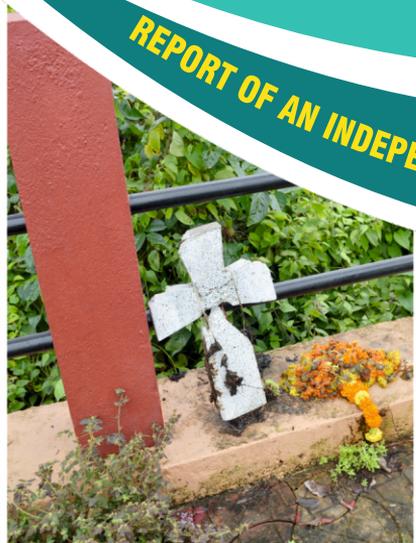




# THE SAGA OF DESECRATION OF CROSSES IN GOA

REPORT OF AN INDEPENDENT FACT FINDING TEAM



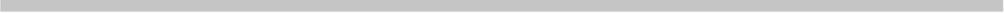


# **THE SAGA OF DESECRATION OF CROSSES IN GOA**



**REPORT OF THE FACT FINDING TEAM**





# Fact Finding Team:

**Rev. Fr. Savio Fernandes:** Executive Secretary for Justice and Peace in the Archdiocese of Goa. He coordinates a number of inter-religious initiatives in Goa and works with communities empowering them in matters of eco-justice, and socio-economic justice. He is a specialist on issues of Global development and social justice.

**Irfan Engineer:** Lawyer and social activist. He has written widely on issues of secularism and communal harmony. At present he is the Director of the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), which came into being after the 1992 Bombay riots. He is also active in the All India Secular Forum and has been a core member of many fact-finding teams to conflict zones in the country.

**Roselle Solomon:** A psycho-therapist and career guidance counselor, she works with youth and children in Goa. She is a trainer on issues of child protection and a known motivational speaker. She was instrumental in starting the Human Rights Law Network in Goa. She has previously worked with several global youth forums at the Asia-Pacific level.

**Neha Dabhade:** A social scientist who completed her Masters degree in Social Science at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai. She is the Deputy Director of Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism. She works on issues of inter-religious dialogue for communal harmony and the secular ideal. She is particularly interested in issues of secularism, from a gender perspective.

**Ranjan Solomon:** An independent Goa-based consultant, working on issues of justice and human rights at the local, national, and global level. He specializes in the issues of justice in the context of the Palestine-Israel conflict, and edits the bi-weekly periodical “Palestine Updates”.

The team is grateful to Jennifer Mirza and Prabhat Sharan for editorial assistance

# Introduction:

Goa evokes an image of an idyllic state dotted with churches, forts, beaches and a unique cultural mélange, characterized by peaceful coexistence.

However, veneer of the picture postcard quietude atmosphere was torn apart when news reports started trickling in June-July 2017 delineating, desecration of Holy Crosses and graves in South Goa.

The assault on religious symbols of the Christian community in a region where Christian population, is quite sizeable disturbed the secular liberal scholars throughout India and particularly in Goa.

The news reports stated that about 50 Holy Crosses and more than 40 graves were desecrated in South Goa in the last week of June and throughout July 2017. Desecrations took place in several villages, including Loutolim, St. Jose de Areal, Gudi Paroda, Curtorim and Curchorem.

Till July 13<sup>th</sup>, police told media that it was clueless. However on July 14th, the police took into custody one Francis Pereira from Curchorem village and Goa Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar, announced that the vandal behind the desecration had been arrested.

However, even as Francis Pereira was locked up in police custody, reports of desecration of Holy Crosses from villages- Madkai and Chimbel villages- filtered through on July 25 and 27.

It was therefore deemed necessary by Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS) and Council for Social Justice and Peace (CSJP) to look into the facts related to the desecration of the holy symbols.

It was decided to send a fact finding team to the scene of vandalism and ascertain the truth by interacting with different stakeholders try to find not just people responsible for such acts but also submit possible recommendations for justice.

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The CSSS & CSJP, constituted a five member Fact Finding team:

- 1) Fr. Savio Fernandes, Executive Secretary, Council for Social Justice and Peace (CSJP), which works on the rights of marginalized people;
- 2) Ranjan Solomon, social activist, associated with CSJP;
- 3) Roselle Solomon, social activist, associated with CSJP;
- 4) Irfan Engineer, Director, CSSS.
- 5) Neha Dabhade, Deputy Director, CSSS.

The main focus of the team, reflected in the interactions with the stakeholders, was primarily to understand:

- 1) Why did the desecrations take place?
- 2) Who is behind it?
- 3) Is the state doing enough to ensure justice and to prevent a repetition of these acts?

## Metodology:

The fact finding team held a brief “sharing session” with prominent activists in Goa on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017 in Madgaon, to understand the context of Goa and assess the overall condition of religious minorities marked by marginalization and discrimination.

The Fact Finding Team visited the sites where religious symbols had been desecrated and interacted with the members of the Christian community and the priests in the affected areas. The Team identified and interviewed political representatives from all the political parties, intellectuals, litterateurs and journalists in order to understand the social, political, economic and historical context of Goa and the issue of desecration.

The team also interviewed politicians and people's representatives: Mr. Ravi Naik, former Chief Minister of Goa and sitting MLA from the constituency of Ponda (Congress); Mr. Sudhin Dhavalikar, Minister of Public Works Department (Maharashawadi Gomantak Party); Mr. Reginaldo Lorengo, MLA from the constituency of Curtorim (Congress); and, Mr. Sunil Desai, BJP Councillor of Ponda Municipal Council and Ms. Radhika Nayak, BJP Chairperson of Ponda Municipal Council.

The team also interviewed: Director General of Police of Goa; Vasant Bhatt, a priest of a Hindu temple; family members of the accused, Mr. Francis Pereira; Mr. Kumar Kalanand Mani from the Peaceful Society; Mr. Sandeep Parkar, a peace activist, associated with the Goa Andhshradha Nirmolan Samiti and Free Thinkers, Goa; Mr. N Shivdas, prominent writer; and Ms. Hema Naik, a prominent Konkani writer.

