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'Wipe away the remaining signs': Hindu nationalist assemblage politics and the Christian other in Goa

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ABSTRACT
This article analyses the consolidation of Hindu nationalist politics in the Indian state of Goa, with a particular emphasis on political transformations occurring over the last decade. Unlike in many other parts of India, where Indian Muslims have been cast as the prime 'antagonistic other' of Hindu nationalism, the article shows how in Goa it is Goan Christians who have increasingly come to occupy this position. This argument is substantiated through an analysis of recent Hindu nationalist mobilisations centred on anti-Christian tropes and issues. Building on this, the article suggests that Hindu nationalism in contemporary Goa may be understood as a form of assemblage politics that is highly attuned to the local context and coarticulates with regional histories, circumstances, and symbolic registers. This politics, crucially, advances through a flexible alignment of organisations, institutions, and actors across the political and civil society divide, effectively connecting mainstream and so-called 'fringe' Hindu nationalist groups in the pursuit of a shared political mission across scales.

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Speaking on the 350th Coronation Day of the Maratha ruler Shivaji in 2023, Pramod Sawant, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Chief Minister of Goa, proclaimed that the time had come for Goa to wipe away the last remnants of Portuguese influence. Speaking from the Betul Fort that was built on Shivaji's orders in 1679, Sawant proclaimed that 'with the inspiration from Shivaji Maharaj, we are committed to do away with the colonial remains and build new Goa' (*Digital Goa*, 2023). Hailing Shivaji and his son and successor Sambhaji as protectors of Hindu culture (*The Hindu*, 2023), Sawant stressed how the Maratha kings had, during their rule, confronted the Portuguese to stop the destruction of Hindu temples in Goa (*Times of India*, 2023a).

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This was not the first occasion that Sawant had targeted the Portuguese as destroyers of Hindu culture, vowing to rectify the historical injustices inflicted on Goa during Portuguese colonial rule. During an election campaign the year before, for example, Sawant had said that:

> In the 450 years of Portuguese rule, there was a destruction of the Hindu culture, and many people were converted. Temples of the state were destroyed. We are going to rejuvenate all of this. I believe wherever there are temples in destroyed condition, they should be rebuilt. (*Business Standard*, 2022)

In this article, I use Sawant's rhetoric on the urgent need for erasing all legacies of Portuguese colonialism, and for rejuvenating Hindu culture and rebuilding Hindu temples, as an entry point for analysing the political strategies of Hindu nationalist organisations in contemporary Goa. The key argument I make is twofold, namely (1) that Sawant's rhetoric is indicative of a major intensification of Hindu nationalist efforts in Goa, that (2) simultaneously signal wider transformations in Hindu nationalism as a political project on a national scale.

In advancing these arguments, I am indebted to Hansen and Roy's (2022) work on 'new Hindutva' and their argument that Hindutva today can be seen to partake in many forms of 'assemblage politics', a concept that seeks to capture the contingent, decentralised, and flexible nature of contemporary Hindu nationalist politics in local contexts. Throughout this article, I seek to show how the Hindu nationalist assemblage politics that is analysed in the Goan context has three defining characteristics. First, it foregrounds Christianity and Goan Christians as its quintessential antagonistic other, often communicated by dog-whistle (López, 2014) through which tropes of Portuguese colonial atrocities in effect come to stand for contemporary Christianity for those attuned to the right audial register. Second, it relies on political deification (Sen & Nielsen, 2022) as a key modality of political transaction, communication, and mobilisation, invoking and deifying figures of authority past or present to drive the antagonistic production of political communities at different scales. Lastly, it advances through a *sangham*, or confluence, of institutions and actors across the political and civil society divide, aligning mainstream and so-called 'fringe' Hindutva groups in a flexible pursuit of a shared political mission across scales.

I proceed by locating the study in the literature on new Hindutva, by which I refer to the aggressively majoritarian politics of Hindu nationalism that has consolidated with particular force since 2014 when the party-political arm of the wider Hindu nationalist movement, the BJP, was elected to power at the national level. I also account for the role of Christianity and Indian Christians in the politics and discourse of Hindutva. I then focus on Goa, a small state with a significant Christian minority that comprises 25 percent of the state's population. Against the backdrop of a discussion of the consolidation

of Hindutva in Goa, I analyse two recent cases of political controversy that I see as exemplary of contemporary forms of Hindu nationalist assemblage politics. Both controversies were propelled by Hindutva groups and centred crucially on Goa's colonial history, and on competing interpretations of the role of Christian missionaries and saints, and Hindu kings and gods, in shaping this history. Despite their grounding in a specifically Goan history, both controversies established wider resonances with Hindutva in other Indian contexts. The potency of this kind of Hindu nationalist assemblage politics, in other words, stems from its capacity for being highly attuned to localised contexts, while remaining firmly committed to the broader political mission of turning India into a Hindu state.

New Hindutva, Hindu nationalist assemblage politics, and the Christian other

Violently undoing claimed historical injustices committed by enemies of the Hindu nation – whether by 'Muslim invaders' or 'European colonialists' – as a means of resurrecting a Hindu golden age in the present has always been a central tenet of Hindu nationalist politics (Jaffrelot, 1996). In this regard, Chief Minister Sawant's statements on Portuguese colonialism as destructive of Hindu culture, and the concomitant need for erasing all its remaining traces, can at one level be seen to echo longstanding Hindu nationalist master tropes. And yet, contemporary Hindu nationalism is in many ways substantially different from what it earlier was (Chatterji et al., 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021; Longkumer, 2021; Hansen & Roy, 2022). Not only does it currently enjoy extraordinary political dominance (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020; Jaffrelot, 2021), it is increasingly hegemonic also in the Gramscian sense, informing common sense and 'permeat[ing] into new spaces: institutional, territorial, conceptual, ideological' (Longkumer, 2021, p. 2).

