

COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF GOA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTION 2022

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ABSTRACT

Since the first Legislative Assembly Election in December, 1963, the Political Party System in Goa offers fragile ground for defections and non-allegiance. This fragility has developed the political discourse in Goa. The family centric nature of regional parties contributed to the success of National Political Parties. Overemphasis on state politics alienated Goa from India's national politics. Amidst this, dominant interest groups have managed to reinvent the issues of identity in their favour. The scenario before and after the Legislative Assembly Elections in March, 2022 has further fuelled this fragility and unaccountability in the tiny coastal state. In this article, we explore the major areas of electoral politics that have caused this legacy to continue. It presents the case wherein the political decentralisation has failed to initiate cultural decentralisation in the state keeping the aristocratic nature of polity intact.

KEYWORDS: Elections, Regional politics, Decentralization, Defections, Language

INTRODUCTION

The results of the forty members Legislative Assembly of Goa on March 10, 2022 surprised the winner Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Opposition Party Indian National Congress (INC) and the Regional Political Parties like Goa Forward (GF), Maharashtra Gomantak Party (MG) and Revolutionary Goans (RG). The main feature of this election is the majority of the members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) of all the parties including chief minister Pramod Sawant won by a slight margin of the votes. Some of them who defected from INC to BJP won and lost by small difference of votes. The regional parties MG, GF and RG also followed the similar trend. Ten MLAs out of 40 could win by the margin below 1000 votes. INC, which could win 17 seats in 2017 assembly elections, reduced its tally to 11. Ravi Naik, well-known for defections and a leader of INC who quit the party to join BJP won merely by 77 votes from Ponda. GF's only Vijai Sardesai won from the constituency of Fatorda. RGP's twenty-eight-year-old Viresh Borkar fetched the victory in St Andre by the margin of 76 votes in its debut attempt. Aam Adami Party (AAP), a newly entrant in the state politics and a national party won two seats from Benaulim and Velim in South Goa after its unsuccessful debut in 2017. Three independents including Alexio Reginaldo who ferried from INC to Trinamool Congress (TMC) finally contested independently, entered the assembly. The BJP registered victory in 20 constituencies grabbing seven more seats compared to its performance in the previous election. Together with TMC, BJP's ideological and

regional ally MGP launched opposition against Sawant led BJP and got only two seats. BJP's politics of marginality after 2014 widened the vote base and fought the anti-incumbency despite being in power for two consecutive terms from 2012 till 2022. BJP under the leadership of CM Pramod Sawant and party chief Sadanand Tanawade manufactured two defections from MGP and INC attracted the Bahujan leadership in its fold. BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah churn out large margins during elections (Bajpai and Sáez 2022). Alarmed by the small margins in Goa, BJP plans to create large margins by adding 'safe seats' to its tally in by broadening its ideological fold. According to Jorgen Rasmussen, safe seat is one which is unlikely to be lost by a sitting member from any political party and registers less fluctuations in the margin over a period of time (Rasmussen 1996). The history of electoral politics in Goa since 1963 registers very few safe seats. BJP coopted the constituencies of Poriem represented by Pratapsingh Rane and Margao represented by Digambar Kamat are few examples of safe seats. These safe seats also represent an aristocratic patronage that influences adjoining and other constituencies in the state. The politics of large margins and safe seats has certainly helped certain castes and families reinvent their political interests.

This article adheres to comparative ethnographic method. The comparative ethnography in election studies compares different findings, highlights dynamics which can be missed by emphasising solely on single case, forefends