## Background/Context:

Goa is a state situated on the West coast of India. It was once a Portuguese colony. The state boasts of a rich diversity in terms of religions, languages and communities. According to the 2011 census, this is the breakdown of the population of Goa: 66.08% are Hindus, 8.33% are Muslims and 25.10% are Christians, together with a small number of other religious minorities. In South Goa where the desecrations have taken place, the demographic composition is as follows: Hindus 53.34%, Muslims 9.93% and Christians 36.21%.

Thus the population of Christians and Muslims is comparatively higher in South Goa than in North Goa, where the Christians are only 16.40%. The percentage of Hindu population in South Goa increased substantially due to amalgamation of Hindu dominated Ponda taluka into South Goa in 2014 by BJP led govt.

Goa, one of the smallest states in India, has a total of 40 assembly constituencies. Over the years, it has witnessed a measure of political instability. The two main parties in Goa are the Indian National Congress (Congress) and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). Elections in Goa, more often than not, have witnessed hung assemblies, with one of the two main parties winning marginally more seats than the others. Stitching a majority in the hung assembly often involves horse-trading and/or political bargaining to win over the support of independent MLAs and some smaller parties.

In the State Assembly elections held in May 2017, the Congress won 17 seats, the BJP won 13 seats and the others won 10. In spite of Congress being elected as the largest party, the BJP formed the government even though it was actually voted out of power.

The BJP, a right wing Hindu Supremacist party, swearing by the political ideology of Hindutva, had to compromise its ideological positions for the sake of political expediency. The Goa Forward Party won the elections in three

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constituencies on the mandate of secularism, opposing the BJP's Hindutva ideology.

However, they quickly decided to join the BJP-led coalition Government. This has resulted in tensions and contradictions which is now manifesting itself in the policies doled out by the state government. Despite political instability, Goans have largely lived in peaceful coexistence.

### **Socio-political scenario**

In order to fully understand the historical context of Goa, which can help comprehend the issues related to the desecration, it is important to look at the composition of Goa's social landscape. The Goud Saraswat Brahmin community is politically, economically and socially the most dominant group in Goa. The community migrated to the Konkan coast and Goa around 1000 BCE as traders. They became the dominant land-owning caste in Goa and secured high positions in the Portuguese bureaucracy, taking full advantage of their education.

When Goa was liberated, Saraswat Brahmins were still in a dominant position socially, economically and culturally. However, democracy and democratic elections enabled political mobilisation of non-Brahmins and 'Bahujan' communities (largely SCs and OBCs). The political assertion by other communities gradually resulted in dominant Sarawats losing control in the corridors of power. Till the 1990s, it was hard to imagine that a Brahmin would become the Chief Minister of Goa.

The indigenous communities of Goa include the Bhandaris, Gawdas, Kunbis and Velips. These communities were less educated, as the upper caste-based hierarchy had prevented them from getting an education.

Hindu majoritarian, communal discourse and the “otherization” of minorities were craftily used as tools for re-establishing the hegemony of the Saraswat community and regain political power, which had in recent times shifted into the hands of the Bahujans.

Goa is diverse and plural in its traditions and culture. However, both overt and covert intrigues for polarising the Goan society were employed by Saraswats to establish their political hegemony in the state.

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The Bahujans, consisting of the above-mentioned indigenous communities, have been politically marginalized by systematically appropriating, incorporating and subsuming their leadership.

The Saraswat leadership has exploited a variety of issues to subsume and undermine the Bahujans. For example, indigenous communities like the Gawadas and others traditionally worshipped the '*Sateer*' or ant hills and *ghoomtis*. They did not have temples or *shiv lingas*, which form part of a predominantly Brahmin culture. The Brahmin leadership repaired and even constructed temples for these communities to establish their cultural and social hegemony and to marginalize Bahujan culture, Similarly a *Shiv Ling* was placed in the Bishop's House.

The construction of temples for the lower castes and the “otherization” of religious minorities was the twin strategy adopted to re-establish Brahmanical hegemony. These were the stepping stones for electoral success. For instance, Sudhin Dhavalikar, PWD Minister from the Saraswat community has been representing the constituency of Madkai for the past five terms.

Madkai has a majority Gawada population. In order to cultivate the Gawadas and ensure electoral success, Mr. Dhavalikar undertook large scale construction and repair work of temples in Madkai. Dhavalikar also actively sought the support of the Sanatan Sanstha to communally polarise and consolidate Hindu castes under a Hindu supremacist ideology.

The political history of Goa sheds more light on the process of “Brahminization”, and in turn, the communalization of Goa. The Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP) and the United Goans Party (UGP) were the two major regional parties in Goa. While the MGP's social base was largely Bahujans, the UGP's base consisted primarily of the Christian communities, along with some upper caste Hindus. MGP's political expression was anti-Brahmin.

During sixties, the MGP pressed for the merger of Goa with Maharashtra, as it considered Konkani, the main language spoken in Goa, to be dialect of Marathi. Also, many Konkani speaking people were bilingual: they spoke both Marathi and Konkani. Among the Hindus in Goa, Marathi enjoyed a higher status and their culture was similar to the culture of the neighbouring state of Maharashtra. Konkani was spoken at home and in the bazaars, but most religious literature, ceremonies etc. were always conducted in Marathi. Some

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people in Goa regarded Konkani as a dialect of Marathi and hence considered all Goans to be of Maharashtrian ethnicity. As a result, there were demands from various sections of society in Goa (as well as from Maharashtra) to merge Goa with Maharashtra.

The Konkani is divided into two scripts – Nagri and Roman. Hindus use Nagri Konkani whereas Catholics use Roman. Hindus are against accepting Roman as one of the script of Konkani language. Thus linguistic rights of the Catholics in Goa are being denied. Opposition to Roman script has become rallying point for Hindu to marginalise Catholics culturally. While Hindus were divided over Marathi and Konkani till recently, for the last five years they are now united in opposition to English. They particularly oppose Government grants being given to English medium schools being managed by Church.

The Bahujans considered the Brahmins (Shenvis) as people who unduly benefitted during Portuguese rule, in terms of land and high offices, which in fact belonged to them. With the merger into Maharashtra, they hoped to shake off the yoke and dominance of the upper caste Brahmins, who they hoped would be marginalized within a larger state.

The UGP's demand was that Goa should be an independent state with Konkani as its state language, by which they hoped to retain their identity. Brahmins supported this separate identity as they wanted to retain their social dominance over the Bahujans. The MGP won first elections, held in 1963, and lobbied for the merger of Goa with Maharashtra. A referendum was held in January 1967. However, a majority of the people voted against the merger and voted to keep Goa a Union Territory as it then was. Goa finally became a full fledged state on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1987.

