



By DALE LUIS MENEZES


## Responsibility and Goan Roads

Along with the rising temperature this summer, there has been a sharp increase in the deaths related to road accidents. The first half of 2016 produced some truly chilling statistics with the death toll for the month of January and February reaching 59 persons. April 2016 saw a staggering 11 deaths in just 5 days. While one may have heard, and received, cautionary advice at the beginning of the monsoon season owing to the slippery roads, perhaps we also need to caution each other at the start of every summer in a similar way. After all, the rising temperature seems to be making our roads, quite literally, hotbeds for fatal accidents.

How does one discuss the tragic deaths on the roads, and also the general usage of and safety on roads? The obvious question to ask is, “who is responsible?” Is it the State or the motorists? With academic studies and road accident reports reflecting that most accidents are caused by reckless motorists, it does appear that the individual driver is at fault for recklessness on the roads. I do not wish to argue against these findings, rather I would like to add to them so that when we debate the issue of road safety, we do not slip into an ‘either/or’ position.

There was a common thread running through the statements of the many activists working on road safety that *O Herald*’s Vibha Verma interviewed – that reckless driving was the cause of accidents. For instance, Ruan Mendes, an activist, observes, “One should not hold the authorities responsible alone, but he/she [the motorist] should take every precautionary measure and diligently follow traffic rules...” This reckless driving is more serious, it was argued, with persons who operate heavy-vehicles, as they are the ones who cause the most number of accidents. Thus, heavy-vehicles and reckless driving emerge as the deadly combo that is driving the accident rate through the roof.

However, the recent and tragic death of two women at Tilamol, Quepem should make us think about faulty economic policies of the State a bit more critically. This is not the first time that people have been killed at the very same spot in Tilamol. If we go back in time in 2010, *a rasta roko was staged by the angry inhabitants of Curchorem and Quepem* after a similar



incident where a man was crushed to death. This was at the time when mining-related transportation was in full swing. Six years later, another mining-related heavy-vehicle is the cause of two deaths. While the residents of Quepem and Curchorem, then as now, demanded a separate bypass road solely for the purpose of mining transportation, nothing has come of the demand. What this also indicates is that the State is not able to effectively balance between the flow of economic activities – of which transport/roads form a major part – and the everyday life of the common people. Thus, while the person at the wheel of a heavy-vehicle is indeed indulging in reckless and potentially harmful behavior, the lack of foresight and planning on the part of the State aggravates the problem.

Similarly, one can think of road-widening projects as being counter-productive for the general safety on roads. It increasingly appears that roads are widened or repaired so that they would look good, rather than properly regulate the flow of traffic – for the traffic-flow does not improve substantially. What further complicates the situation in Goa is that the tiny or narrow roads in the villages can immediately meet a national highway, and cause confusion in the minds of the drivers. The new bypass roads constructed as an aid to the existing highways are a good example, as they run through rice-fields and villages. That land is fast depleting in Goa should also make us realize that road-widening is not a viable option.

So, we are slowly coming to realize the intervention by the State through policing, fines, awareness campaigns, regulations, and infrastructure development is not helping. Further the suitability of the urban and economic vision of the State, which privileges a neo-liberal, faster-bigger-is-better vision, should really be examined again. Rather than asking whom one should blame, it might be more useful to demand that thorough professionals be employed who are committed to a vision of streamlining and regulating the existing roads in Goa – with their close proximity to houses, trees, and other structures. Possibly, each and every road needs to be studied as to how this links to other roads and what is the best way to regulate it. In other words, the network of village, taluka, district, and city roads need to be studied as a particularly Goan problem, if we would like a meaningful solution. That and providing efficient public transport may be the only meaningful solution to the problems on roads.

I have in the past argued that the experience of Goan roads is marred by the aggression that motorists subject each other to. We need to recognize how individual behavior frustrates the implementation of state policies that are obviously beneficial, and how faulty state policies

lead to chaos – and even death on roads. Both are two sides of the same coin.



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