misplaced critiques and provides opportunities for researchers to theoretically innovate (Simmons and Smith 2019, 342). The comparative ethnographic narrative analysis systematically compares narrator's experiences, meanings, decisions and examines distinct themes and illuminate meta-level thinking (Arnault and Sinko 2021). The sequential comparative ethnography deliberately explores the themes and theoretical questions and then explore another site and compare (Abramson and Gong 2020, 199). William J. Keefe points out three approaches of comparative study of state politics: institutional description studies, analysis of inclusive categories and small group study (Keefe 1956, 727). The comparative analysis of political parties helps in understanding the ways of conscription, self-recruitment, co-optation and agency in a particular polity (Seligman 1961, 85). The non-allegiance, splits and defections in political parties in the state deserves comparative ethnographic inquiry to identify what motivate this behaviour. This study is largely based on the comparative ethnographic reading of the local newspapers, social media and field interactions in the state. The study of elections in states in India are largely driven by mindless empiricism or impressionistic theorisation (Nigam and Yadav 1991, 2391). The comparative study of politics within the states put on record the struggles and assertions fought on the lines of region, religion, dialects, caste and community to capture the political power (A. Kumar 2009). This article employs comparative ethnographic method to explore the fragility and unaccountability of party system in Goa.

DECODING GOA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTION 2022

Though the strategy of bahunjan appeasement benefitted BJP in assembly elections held in February, 2022, it changed the equations among the bahunjan castes in Goa. It also fails to affect the constituencies usually won by the candidates of Goud Saraswat Brahmins (GSBs). These electoral outcomes shape the political expression of the identity of Kunabi-Maratha in Goa under the banner of BJP. These two communities currently hold the major portfolios in the government as well as the positions in BJP. Kunabi, Gauda and Velip fall under the Scheduled Tribe (ST) whereas Maratha is the unreserved category. The small state of Goa elected four MLAs from ST communities amidst their demand for reservation of seats in the assembly. Newly elected speaker Ramesh Tawadkar hails from the ST community from Canacona. Two leaders from Maratha community Pramod Sawant and Subhash Faldessai hold chief minister and Tribal Welfare and Social Welfare, socially vital portfolios respectively to mobilize the bahunjan communities behind them. Earlier ST and Other Backward Classes (OBC) MLAs held these portfolios. Though the major portfolios remained with Marathas, they accommodated MLAs from Bhandari, Kharavi, Kumbhar and

lone Scheduled Caste MLA from Pernem under various ministries and corporations. BJP offers another Maratha assertion Vishwajit Rane, son of former chief minister from INC Pratapsingh Rane. Though the leadership conflict between Sawant and Rane delayed the government formation, BJP's thrust on maratha identity keeps Rane's hopes intact of getting the leadership of the state. Bringing the Maratha identity to the centre-stage, BJP draws criticism from another numerically large community Bhandari, an agricultural tenant caste in the state.

The second feature of this election is the familial aspirations to provincialize the constituencies. Unlike 2017 assembly elections where 9 families fielded 16 candidates, five couples from the small state of Goa fought 2022 election. Vishwajit Rane and his wife Dr. Deviya Rane contested on BJP's ticket from Valpoi and Poriem and won. BJP fielded Atanasio Monseratte and his wife Jenifer Monserrate in Panaji, capital of the state and its suburb constituency Taleigao. They won and Atanasio Monseratte defeated the son of former chief minister late Manohar Parrikar, founder of BJP by 716 votes in Panaji. Quitting BJP Michael Lobo and wife Delilah Lobo won from Calangute and Siolim on INC tickets. TMC fielded former BJP MLA Kiran Kandolkar and wife Kavita Kandolkar from Aldona and Tivim. They lost. Former Leader of Opposition from INC and Deputy Chief Minister Chandrakant Kavlekar's wife tried for BJP ticket in Sanguem constituency. Kavlekar defected to INC with ten MLAs in 2019 brought stability to the BJP government. Kavlekar and wife Savitri Kavlekar lost in Quepem and Sanguem. Culturally dominant Maratha community has remained electorally insignificant in the constituencies of Cuncolim, Quepem, Curchorem and Sanguem. In addition to it, Savitri Kavlekar contested as an independent candidate against the Maratha community leader Subhash Faldessai in Sanguem. The assertion of Maratha identity coupled with the Maratha-ST community alliance defeated Kavlekar family in South Goa.