Writing about what they refer to as 'new Hindutva', Hansen and Roy (2022) analyse Hindu nationalism's newfound dominance to identify several features that set it apart from its historical predecessors. Unlike Hindu nationalist strategy and politics in the 1980s and 1990s, which relied heavily on large-scale and often violent popular mobilisation 'with a decidedly insurgent charge' (Hansen & Roy, 2022; see also Ludden, 2005; and van der Veer, 1996) that often targeted the institutional order of the state establishment, Hindutva today is now fundamentally concerned with statecraft and rule, repurposing and innovating constitutional democracy from within. This is enabled by the unprecedented political and governmental power that the BJP now enjoys, and occurs through a broad array of legal and policy measures geared towards transforming Indian into a Hindu state (see also Chatterji et al., 2019; Nielsen & Nilsen, 2021, 2023). These measures include for example the official renaming of cities; state-sponsored saffronisation of the public

sphere;[1] and budgetary allocations for temple reconstruction. They also include new legislation that enshrine key ideological tenets of Hindu nationalism in state law by, for example, criminalising religious conversion and cow slaughter (Nielsen, Selvaraj, et al., 2023; Jakobsen & Nielsen, 2024).[2] This new form of governmental Hindutva, Hansen and Roy (2022, p. 8) argue, constitutes a considerable expansion of the Hindu nationalist repertoire and its capacity for carrying forward its ideological project in and through the state.

Alongside this unprecedented entrenchment of Hindu nationalism in state and governmental spaces, another defining feature of new Hindutva is the rapid proliferation of new groups and organisations espousing the cause of Hindutva in civil society. As Anderson (2015:, p. 47) observes, many such groups operate outside the institutional and ideological framework of the Sangh Parivar and represent more idiosyncratic expressions of Hindu nationalism, rendering new Hindutva evermore diverse and multifarious in terms of organisation, practice, and strategy. These new groups include a significant number of so-called 'hard neo-Hindutva' formations that more loudly expound Hindu chauvinism and cultural nationalism (Anderson and Longkumer, 2021, p. 3), often in militant ways. Yet while hard neo-Hindutva groups sometimes depart from the Sangh's formal positions and praxis, they nonetheless – as I show in the case of Goa – often align unproblematically in ideological and sometimes also strategic terms with much of the fascist baggage of the Sangh Parivar (Sabastian, 2020).

Hindutva's governmental entrenchment in political society; its increasingly hegemonic position in civil society; and its organisational diversification and proliferation, lead Hansen and Roy to conclude that contemporary Hindutva has acquired a new organisational form and modus operandi. To them, the 'familiar model of a pre-planned master-minded project of Hindu nationalism that is controlled and orchestrated by a central node' (Hansen & Roy, 2022, p. 10) has increasingly given way to a form of Hindutva that partakes in many forms of assemblage politics. Hansen and Roy do not work in the tradition of assemblage theory that we normally associate with Deleuze and Guattari, but rather align the concept with Stuart Hall's notion of articulation. They thereby argue that Hindutva today co-articulates with a large number of regional histories and specific circumstances, advancing not so much through the imposition of centralised master plans and fixed narratives, but rather through a 'contingent, decentralized, and flexible series of actions and events that are shaped by localized contexts and imperatives and yet (re-)produce a Hindu majoritarian social order' (Hansen & Roy, 2022, p. 10). To a certain extent, Hansen and Roy exaggerate the newness of this politics and strategy. Hindutva organisations have for a long time flexibly adopted their strategies to India's plurality of regional political cultures, strategically tapping into, for example, Gujarati sub-nationalism and pride in Gujarat (Jaffrelot, 2024), Rajput culture in Rajasthan, Pahari cultural traditions in

Himachal Pradesh (Basu, 2015, p. 205), and the cultural legacy of Bankim and Vivekananda in Bengal (Kanungo, 2015). As Flåten has shown, such flexible adaption became particularly pronounced from the early 1990s, when the BJP began to make more concerted efforts at expanding beyond the Hindi heartland by 'regionalizing its own strategies without undermining its key message of Hindu unity' (2016, p. 158). The BJP's ability to generate political synergies across scales by making 'the local' nationally significant and vice versa is also well documented (Tambiah, 1997; Basu, 2015; Selvaraj, 2025). In terms of political strategy and modus operandi, then, the new Hindutva that Hansen and Roy speak of emerges from a longer history on the part of Hindu nationalist organisations of engaging and appropriating specific localised histories and circumstances. A key contrast with the past, however, is that these strategies can arguably now – with the governmental entrenchment of the BJP at the centre and in many states and union territories, coupled with the wider social 'sedimentation of Hindutva as a shared sentiment' (Hansen & Roy, 2022, p. 10) – be pursued with greater vigour and more unapologetically.

