

The subtle persecution of Catholics in Goa

The silent ethnic cleansing of Catholics in Goa. The subtle persecution of the community has now become blatant



Goa, the former Portuguese colony and a Catholic stronghold in western India, has for the first time this century shown a marginal increase in the Christian population. Religion-based data for the 2012 census released last month shows an increase of 6,560 Christians within the past decade.

Actually, this hides a negative Christian growth as the state's population has grown by eight percent in the past decade from 1.34 million to 1.45 million. The proportional growth should have produced at least 28,000 Christians, which is eight percent of the 359,000 Christians counted in 2001. But that has not happened.

The decline of Goa's Christian population, almost all of them Catholics, should not come as a surprise because even during the Portuguese colonial days (1510-1961) the slide was evident. Worrisome however, is the quantum of decline: Catholics, who were 64 percent against 35 percent Hindus in the 1851 census, have been reduced to 25 percent compared to Hindus, who now make up 67 percent of Goa's population today.

The quantum jump backwards began immediately after India annexed Goa in 1961, ending 450 years of Portuguese rule in this tiny coastal enclave. From 1961-63, around 50,000 Catholics emigrated. The trend continued since the community could not progress beyond a certain limit. During this emigration, thousands of immigrants, mainly Hindus from neighboring states, entered the newly declared federally

ruled territory that only became a fully fledged Indian state in 1987. The continued migration over the years ballooned the Hindu population to a level higher than what was the Catholic percentage in 1851.

Muslims, who were less than 1 percent in 1961, made the biggest inroads in Goa to become close to 9 percent of the population today.

A quest for jobs abroad, aided by Goan Catholics' different mindset, better adjustment to communities overseas, and the Portuguese government considering them as "brown Europeans," boosted emigration. Under the Portuguese constitution, every Goan born in Goa before Dec 19, 1961 or his progeny is entitled to Portuguese citizenship, empowering them to settle in any part of the European Union under the Schengen Agreement.

In recent years, following the rise to power of the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party in Goa, the emigration has shown a dramatic spike. Every family can boast of at least one member either employed or settled overseas and those who had vowed some years ago to ensure that their kids do not emigrate are now motivating their children to leave because they see no future for Catholics in the state.

Silent genocide

This exodus stems largely from efforts to destroy Goan culture, as a result of the large-scale influx from other states in violation of the Geneva Convention, which prohibits population displacement from in or out of an invaded region. Some see this demographic shift as amounting to a silent genocide of the Catholic community.

Though subtle persecution of the community has always been a reality following the annexation, lately it has become more blatant, compelling many Catholics to sell off their assets and emigrate.

The first glaring instance to wipe away the "Christian" and Goan identity was to merge Goa with neighboring Maharashtra. The idea resulted in a 1967 referendum that voted against the merger — often seen by historians as a mandate against the conquest. But anti-merger champion Jack de Sequeira, who worked to save Goa from being obliterated, was never given his due.

Paradoxically, the man who espoused the merger, Goa's first chief minister Dayanand Bandodkar, has life-size statues installed. Over the years, efforts to install a statue in honor of Sequeira have repeatedly been stonewalled by successive governments, simply because Catholic bashers believe that Christians should be subjugated.

An exception to the rule however was during the last parliamentary elections when India's Home Minister Rajnath Singh at an election rally said that the first banner of revolt against the Portuguese (in fact against any colonial regime in India) was raised by Catholic priests in Goa — in what is historically known as the Pinto Conspiracy. But, then, it was an election rally looking to garner Catholic votes.

After India "liberated" Goa, Catholics were heckled and branded as "Portuguese agents" despite hundreds of Catholics involved in Goa's freedom struggle. The Bandodkar government introduced

"agricultural reforms," which made tillers virtual landowners. In one stroke, the predominantly Catholic landlords — who mostly had small land holdings — were reduced to being landless and rendered many who were solely dependent on agricultural produce, to penury.

The tenants, who were subjugated by Catholic landlords during the colonial regime, now began flexing their muscles, even dragging many erstwhile landlords to court. Illegal encroachments, threats and assaults goaded by the delay in the justice delivery system embolden the tenants. Threats of acquisition from greedy political proxies demanding sale of the land according to a price spelt out by them compounded the problem. Many Catholic landlords died in pursuit of justice for over 30 years. Disgusted, their heirs felt that the best option was to dispose of the property and migrate.

Moves to isolate Catholics

Even the naming of Konkani as the official state language was fraught with anti-Christian legislation. The official status came after a protracted statewide battle, where seven were killed in 1986 — all Catholics and no Hindus. The mother tongue was made the official language, but it was with a rider: The official gazette defined Konkani as Konkani in Devnagiri script — a shrewd move by Hindus to isolate the vast majority of the Christian community who used the Roman script, not the Devnagiri. The notification simply meant that government jobs would go to Hindus who had mastered the Devnagiri script.

After Goa became a state, no Catholic chief minister lasted a full term because of an unwritten law that no Catholic deserves to be chief minister. Early this year, after Goa's Bharatiya Janata Party chief minister Manohar Parrikar was made India's defense minister, Francis D'Souza, a Catholic and his deputy in Goa was denied the position of chief minister. Catholics have lost their sociopolitical clout in the state.

The large-scale influx has had a detrimental effect on the quality of life of the local populace. It has brought about a regressive lifestyle, which in return has triggered "adjustment problems" with many opting to emigrate. An effort is on to wipe out the concept of Goa as a Catholic hub.

What is evidently going on in Goa is silent, bloodless ethnic cleansing. Political watchers explain it as the doctrine of "legitimacy through defiance." With the government showing no interest at granting special status to protect against this cultural onslaught, the Catholic community prefers to leave because the truth is that a systematic effort is on to attack the Catholic community so that it eventually disappears.

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