Churchill Alemao and daughter Valanka contested the 2022 elections from Benaolim and Navelim respectively on TMC tickets and lost to AAP's Venzy Veigas and BJP's Ulhas Tuenkar. They are new entrants in the legislative assembly. INC dominated Navelim for decades due to the majority of Catholic and Muslim votes. INC leader from Navelim Irfan Mulla joined BJP and aided BJP's long-serving Shaikh Jeena direct the Muslim votes to BJP. This move prevented Alemao family in Navelim. With the defeat of Kavlekar, Kandolkar (two Other Backward Classes families) and Alemao family, the shadow of the slight margin hovers on the electoral future of Rane, Lobo and Monserrate families.

Finally, BJP employed the language of marginality convenient to bahunjans during the election. They suddenly moved the focus on Hindu religious identity and its cultural

preservation after the results. In December 2021, CM Sawant hinted at the rebuilding of the demolished temples during Portuguese Goa. Though religious narratives were pre-empted during the electoral campaigns, they were not made the vehicle of mass-mobilisation. The main opposition reluctantly maintained silence over religious controversies. The success of BJP in the election quietened the full-throated opposition of GSB MLAs especially of Vijai Sardesai. He accused Sawant as an outsider in the state and accused him of originally belonging to Sawantwadi, Maharashtra that shares the boundary with Goa. As a result, Sawant resorted to popularizing the identity of Shivaji before and after the elections. CM instructed all the deputy collectors to celebrate the coronation day of Shivaji at taluka level on 6th June. CM mobilized the Maratha MLAs behind him from the INC like Rajesh Faldesai. The Maratha image of CM helps contain the opposition from GSB, the dominant caste. Another critic of Sawant, Rohan Khaunte joined BJP just before the elections and former LoP Digambar Kamat aimed to find the space in BJP since the death of Parrikar. Kamat along with Micheal Lobo and six others defected to BJP in September 2022. It appears that the silence of GSB MLA's waits to exploit the leadership conflict between Sawant and Rane.

The history of elections in Goa is studied by tracing the networks of dynastic families, Marathi- Konkani language controversy, Mediums of Instruction, environmental movements and goan exceptionalism rooted in its Portuguese past. The aristocratic nature of polity has remained unchecked. The dynastic families from the Bahujan castes emerged as the consumers of the aristocratic polity. In today's world, aristocracy maintains its power without electoral means (Michels 2001). The consolidation of aristocratic identities forms the aristocratic democracy. In Karnataka since 1990s and Maharashtra since 2014, BJP slowly built its base among Lingayat and Marathas (Palshikar 2014). BJP had employed the idea of 'Jatland' stressing upon the 'Jat' caste during 2014 assembly elections in Haryana (R. Kumar 2015). Similarly, BJP seems to build its cadre among Maratha populace since 2019 especially in South Goa which has been traditionally the stronghold of Congress. Politicising the dominant caste with its historical identities has been BJP's strategy to detach them from the Congress system. After Independence, Congress inherited the aristocracy of the landed and feudal, businessmen and bureaucracy at regional and national level (Baru 2021). The BJP aims to blend Maratha assertion with GSB dominance to reinvent the new elite class to meet their political ends. The conservative party assumes hostile and revolutionary attitude towards the existing state and mobilize the common people to reintroduce the aristocracy (Michels 2001, 9). The power elite emerges from the similar psychological and social bases to realize a particular plan (Mills 1956, 19-20).

CENTRALITY OF LANGUAGE POLITICS

The linguistic formation of state gave rise to 'regionally oriented elite' different from national elite (Pai 1990, 397). The enactment of Konkani as official language of Goa in 1987 provided impetus to the political aspirations of the regional aristocracies. The political decentralisation is more than fiscal decentralisation in regional political parties in India (Brancati 2008, 137-138). Contrary to it, the case of Goa indicates high political decentralisation as well fiscal decentralisation. The regional parties in Goa lacks cultural decentralisation which is largely visible in states like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Telangana, Kerala, Bihar. The aristocratic influence over regional parties contains the cultural decentralisation in the state. Cultural decentralisation is a policy objective to combat inequalities in cultural opportunities and aims to promote spatial diffusion of culture in the state-craft (Kawashima 2009).