In this article, I approach Hindu nationalist politics in contemporary Goa as a regionally specific manifestation of such Hindu nationalist assemblage politics – a politics that is highly attuned to the specific Goan context and its distinct imperatives, while simultaneously contributing to the production of a Hindu majoritarian order that aligns with the wider ambitions of the Hindu nationalist movement. The colonial history and demography specific to Goa means that the political construction of Indian Muslims as 'the epitome of the other' (Jaffrelot, 2021, p. 194) that is so dominant in Hindu nationalist politics elsewhere in India has been less pronounced in Goa. Here, it is rather Goan Catholics who have occupied this position. This foregrounding of Christianity as the other of Hindu nationalism is, admittedly, not unique to Goa as Hindu nationalism has historically been antagonistic towards Christianity. In many parts of India, Hindu–Christian conflicts increased substantially from the 1990s, and today, Indian Christians have become 'prime targets' (Jaffrelot, 2021, pp. 189–193) of Hindu nationalist politics: In the domain of governmental Hindutva, BJP governments have sought to undermine the freedom and operational capacity of Christian schools and NGOs through a variety of legal means, criminalising proselytisation – and any activity that can be construed as such – in many states (Nielsen, Bhattacharya, et al., 2023). Such governmental interventions have, in turn, enabled an increase in extra-legal violence against Christian communities, including the vandalisation of churches by hard neo-Hindutva groups across several states. Although they formally operate outside governmental domains, these vigilantes often coordinate with the police, presenting themselves as righteous defenders of the law of the land against so-called 'anti-national' Christian communities whose loyalties they believe lie elsewhere.

Yet despite this despondent scenario, there is considerable local variation in Hindutva's current engagement with Indian Christians. Pentecostal Christians, for example, tend to be more aggressively targeted because of their greater evangelical assertiveness (Bauman, 2014) and 'in-your-face type of proselytization' (Abreu, 2019, p. 10). In states with electorally significant Christian communities such as Kerala, in contrast, sections of the church have found common ground with the BJP in condemning the alleged 'love jihad' of ostensibly predatory Muslim males against non-Muslim women, both Hindu and Christian (Sasikumar, 2025). And in the northeast where Christians in many places constitute the majority, the openly confrontational form of hard neo-Hindutva has been downplayed considerably in favour of a version of Hindu nationalism that is creatively sensitive to indigenous cultural forms (Longkumer, 2021). As I show next, Hindu nationalism has also engaged Goan Christians in specific, contingent, and sometimes-contradictory ways.

Hindu nationalism in Goa

Goa has received unparalleled attention over the past decade from Hindu nationalist organisations, and its importance to the BJP's national leadership has become increasingly evident. During the assembly elections in 2022, for example, the party's entire top leadership visited Goa, conducting door-to-door visits, interacting with voters, offering prayers at local temples, or addressing public meetings. During the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Modi campaigned in Goa again, fondly calling it the place where his destiny had been written since it was here that he had first been anointed the BJP's prime ministerial candidate back in 2013. Amit Shah also campaigned in Goa and likened it to the bindi on Bharat Mata's forehead.

This situation contrasts strikingly with how Hindutva was for long a marginal political phenomenon within Goa. Indeed, the syncretistic nature of popular religiosity in Goa (Newman, 2001; Henn, 2014) has often been thought of as a stumbling block to the aggressive politics of religious polarisation espoused by Hindu nationalist organisations. Newman (2001) has, for example, persuasively argued that popular religiosity in Goa can be conceptualised as a distinctly 'Goan religion', understood as a continuum that may be recognisably Catholic at one end and recognisably Hindu at the other, but whose vast middle is defined by a mixture of Catholic and Hindu rituals, saintly figures, symbols and beliefs that constitute a unity of identity and similarity underlying surface appearances of religious difference. Against this backdrop, a political project defining national belonging and identity exclusively in the language and categories of Hinduism would be expected to find infertile soil in Goa. And electorally, Hindutva indeed remained marginal for long, with regional parties dominating the landscape – including

the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP) which enjoyed strong support from the *bahujan samaj* (Parobo, 2015), the predominantly Hindu lower castes. Even by 1989 when Hindu nationalism was making its electoral mark in much of India, the BJP managed a mere 0.4 percent of the vote in the Goa state elections.

The BJP achieved an electoral breakthrough of sorts in 1994 when it polled around 10 percent and won four seats in a legislature of 40. The BJP's electoral success was the outcome of an uneasy alliance with the MGP whose mass base the BJP cannibalised, 'converting a vote bank that was rooted in a strong *bahujan* ideology into one that can perhaps best be described as soft hindutva' (deSouza, 1999, p. 2436). The BJP improved its performance in the 1999 elections, at a time when it was in power nationally for the first time. That year, BJP's Manohar Parrikar was made chief minister,[3] signalling the arrival of governmental Hindutva in Goa. Since 2012, when a BJP 'tidal wave' (Noronha, 2012) swept the state, the post of chief minister has consistently remained with the BJP, also when it has failed to secure a majority on its own.

Writing in 1999, sociologist Peter deSouza (1999, p. 2438) noted that although Hindutva had made inroads into Goa, it had taken 'a soft form' because its more strident version had limited local appeal. Parrikar had, during his first tenure, initially pursued more centralised and polarising Hindu nationalist logics (D'Mello, 2022), but soon adopted what Noronha (2012:, p. 26) calls 'Goan-style soft Hindutva': He presented BJP as a non-communal party, nominated several Catholic candidates, foregrounded development over religion, vowed that minorities would prosper under his rule, and sometimes confronted hardline elements in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)[4] – even as he from time to time insisted that India was 'a Hindu nation in the cultural sense' (D'Mello, 2012; *Firstpost*, 2013; *Herald*, 2014). However, although the confrontational line was generally subdued in governmental Hindutva under Parrikar, it was not absent. Writing in 2012, Noronha (2012:, p. 26) noted how 'religious polarization is clearly having an impact on all religious communities'. Importantly, as the statements by Chief Minister Sawant which opened this article show, a more unapologetically confrontational form of Hindu nationalism increasingly permeates the domain of governmental Hindutva in Goa (Nielsen, Bhattacharya, et al., 2023), signalling the demise of Parrikar's Goan-style soft Hindutva and its replacement by a more assertive and openly polarising variety (D'Mello, 2022).

