.

One would therefore like to ask the Chief Minister to read Dadu Mandrekar's book. And then tell us: were the New Conquests really saved by being conquered later by the Portuguese? Or was it the Old Conquests which were actually saved, by being conquered earlier?