




By DALE LUIS MENEZES

The Household-Office and the Approachable Politician

If *Goemkarponn* unites all Goans one would wonder why a Goan is an outsider in a village/town other than his own. Perhaps, *Goemkarponn* and other Goan identities contain mild xenophobia towards those it calls its own. Girish Chodankar, the Congress candidate in the just concluded Panjim by-elections, was termed an “outsider” by his opposition. One would be forgiven for assuming that Chodankar hailed from a place beyond the borders of Goa; it turns out that he is a *bhailo* in Panjim only – he resides in Margao!

Obviously, it was impossible for Chodankar to carry on with what we now know was his unsuccessful campaign without addressing the issue of him being a resident of Margao and not Panjim. Therefore, he issued a statement, which circulated on social media, assuring the voters of his full-time presence in their constituency. Chodankar’s full statement deserves scrutiny: “The people of Panjim are ready for a change. They have one doubt, however. I reside in Margao, and being from Margao they (the people of Panjim) are concerned that they will have to come all the way to Margao to meet me. They have asked me...if I will shift to Panjim. When I told them that I will shift to Panjim, they told me to publicly declare that after winning the election I will shift to Panjim. I would like to inform all my voters from Panjim that I have humbly accepted your request and I will immediately shift to Panjim after being elected...Moreover, the people of Ribandar because they have to travel to Panjim, have requested me to be present in Ribandar once a week. So there will be an office in Ribandar, in addition to the one in Panjim”.

Listening to Chodankar’s statement, it struck me that the people of Ribandar could also make similar demands of wanting their MLA to be resident in their area. After all, they too are equally entitled to meet their MLA as per their convenience, as are the people of Panjim. If indeed Chodankar would have his offices in Panjim and Ribandar, the question still remains of the need to move house to Panjim. Couldn’t he travel daily to Panjim or Ribandar? Wouldn’t it be the same as residing in Panjim – traffic snarls and commute hassles notwithstanding? The answer to this is obviously, no. It isn’t the same and convenience is not the only factor in this equation.



In India, as in Goa, power is brokered and negotiated at multiple levels of governance (the Panchayat, Zilla Parishad, Municipality, etc) and through caste and class relations. Those who occupy power at each of these levels are figures of authority that not only display their power and discharge their duties through their public offices, but extend their sphere of influence to the physical location of their households as well. Such a mode of functioning is reminiscent of the manner in which kings and feudal lords would rule over their territories from their household – their courts were contained within it. They did not have a separate office as such to conduct the affairs of the state. The residence of the emperor/king/feudal lord doubled as the court; there was no separation as such between these two spheres. The commoners as well as the other officials who had to approach the ruler, for any matter, had to essentially come to the abode of the ruler. In such a system, one is personally indebted to the ruler-lord, for it is through the personal attention of the ruler-lord that one is provided with relief and bestowed with justice.

The non-separation between the private and public spheres within the political culture of Goa also indicates the manner in which common people are forced to relate to those who rule over them. Even if Goa is operating within a system of democracy that stresses individual liberty and freedom of choice, there is a good reason to believe that the age-old feudal order is still thriving as political reforms haven't brought about a change in the social relations amongst Goa. For instance, in modern and liberal forms of governance people don't need to constantly knock on (literally) the doors of public servants and elected representatives for personal favors – even for trivial purposes. The people would, ideally, approach the concerned department or office in the bureaucratic system. In Goa, one observes that the bureaucracy is the least approachable and mostly requires a nod from the authority figure to swing into action.

A couple of months ago the current government issued a circular barring government officials from visiting the homes of MLAs for official business. As well-intentioned as this circular seems, it was issued with the intention of stopping government officials visiting the opposition MLAs. The uproar that was created in the Assembly and the government's easy capitulation only indicates how crucial the household-office is in politics. Even if the opposition MLAs today argue that they need to meet officials in their homes due to a lack of proper, officially-designated meeting places, the same opposition MLAs never stopped receiving people in their household-offices when they were in power. When the 'cult of the personality' takes over the governance, the bureaucratic system becomes an extension of a

durbar. The modern politician, therefore, assumes the role of a traditional lord, and the voters become the traditional clients.



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A shift away from this patron-client relation in the political culture would necessitate that we recognize that the individual needs to exist without depending much on figures of authority. Rather the promise of every election – of one person, one vote, and one value – needs to be realized to its full potential.

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