While the political and governmental consolidation of Hindutva in Goa thus occurred quite late, the groundwork was laid over the longue durée by other members of the Hindu nationalist family of organisations active in civil society, following India's annexure of Goa in 1961. As noted by Menezes (2018), the integration of Goa into India ushered in a pronounced

Hindu revivalist fervour, accompanied by considerable adaptation by the Goan Hindu establishment as it endeavoured to erase localised differences from what it perceived to be the national Hindu mainstream. This was also the time when the RSS – whose later political influence can be gleaned from the fact that all three Goan BJP Chief Ministers have been lifelong RSS members – established itself in Goa. Beyond the domain of electoral politics, Goan society was far from untouched by the accelerating spread of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s. As Henn writes (2014, p. 14), during those decades, Goa witnessed new efforts to intensify and sanskritise the expression of Hinduism in public life, alongside an increased presence of Hindu symbolism in popular and public folklore. Syncretistic ceremonies and practices were Hinduised or 'purified' by removing Catholic content, by increasing Hindu control over ceremonial roles and functions, or by shifting the site (and sometimes the date) of syncretistic practices from churches to temples.

From the 1990s, Goa would additionally witness the emergence of hard neo-Hindutva groups. These groups are, as mentioned, not formally affiliated with the RSS but overlap in terms of ideology. Notable among these is the Sanathan Sanstha that has been linked to acts of violence, bombings, and murder (Jaffrelot, 2021, pp. 243–247; Jha, 2017), and which a Goa police report from 2011 described as engaged in 'terror activities' (see also Ghadyalpatil, 2018). The wider ecology of hard neo-Hindutva groups also includes the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS), an affiliate of Sanathan Sanstha. The two have been instrumental in coordinating wider Hindu nationalist efforts in Goa where a large number of Hindu nationalist groups have gathered annually since 2012 for the annual All India Hindu Rashtra Convention, hosted by the HJS and Sanathan Sanstha. This convention provides an important platform for these groups to amplify their agenda, and for discussing a range of Hindu nationalist issues, often with considerable media coverage. Given its all-India scope, the key themes usually align with Hindu nationalist master frames – including a national ban on cow slaughter, combating 'love jihad', the repatriation of Kashmiri pandits, and the reconstruction of Hindu temples – but there is also space for articulating Hindu nationalist agendas and strategies much more attuned to the Goan context.

The relationship between these hard neo-Hindutva groups on the one hand, and the mainstream Sangh Parivar and the governmental form of Hindutva on the other is complex. Officially, the RSS keeps the Sanathan Sanstha at bay, distancing itself from its violent approach so as to retain its air of social respectability. At the same time, the RSS has selectively endorsed the retributive violence that these groups carry out (Ghadyalpatil, 2018), and RSS leaders have routinely participated in the All India Hindu Rashtra Convention alongside hard neo-Hindutva groups. The BJP in Goa has likewise officially maintained a distance from these groups but has simultaneously downplayed

and trivialised their militancy. Additionally, the HJS has campaigned for the BJP during elections (D'Mello, 2012) and has offered to support the current BJP government by identifying the sites of Hindu temples destroyed by the Portuguese and assist in their rebuilding (*Times of India*, 2023b). The *sangham*, or confluence, of hard neo-Hindutva and governmental Hindutva in Goa is evident in both discourse and practice.

Below I turn to the two cases to analyse Hindu nationalist assemblage politics as it unfolds in contemporary Goa. Both cases concern instances of political confrontation propelled by Hindutva groups targeting Goan Christians. The first case returns to the themes of the opening vignette and centres on the local significance of Shivaji as a heroic protector of Hindu interests in the context of Portuguese colonialism. The second centres on the status of the Catholic St. Francis Xavier as the protector of Goa and a Hindu nationalist campaign to dislodge and replace him with the Hindu god Parshuram. Together, they demonstrate what I argue are the three defining characteristics of Hindu nationalist assemblage politics in Goa, namely its dog-whistle nature whereby 'Portuguese colonialism' functions as a discursive proxy for vilifying and reinforcing the otherness of Goan Christians; the centrality of political deification as a modality of political transaction, communication, and mobilisation; and the flexible alignment of mainstream and fringe Hindutva groups. Crucially, they also demonstrate how this kind of assemblage politics works in ways that are highly attuned to localised contexts, histories, and symbolic registers, while simultaneously connecting these to Hindutva politics in other contexts, seeking to establish a Hindu majoritarian social order across scales.

Shivaji: national hero or Hindu god?

In August 2023, a video recording of a sermon in a Catholic church generated considerable controversy in Goa. The sermon lasted approximately 15 minutes, but it was a much shorter excerpt that would cause outrage. In this excerpt, the priest spoke about Shivaji thus:

> There are a few people for whom Shivaji has become a God … Yes, he is a national hero. We have to honour and respect him. What he has done, the battles he fought to protect his people … for all that he deserves respect. He is a hero, but not a god … We have to have a dialogue with our Hindu brethren and ask them 'Is Shivaji your God? Or a national hero'. If he is a national hero, let it be at that. Don't make him a God (cited in Chadha, 2023a).

What the priest was commenting upon was the way in which Hindu nationalist groups in Goa and elsewhere had increasingly appropriated Shivaji as an icon for their political project and xenophobic campaigns against religious minorities. A munificent reading of the priest's sermon might have concluded that by seeking to secularise Shivaji – upholding him as a *national* hero of all

Indians irrespective of creed and confession and not a god belonging *exclusively* to the Hindu community – the priest was trying to create a more inclusive aura around Shivaji, enabling Indians of all faiths to stake a claim to Shivaji's legacy. Yet the reaction from local hard neo-Hindutva groups would indicate a less munificent line of interpretation.