In spite of losing the referendum issue in 1967, the MGP won subsequent elections in 1967, 1972 and 1977 and so retained power. The MGP finally lost the 1980 state elections to the Congress Party. The United Goans Party led by Dr. Wilfred D'souza and a breakaway faction of MGP had merged with the Congress (Urs) Party before the elections of 1977. Congress (Urs) Party was later renamed as Congress (I) Party. Thereafter, the Congress Party won three consecutive terms in 1984, 1989 and 1994 with the MGP as its main opposition. A section of Bahujans supported the Congress along with the Christian community. However, there were communal undercurrents within Goa which were not overtly expressed.

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With the Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) expanding its political base across India, it also made inroads into Goa as well. Shripad Naik, a leader from the Bahujan community, worked singularly to expand the base of the BJP in Goa. Shripad Naik was the chief ministerial candidate of the BJP in 2002 Assembly elections, however, he lost from Ponda Assembly Constituency. The Bahujan politics could have continued if he had won the election. Since then leadership of BJP as well as MGP fell into the hands of Sarswat Brahmins in both parties. A lone MLA of the United Goans Democratic Party (UGDP) – Mathany Saldanha -- also joined the BJP. In the Assembly elections of 1994, the BJP for the first time was able to get 4 of its members elected. In the 1999 Assembly elections, the BJP had 10 elected members, displacing the MGP as the main opposition party. Shripad Naik contributed a lot to the strengthening of the BJP in Goa. However, when the party got 21 of its members elected in the 2012 elections, he was marginalized and Manohar Parikar, a Brahmin was elected as the Chief Minister, something that was unthinkable till then.

While the BJP's long term goal was to establish Brahminical leadership, it simultaneously also began weaving a grand social alliance of all Hindu castes. Thus the process of polarization and communalization intensified. The Curchorem – Sanvordem communal riot in 2006, targeting Muslims was an outcome of such polarization. Shops and vehicles belonging to Muslims were damaged. A Muslim prayer house, situated on government land, was razed to the ground by members of the Hindu community, even though there was a Stay Order on the demolition by the court.

The accused included senior BJP members – Satish Dhond and Sharmad Raiturcar, who were later acquitted as the Prosecution did not produce adequate evidence of their involvement. (The Hindu, 2012). Fact finding reports riot pointed out the significant role played by the RSS and VHP in fomenting communal hatred and violence.

Renaming the Old Goa station to 'Karmali' was another contentious issue. The history of Goa was rewritten and the Portuguese were depicted as rulers who converted Hindus during their reign. They were accused of destroying Hindu temples and constructing churches.

Similarly, there was an attempt to claim Portuguese heritage as 'Hindu' heritage. A heritage walk was organized by Hindu activists, where they described the Memorial where St. Joseph Vaz resided, as being previously a

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temple and thus part of 'Hindu' history.

The opposition to the Konkan Railway (which was more on the grounds of environmental concerns and debates around the development of Goa or the benefits to Goa's economy from the railway) was stigmatized as Christian opposition to the railway and therefore to the 'pride' of Goa.

These campaigns have had a definite polarizing effect. The MGP was sidelined and marginalized. Its character as a party representing the Bahujan community was lost and its shift to the extreme right was visible in its support to the Sanatan Sanstha and other regressive policies.

The hegemony of the Saraswats and other Brahmin groups was complete with the marginalization of the Bahujan leadership. Ravi Nayak and Kashinath Zalmi were Bahujan leaders, but they were marginalized. Similarly, Shripad Nayak was sidelined within the BJP.

As a result, today there is no Bahujan leadership to take up issues of development. The Bahujans have been subsumed within the 'Hindu' fold under Brahmin hegemony. This process was based on 'othering' both the Muslim and Christian communities.

False myths were spread about Muslims and Christians via the social media and other hate campaigns (mentioned below). However this communalization, based on religious identity, is only a smoke screen to render invisible the rising Brahminical hegemony over the Bahujans. The Desecration episodes should be understood within this context. The welding together of castes – with hierarchies intact -- into a political unity was achieved by creating a discourse of hatred against religious minorities. The process of 'othering' is benefiting the powerful Brahmin class.

The hegemony of Sarswat Brahmin on Goan politics has grown further with Vijay Sardesai, leader of Goa Forward Party, joining the BJP led Government. The Goa Forward party is being used as a tool to bring other elected Assembly members into the fold of BJP led Government, ultimately strengthen the hegemony of Sarswat trio Parrikar, Sardesai and Dhawalikar

However, Goans have always lived in peace and harmony. There is a respect for diversity and for multicultural traditions that prevails in its society. For example, Goans across religious and caste identities participate in the Feast

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of St. Francis Xavier or 'Saibachem Fest' as it is called popularly. The same is true for other feasts as well. Christians too visit Hindu temples and participate in Hindu festivals and traditional functions.

### **Right wing identity politics**

The extreme right wing outfits in Goa have been instrumental in spreading disharmony and tensions in the State. In 2009, on the eve of Diwali, there were bomb blasts in Madgaon. All the six accused were associated with the Sanathan Sanstha, an extreme right wing organization, subscribing to a Hindutva ideology and masquerading as a Hindu religious organization.

The accused wore fake beards to give the impression that Muslims were behind the bomb blasts (Messias, 2009). Through its publication – *Sanatan Prabhat* – and its poster campaigns, the Sanatan Sanstha has been depicting Muslims as terrorists, loyal to Pakistan and beef eaters. Christians were depicted as beef eaters, engaged in converting other communities to Christianity through fraud or inducement. Incidentally, the members of the Sanatan Sanstha are also the accused in the murder cases of Narendra Dabholkar, a rationalist and anti-superstition activist, and Govind Pansare, rationalist and author.

The Sanatan Sanstha has been very active in instigating communal attitudes and fomenting violence in Goa. Founded in 1990, the Sanatan Sanstha, claims that its main objective is the pursuit of scientific spiritualism. It guides the *sadhaks* (seekers) to attain spirituality.

However, in reality the ideological foundation of the organization is the establishment of *Hindu Rashtra* which it considers *Hindu dharma*. An integral part of this dharma is the 'destruction of the evildoers'. The 'evildoers' referred to by the Sanatan Sanstha are the religious minorities in India.

