Article

Histories, Identities and the Subaltern Resistance in Goa

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Parag D. Parobo[1]

Abstract

Spectacular outbreaks against the Portuguese receive regular scholarly attention. Resistance qualifies as an act against the colonial state, and in doing so, the dominant castes have succeeded in misrecognizing their social dominance. Fixing dominance on the colonial state narrows the agency of resistance and, consequently, produces a framework that leads to an emphasis on the formal properties of colonial power, ignoring its local and micro-context in which the dominant castes are deeply implicated. In addition, the dominant castes are relocated and redefined as primordial nationalists whose every act signals resistance. These two tendencies on the notion of resistance have been in vogue for at least a century, and the problem—existence of local dominance—is held in analytical abeyance. This article analyses the scholarly framework on the concept of resistance in Goa and examines the interplay of subaltern resistance, more particularly through identity and temple ownership with the workings of power.

Keywords

Resistance, subaltern, Portuguese, Goa, temple, identity

One of the central problems of scholarship on Goa is the manner in which resistance has been studied. Post-colonial historiography has reduced resistance only to the spectacular outbreaks against the Portuguese state. In doing so, power is fixed on the Portuguese state, and thereby, resistance qualifies only as against the colonial state. The problem with this reductionist framework is that it completely ignores the element of protest at the margins.

Goan Historiography: (De)Valuing Resistance

The forms that resistance takes are most commonly studied from the viewpoint of local elites where any rebellious act committed by them qualifies as resistance. The range of actions being celebrated as resistance includes 'flight of the deities', syncretism, outbreaks against the Portuguese and various

[1] Goa University, Goa, India.

Corresponding author:
Parag D. Parobo, Department of History, Goa University, Goa 403206, India.
E-mail: parag@unigoa.ac.in

collaborations. All these actions are bundled together to demonstrate the forms of colonial power and how the dominant castes resisted it.

How does one locate resistance? Going by the scholarly works, one is persuaded to see resistance as an action fixed against the colonial state (Ali, 1986; Axelrod & Fuerch, 1996; Borges, 1989; Kamat, 1999). In terms of categorization, it is Hindu where the deities were shifted, and it is Catholic where the *Lusitanian* (Portuguese culture) cross being 'axed' through syncretic practices of the converts and nationalists is seen as an attempt to resist the colonizers. All these actions originate from the dominant Hindu and Catholic castes, and the subaltern is denied agency.

The extension of the Portuguese power across Goa, and the policy of Christianization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, led to the destruction of many Hindu temples. During this time, the Hindu deities were ferried across rivers to the 'New Conquests'—territories that were captured by the Portuguese towards the late eighteenth century. The act of shifting the deities is essentially seen as being performed by the dominant castes (Axelrod & Fuerch, 1996). Similarly, scholarship on syncretism has mostly concentrated its efforts to study the Hindu and Catholic dominant castes and seldom draws attention to subaltern communities. Interestingly, these studies romanticize syncretism through an emphasis on the power of the colonial state. It has been stated that in the face of an aggressive proselytizing, Gaud Saraswat Brahmins (GSBs) seem to have captured two symbols of colonialism: the sea and cross (Kamat, 1999, pp. 64–66). Syncretism has been politicized—while the colonial state denied any agency to syncretism by condemning it as 'the devil at work', the nationalists, and later some scholars, celebrated it as a form of resistance (Mendonça, 2002, p. 298).

Amongst other forms, collaboration with the colonial state can easily lend itself to a discourse of resistance. It has been argued that the crucial commercial collaboration of the GSBs with the Portuguese, their dominant position in the coastal trade and involvement in the revenue administration, in addition to diplomacy of the Portuguese state in India, meet the criteria of everyday resistance (Kamat, 1999, pp. 74–79). Such an essentializing approach risks labelling resistance as a way of life of the dominant elites and is contradictory to the actual context, meaning and purposefulness of everyday resistance.

