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### **Caste System in Goa**

Goan society presents a remarkably harmonious character despite the religious and caste divisions that have dented it, especially during the din and bustle of democratic electoral politics. For the integrity of its self same ethnic composition is well-known and resists rupture on those lines. These are, however, drawn with less rigidity than elsewhere in the country and are hence felt in much less harsher terms.

The social character of the community has been, as in the rest of the country, impressed with the ubiquitous caste system, though without its strict and pervasive observance as in many parts of the country. It may be borne in mind that the term caste' is itself a Portuguese appellation meaning chaste' or 'pure. It is the concept of purity that is at the base of the determination of caste hierarchy in general, The Portuguese of the sixteenth century, on observing the social stratification of the population of Goa at that time, mixed up the Varna, i.e. groups based on refinement and culture and originally associated with 'colour', with the Jati, i.e. groupings formed according to the concept of purity in its varying gradations, and called all of them indiscriminately by the label of 'castes'.

## Caste Structure

The four-fold structure of the Varna system, as it is believed and known, is made up of the Brahmin, Kshatriya/Rajanya, Vaishya and Shudra, with the Brahmin being placed at the apex of the hierarchy by Manu, the legendary law-giver. The sacred text of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, however, glorifies the Varna of the Kshatriyas as being 'the best specimen' and states that the gods Indra, Varuna, Soma, Rudra, Parjanya, Yama, Mrityu and Ishan belonged to it, giving only secondary importance to the Brahmins. In Vedic times, this was an open system based on a mere division of labour, which came to be ossified by the end of that period. For the Rigveda distinguished between priests (brahmins), nobles (rajanyas or kshatriyas), tillers of the soil and merchants (vaishyas) and servants (sudras). There was always the possibility of upward and downward mobility, according to the conduct of their individual members, which was, however, gradually denied to them in later times.

### a. Among Goan Hindus

The caste structure existing in the rest of India is more or less observed in the same manner in the Goan Hindu community also, with the necessary modifications and adjustments as warranted by the local social conditions. The Brahmin group of jati consists of the following: the Bhat or the priests who officiate at the temples of the various sub-groups in this caste, and are mainly the descendants of those who migrated into the State from neighbouring Maharashtra and a few from Karnataka to man those houses of worship, they being of the Chitpavan, Dravid, Karhade and Padhye denominations, the Saraswats, who are further sub-divided into the Vaishnava and Smarta or colloquially yet graphically in Konkani as ube and addve respectively, the appellation indicating the smear of consecrated ash on their forehead as vertical or across in that order. While the first group has surnames like Phadke, Pujari, Bhave, the second group, i.e. Saraswats have Shenvi or Shenoi, Kamat,

Pai, etc. as theirs, added by the name of the village they hail from. They take up other occupations like teaching, agriculture, trade and commerce, etc. The Kshatriya group of jati is headed by the Chaddhi, which appellation has fallen into disuse now among the Hindus of that caste, who have adopted the lower one of Marathi But was very much prevalent at the time of the Portuguese arrival in Goa in 1510 and much later till the ascendance of the Marathas on the political firmament of India. For the records of conversion to Christianity of members of this caste and later papers relating to the measurement and settlement of property, are eloquent on this caste among Goan Hindus/Even some temples continue to have Chaddhi purus venerated in them along with Brahmani purus, as in Sanguem and Sattari counties of Goa. The Dessai landlords of Goa and others with surnames like Naik, Prabhu, Kamat, belong to this group. These were mainly descendants of the noble or warrior class. There were other claimants to this caste from the related soldiery of former times. These began calling themselves Marathas, which is a misnomer, as scholars like Shenoy Goerbab have pointed out. Recently some other castes lower down the hierarchy which could be put into the Sudra category, including the toddy-tappers, temple attached personnel and even the Gaudi who belong to the tribal stock, have been also rather incorrectly applying that prefix to their caste nomenclature.

The Vaishya-Vani group of jati are the merchants and related trading class of wholesale and retail vendors, some of whom have been doing extremely well for themselves, There is a community of goldsmiths and gold dealers who go by the designation of Shet indicative of that calling, which is a part of their name, and who claim a higher status, that of Daivednya Brahmin, though the latter group does not allow it to them. The surnames of the Vani group are Verenkar, Amonkar, Munz, etc. while those of the Shet community are Vernekar, Raikar, Anvekar. There is a small group in Canacona called Gaud or Gowd of this Varna

Below them are the occupational divisions of the various sub-castes or jati subsumed under the Sudra varna. They are mostly the craftsmen and artisans like the blacksmiths, the tinsmiths, the carpenters, as well as the professionals

like the fitters, toddy-tappers, fishermen, washermen, etc. There are others like barbers, wicker workers, labourers who are outside the pale of the caste system, as they are treated as outcastes virtually, though this does not happen so rigidly in Goa. Still further down hover the aboriginals called Gauddi, Kunnbi, Vellip, who demand schedule tribe status, while they have been included under "Other Backward Classes". There were other marginal communities like the devadasi (attached to the temple) and citeddvane/ i/ em (those born of kept women), which practices have by and large been eradicated today.

