

GOA : COMMUNAL TINDERBOX?

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(Curchorem a city in South Goa District, part of Quepem Taluka, with a population of 25,000 people and neighbouring Savordem have today come to define what shape Goan polity takes in future. In fact the simultaneous vandalism of two temples in the area which are five kilometers away from each other and the planned mobilisation of people belonging to a particular community who came out on streets immediately to protest the incident has sent shivers down the spine of the police.

As of now, security has been beefed up after this deliberate attempt to create communal divide has come to the fore. But looking at a weak Congress Party regime in the state, which has yet to come out of its internal bickerings, the marginal status of the secular forces and an aggressive BJP which is gearing itself up for coming elections, it is impossible to guarantee that communal peace would be maintained at every cost.)

The demolition of a mosque which housed a madarsa also, is still fresh in the minds of Samshad Begum Anarbi. She had built the structure singlehandedly, of course community members did come forward to extend financial help. In fact, the idea was to build a mosque and a madrasa where people could pray and young children could study Arabic. The whole structure was built on a government land, which came under the Twenty-Point Programme.

On February 24, last year the Savordem panchayat issued a notice in which they stated that the structure is illegal and would be demolished within seven days. Samshad Anarbi immediately approached the directorate of Panchayats and could manage to get a stay order from it. When the locals learnt about it, they attacked the building at night and demolished the structure.

She knew many of those people involved in the midnight demolition of the mosque and the madarsa. Many of them young kids, who used to salute her when she used to pass on the road. But all that is passe. The dark night last year when the structure which she had built singlehandedly came under attack, she realised how it is possible to make monsters out of ordinary peaceloving people.

Nobody could have the premonition that this 'spontaneous' sounding attack was part of a larger gameplan of rightwing forces especially the forces of the Hindutva brigade. With police badly equipped to deal with the situation and an administration which was led by the Congress Party, which is itself suffering from 'paralysis of willpower', the ensuing communal violence in Curchorem-Savordem provided a field day for these people.

Recent events in the same area have once again demonstrated how the forces of hate and communal disharmony are out to create new social divide in the area. The alleged desecration of temples at Curchorem-Cacora near Panaji and the police suspecting role of miscreants out to create communal tension has rekindled memories of the March 2006 communal riots in Savordem and Curchorem. It is now history how rightwing organisations especially the BJP had incited trouble in the area then after demolishing a structure which housed a mosque and a madarsa. Fact finding reports on the violence had even specifically named a BJP leader and a candidate for the Assembly elections for instigating the violence.

The way Siddh Dev Mutt and Rakhandev temples, which are five kilometers away from each other were plundered - with robbery being not the motive - and the way locals immediately came out on the streets, has left the law and order people worried. A senior police officer told the media that '...the incident was well planned' (*Indian Express*, 6th April 2007). Looking at the fact that elections to the assembly are scheduled later this summer, events of similar nature are not unexpected. While the people in power need to be extra-vigilant to prevent recurrence of such incidents in future and the law & order machinery needed to be geared up to face any untoward

incident, one notices the state government itself suffering from 'paralysis of willpower'. With internal bickerings within the ruling Congress Party on the upswing and a senior leader of the Party, Churchill Alemao, showing signs of rebellion, one does not see any sign of improvement in the immediate future also.

The most disturbing part of the whole scenario is that even after a year of rioting at Curchorem-Savordem—forget filing of chargsheets in a timebound manner—the investigations into the disturbances have not moved ahead. Day by day faint hopes that guilty would be brought to justice are fading away. It need be mentioned that while the rest of India has been witness to the flaring up of communal tension every now and then, as far as Goa is concerned, nobody expected that a small minority of Muslims would come under such a organised, vicious attack at the hands of the Sangh Parivar and its affiliated organisations. It was no surprise that the rioting at Curchorem-Savordem shook the Goan society to its foundations.

The March disturbances had also witnessed introduction of a new element in the communal divide, where Hindutva organisations were able to win over a section of the Christians to target the Muslims. In its perceptive writeup 'Communal Violence in Goa : Neros in Khaki' *Gomantak Times* (Weekender, Panjim, March 5, 2006) had specifically mentioned : "A controversial senior office bearer of BJP was heard saying "It is high time that Hindus and Christians join hands to kill the Muslims". Despite all this, no BJP leader was arrested or warned for igniting the crowd and creating communal tension!

One could also find the rumour spreading machinery of the Hindutva Brigade in full swing then which had tried to rationalise the violence unleashed by its cadre claiming that armed people belonging to the minority community from Bhatkal and Hubli-parts of Karnataka—had reached the place. Not only the fact finding team but even senior police officers had debunked this propaganda. It was for everyone to see that if the people from minority community were really armed, then instead of retaliating or attacking the mob, why had they rushed back home while many others took shelter in the mosque at Curchorem. Secondly not a single vehicle, which was damaged and destroyed, had Karnataka registration. All vehicles belonged to people from minority community in Goa itself.

Commenting on the communal disturbances in March, Sujay Gupta in his Open Edit (*Gomantak Times*, 7/03/06) clearly stated :

"This is a strange war where there aren't two groups fighting each other. There is one assaulter—the Hindu fundamentalists co-opted into the BJP, and one assaulted—the community of Muslims. ... Given the manner in which things unfolded, the attack on the Muslims was pre-meditated. The disputed structure was demolished by a Hindu mob who had no jurisdiction over a disputed structure. They are not the "authority", the police is. This was the first real attack. How can the majority community which has initiated the task of affecting violence, have the gumption or gall to blame the minorities or the police for the violence?"

The ascendance of the communal forces in Goan polity is for everyone to see. Over the past few years, Goa has witnessed incidents which have a communal tinge to it. In a public meeting held on March 5, 2007, noted secular activist Ramesh Gauns underlined the challenges before the movement in a perceptive manner. Mentioning the reported clash at the Savordem mosque and wondering whether it was truly a coincidence that this occurred exactly one year after the Snordem-Curchorem violence he posed a question before the audience that whether there were more sinister designs at play. He mentioned the case of Tariq Battlo, the alleged terrorist, who was arrested just a few days after the previous communal violence, as another suspicious 'coincidence', which indicates that an impression is being sought to be created by fascist forces that minorities are responsible for communal disorder.

It does not need lot of wisdom to comprehend how things may unfold in the near future. An ascendant Hindutva brigade, a lacklustre Congress and the absence of a

strong people's movement to unite people cutting across communities and castes, it would not come as a surprise if the situation deteriorates further.

One just wishes that secular forces in rest of the country get ready to go the extra mile to avert such a situation. □□□