The literature of the Sanstha is replete with examples of the glorification and valorisation of violence. In order to protect their Hindu Dharma, Hindus are called upon to take arms to defend their religion. Mere chanting of hymns is inadequate and actual action means the destruction of the evildoer. In the book 'Science of Spirituality' and in other books of the Sanstha that are considered significant, emphasis is laid on the training to use guns and other weapons (Gatade, 2010).

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The Sanatan Sanstha publishes a newspaper called 'Sanatan Prabhat'. In one of its issues, the newspaper states that the Bible is a 'manual for teaching immorality' and encourages 'the rape of a sister by a brother'. Priests are depicted with horns, portraying them as demons whose agenda in India is to proselytize members from other communities. Muslims, on the other hand, are portrayed as terrorists. The Sanstha also advocates that the caste system in India should be strictly followed with all castes performing their respective assigned roles.

Thus with its regressive ideological outlook, it propagates violence against the vulnerable groups as the 'duty' of all spiritual Hindus. In this framework, minorities are considered to be threats to Hindu interests and so the Sanstha calls for unquestioned obedience by Hindus to its call to destroy the 'evildoers'.

The politics of Sanatan Sanstha should be understood within the larger framework of identity politics being played out in Goa. There are contesting political mobilizations based on religious as well as regional identities. Both identities are inclusive and exclusive at the same time.

Goan identity includes all Goan domiciles belonging to all religions, but excludes migrant workers. Political Hindu identity includes Hindus of Goan and non-Goan origin, but excludes, nay demonizes, Christians and Muslims. The Goan identity is inclusive in a sense that it includes followers of all religions domiciled in Goa and who speak languages such as English, Konkani and Marathi and also includes a cultural ethos which has evolved from this interaction.

Hindutva ideology considers Christianity as a western import, along with the Church and its affiliated institutions, including the English medium educational institutions. While beef is widely consumed in Goa, Hindutva problematizes beef consumption on the pretext that the cow is sacred to the Hindu community.

### **Creating schism in Goa**

“Beef” and “language” have become salient features of right-wing identity politics in Goa of late. There were demands from Hindutva activists led by Subhash Velingkar that the state suspend support to schools which teach in a medium other than Konkani and Marathi. This is clearly a discriminatory move against the schools teaching in the English medium. English medium schools

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are popularly associated with the Catholic Church and are preferred as an English education helps improve the job prospects of students. However, the RSS claims that the English language is an assault on our 'Indian identity' and thus Government grants to English medium schools should be suspended. The Christian community has understandably felt insecure with this campaign against the English language, which is acquiring a subtle undercurrent of anti-Christians.

The other Hindutva issue is that of beef. Goa is a favourite international tourist destination and a substantial part of the local population also consumes beef. However the RSS, VHP and Santan Sanstha have been demanding a beef ban in Goa. Initially the BJP promised that it would in time, bring in the beef ban. However, when they formed the Government, they reneged on the promise as they realised that it would imperil the flourishing tourism industry.

The demand for the ban on beef was again, directed against the minorities. The extremist Hindutva organizations threatened dire consequences for the people who consumed beef. In the last few days, the BJP has been clear that it will not implement the ban beef imports into Goa.

As mentioned earlier, Goa is a tourist hotspot that attracts a large number of foreign visitors. Most foreign tourists are insensitive to Goan culture and have an arrogant, consumerist attitude. However, as tourism is the backbone of the state's economy tourists are mostly tolerated and, to some extent welcomed, even though they are seen to be disrespectful to Goan culture.

### **Migrant workers treated as pariah**

On the other hand a section of Goan society has become quite intolerant of local Indian immigrants. Though these immigrants – both unskilled and skilled workers -- contribute significantly to the economy, by providing valuable services, their culture including dress, food habits, language and religion is perceived as a threat to Goan culture.

Muslim migrants from north India or migrants from Karnataka and other states are marginalised in different ways. The Muslims in the State are increasingly being stigmatized and demonized. They are being denied land for cemeteries in the State and their prayer houses come under attack. Aspersions are cast on their loyalty to India.

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Goa has a sizeable number of Muslim migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Rajasthan who are self-employed. Migrant Muslims are not welcomed in non-Muslim neighbourhoods. This is due to a systematic hate campaign undertaken by Hindutva organizations in the state. Christians too fall prey to this bigoted campaign and internalize this intolerant attitude.

The recent attacks on religious symbols should be located within the contesting politicization of identities. The Hindu nationalist organizations seek to polarize these identities on religious fault lines by demonizing Muslims and Christians.

In June 2017 before the spate of desecrations began, the Hindu Jan Jagruti Samiti, a sister organization of the Sanathan Sanstha, organized an All India Hindu Conclave in Goa to discuss the establishment of a 'Hindu Rashtra' in India.

The conclave witnessed spewing of hate speeches by Hindutva activists. Sadhvi Saraswati, called for open violence against beef eaters, particularly targeting Muslims, Christians and Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

In her inaugural speech of All India Hindu Convention at Ramnathi village, she said, *"I would recommend the Government of India that those who consider it as a status symbol to eat the meat of one's own mother should be hanged in public. Then only people will realize that it is our duty to protect 'gau mata',* (The Times of India, 2017)"

She also exhorted the Hindus in the audience to keep arms in their homes to protect themselves, heightening the anxiety of Hindus, despite there being no provocation. She said, "If we do not stock arms, we will be destroyed in the future". No action was taken by the State against her and others who made instigator and inflammable speeches against Muslims and Christians. Her statements constitute an offence under sections 153, 153A and 295A of the Indian Penal Code. The police and the state are duty bound to take action against the Sadhvi.

Section 153A of the IPC penalises the 'promotion of enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc., and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony'. Section 153B of the IPC penalises 'imputations, assertions prejudicial to national-integration'. Section 295A of the IPC penalises 'deliberate and malicious acts,

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intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs'. The Chief Minister of Goa, in gross negligence of his Constitutional duty, acquiesced to the hate crimes on the grounds of “freedom of expression” stating that he was not responsible for every statement made by any person.

### **Desecration in other parts of India**

The desecration of religious symbols in Goa, though a disturbing trend, is not uncommon in India. Since 2014, Churches in India have increasingly been vandalized. Such incidents have taken place in Delhi, Mumbai, Chattisgarh and UP amongst other places. However, the police and the State have consistently dismissed these cases as trivial, attributing the crime to petty criminals or 'anti-social' elements.