b. Among Goan Christians While the structure of that Varna system was prevalent

among Goan Hindus and persists to this day, the transposition of it onto the neo-Christian sub-society that was ushered in with the mass conversions to Christianity in Goa, with the active assistance of the Portuguese in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, can be gauged from the baptism records of those who were admitted into that fold. For they mention specifically the caste of the convert, along with his/her Hindu as well as the new Christian name. This practice of writing the two names together, to indicate their origin particularly among the upper castes, which they wished to flaunt, continued in land measurement and other commune records till the eighteenth century

There must have been on the part of the Portuguese an attempt to carve out a separate society of Goan Christians, to over-ride the stigma of the loss of caste that would fall on them inevitably upon conversion, particularly when the people involved were from the high castes in the Hindu social structure, as seen from the records and opinions on the subject. This new society could only be formed in the image of the social structure of their own country back in Europe. It may be recalled that the hierarchy there comprised the clergy, the nobility and the people. On finding that the caste structure in Goa was somewhat similar to the pre-eminences in the social hierarchy based on the nobility of blood claimed, they adapted the former to the procrustean yardstick of the latter. Thus, all castes and sub-castes or jati which were then

distinct by themselves, as mentioned above, among the Brahmins or some claimants to brahminhood among the various segments of the population of Goa, particularly some goldsmiths and even some Vani merchants probably, as seen from the caste-coloured surnames of village commune members purportedly all-Brahmin now, were put into the new Christian caste of Bamonn (Brahmin).

Similarly the various groups among the Kshatriyas, locally known by its jati form of Chaddhi (Punjabi Chad dha?) were called by that name of Chaddhi, a practice which continues even today, with pride, while it has been discarded by the Hindus of that caste, who call themselves Maratha and some even Brahmin. These included among the Hindus of that time, mainly the noble and warrior class (Rajaputras or Khetri as the early Portuguese chroniclers describe them), some of them possibly engaged in the trading profession, known as Chatim or Shet on that account, which was an occupational appellation of the goldsmiths essentially but applicable commonly to the Brahmins and Kshatriyas practising it, as seen from the records of that period. Shenvoy Goembab, the great Konkani writer and scholar, himself a Saraswat Brahmin by caste, traced the jati term Chaddhi to Chaturathi, meaning noblemen meriting the honour of four chariots. It is inaccurate to suggest that Kshatriyas and Vanis were merged to form a 'new caste' of Chardo, as it is spelt and pronounced in Portuguese, an error which was perpetrated by a few scholars and has since been copied unquestioningly by others. Those of the Vaishya-Vanis who could not succeed in their attempts to merge themselves into the Brahmin and Kshatriya high castes among Christians as happened in rare cases, still appear as Gauddo in some places in the Bardez county in particular, among them. The Christian counterpart of the Vaishya-Vani caste is the Gauddo caste, which is treated as one of the higher castes, as distinct from Gauddi of aboriginal stock

The other castes and sub-castes who did not or could not get themselves admitted into the above three, considered as upper castes, among Goan Christians, and interestingly even some goldsmiths and Bhanddari (toddy-

tappers among Goan Hindus) were all dumped together indiscriminately under the general label of the Christian caste of Sudir or Sudras.

The aboriginal stock of people in Goa are known as Gaudi. The Christian converts from this group continued in some cases to carry the same name but in most cases were termed kunnbi, which is an appellation different from the one used in Maharashtra for an agricultural caste. They are found in their bulk in the Salcete county of south Goa and in their day-to-day life, are slightly different from their Hindu counterparts and are still faithful adherents of Christianity. Besides these, there were a few of the so-called once 'untouchable' castes, like the Mahar (wicker-workers and those engaged in menial tasks) and Chamar (leather workers), who had converted to Christianity but their social status did not improve an iota after it. In course of time some of them have dissolved into the Sudir caste among Christians. An infinitesimal few still continue in a degraded position. The Gaudi communities have been demanding the tribal status due to them.

The Portuguese records of the early period refer to the upper castes of Bamonn and Chaddhi as being "the two advanced castes among the Hindus in Goa at that time; they continued to attach their caste to their Christian names and surnames even after conversion." As a matter of fact the missionaries of that period endeavoured hard to convert the higher castes, the Brahmins and Kshatriyas first of all, either individually or in groups, expecting those lower down the hierarchy to follow suit. That was contrary to the position in most parts of India, where the converts came generally from the lower and disadvantaged classes.

The first mass conversions to Christianity or general baptisms', as they were called, are graphically described in respect of some important villages of the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes, which were mostly exclusive of each other, by missionaries in their letters home or in books relating to these matters. The earliest mass conversions, invariably with prior approval of the concerned village communes, took place in two prominent villages in the vicinity of the

then city of Goa (now in ruins as Old Goa) viz. Carambolim and Divar, the first comprising the Kshatriyas and the second of the Brahmins. Of the total number of village communes converted to Christianity during the period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the three (now four) coastal, better-developed counties of Goa, the majority belonged to these two high castes. That did not mean the majority of the people, as the communes were mostly managed by those high castes. In fact, the Church, bowing to the harsh realities of the social situation at that time in Goa, even directed that the priests in the community should be recruited, and in fact they were so, exclusively from "the two nobler castes".