The short excerpt was picked up by groups of *Shiv premis* (followers of Shivaji) for whom Shivaji is an incarnation of Shiva and is worshipped as such. The *Shiv premis* were outraged by the priest's remarks that, on their reading, effectively denied Shivaji's divinity. They lodged a complaint with the police, demanding that the priest be charged under various sections of the Indian Penal Code. Their accompanying written complaint stated that the priest's statements had been made 'with intent to outrage religious feelings … which insulted/provoked the religious sentiments of people of Hindu religion and followers of Shivaji'. Three similar cases were filed in police stations elsewhere in Goa (Akkara, 2023), and a group of more than 100 *Shiv premis*, including members of hard neo-Hindutva groups such as the Bajrang Dal and the Karni Sena, gathered in protest outside one police station, demanding the immediate arrest of the priest. The priest – who filed anticipatory bail and avoided arrest – soon publicly apologised for hurting people's feelings, encouraged people of all communities to maintain peace, and added that the whole world, himself included, admired Shivaji.

Several groups of *Shiv premis* have worked to make Shivaji central to Hindu nationalist efforts in Goa in recent years, deploying well-known Hindu nationalist tactics such as rewriting history according to the tenets of Hindu nationalism (Flåten, 2018). The HJS has, for example, demanded greater coverage of Shivaji's exploits in schoolbooks (*Hindu Janajagruti Samiti*, 2010), and insisted that 'distorted' representations that 'belittle' Shivaji be removed (*The Wire*, 2020). A more visible strategy, however, has been to claim public space by populating it with Shivaji statues and imagery.[5] For example, in 2017, the Sattari Shiv Premi Nagrik in Valpoi used the annual Shiv Jayanti parade to install a Shivaji statue centrally in town. The statue was deemed illegal and removed by the municipal administration, but the following year – ostensibly the '350-year anniversary of Shivaji's visit in Goa' – local *Shiv premis* planned a 'mega rally' demanding the reinstatement of the statue (*Herald*, 2018). Although the *Shiv premis* failed on this occasion, the local administration later – in a move that exemplifies the confluence of hard and governmental Hindutva – not only installed a much bigger (and legal) Shivaji statue; it also allotted INR 1.56 crore to beautify the local Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Municipal Park (*The Goan*, 2022a).

Elsewhere in Goa, in 2022, a pedestal with a bust of Shivaji was installed without prior permission during the night in a central location in Mapusa by a group of *Shiv premis*, who later actively prevented the police from interfering or moving the bust (*The Goan*, 2022b). The same year, a small bust of

Shivaji mysteriously appeared on a roadside in Calangute. The year after, this bust was replaced by a 16-foot statue of Shivaji sitting astride a horse with a sword in hand. The statue came up overnight – thanks to the Shivswarajya Calangute and an earthmover and a crane – in a central location to mark the 350th year of Shivaji's coronation. When the panchayat subsequently declared the statue illegal and ordered its removal, more than 200 *Shiv premis* – some affiliated with the Karni Sena and Bajrang Dal – successfully mobilised to stop the demolition. Not only was the demolition order cancelled, the *Shiv premis* also filed a formal complaint against the local *sarpanch* – a Catholic – for 'hurting religious sentiments' by ordering the statue's removal (Chadha, 2023b). While the *sarpanch* complained that he was unfairly 'made to look like Salazar' (Pereira, 2023), he eventually publicly apologised for having insulted religious sentiments and declared that he too was a *Shiv premi* (*Free Press Journal*, 2023).

As the remarks by Chief Minister Sawant with which I opened this article show, Shivaji's current political significance in Goa is closely aligned with his posited historical role as a heroic protector of Hindu culture and temples in a context of Portuguese colonialism. This rendering of Shivaji builds on the several occasions on which he invaded territory under Portuguese control, even if no outright war ever broke out between the Marathas and the Portuguese under Shivaji. War only occurred when Shivaji's son Sambhaji was made king in 1680. Sambhaji made concerted efforts to take over the centre of the Portuguese empire in India as part of his greater ambition of confronting the Mughals, and his attacks on Goa caused considerable destruction. So critical did the situation become from the point of view of the Portuguese that the Viceroy in a desperate attempt to stave off the Marathas handed over his baton of command to St. Francis Xavier's mummified body (Gupta, 2014, p. 129). Whatever role the saint may have played in Sambhaji's retreat, on the battlefield it was the Mughal army of Shah Alam who caused the withdrawal of Sambhaji's armies from the Konkan (Pinto, 2023, pp. 175–179).

The invocation of Shivaji to various degrees shines a light on the three distinct characteristics of contemporary Hindu nationalist assemblage politics and strategy in Goa. First, the priest's sermon in effect produced what Hansen (2001, p. 23) calls 'a political struggle over historical signifiers and community boundaries'. At the heart of this struggle is the contentious question of deification, that is, the question of whether Shivaji should be understood as a divine god or a secular hero. Questions of political deification are of course nothing new to Indian politics, and certainly not to Hindu nationalism which has always sought to harness the symbols of Hinduism for its political project. The degree to which Hindutva has now succeeded in centring political deification as a legitimate and even dominant mode of political transaction and communication almost across the political spectrum

is, however, unprecedented. As argued elsewhere (Sen & Nielsen, 2022), processes of political deification whereby earthly figures of authority past or present are treated as (Hindu) gods in contexts of political mobilisation and competition are fundamentally about the antagonistic production of political communities at different levels of scale. In our case, the deification of Shivaji by hard neo-Hindutva groups effectively staked an exclusionary claim to his legacy, casting him first and foremost as a defender of Hindu identity and culture against threatening Christian others both past and present, drawing clear and antagonistic boundaries around communities that either revered him as a god; or denigrated him by denying his divinity. Secondly, the centrality of Shivaji both to a plethora of hard neo-Hindutva formations *and* to governmental Hindutva – exemplified by Chief Minister Sawant's statements – demonstrates how closely the two are aligned in discourse, practice, and politics, despite the formal organisational and tactical distinctions that exist between the two.