Configurations of Power

Studies on Goa, involved as they were in the effort to explain colonialism, provide a justification of colonial dominance without engaging with the complex set of questions concerning the relation between the colonial state and locally dominant GSBs. Thus, by identifying dominance only through the colonial state, the local dominance of GSBs is effectively glossed over.

The GSBs, as scribes to the kingdoms of the Deccan, were deeply involved in political ideologies. The conquest of Goa by the Portuguese did not alter their economic status. In fact, they benefited from the Portuguese rule, and given the discriminatory legislation that did not permit Hindus to carry on trade and business, the ascendency of GSBs is significant (Kamat, 1999, pp. 73–80). As scribes, government officials and landed magnates, they wielded considerable wealth and power.

The dominant position of the GSBs led to a growing tension with other Brahmin communities who critically examined the caste status of GSBs. In the nineteenth century, the Maharashtrian Brahmins questioned the brahminical status of GSBs since they ate fish (Parobo, 2015, p. 22). Their dominance in social, political, cultural and economic aspects was also reproduced in a highly articulated historical view. The past is a scarce resource—collectively held, publicly expressed and ideologically charged (Appadurai, 1981). The practice of invoking the past in order to unite the sub-*jatis* (groups) among the

GSBs first began in the second half of the nineteenth century. As their brahminical status was being increasingly contested in Maharashtra, GSB authors wrote a corporate historic past, whereby myth, lineage and temple became a language of argument (Gunjikar, 1884; Sohani, 1937).

The temple is not just a place of worship; it is deeply embedded with caste identity and is an important source of power. Most of the prominent village temple deities that were ferried from the 'Old Conquests' to the 'New Conquests' eventually became the *kuladevatas* (lineage deities) of the GSBs—a transformation accomplished by conferring new genealogies and myths of North Indian origin to local deities (da Cunha, 1877; Wagle, 1909). The term *mahajan* (male administrator of a temple) was an honorific title meaning a prominent person (Pereira, 1978, p. 1). Until the nineteenth century, the temple in Goa had a fragile administrative structure, whereby the *mazania* (traditionally a temple committee) managed temple interests, primarily directed towards the maintenance of the deity's properties and carrying out ritual processes. At this point of time, there was considerable flexibility over the position of the *mahajan*; one could become a member of the temple committee with wealth and power and also by making a contribution towards the temple, both financially and through other means.

In the early nineteenth century, as the temples grew richer, the *mahajans* were accused of diverting the temple funds and usurping their properties. This led to the edict of 1828 that made an attempt to control the malpractices in temple administration by establishing a system of three key holders for the safe, bookkeeping of all credit and debit accounts and inventory books of all the moveable property (Pereira, 1978, p. 26). As it turned out, an attempt to formalize the financial records led to the appointment of the GSBs as key holders by virtue of their position and scribal skills. Further, with the growing tension between groups having an enduring corporate interest in temple control, the colonial state sought to codify the temple administration in 1886 with Regulamento das Mazanias (temple law). Under the code, a catalogue of *mahajans* had to be drawn to end all disputes (Pereira, 1978, p. 26). The law made it mandatory for the temples to draw a *compromisso* (by-law of a temple) detailing the rights and privileges of *mahajans* and other social groups related to a temple. Thus, the drafting of the *compromisso* emerged as the only legal framework for establishing the position of a *mahajan*. Besides, once the catalogue of *mahajans* was approved by the colonial state, it allowed the *mahajans* the privilege of succession—their direct male descendants would take up their position. There was, however, a possibility for the inclusion of new groups as *mahajans*, provided the newly endorsed *mahajans* who were entrusted with legislative powers accepted the claim. Thus, the drafting of the *compromisso* emerged as an important site of contest between organized interests in a temple.

The temple was an arena for the display of power by the more powerful groups, and the position of a *mahajan* meant authority and had many formal and informal benefits. *Mahajans* could vote to elect a temple committee among themselves and draw orders regulating the mode of life around the temple. They were in control of the financial matters of the temple, including its moveable and immovable properties. The temple was involved in moneylending, auctioning of fields and coconut crops to the highest bidder, and the *mahajans* benefitted from these transactions. In addition, the *mahajans* exercised a firm control over the temple's day-to-day rituals and its servants. Besides, the position of a *mahajan* had considerable prestige—'the public face of domination' (Scott, 1989).

