




902 buses were reportedly organised by the BJP to ferry people from distant villages to Panjim for Manohar Parrikar's birthday party, resulting in a city that was completely choked with traffic, amidst BJP cheers about the popularity of their leader. Behind the cheers though, what was obvious and heartening was that the arrangements of free transport, snacks, and other goodies were motivated by the obvious fear that nobody would turn up for the spectacle otherwise; this fear is a compliment to Goans' good sense, even if this good sense did not extend to refusing the all-paid-for circus.

'Bread and Circuses' is a term that comes from classical Rome, coined by the poet Juvenal to describe the way in which common Romans were kept happy and quiet, thanks to food doles and free spectacles of violent entertainment, leaving the republican government free to do whatever it wanted. It is still used for broadly the same thing, the provision by governments of pleasurable distractions for the people, in order to rule as they wish. And as an example of it, we have today's Goa.

Let us remember another and recent evening of state-organised mass bussing. The ten-day-long International Film Festival India (IFFI) was on in Panjim at the time, in its usual spectacular way. On November 20th, the very first day of the spectacle, a couple of film students were arrested from the IFFI inauguration venue and whisked away to a distant police station; the students had been trying to draw attention to the problems they were facing at FTII, India's premier film institution. The second day saw another student arrested, as well as another unrelated protest: a public demonstration at Panjim's Ferry point, to demand serious investigation into the strange death of Fr. Bismarque Dias, well-known opponent of much of the state-backed land-grab happening all over Goa. A huge number of police broke up the demonstration before it even began, pushing people into buses, to ferry them to police stations in distant villages. Some 105-odd people were arrested and released only at night.

The purported crime of these arrestees was to gather in public despite the imposition of Section 144 on the city; Section 144 being a law in India's Criminal Procedure Code that bans

The holding of public meetings, the gathering of more than 5 people in public, also public banners, placards and arms. But IFFI was on at the time, with banners all over the city, trees groaning under strings of lights, pavements likewise with strings of food and drink stalls, open-air music and film shows at a number of public spaces, and everything else that would lead to hundreds of people, in large and small groups, gathering all over. A bit bizarre, one might say – to ban gathering in public in the middle of a big international jamboree. But the law, although in place all over the city, was only applied selectively. It was only for the protestors, both those grieving Fr Bismarque’s death and those worried about FTII. The FTII student’s arrest on November 21st in fact did not even have this fig-leaf of law to cover it; he was arrested within the IFFI premises (for which he was a registered participant), for reportedly doing nothing more than wearing an FTII t-shirt.

What better place to discuss the problems in film education, if not at a film festival, among international film-makers, film students, and audiences? But that wouldn’t be mindless spectacle. So IFFI continued, the usual buffet of mostly liberal and anti-oppression films from all over, which this time notably included, along with the mandatory WWII Holocaust film to keep sympathy alive for Israel, films on the holocaust in Palestine BY Israel. So while film buffs ensconced in cool auditoria were lost in all those troubling, or cathartic, or sometimes almost holier-than-thou, kind of feelings produced by serious cinema on serious issues; and outside these venues, other bon vivants enjoyed live music and fancy cuisines from all over – but of only the *shudh* brahmanical variety, mind you – still others, not that far away and including some women above the age of 70, were waiting to be released from prison.

The FTII protestors were trying to ‘tarnish India’s image’ said a Union Minister to the press later. Image is always important for Bread-and-Circus politics, right from the time of the Nazis with their grand Berlin Olympics in 1936, which conveyed a glowing and united image of Germany to cover up the monstrosity just behind. And of course, these arrests in Panjim were not the worst the state can do, not by far. People have been found dead in police custody in Goa; protestors against land-grab, house demolitions, and polluting projects have been beaten up by bouncers, lathi-charged by the police, even shot. But normally not when the world is watching. The fact that this government had to do this, had to arrest film students and ban student films at an international film festival, and then ‘disappear’ 100 people from the heart of the capital, even as it basks in the public eye, is also a sign of desperation, a sign that it cannot hide the dissent, a small victory against the all-round attempt to stifle the public will.



(The title and idea of this essay is owed to a comment about IFFI by fellow-arrestee, Dr Luis Bread and Circuses Dias.)

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