Importantly, although the legends, histories, and symbolic significance of Shivaji in Hindu nationalist assemblage politics are in many ways distinctly tied to the Goan context, the centrality of Shivaji enables much wider resonances with Hindutva in other contexts where Shivaji is symbolically significant. This includes first and foremost neighbouring Maharashtra where Shivaji Jayanti – Shivaji's day of commemoration – has been celebrated since 1870 and is a state holiday. Shivaji is found across Maharashtra, as statues, little figures, calendar art, and posters, represented in hypermasculine poses, rendering him a mythical and omnipresent emblem of the origin and power of Maharashtra (Hansen, 2001, pp. 20–24). Shivaji has for many decades been adopted as a symbol, and used to mobilise support, by the Marathi nativist Shiv Sena, for whom he serves as a master signifier of the identity, pride, and interests of the Marathi *manoos* (the Marathi speaking people of Maharashtra) (Verma, 2011). The Shiv Sena has been instrumental in effecting a more aggressive turn in the political uses of Shivaji from the 1960s, mobilising the narrative of Shivaji as the saviour of Hindus from the onslaught of the Mughals (rather than the Portuguese) to violently target Indian Muslims in the present. But constructions of an antagonistic 'other' through Shivaji work in flexible and shifting ways in Maharashtra so that virtually all communities that are deemed as threatening to indigenous culture and pride can occupy this position. This has included south Indian migrants (Subramanian, 2015) and Communist trade unions, but also Hindu students and labour migrants from the north Indian heartlands of Hindu nationalist politics, indicating an interesting possibility of Shivaji symbolism fracturing the wider Hindu nationalist project.

Yet despite Shivaji's rootedness in particular regional contexts, histories, and symbolic registers, he is also a pan-Indian Hindutva icon that can be unmoored from his various regional anchorings to advance the project of

creating a Hindu majoritarian social order at the scale of the nation. For the RSS, for example, Shivaji has consistently represented a more martial version of Hinduism – a masculine and warrior-like protector of Hindavi Swaraya and an ideal for emulation for all Hindus. And, Shivaji also figures in contemporary governmental Hindutva at the scale of the nation, where Modi portrays him as a governance icon, an early pioneer of good governance, self-reliance, and public welfare, whose visions and dreams constitute Modi's blueprint for the India of tomorrow (Bose, 2023).

Goencho Saib: Christian saint or Hindu god?

In 2022, the former state leader of the RSS in Goa, Subhash Velingkar, caused controversy when he declared that St. Francis Xavier should no longer be accorded the status of 'Goencho Saib', the lord and protector of Goa. The atrocities committed on Goans by St. Francis Xavier and the Inquisition, Velingkar stressed, made St. Francis Xavier unworthy of this honour. Instead of the anti-national saint, as Velingkar called him, he wanted the Hindu god Parshuram declared as the new Goencho Saib, adding that he would soon reveal to the Goan public his 'Goa files': A collection of photographs and documents that would bring to light the violence of Portuguese colonialism and the Inquisition, including the forced conversion of Goan Hindus to Catholicism (Nielsen, Bhattacharya, et al., 2023). In 2024, Velingkar again raised the demand that St. Francis Xavier should no longer be recognised as Goencho Saib while also demanding that a DNA test be carried out on the saint's remains that are kept in the Basilica of Bom Jesus in Old Goa to test – and presumably disprove – its authenticity.

In singling out St. Francis Xavier and the Inquisition as historical enemies of the Hindu nation, Velingkar was far from alone. Other hard neo-Hindutva groups such as the HJS has for years portrayed St. Francis Xavier as 'a pioneer of anti-Brahmanism' and a destroyer of temples, likening him to the 'equally savage temple destroyer' Aurangzeb. In the same spirit, they have portrayed the Inquisition as a harbinger of 'unparalleled barbarism, inhumanism and fanaticism' against Hindus (Sundaram, 2008; 2011) and have encouraged Goan Hindus to stop celebrating the Feast of St. Xavier, a popular annual feast and fair attended by Goans from all communities.

Velingkar's and the HJS's identification of the intimate connection between St. Francis Xavier and the violence of Portuguese colonialism is far from novel and hence in itself hardly headline-making material. As shown in Gupta's (2014) seminal study *The relic state*, St. Francis Xavier was crucial to defining Portuguese colonial rule in Goa for more than four centuries. Xavier arrived in India in 1542 and spent the next ten years in the service of the Jesuits. During this time, Xavier (among other things) promoted campaigns of mass baptism and requested a Holy Inquisition for Goa (established

after Xavier's death in 1560). With Xavier, Goa was transformed into a large 'base of Catholic operations', often through militant means. Efforts towards conversion were combined with the expulsion of Hindu Brahmins from the territory and the destruction of Hindu shrines, temples, and images (Gupta, 2014, p. 32) which were as a rule replaced with Christian equivalents (Henn, 2014, p. 41). These coercive measures, coupled with a general attack 'of the utmost ruthlessness' (Henn, 2014, p. 43) on Hindu religious and cultural practices *tout court* which Henn (2014:, p. 21) likens to a 'hostile iconoclastic onslaught against Hindu culture' would continue and even intensify after Xavier's passing, when large numbers of Hindus were either expelled or migrated from Goa. Hindus who stayed were forced to live lives of humiliation, and many converted to Christianity to escape repression and restrictive prohibitions (Pinto, 2023, pp. 122–127; Henn, 2014, pp. 46–47).