In Search of the Self

The subaltern has time and again employed cultural resources available to them in order to improve upon the conditions of their existence. Such efforts could conceivably assume a variety of forms, but our

analysis will be restricted to the following two acts: the construction of identity and the ritual contest by the *Nabhik* (barber) community of Goa. Of course, these forms are not exclusive and restricted to the *Nabhik* community. However, here the focus is on the *Nabhik* community largely for three reasons: they were first amongst the Hindu lower castes to make efforts towards the advancement of their community; they could rally other lower castes against the GSB dominance over the Mahalaxmi temple of Panaji and in the long run, they succeeded in establishing their community temple.

Historically, the *Nabhik* community is referred to as *Napit*, *Nhavi*, *Hajam* and *Malo*. Like other lower caste communities, they owed their services to the entire village. Besides, a *Nabhik* was entrusted with the responsibility of carrying the rays of the sun to the deity by holding a mirror during important rituals and festivals, a service for which he was paid. By the late eighteenth century, as the Portuguese captured neighbouring territories, the *Nabhik* community migrated from the 'New Conquests' to the 'Old Conquests', more prominently to Panaji. Their early progress was linked to the expansion of Panaji—a fishing village full of marshlands that emerged into a suburban space from the second half of the eighteenth century and then became the capital city of the colonial state after 1843 (Pinto, 2016, p. 188). With the exception of Panaji, the concentration of the *Nabhik* community at one place was uncommon. They benefited as their traditional services were being transformed into a professional one. They were chiefly employed by government officers, from the Governor General to the local elites of Panaji. Apart from their traditional role of barbers, the *Nabhik* community was also taking up other services emerging from the demands of city living. They might have also gained informal power through their regular contact with government officials.

Alongside this, the desire to build an advanced community motivated the *Nabhiks* to focus on education and to construct a new meaning to the ascribed status of their caste. In 1907, they founded a library—Mahalaxmi Prasadic Hindu Vachan Mandir—which was probably one of the first libraries set up by a barber community in India. Initially, the library functioned in a rented space. Later, funds to construct a new building were raised by staging Marathi dramas. Further, although a few libraries were set up by the GSBs towards the late nineteenth century, the Mahalaxmi Prasadic Hindu Vachan Mandir not only had a formal institutional structure but also was the first library to be set up by Hindus, and that too by a backward caste, whose statutes were approved by the Portuguese government (Government of Portuguese India [GPI], 1911, pp. 867–868). In 1920, the Mahalaxmi Prasadik Mofat Marathi Primary School was added to the library.

In their efforts towards cultural advancement, the *Nabhik* community also adopted a strategy of establishing counter narratives in order to relocate and redefine themselves historically. They traced themselves to the Vedic period and claimed the caste status of superior Brahmins (Majumdar, 1930). They were also seen as rulers and ministers during the Vedic period, and Chandragupta Maurya was seen as the *Navhi-Samrat* (Barber-Emperor) (Sapkal, 1931a, pp. 2–5). What was celebrated was the ability of the *Nabhik* to purify. Since *Nabhiks* officiated as barbers at significant stages in an individual's lifetime, this was interpreted by them as a sign of extraordinary personal purity, giving them the power to purify the impure. They saw contemporary Brahmins as being born out of lower castes and blamed them for the present lower caste status of *Nabhiks* (Sapkal, 1931c, pp. 15–19). Furthermore, a new meaning was ascribed to the word *Napit* as they were commonly addressed. *Napit* till now meant someone who lived by unproductive services and, hence, an inferior person. According to the new definition, *Napit* meant anyone who had lost their upper caste status and were downgraded to a new lower caste position (Sapkal, 1931b, pp. 4–8). Consequentially, the word *Napit* was amended to *Nabhik*, meaning one who is born from the *nabhi* (navel) of Brahmadeva, the Hindu creator-god of the Universe. While the four castes were born from the different body parts of Brahmadeva, the birth of the *Nabhik* was seen as special, conferred with the purpose of purifying the impure. In 1921, the *Napitodaya* periodical was started in

Panaji to bring about awareness towards advancement of the community. In the second year, it was renamed *Nabhikodaya* (Nayak, 1965, p. 45). The periodical ran for two years, and later, a similar periodical with a similar title and aim was published from Mumbai.