Conversions to Christianity did not change anything but the faith. The old usages and customs and age-old traditions and superstitions of a varied order, including the caste system, were transferred to the neo-Christian society, informing all the social, cultural and psychological aspects of the life of the converted people. The Christian Brahmins in Goa continued to be "a dominant caste, who occupy some of the highest positions in the administration, clergy and the liberal professions", and the Christian Kshatriyas formed "a rural aristocracy preponderant in some villages in Goa, seeking to confirm this fact with titles of Portuguese nobility... occupying a privileged position in the Goan hierarchy" also in the highest posts in those above mentioned spheres. The Christian Sudris are of the "stock of peasants, artisans, today practically free though with memories none too far of the times they belonged to their landlords; this does not mean that there are no cases in which in a relatively-veiled manner there still exists dependence." The Kunbis, as stated above, are Christians of aboriginal stock, mainly landless labourers who work on the plantations of coconut-trees, mango-trees and other jobs on land and around houses of the landlords, they being employed for hard tasks and particularly as experts

for coconut plucking. But in the course of the last nearly five centuries in Goa

Christianity has brought about a visible relaxation in the rigidity of the inherited caste system and a better integration of all the people of disparate social status into one composite community heading towards cohesiveness, as opposed to the divisions that persist among their counterparts elsewhere. Education has opened up new avenues of socio-economic mobility for the lower castes too.

c. Among Goan Muslims This is a very small religious community in Goa but it has

been considerably reinforced over a tiny core of ethnic Goan Muslims, by accretion from the neighbouring States, particularly of Karnataka and Kerala. In the original social structure prevalent in Goa, (they had the caste divisions of Sayyad and Sheik at the top of the hierarchy corresponding roughly to the Brahmins and Kshatriyas respectively in the Hindu order. The Memons, Muzawars, etc. corresponded to the Vaishya-Vanis among Hindus and the artisans like weavers, tailors, fitters, and labourers with corresponding occupational surnames, were approximately equivalent to the Hindu varna of Sudras or Sudir in Konkani. The Goan Muslims followed the uniform Civil Code enjoined for all communities irrespective of their

religion, The Muslims mentioned above are of the Sunni persuasion which is the majority dispensation. There are, however, some Shias as well, particularly those owing allegiance to the Aga Khan, and some Bohras, which is another sect of this community.

### Changes in the Caste System

Important changes are coming about in the entrenched social structure, especially among the Christians, in Goa, with some relaxation of the rigidity of the caste system even among the Hindus, Though by and large the Christian

Brahmins and Kshatriyas continue to seek marriage partners among their own caste men and women, as the Hindus do, within their circle or village, there appears to be operating a closer coalescence between these two upper castes, though at one time bearing an inner current of antagonism, one group never conceding precedence to the other. The mutual prejudices are still in vogue, though their overt expression is attempted to be suppressed. They appear to have apparently arrived at some sort of equilibrium in their social relations among the Christians in Goa. They have begun inter-marrying rather easily now if the economic and educational status and social ranking are found to be compatible on the whole. Among the Hindus, the Brahmins including the Saraswats are reluctant to give up their dominant position and have little to do with others down the line in terms of marriage, but have been compelled to give in recently in some cases.

Their treatment of the other castes lower down the hierarchy is less condescending and rigid now. The young men and women of the Sudir group of castes among Hindus and Christians who are getting increasingly educated, move rather freely with their peers among the high castes. There is less deference shown to the higher caste colleagues by the others, as was expected earlier. For they mix together as friends now, though the difference in caste status does to a certain extent inhibit an open friendship of a more intimate character among them. For at home the older generation of upper castes still views the lower castes as beneath themselves and to be treated as such. The children of the lower castes are giving up their old ancestral avocations of a traditional character and taking up modern professions and jobs of a white-collared variety, in imitation of the upper castes, who still do Emigration to foreign countries among the Christians in particular, especially in jobs in the Arabian Gulf region, which fetch a lot of money in Indian terms, have pumped more income into the hands of the lower castes in particular and they are now able to afford better living conditions and an education that was beyond them earlier, giving rise to enhanced expectations.

Changes in the political sphere, with the power of the vote in terms of numbers, have catapulted the Sudirs among both the communities, to

positions of dominance in the management of the Panchayat at the village level as well as in organizations like the Jaycees and other social service outfits like the Lions Club as also in electoral politics at the assembly level and now at the Zilla Parishads at the district level. The result of all this churning of the social cauldron, has been a gradual erosion of the rigid caste hierarchy of the old days and the segregation consequent thereto. Social relations between various sections of the people have been tempered and mellowed considerably over the years, particularly after Goa's merger with India, except in the matter of inter-marriage among various castes. But the process towards that end has been set in motion, albeit on a small scale, to begin with, with limited success. For the upper castes do not mix freely on social terms with those lower down the hierarchy and shun marriage with the latter, ostracizing those who take the plunge into forbidden ground. However, there has been more coalescence among the various occupational groups of the Sudra castes. The consequence of all these changes has been a gradual reorganization of society from