St. Francis Xavier, however, would remain central to the legitimation of colonial rule centuries beyond his lifetime. As Gupta shows, Xavier's ritualisation was over time transformed from a small-scale Catholic religious feast day into an elaborate celebration of his canonisation organised jointly by the church and state. This later evolved into a series of large-scale state expositions organised by colonial officials to shore up popular and divine legitimacy for colonial rule, right up to the departure of the Portuguese in 1961. This made St. Francis Xavier 'a symbol and agent of colonial state authority' (Gupta, 2014, p. 125). The close connections between violent processes of colonial state-formation and legitimation and the cult of St. Francis Xavier are thus well-established.

However, patron saints such as Francis Xavier are not exclusively tied to processes of state formation. Rather, they have evolved over centuries to become intrinsic parts of popular Goan religiosity. Indeed, as Henn (2014, p. 106) argues, patron saints are to Goan Catholics what *ganvdevata*, or village gods, are to Goan Hindus. Popular Catholic religiosity in Goa is, Henn argues, guided by a localistic principle that closely associates saints with particular territories and localities. Patron saints are considered simultaneously founders, members, and guardians of their village community, attending its social gatherings and feasts, but also protecting its territory and people (Henn, 2014, p. 83; 110). These saints, in other words, embody rather than simply represent the village. St. Francis Xavier, whose mummified body is kept as a relic, is the most popular and significant by far among Goa's many patron saints, appearing in myriad manifestations across the state, in images, wayside crosses and shrines, thus inscribing him onto Goa's geography as a whole. As Henn notes (2014, p. 107), his relic marks 'the most genuine of all Catholic icons in Goa, which his devotees simply refer to as *kudh*, the body, thereby implying that the corporeal presence of the saint stands for the protection and well-being of all Goa'. The honour or status of Goencho Saib granted to Francis Xavier is, in fact, an

expression of such popular devotion, and not a result of any official bestowal by the church or the colonial state (Mendes, 2023).

Moreso than our previous case, then, Velingkar's attack on St. Francis Xavier illustrates the dog-whistle nature of Hindu nationalist assemblage politics in Goa as it taps into the widely acknowledged intimate association between saint and community without being seen to explicitly do so. Velingkar's attack is iconoclastic, denying St. Francis Xavier's status as a special human being with protective qualities, demoting him instead to the status of an 'anti-national' foreign tyrant that has no place in Goa – presumably much like his devotees. Velingkar's posited association between Goan Catholics and anti-national sentiments, in turn, has deeper historical resonances. Writing about popular debates on the future of Goa at the time of its integration into India in 1961, Fernandes (2020, p. 149) demonstrates how political discourse at the time held that 'Catholicism … mould[ed] a person's loyalty towards 'the colonial master', while Hinduism seemingly naturally created an empathy with India'. This presumed association between Christianity and pro-colonial sentiments placed Goan Catholics in an inherently anti-national position as 'not really Indian, or automatically not nationalist, or worse, anti-national'. This discursive framing of the Catholic as always-already anti-national, Fernandes argues, effectively functions as a modality of political emasculation, limiting political options and compelling them to accept the frames of Hindu nationalism for fears of otherwise being seen as, *in fact*, anti-national. Velingkar's attack on the 'anti-national' St. Francis Xavier, then, is primarily geared towards drawing clear and antagonistic boundaries between, on the one hand, those 'anti-national' Christian communities who continue to revere St. Francis Xavier as their lord and protector, and patriotic Indians on the other hand. In this sense, Velingkar makes it clear that for adherents to hard neo-Hindutva, Christianity is part of the 'colonial remains' that must find no place in Goa.

That the category of patriotic Indians is a distinctly Hindu category is evident in Velingkar's demand that Parshuram be named as the new protector of Goa. The local significance of Parshuram is derived from popular legends about the origins of Goa that hold that it was Parshuram, the warrior sage, who claimed the land of Konkan and Malabar. In some versions, Parshuram begs the sea-god Varuna for land, while in others he claims it from the ocean himself by variously shooting an arrow or throwing his axe into the ocean. After making the Konkan inhabitable, he calls Gaud Saraswat Brahmins from Trihotra in north India to settle his lands, rendering Hindu Brahmins the mythical original inhabitants of the Parshuram Bhumi that according to legend comprises contemporary Goa.

Velingkar's assemblage politics is thus closely attuned to the Goan context, grounded in a politics of deification centred on origin myths of the Konkan and a local colonial history of Catholic domination specific to Goa. And yet,

as in our previous case, the foregrounding of Parshuram establishes clear resonances with contemporary Hindutva in other Indian contexts, particularly north India where Parshuram has increasingly moved to centre stage in Hindu nationalist politics. As shown in Bhattacharya's (2022) work on the political deification of Lord Parshuram in Uttar Pradesh, his contemporary political salience in this part of India builds on a different set of legends and stories, namely those that describe Parshuram's origin and deeds in the Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. In the Mahabharata, Parshuram appears as an incarnation of Vishnu, conceived through an accidental mixture of the qualities of the Brahmin and Kshatriya, something which imbued Parshuram with the varna attributes of both a sage and a warrior. The epics, importantly, chronicle how Parshuram slaughtered a full 21 generations of Kshatriyas as a response to the killing of Parshuram's father by a Kshatriya king. This vengefulness on the part of Parshuram is explained in both epics as just punishment inflicted on the corrupt Kshatriyas who had deviated from their caste duties by crossing caste boundaries. More generally, Parshuram's battles always have the underlying imperative of establishing Brahminic caste supremacy, indexing Parshuram as a symbol of Brahminic hegemony. Indeed, in contemporary Uttar Pradesh, Parshuram has become an icon for a militant form of Brahmanism that is Hindu nationalist in orientation, but which also seeks a hegemonic position for Brahmins within the wider Hindu nationalist project. Not just the BJP, but virtually all major political parties in the state partake in his deification and invoke him to enlist the support of the state's Brahmin electorate. And, in civil society, many organisations promote Parshuram's cause, celebrating his mythical iconography and amplifying his muscular Brahminical caste values within a wider Hindu nationalist universe.