Temple and Communities: Changing Relations

In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese, determined to spread Catholicism, had destroyed Hindu temples in Tiswadi, Bardez and Salcete talukas. One such temple was of Mahalaxmi in Taleigao, a village adjoining Panaji, which was shifted to Mayem, a village then in Sanquelim. In 1818, the image of Mahalaxmi was brought back to Panaji by seeking permission from the Portuguese Viceroy, Count of Rio Pardo. There have been two differing accounts of the re-shifting of the deity, the official one and the subaltern version that demands recognition. The history of Mahalaxmi temple as given in Article 1 of *compromisso* credits Narayan Kamat Mhamai for using his position and influences to get back the deity, housing its image and, later, founding the temple (GPI, 1934, p. 1423). Kamat Mhamai was a leading business family, and the presence of the family's mansion close to the governor's residence, a centre of Portuguese administration, is not a small matter in itself.

On the other hand, the *Nabhiks* invert this official narrative claiming that most of the information was inevitably omitted to favour a particular reading of the event. We are informed that the deity first visited Narayan Kamat Mhamai in a dream and communicated her wish to return (Pednekar, 2005, pp. 16–18). Accordingly, he along with others comprising a *Daivadnya Brahmin* (goldsmith), *Nabhik*, *Tarukar* (fisherfolk) and *Bhandari* (toddy tappers) went to Mayem and through their combined efforts ferried back the deity. Since Narayan Kamat Mhamai had a palatial house, it was decided to keep and worship the deity there until a temple was constructed. One of the major difficulties in building the temple was to get an approval from the government. This was not easy, as an approval meant endorsing the reverse-migration of a deity, which could open up similar claims from other temple communities. It got much more difficult with the Archbishop of Goa intensely opposing the move (Pereira, 1978, pp. 37–38). At this point, what seemed almost impossible was made possible by Khema Mhalo, a barber of the Viceroy, Count of Rio Pardo (Pednekar, 2005, p. 19).

These two claims are competing accounts, a contest for honour and dignity. The temple in Goa, similar to the village rituals, has been a space for a constant negotiation between different group interests, an arena for the display of power by the more powerful groups and for the achievement of power by the less powerful groups (Dirks, 2015, pp. 109–131). As Panaji was urbanizing, the newly built Mahalaxmi temple emerged as the centre of Hindu life, not only pertaining to worship but also as a space where meetings would be held to discuss and debate social issues and government actions. Within a short span of time, all Hindu communities in Panaji identified themselves with the deity and contributed towards the temple's worship and maintenance. In the nineteenth century, while the temple was administered by the GSBs, primarily due to their wealth and position, most of the temple festivals were allocated to different communities with a day reserved for one particular community.

The narrative of the Mahalaxmi temple created by the GSB authors also idealizes the role of Narayan Kamat Mhamai in shaping the administration of the temple and its worship (Nayak, 1935, pp. 17–23). Often, the members of the temple committee were powerful individuals and others found it difficult to raise a voice against them, so this arrangement continued for almost a century. Later, with the Regulamento das Mazanias, 1886, temples were ordered to draw a *compromisso*. From 1880s to 1910s, many attempts were made to draft the *compromisso* of the Mahalaxmi temple delineating the GSBs as the only *mahajans*.

However, these efforts were unsuccessful as complaints were made to the government by communities who were not acknowledged as *mahajans*.