Thus they completely deny any criminal conspiracy to outrage the religious feelings, or to target, the Christian community. This seems odd given the level of intolerance that has resulted in the lynching of innocent human beings in some parts of the country during the same period, from Mohammad Akhlaq in Dadri to Junaid Khan. Hysteria has been engineered over the issue of the cow being a symbol of nationalism (Hindu religion) by the Hindu supremacists.

Hindu supremacists enjoying State patronage has only emboldened them to fuel further violence and intolerance in our society.

## Brief description of sites of desecration in Goa:

Date (2017)	Place	Number of Crosses desecrated
19 <sup>th</sup> June	Chandor	2
2 <sup>nd</sup> July	Curtorim	1
2 <sup>nd</sup> July	Curtorim- Paroda	2
10 <sup>th</sup> July	Curchorem	40 (graves, niches and crosses)
13 <sup>th</sup> July	Loutolim	2
14 <sup>th</sup> July	Margao	1
25 <sup>th</sup> July	Madkai	12
27 <sup>th</sup> July	Chimbel	1
Total		61

### *Guardian Angel Cemetery*

The team visited a cemetery in Curchorem called the Guardian Angel Catholic Cemetery which was vandalized on the night of July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The Priest informed the team that the graves were damaged in 2012 too. In 2012 finger-print experts and dog squads were called for investigation. On July 6, the police were stationed at the entrance of the Church, behind the cemetery. At night, when the police heard loud noises, they rushed to the cemetery.

They flashed their torch-lights at the miscreants, but they managed to flee. There were three CCTV cameras in the cemetery which were broken by the miscreants before damaging the graves. More than 40 graves were damaged. The niches in the cemetery were broken open and the mortal remains were strewn around. The photos of the deceased placed in the niches were also removed. The team spoke to the relatives of the ones buried in the cemetery.

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They were shocked and pained, but were unable to give any information.

### **Holy Crosses**

The Christian Community has a tradition of placing a Cross to commemorate either an event that happened or to commemorate a person who died in an accident at that spot. The name of the person, in whose memory the cross is built, is specified on the cross and a feast of the cross is observed. Each Cross has a story to it.

There are also feasts organized for the Holy Crosses, where residents of a village participate. All members of the local community, irrespective of their religion, participate in the feast of the Cross. The crosses are repositories of the cultural and historical memory of the community. Given below is the description of some of the desecrated Crosses visited:

### **Raitollem Cross**

The fact-finding team visited St. Alex Church at Curtorim. A group from the church, consisting of Fr. Mariano Proenca, Fr. Louis Pinto and Josely accompanied the team to the site of the desecration. The Cross was called Raitollem Cross. Apparently this Cross is very old. It was constructed even before the road on which it is situated was built.

Legend has it that there was a man who used to ride past on a horse. He would stop every day on this road and sit in the shade of the tree, in the spot where the Cross now stands. When he died, this Cross was built in his memory. A noteworthy feature of the Cross is that it is situated on an isolated road where there are no houses or residences. So there would be no eye witnesses if the desecration took place at night. It was suspected that the Cross was desecrated either late at night or in the wee hours of the morning.

The base of the holy Cross was attacked around its edges. This was discovered at 7am. Mr. Phillip Fernandes discovered that the Cross was desecrated and he lodged a police complaint. Though the Police inspected the place, they did not get a forensic team for further investigation nor sniffer dogs, as is the routine for such cases.

### **Tari Khuris**

This Cross is situated in Chandor and was erected in 1947. There is a belief that the Cross was built to ensure a safe crossing of the river, which flows in close proximity to the Cross. The desecration took place on July 7<sup>th</sup> and Annie Colaco who first came across it around 8.15am informed her brother Pascal

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Dias. Mr. Dias went to the police station and lodged a complaint.

Inspector Gawde came with a forensic team to the spot. A dog squad was also called. However, to determine who exactly was behind the act proved difficult, as there are no residences in the vicinity of the Cross. There are some buildings under construction nearby, but nobody stays on the site at night. The Cross is situated on a level below the road, so it is not even visible to commuters on the road.

Interestingly, there is a tube-light attached to the structure of the Cross, but it was switched off on the night of the desecration. Again, here too, the base of the Cross was attacked and destroyed and there was damage to the Cross itself. Though there were no eye witnesses, Pascal Dias was of the view that this act took place to disturb the communal harmony in the area and observed that such incidents of vandalism have increased after the holding of Hindu Conclave in June.

### **Alma Khuris**

Alma Khuris, at Cavori in Chandor, is quite famous in the region and has witnessed desecration three times. This last desecration was discovered by a bread vendor in the morning between 6am and 6.30am. He then informed the police. After which police constables have been assigned to patrol the area around the Cross.

### **Taicho Gondo Cross**

This 32-year-old Cross prior to its present location, was situated at a lower level. It also has a statue of Our Lady of Vailankani. It was desecrated on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, in the wee hours of the morning. At 6.15am, some church goers discovered the desecration. No one stays near the Cross, so there were no witnesses to the desecration. This is the third time that the Cross has been desecrated. No FIR was lodged. The damage on the Cross indicates the use of a heavy equipment.

### **Babekegad Cross**

On July 6th, this Cross which also held a statue of St. Antony, was desecrated. This Cross is situated on private property The Cross was broken and so was the statue of St. Antony. The Cross is more than 50 years old. It was desecrated thrice before. No FIR was lodged since the residents felt that no action is ever taken by the police as desecration has become a routine act.

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## **Almacho Khuris**

This desecration took place on July 6th. The Cross was broken and the base of the Cross was damaged. An FIR was been lodged.

## **Varied Opinions**

Several interactions with a wide range of respondents helped us gain a more nuanced understanding of the situation in Goa. One section of the people we talked to, believe that there was no communalization in Goa and that the desecrations were carried out by Francis Pereira, a 50 year old taxi driver from Curchorem.

They believed that Pereira desecrated the crosses as he did not seem to be of sound mental health. They further believed that the police had investigated all aspects of the issue and that the desecrations needed no further investigation. This section comprised the BJP elected representatives, an MGP minister and the Police.

Another section of the respondents pointed to the increasing polarization and communalization of Goan society, along the lines of caste and religion. They opined that the desecrations should not be seen in isolation but as part of a larger objective to polarize society.