The Xavier-Parshuram controversy also demonstrates the flexible alignment of mainstream, governmental, and hard neo-Hindutva, albeit in subtler ways than our first case. Because Velingkar's – who had left the RSS years earlier and founded his own group, the Hindu Raksha Maha Aghadi – attack on St. Francis Xavier was, despite the dog-whistle, broadly perceived as more overtly anti-Christian, representatives of governmental Hindutva largely ignored it, given the electoral significance of Christian voters. Indeed, when Velingkar demanded a DNA test on the saint's remains, several BJP politicians in Goa eventually denounced him (D'Souza 2024). But both mainstream and governmental Hindutva have subtly targeted St. Francis Xavier on other occasions. Parrikar, for example, had sought in 2002 to demote the feast of St. Francis Xavier from a public to a restricted holiday. And, in 2014 the RSS, during the month-long decennial exposition of the saint's relics, organised a training camp as a parallel event near the exposition site. Here, an RSS leader had raised the spectre of forced conversion under Portuguese colonialism and the 'un-belonging' of Goan Christians by proclaiming that if the latter wanted to return to their ancestral religion,

the RSS was willing to take them back (Thakur, 2022). The event was endorsed by both Parrikar and the BJP's chief minister at the time, who both attended the camp, alongside the speaker of the state assembly, also from the BJP.

Like Velingkar, governmental Hindutva has also increasingly appropriated the symbolism of Parshuram. Chief Minister Sawant is said to have arranged for state police protection for Velingkar to display his Goa files on Parshuram Jayanti (*The Goan*, 2022c) and he has also greeted Goan citizens on the same occasion via Facebook, alongside a photo of Parshuram – possibly the first time in history that a Goan chief minister has issued a public greeting on Parshuram Jayanti (Narayan, 2022). And in 2023, Sawant unveiled a new landmark statue of a muscular, bow-armed Parshuram in Panaji, named 'the creator of the land of Gomantak'. A similarly muscular Parshuram – armed with bow and axe – was the centrepiece of Goa's tableau for the Republic Day parade in Delhi in 2024 (Goes, 2024).

Conclusion

The Portuguese colonisation of Goa, Henn (2014, p. 40) writes, involved a ferocious 'war between images' that saw the Portuguese colonisers not merely destroying Hindu images, monuments, and temples, but also systematically replacing them with Christian equivalents. This historical process of colonial conquest and destruction is, as shown in this article, central to the politics of new Hindutva in Goa, audible in calls for undoing colonial injustices and restoring Hindu temples, culture, pride, and dominance. But the iconoclasm of the Portuguese also had other, more paradoxical effects: The new Catholic imagery introduced by the Portuguese would eventually come to coexist in close territorial proximity to Hindu images and places of worship, thereby producing the spatial preconditions for a diversity of new syncretistic expressions and practices that over time became characteristic of popular religiosity in Goa. In this article, I have shown how Hindutva's agenda for political deification in Goa (through Shivaji, Parshuram, and St. Francis Xavier) seeks to wipe away such 'colonial remnants' as religious syncretism and Christianity, while also drawing firm and antagonistic boundaries between religious communities in ways that relegate Goan Christians to the margins of an emerging Hindu majoritarian social order. This strategy currently coexists uneasily with sporadic symbolic outreach to Goan Christians by BJP politicians, such as when Chief Minister Sawant attends the exposition of St. Francis Xavier, promises to ensure a steady supply of beef for Goan palates, or vows to take action against the provocations of the likes of Velingkar. Indeed, it is still possible for Goans to dismiss the latter's strand of Hindutva as merely 'silly and childish provocations' (Menezes, 2024). However, the overall trajectory of Hindutva in Goa is arguably one in which the earlier model of Goan-style soft Hindutva has gradually been abandoned in

favour of a more polarising and confrontational strategy, pursued in coordinated and more or less open ways by Hindu nationalist groups and organisations in both political and civil society and in government. Such Hindu nationalist strategies and politics in contemporary Goa may, I have argued, be understood as a form of Hindu nationalist assemblage politics that advances through coarticulation with regional histories, circumstances, and symbolic registers, and a decentralised and flexible approach that is sensitive to local context. Dog-whistle political communication, a politics of deification, and the flexible alignment of Hindutva formations across the political and civil society divide are characteristic of this assemblage politics as it unfolds in, and seeks to, reconfigure Goa. Despite its evident local moorings, it is also a form of politics that can be made to resonate with Hindutva politics in other Indian contexts, thereby connecting locally attuned political assemblages to the broader Hindu nationalist project of transforming India into a Hindu state.

Notes

1. The colour saffron is associated with the Hindu nationalist movement.
2. Goa does not currently have an anti-conversion law, but Chief Minister Sawant has on some occasions spoken of the possible need for one.
3. Parrikar had been a lifelong RSS member and had less than a decade earlier organised groups of Goan *karsevaks* to travel to Ayodhya during the Ayodhya campaign.
4. For example on the issue of government grants to church-run English medium schools which runs counter to the RSS's insistence on education in the mother tongue (Andersen & Damle, 2019, pp. 206–218).
5. Other tactics include demands for changing the nomenclature of Goa's geography by bestowing Indic names on cities and villages bearing Portuguese-inspired names; and portraying the era of the Kadamba dynasty as a precolonial golden age.

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