A considerable delay in the finalization of the *compromisso* compelled the government to issue a deadline, failing which the doors of the temple could be sealed. In fact, the time limit to frame the *compromisso* was extended on several occasions from 1880s to 1930s. It is against this backdrop that an attempt was made to finalize the *compromisso* of the Mahalaxmi temple with much more fervour. In 1929, while the *compromisso* was drawn yet again with the GSBs as the only *mahajans*, the lower castes rejected the draft, left the temple and resolved not to enter it until they were able to get back their right as *mahajans*. Further, various opposing communities led by *Nabhik*, *Bhandari* and *Tarukar* met at Shree Pandurang Devalaya, a temple set up by the *Bhandaris* in Panaji, and passed a resolution to take up all necessary measures to contest. At the same time, in view of the strength of the GSBs, it was decided to establish *Saraswatater Samaj* (non-Saraswat community), and efforts were made to stay together.

What looked like, in the beginning, a fracture of a temporary nature that would be resolved immediately with government intervention appeared endless, compelling the non-Brahmin community to continue with their temple boycott. This forced the *Saraswatater Samaj* to transform itself into *Gomantak Saraswatater Samaj* with an important objective to build a new temple of Bhavani Shankar in Panaji in order to hold the non-Brahmin community together. In 1931, the *Gomantak Saraswatater Samaj* received official recognition when its statutes were approved by the government (GPI, 1931, pp. 970–971). Subsequently, it was decided to construct the Maruti temple instead of Bhavani Shankar.

Although the other non-Brahmin communities did play a part, the most notable characteristic of this movement was the major contribution of Panaji's *Nabhik* community. There are multiple factors that contributed to their leadership of the movement. The first crucial factor was that the *Nabhiks* had moved to Panaji, where, with their experience of living and working, the Mahalaxmi temple had become a symbol of identity to rally around. By recording and preserving the events centred on the temple that mattered to them, the *Nabhiks* stitched together disparate individuals coming from the 'New Conquests' into a community. They saw themselves as the ones who made the construction of the temple possible. Secondly, the community valued their participation in calendric festivals of the temple. For the period of the *Bhajani Saptaha* (a seven-day celebration that falls in the month of Shravan [July–August]), one day was reserved for the *Nabhik* community, and at the time of *Poornima* (full moon), which was celebrated during the month of *Paush* (December–January), the community had the honour of taking out a public procession of the deity seated in a palanquin.

The process of identifying themselves with the Mahalaxmi temple is seen in the fact that the *Nabhik* community named their library and primary school after the deity. Besides, the *Nabhik* community of Panaji viewed themselves as higher in status in relation to the rest of the communities and had begun cementing this position by calling themselves the *Paush Poornimekar Samaj*—here again the temple was of great importance. Moreover, what is noteworthy in this context of the temple and identity is that while the *Bhandari* and *Tarukar* communities had established their temples, the *Nabhik* community did not have a single temple in Goa, except the Mahalaxmi temple with a kind of ceremonial participation. On the other hand, in this conflict over the position of *mahajans*, the opposing faction of GSBs had demanded documentary evidence from the *Nabhik* community in order to substantiate their claim and had declared them as relatively disenfranchized *bhajak* (worshippers) with no rights over the temple. The *Nabhik* community faced much criticism from the GSBs who saw their conduct as opportunistic and challenged them to show at least one temple that belonged to them in order to have some moral ground for their claim (Pednekar, 1930, p. 8). The *Nabhik* community was seen as having such a low status that it did not allow them to build a single temple. The *Nabhiks* contested this claim, asserting that their inability to raise resources to build a temple was misrepresented to denounce them (Pednekar, 1930, p. 9). In demonstrating

their resistance, the *Nabhik* community built a temple of *Gomteshwar* (a form of Shiva) at Brahmapuri, Old Goa, and also got its *compromisso* approved (Pereira, 1978, p. 52).