They expressed doubts over the culpability of Francis Pereira and were of a view that a more thorough investigation was required in order to apprehend the real culprits and unveil the larger conspiracy. This section included peace activists, elected representatives of the Congress party, prominent intellectuals and writers and also the members of Christian community.

## **Is there a cover-up?**

The Police stubbornly maintained that Francis Pereira was the lone desecrator. The team met the DGP before the Madkai and Chimbhel desecrations. The DGP, Dr. Muktesh Chander, made it plain that, in his opinion, the investigation was complete and all probable angles were enumerated and investigated thoroughly. The Police maintained that Francis Pereira felt that the spirits were trapped inside the Crosses, and by breaking them he was liberating them. Periera, the DGP pointed out, was also critical of the Catholic Church as an institution.

On August 8<sup>th</sup>, i.e. after the Madkai and Chimbhel desecrations and while Pereira was still in custody, we met the PWD Minister and leader of MGP, Mr. Sudhin Dhawalikar as well as Chairperson and Councillor of the Ponda

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Municipal Council, Mrs. Radhika Nayak, and Sunil Desai, respectively, both members of the BJP. Mrs. Nayak, the Chairperson of Ponda Municipal Council confirmed that the desecrations still continued even after the arrest of Francis Pereira but that it could be the work of some pranksters.

She also said it was wrong to have so many Crosses on the roads, since it hampered road widening and obstructed traffic. Sunil Desai, Councillor from the Ponda Municipal Council, was of the view that the investigation was on the right track and that the police have arrested Francis Pereira who seemed to be of unsound mind.

He pointed out that the bank balance of Francis Pereira was quite substantial and thus there might be a conspiracy behind the desecrations. Both Radhika Nayak and Sunil Desai reiterated that Goans were a peace loving people, and could not be instigated by communal forces from outside, referring to the Hindu Jagriti Conclave.

Mr. Sudhin Dhavalikar said that Francis Pereira was a 'mad man' and it was he who was behind the desecrations. He expressed satisfaction that the real culprit was arrested and that there was nothing more to investigate.

When the Fact Finding Team members pointed out that desecrations had taken place in Madkai and Chimbhel even after the arrest of Pereira, Mr Dhavalikar reported that a man was arrested in Jharkhand in connection with these desecrations and he too was of unsound mind. He hinted at the rampant use of drugs and its influence on people who then indulged in criminal activities.

### **Divisive politics**

Reginaldo Lorenzo is the MLA from Curtorim constituency. Without mincing words, Reginaldo Lorenzo held the Sanathan Sanstha responsible for the spate of desecrations which took place over a span of one month. .

Sanatan Sanstha also organized a Hindu rally to increase their base in Goa. He said that in the past, temples of Hindus of the Bahujan community were damaged and this was used as an opportunity by the Sanatan Sanstha to spread hatred and violence.

According to Reginaldo, violence and acts like desecration were used to polarize the votes, especially ahead of the bye poll elections to be held in North Goa shortly. The political establishment had also brought pressure on the Police to be soft on the Sanathan Sanstha.

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Ravi Naik, MLA from Ponda constituency and former Chief Minister of Goa, was critical of the activities carried out by the Sanathan Sanstha in Goa and suspected the role of the Sanstha in the desecration of religious symbols. He said that there had to be an impartial probe into the desecration.

He pointed out that the wife of Mr. Dhavalikar, who was the minister for PWD, was a senior leader of the Sanathan Sanstha. Vasant Bhatt, who is a priest of a temple adjoining the Sanathan Sanstha Ashram, stated that the involvement of the Sanathan Sanstha should not be ruled out in the desecrations.

### **Neighbours says Periera “A pious man’**

Members of the Team met the family members of Francis Pereira. Pereira is member of the Catholic community, and inside his home there is an altar with a cross and images of Mother Mary and Lord Jesus.

The Team wonders how Pereira could think of demolishing Crosses located in both near and distant villages, when he had a Cross inside his own house. The Team also learnt that Pereira kept a copy of the Bible with him, even while in custody. His sisters felt that he was a caring and loving brother – a generous and caring man.

The priest described him as a 'jewel' from everything he knew and heard about him. He was a trusted cab driver who didn't give in to greed and, hence, did not charge at levels that normal taxis charge. His generosity was for all. That is why he was highly sought after. He was hard working and spent many hours transporting customers to their destination.

His customer -relations was excellent and his family had not heard of a single instance of wrongful behaviour with customers. On the contrary, he was described as pleasant, friendly and helpful. He led a simple and frugal life and his sisters complained that he never ate outside, even when he was out at meal times. He didn't frequent hotels or cafes. He always returned to eat at home. So, he was a very family-oriented and connected person. He was into saving and was anything but reckless in spending.

### **Media befuddled, wants a proper probe**

Raju Nayak, Editor of Lokmat, also thought that the desecrations were carried out by Francis Pereira. He suspected that Pereira was of unsound mind and carried out the desecrations while in an incoherent state of mind. But he was not totally convinced. He said that he based his opinion on the videos that showed Francis Pereira laughing while in police custody.

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However, Naik also admitted that confessions obtained in Police custody could be made under coercion and do not have much credibility. So it was possible that Francis Pereira was innocent, and that there were other actors involved.

He said that the general perception was that Francis Pereira was the culprit, as the desecrations had stopped, more or less, after he was arrested. But, according to him, deeper investigations were necessary to find out the real culprits. He feared that the police were complacent and in order to put the matter to rest, have arrested Francis Pereira and not investigated any other angle to the desecrations. He suspected that the Police were conducting a very inefficient investigation.

Hema Nayak, prominent Konkani writer and intellectual, admitted that it was difficult to say with certainty if Francis Pereira was the real culprit, and that further investigations were required into the incidents of desecrations.

However, she disapproved the construction of Crosses or Ghoomtis on the roadside or on public property where they proved to be an obstruction. A similar view was expressed by N Shivdas, a Sahitya Akademi Award winner, who felt that though the real culprits behind the desecrations should be apprehended but was opposed to the erection of religious symbols in public spaces, as they were often used for commercial gain.

Both the writers pointed to the need for a proper investigation, since there could be a complex interplay of power, based on religion and caste in Goa.