The linguistic concerns largely mask the empirical realities in the state. The delegation of Romi Konkani Sonsthanchi Ekvott (delegation of Romi Konkani Institutions) including former speaker Tomazinho Cardozo presented the memorandum to the Governor to accord equal status to the Konkani written in Romi script immediately after the assembly results. The convenor of Bharatiy Bhasha Suraksha Manch (BBSM) Subhash Velingkar quickly opposed this demand. Thereafter, Speaker Tawadkar announced the assembly business in Konkani. Sawant stressed upon the use of Konkani along with English in the proceedings of the High Court of Bombay at Goa. The Mahavikas Aghadi (Shivsena-NCP-Congress) in Maharashtra attempted to lure the Konkani section to offset BJP in Goa. The 95th Akhil Bharatiy Marathi Sahitya Sammelan at Udgir, Latur in Maharashtra invited Jnanpith awardee and ardent Konkani activist Damodar Mauzo as a chief guest. The president of Akhil Bharatiy Marathi Sahitya Sammelan Mahamandal Koutikaro Thale Patil demanded equal official status to Marathi in Goa on the platform of the sammelan. This has further honed the bygone narratives on language debate between the Marathi and Konkani. During the inaugural of Akhil Bharatiy Konkani Parishad at Malvan, Maharashtra, CM Sawant asserted that Konkani is not the dialect of Marathi (The Goan Network, 2022). Goa University named its language school after the Nagari Konkani icon Vaman Valaulikar known as Shenoi Goembab among Konkani protagonists. Simultaneously Marathi supporters renovated the Marathi Bhavan at Porvorim which was in shabby condition after its closure in 2014 during the Parrikar government. The former MGP MLA Rohidas Naik and former Shiv Sena leader Ajitsingh Rane demanded equal status to Marathi. On June 17, 2022, former deputy Chief Minister Ramakant Khalap with Marathi Rajyabhasha Prasthapan Samiti, Gomantak Marathi Akadami, Kokan Marathi Parishad Goa,

Marathi Ase Mayboli Amuchi, Gomantak Marathi Sahitya Parishad and Gomantak Marathi Bhasha Parishad staged a protest at Azad Maidan in Panaji to demand equal official status to Marathi. Earlier GSB MLAs attributed Sawant's leadership to Marathi and Maharashtra. He faced humiliation due to his inability to speak in upper caste Konkani dialect. To rectify the image, Sawant initiated the popularisation of Konkani in government business post-election. He shared the stage with Konkani literati and assured his support to Konkani. He prefers the maratha identity in Konkani and keeps Marathi supporters guessing. This strategy contains the criticism as well as helps him make inroads in the constituencies of his opponents. Sawant appears to reinvent the local identities convenient to electoral politics thereby making the BJP unassailable in upcoming elections.

CONCLUSION

The postcolonial electoral landscape of Goa has transformed from regional bi-party system to coalition party system led by national parties and marred by political instability in last sixty years. Bhandarkar politicized Maratha identity as a bahun identity. The same is being consciously attributed to Kshatriya Maratha caste irrespective of religion. This waning consciousness caused to bring the few families and castes on the platter of politics. Rather than intervening in the federal relations, kinship-based parties prefer to be regional extensions of the national parties. Therefore, the government formation at the centre changes the electoral alliances in the state. The language controversy is a major issue of these aristocracies to lure the voters. As regional leaders built the INC, it still offers fragility to defect and disintegrate. BJP invokes Hindu identity to scare and attract newcomers in the party. When the hopes of efficient opposition dwindle, the slight margin may spook into the dreams of the incumbents about their electoral success in future. The noise of electoral turmoil hardly gives anyone chance to know the aristocratic nature of electoral politics in Goa.

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