After five years of contest, the judgement was in favour of the non-Brahmin community, and the GSBs were forced to amend the *compromisso*, more particularly Articles 5 and 15. It opened the position of *mahajans* to all the Hindus who had contributed to the expenses, upkeep and maintenance of the temple and whose names were included in the catalogue of *mahajans* (GPI, 1934, p. 1423). Moreover, Article 15 was the most noteworthy amendment—Hindus of all castes were permitted to worship, thus opening the doors of the temple to untouchables, at least in theory. While the *compromisso* had a list of 1,013 Hindus as *mahjanas*, the GSBs alone had as many as 518 individuals, and persons from other communities who had legally qualified as a *mahajan* included Dravidian Brahmins, Lingayats, Rajputs, Gujirs, Kasars, Lohars, Daivadnya Brahmins, Vaishyas, Naik Gaonkars, Tarukars, Naik Bhandaris and Naik Marathas. In contrast, however, there were also paradoxes largely produced by the Brahminical status and, more particularly, through a claim on ritual practices 'inherited from the past' (GPI, 1934, p. 1424). Article 11 affirmed the performing of important rituals in the Mahalaxmi temple as an exclusive right of the GSBs. Further, with the exception of temple priests, only the GSBs could enter the innermost sanctum where the deity resides. For this reason, the Daivadnya Brahmins appealed to the government demanding similar privileges but were disallowed (GPI, 1941, p. 247; Pednekar, 2005, p. 35).

The GSBs appealed against the *compromisso* of 1934, more particularly against Articles 5 and 15 at the Imperial Colonial Council in Lisbon (GPI, 1940, p. 206, 1942, p. 368, 1943, pp. 157–159). There were also strong reactions against the *compromisso*, not only in Goa but also in British Bombay (Nayak, 1935). In 1943, the Imperial Colonial Council rejected the appeal of the GSBs, and after 14 years of boycott, the non-Brahmin community made a temple entry (GPI, 1943, pp. 157–159). In view of the fact that there were many such temples in Goa where non-Brahmins were demanding the position of *mahajan* and had often failed, the question is why was this judgement different? Perhaps, one of the possibilities was that the GSBs themselves were responsible for their defeat. Unlike other temples where they had succeeded in transforming the *gramdevatas* (village deities) into their *kuladevatas* by the publicly expressed and ideologically charged versions of myth and history, they had failed to do so here. The judgment laid great emphasis on the identity of the deity as *gramdevata* and not of a particular community (GPI, 1943, p. 159). Without any resources of a mythological past, the only history available to the GSBs was the role played by Narayan Kamat Mhamai in the construction of the temple and, most importantly, that the deity remained in his house. This made it possible for his family members to proclaim the status of being the foremost *mahajan*, a position recognized in the *compromisso*, whereby the first 12 names of *mahajans* in the catalogue are from this family (GPI, 1934, p. 1425). Secondly, the crucial determining factor was the unity of the non-Brahmin community and the ways in which they began to re-invent their protest: from boycotting the temple to setting up of the *Gomantak Saraswatater Samaj* and later building temples.

Conclusion

The concept of resistance has been a rich source for writing the history of Goa, particularly since the early half of the twentieth century. Moreover, the historiography filled in by the mode of over presence of the Portuguese has often perceived the colonial state as the only embodiment of power—hence, resistance qualifies as only against the Portuguese. Rejecting this, we should look for resistances of a different kind with different forms of power—the macro-power of the Portuguese and the micro-power of the local elites, dispersed in fields that we do not predictably associate with the colonial state.

This approach, being more focussed on locating power rather than fixing it on the colonial state, provides alternate ways to understand resistance and opens up possibilities to engage with subaltern lives.

Speaking of the subalterns in Goa, the practice of de-rationalizing their actions as illogical and opportunistic denies them agency. The argument is, rather, to 'recover the subaltern' from the histories of Goa with the demand for recognition of the values and meanings which they incessantly manufacture (O'Hanlon, 1988). Further, the attempts made by the subalterns to subvert dominant cultural forms and meanings—role of identity and temple in the construction of community—are efforts to dismantle the sources of power. Such behaviours, when perceived from a subaltern perspective, make it obvious that history is not merely what happens to the subaltern but also something that they make.

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ORCID iD

Parag D. Parobo https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5250-943X

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