### **Politics of demography**

When the Fact Finding Team asked if polarization based on religion was increasing in Goa, it got mixed responses. Mr. Sudhin Dhavalikar denied outright that there was any communal polarization occurring in Goa. According to him, Hindu consolidation did not imply polarization.

When asked about the Hindu Conclave organized by the Hindu Jan Jagruti Samiti, a sister organization of the Sanatan Sanstha, which was led by Mr. Dhavalikar's wife in Goa, he said that the statement made by Sadhavi Saraswati was her personal opinion.

He believed that the State was not obliged to act against individuals such as Sadhavi Saraswati, since they were both religious and nationalist activists. He stated that the Sanatan Sanstha stood for Hinduism. Nobody could stop the activities of the Sanatan Sanstha and the RSS.

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When the Team pointed out to him that the Sanatan Prabhat carried deprecating pictures of Christian priests, depicting them with horns and demonizing them, he shrugged off the issue by claiming that the newspaper did not have much readership! He further claimed that the Sanatan Sanstha was not in any way connected with the murders of the rationalists, Govind Pansare and Narendra Dabholkar, terming the motive of the murders as 'personal rivalry' or on the 'eccentric mind' of the murderer.

On the question of how he was sure that there was communal harmony, he retorted that there *was* communal harmony in Goa. In fact, he said that there were many Muslims in Goa; and that even the Panchayats had noted that Christians in Muslim majority areas had left the neighbourhood. He said that the demand of the Muslims to have *Kabristans* was rightly opposed and that he was also opposed to the demand.

The Muslims in Goa have been demanding burial grounds or Kabristans to bury their dead. The Government granted them land, but this move was opposed by Christians. This has given rise to tension between the two communities. He also exhorted the Christian community to vote for him, and stated that the Muslims were a threat to the Christian community.

The Christian population of Goa was decreasing because a significant number of Christians have sought and obtained a Portuguese passport. This could lead to them losing their voting rights. He pointed out that while the population of Muslims has increased in Goa from 1.5% to 7% since the liberation of Goa, the population of Christians had gone down from 35% to 22%.

According to him, the increase in the population of Muslims was a common trend, especially due to the arrival of Muslim migrants from Bangladesh -- the number he incorrectly pegged at 5 crores. The figure of 5 crores could not be substantiated by him, even after being challenged by the Team to name his source. The Minister continued to spew venom against the minorities, and Muslims in particular, in total violation of the oath he had taken for his constitutional post.

A similar response was given by Sunil Desai who denied that there was any polarization in Goa on the basis of religion. When questioned about the government's lack of action against the hate statements made by Sadhvi Saraswati, he maintained that Goans were a peace loving people and didn't get instigated by hate statements. Radhika Nayak also echoed his views. She

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further went on to say that Muslims were a cause of concern in Goa. There was an assertion of a distinct Muslim identity by Muslim women wearing burqas. They suggested that human values be taught in schools, to make children better citizens and foster communal harmony.

### **Polarization in Goa**

On the other hand, when the same question was posed to Hema Nayak, a well known Konkani writer and Kumar Kalanand Mani, Director of the Goa Peace Society, a Gandhian Organization, they insisted that communal polarization was on the increase in Goa.

But they explained that in the process of polarization in Goa, caste also had played a large role. Hema Nayak elaborated on the role of Saraswat Brahmins and their prevalent hegemony. This was leading to a polarization based on caste. Kumar Kalanand Mani emphasized that, through clever campaigns and strategies, the upper castes in Goa were perpetuating their power by targeting the non-dominant castes as well as Muslims and Christians.

By a series of different strategies, the BJP has not allowed any leadership to emerge from the schedule castes. There has been a shift from Bahujan politics to Saraswat politics. Social media and organizations like the Sanatan Sanstha are used to spread hatred and violence. The involvement of the Sanatan Sanstha couldn't be ruled out in the incidents of desecration.

Desecration was but a small part of the politics of hatred, that aims at perpetuating the hegemony of the Saraswats and the Bhats. They want to ensure their dominance over all other castes and establish a non- inclusive hegemonic and violent Hindu Rashtra.

Vasant Bhatt explained that that the Sanatan Sanstha was involved in the 2009 bomb blasts in Madgaon, leading to a demand by the villagers that the Sanathan Sanstha leave the village. Bhatt also indicated that there were illegal and immoral activities carried out in the Ashram. He disapproved of the Sanathan Sanstha's ideology which, it claimed, was based on the Hindu religion.

He felt that what ordinary citizens practiced as religion was Hindu religion, and the Sanathan Sanstha had no exclusive claim to the Hindu religion. Bhatt was instrumental in questioning the activities of the Sanathan Sanstha and organizing people against it. But he said that the people who questioned these activities were then implicated in false cases in order to discourage them.

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As an indication of immoral and illegal activities going on at the Ashram of the Sanatan Sanstha, Mr Bhatt pointed out how some years back, a large number of condoms were flushed through the sewers of the Ashram into the fields of the citizens. Also the Santha maintained total secrecy about its activities, and visitors who were not members were not allowed inside the Ashram.

Apart from Vasant Bhatt, peace activists Sandeep Parkar, Reginaldo Lorenzo and Ravi Naik also believed that the Sanatan Sanstha had been pivotal in spreading hatred and polarizing Goan society.

# Findings

## **1: A Definite Pattern to the Desecrations:**

The team found that most of the Crosses desecrated were situated in isolated places and some were not easily visible from the road. Every Cross that was desecrated had its base attacked at the edges, with the assistance of heavy equipment such as steel sledge hammers.

Desecrations were carried out only at night. The locations of the Crosses to be desecrated were chosen after careful research, and at the Guardian Angel Cemetery, the CCTV cameras were also damaged suggesting that a lot of prior preparation and planning went into the desecration of the Crosses.

The pattern of desecrating was also the same. This suggests that though the incidents of desecration seem to have been isolated and spread out, they were part of one conspiracy, hatched by the same individuals or organizations. There is a pattern to the desecrations that also suggests the involvement of more than one culprit.

The Crosses are made of granite and are not fragile structures. The desecrations seem to have been carried out by specially procured heavy equipment. To procure the equipment, identify the places, attack them and flee undetected would need expertise, reconnaissance and planning. The timings of the attacks are also peculiar. To attack so many Crosses without being apprehended, and within such a short duration, requires meticulous planning.

Police investigation was very shoddy and shallow. Many issues were left unexplored and not thoroughly investigated indicating that there the investigating agency was under political duress.

