

Plunder of a people

KONKANAPURANA



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Ambelim borders Velim on the north and east, and has been a part of it in many respects.

As said before, along with Assolna, Veroda, and Cuncolim, the two constitute the margin between the velp and the ksatriya territories. When the Portuguese sought to impose their rule and their faith on these villages the inhabitants of these five villages rebelled. They put to death a number of Portuguese officials including the tax inspector of Salcete; and went up to the authorities in Rachol (from where Salcete was controlled at that time) to protest against the restrictions on their religious practices and the forced conversion of the inhabitants to the Christian faith. The rebellion lasted for eight years, until one night in 1583 the Portuguese laid siege to the villages under the orders of Viceroy Dom Francisco Mascarenhas. His nephew Dom Gilianez Mascarenhas, the captain major of Malabar, sailed in through the Beul Bay and the captain of Rachol, Gomizianes de Figueiredo, marched overland for the attack. The two together 'burned and demolished all that met their eyes' ('queimou e arrasou quanto achou diante'). [Xavier, 1907: 'Bosquejo Historico das Comunidades das Aldeas dos Concelhos das Ilhas, Salcete e Bardez', vol. 2, 278]

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The rebellion culminated in an encounter in Cuncolim on July 15, 1583, in which some Jesuit priests and lay people died. The history has somehow remained focused entirely on this event, thereby emphasising the religious and political aspect of the rebellion - what has been called the 'missionary-colonial discourse'. [Robinson, 1997: 'Cuncolim - Weaving A Tale Of Resistance', in Economic and Political Weekly, volume 32, no. 7, 335]

Consequently not much attention has been given to the plunder of the

five villages in the form of 'confiscation' of the properties of the gamvkaris. What has remained largely unstated is the fact that the confiscation was not a consequence of the rebellion by the villagers or the massacre of the Jesuit priests; rather the rebellion was a consequence of the attempt by the Portuguese to hijack the local economy; the attack on the villages was a premeditated move with a clear economic motive. Though the encounter has become famous as the Cuncolim Revolt, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the rebellion was spread across the five villages. According to the Jesuit accounts of the encounter between the priests and the gamvkars, Captain Mascarenhas 'entered the Sal river by night, went ashore at daybreak and laid waste all that he found'. This happened not in Cuncolim, but in Assolna which is on the bank of Sal. It's from there that the Captain of Rachol proceeded to Cuncolim. [de Sousa, 1710: 'Oriente Conquistado a Jesu Christo ...', Part II, 186]

It was probably the relative prosper-

ity of this cluster of villages that attracted the attention of the Portuguese, or more correctly the Portuguese 'fidalgos'; and this is borne out by their doings post confiscation.

The agriculture in these villages was highly productive, given fertile soil and abundant sources of water. Surplus agricultural production had enabled these villages to develop crafts. Cuncolim had a thriving market that attracted buyers and sellers from a vast hinterland. More so because these villages lay at the end of a bunch of trade routes that connected them to the trans-Sahyadri hinterland; the ports at the mouth of the Sal River made them a hub of coastal trade. As a result, their temples were irresistibly rich.

Upon confiscation in 1585, the contiguous villages of Assolna, Ambelim, and Velim, along with their gamvkaris, were leased to Dom Pedro de Castro. The letter by Viceroy Dom Duarte de Menezes granting the lease of Assolna, Ambelim, and Velim ('assento da mercê' = gift deed?), reads as follows (summary)

'In recognition of the numerous services rendered by D. Pedro de Castro, nobleman ('fidalgo') to His Majesty, by this letter of 6th August 1585, is granted on perpetual lease for possession by him and his heirs and successors the villages of Assolna, Ambelim, and Velim, along with their gamvkaris, and all that they possess.' The statement of grant is preceded by a long list of favours that 'His majesty' owes to Pedro de Castro. However, in the margin of the letter is found a noting to the effect that the said Pedro de Castro has donated the villages to the Jesuit College in Cochim. [Xavier, 1903: 'Bosquejo Historico das Comunidades das Aldeas dos Concelhos das Ilhas, Salcete e Bardez', vol. 1, 224] Note the obvious complicity. Was Pedro de Castro, with all his 'services' to the king, only a means of transferring the ownership of the villages to the Jesuits? And why the Jesuits of Cochim? Does that have anything to do with the fact that the villages were 'conquered' by Dom Gilianez Mascarenhas, the captain major of Malabar? The 'as-

sento da mercê' granted to Pedro de Castro 'all that the gamvkaris of these villages possessed'; did these possessions include the temples?

It was only right that the Royal Letter (Carta Regia) of February 6, 1989 addressed to Viceroy Dom Duarte de Menezes disapproved this flagrant abuse of power by the viceroy and the misuse of their political influence by the Jesuits. It read: 'With regard to the donation made by Dom Pedro de Castro of some villages of Salcete to the religious of the Society of Jesus, which were given to him in my name by Count Dom Francisco Mascarenhas who was governing this State, is not in order. Several persons in my service disagree with the said villages being given to the said religious, and also with Dom Pedro de Castro being gifted the villages without my express permission and confirmation.

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... But neither this Carta Regia nor the charters of November 25, 1592, December 24, 1609, March 15, 1618, April 3, 1628, and April 5, 1737 ordering the restitution of the properties to the original owners failed to have effect.

Upon the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1759, the properties were confiscated by the State. [Xavier, 1903: 'Bosquejo Historico das Comunidades das Aldeas dos Concelhos das Ilhas, Salcete e Bardez', volume 1, 225] The villages of Cuncolim and Veroda, along with their gamvkaris, were leased on similar grounds and on similar terms to João da Silva by Viceroy Dom Duarte de Menezes by 'assento da mercê' of March 27, 1585. These were later handed over to the Condado de Marquis de Fronteira, with whom they remained till 1961.