The government and the ministers themselves denied any communal angle, despite an obviously clear connection. They maintained a studied silence on the hate speeches delivered at the Hindu Conclave and also on the inaction of the State machinery, after each incident of desecration. Similarly no action was

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taken against the Sanatan Sanstha and their hate propaganda that was both constant and in the public domain.

## **2. The role of communal forces and their activities:**

The desecrations cannot be confined only to religious angle, it is important to also examine the caste struggle and the bid to re-establish the hegemony of the Brahmins in Goan society.

The upper castes in order to perpetuate their hierarchy and tighten their grip on power are using hatred against Christians and Muslims as a smokescreen to consolidate their hegemony over the other castes. A major force in this process of spreading hatred is the Sanatan Sanstha.

The Sanatan Sanstha, both through its publications and the Hindu Jagruti Conclave, incited violence against beef eaters – in other words, Christians and Muslims. In fact, according to the Sanathan Sanstha it is the duty of the Hindus to eliminate these people.

The Sanstha, which supports the BJP electorally, is working to polarize communities by sharpening their identities as explained earlier. By advocating the stocking of arms and hatching conspiracies such as bomb blasts to falsely implicate Muslims, it is encouraging violence.

Sadhavi Saraswati's open call to violence, along with the other inflammatory statements by the Sanstha, are advocating violence and encouraging emboldened attacks on religious minorities. The Sanstha cannot escape the responsibility for creating this vitiated atmosphere, where violence is normalized and resorted to against minorities.

The Team spoke to members of the Christian community, to some elected representatives and a member of the Hindu community. The perception of all seems to indicate that the desecrations may have been triggered off by the Hindu Conclave in Goa in early June 2017.

Open hate speeches were made against the minorities. No action was taken against the speakers. No complaints were lodged either, even though the speeches were widely reported. This has emboldened Hindutva fringe elements. It cannot be a mere coincidence that a spate of desecrations took place shortly after such speeches.

## **3. Role of the police/state:**

The team found the action of the State and the Police wanting on several fronts. So far, the police have not taken adequate measures to bring the culprits

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to justice. Only after the mounting pressure from citizen activists and civil society, did the police finally arrested one Francis Pereira.

Interestingly, just a couple of days before the arrest of Francis Pereira, the police had admitted that it was clueless.

However, despite several questions remaining unanswered the investigators believe that there is no need for any further probe. The Chief Minister himself has proclaimed that Francis Pereira is indeed the real culprit and that the desecrations will now come to an end. It is odd for a Chief Minister to suggest that an accused is guilty pending a trial in a court of justice.

The Fact Finding Team does not think that the real culprits have been apprehended. Francis Periera is merely a scapegoat to hide the larger conspiracy.

The police seem to be heavily relying on the confessional statement of Pereira, which is not admissible as evidence in court. Often confessions are forced out of the accused by exerting lot of pressure, stress and threats. After interacting with the family members of Francis

Pereira, it seems unlikely that he could have carried out the desecrations. Also, the equipment with which the demolitions were executed have not been recovered

The hate speeches delivered at the Hindu Conclave have fuelled an atmosphere of violence and hatred towards minorities and the spate of desecrations have followed it as a natural consequence.

The speeches may have abetted the desecrations. In any case, the Police and the State have to take action against these hate speeches, especially in the context of the desecrations. But no case has been registered against the hate speeches. The police claim that Francis Pereira single-handedly desecrated the religious symbols.

The Team does not find it plausible that just one man, who is 50 years old, can plan and execute so many desecrations single-handedly, in such a short span, without any motive.

Moreover, the desecrations have not stopped after the arrest of Francis Pereira. The police are either under tremendous political pressure to close the case and toe the political line, or are unwilling to get to the real culprits.

In any case, the people of Goa do not put much faith in police. Most of the Crosses had been desecrated earlier and the police were showed indifference to

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the acts. Thus not all the incidents were reported to the police indicating the helplessness and frustration of ordinary people.

#### **4. Police theory full of holes**

The police and the government have declared with certainty that the lone desecrator was Frances Pereira. This theory collapses when one sees the continuing desecrations in Goa even after arrest of Pereira.

Desecrations continued in two locations. In *Madkai*, 12 crosses were desecrated. The attackers were ruthless; pillars were thrown on the ground; and the main gate was uprooted.

To establish and confirm an allegation, the community found in *Chimbel*, a lone Cross that had been desecrated. The police put forward a theory, which people have dismissed, that cattle may be responsible for the fall of the structure.

Rather than collecting forensic evidence, investigators actually destroyed the evidence by replacing the fallen pieces and reconstructing the Cross. When Catholic priests arrived at the spot, they saw that the Cross was being tampered with, and an attempt being made to tamper with evidence.

Clearly, there is also another angle, that the police may be actually destroying evidence.

The desecration of the Chimbel Cross leaves ample room for doubt in the minds of citizens about both political manipulation and possible police complicity. The police are seen as trying to first construct a theory and then cooking up the evidence around it.

The Team was informed that a man was arrested in Jharkhand for the Madkai desecration and that he too was of unsound mind. It is too much of a coincidence that two madmen are desecrating Crosses in Goa, without any motive.

# Recommendations

1. The Fact Finding Team recommends the constitution of a *Special Investigation Team (SIT)* under the supervision of the Bombay High Court or the Supreme Court to impartially investigate the desecrations and bring to justice all involved in the crime. Such an investigation should explore all angles, including abetment by hate speeches delivered at the Hindu Jagruti Conclave.
2. The Fact Finding Team also recommends that legal action be taken against the hate speeches made at the Hindu Conclave under the relevant Sections such as 153A and 295A of the Indian Penal Code.
3. Civil Society will have to undertake a sustained campaign against communal forces and compel the State Government to perform its Constitutional obligation to arrest all perpetrators of hate crimes and uphold the democratic rights of all citizens. A sustained campaign will also have to be undertaken to promote feelings of brotherhood and sisterhood among members of all religious communities.
4. All progressive democratic forces should work towards the political mobilization of the marginalized communities and castes, which are so far being used as vote banks by the upper castes. Through the democratization of culture, all marginalized groups should be in a position to assert their unique identity and cultural, socio-political and economic rights.
5. The Church can reflect over its role in maintaining communal harmony. It can evolve strategies to engage positively with other marginalized faith communities to build trust and respect.



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