

By AMITA KANEKAR



Ami asa, mhunn tumi asa: Of the Big Daddies who would rule us

The above is what someone campaigning in the Panjim bye-elections said to a group of voters living next to the St. Inez creek, when they spoke up at the election meeting about how the creek had not been cleaned even though monsoon was around the corner, which usually means terrible floods engulfing the houses and their residents. Don't complain, was the answer. You live here because of us; be grateful. But the people did not stop complaining, so the meeting ended with a lot of promises of action and improvements, none of which have been fulfilled till date.

This is votebank politics in a nutshell. I had written about this political culture some time ago, and how, despite all its flaws, it is the only real democracy we have. Because it is the only time the so-called people's representatives are forced to show some concern or efforts on behalf of their ordinary voters. It is never enough, of course, and always ad-hoc, unlike their 24/7 devotion to the interests of the moneybags. But the dominant castes, who rarely criticise politicians for cosying up to the Ambanis or Mallyas, the casino-owners or the mining corporates, never tire of condemning votebank politics, calling it the support by politicians to criminals of various hues. According to them, these 'criminals' - or 'squatters' or whatever they are abused as - are encouraged in their illegalities by the politicians in return for votes.

Anybody with a grain of justice in their head would see the colossal difference between the illegalities perpetrated by the poor and those by the corporate fatcats. Yes, people who comprise votebanks might be illegal in some way, but if you live in a society which doesn't uphold every citizen's right to decent housing, education, or employment, you have to survive any which way you can. It is this great and continued vulnerability of the Dalit-Bahujan-Tribal communities, resulting from our disregard for human rights, and also a lack of the caste networks that allow the dominant castes to work the system for their benefit, that politicians exploit, by promising houses, jobs, water or electricity connections, or just - in the case of the urban poor - no demolition of their homes, in return for votes. These promises are usually unfulfilled, or fulfilled partially just before the elections, but the relationship continues as the people have few other options.

Because their issues, whether of secure homes or land rights, essential infrastructure, employment, quality education, or implementation of caste-based reservations, are never election issues. The dominant castes and their media make sure of that. Instead, we have election issues like 'development' which essentially means more casinos, environment-destroying airports and coal corridors, nationalised rivers, illegal mining, hellish highways, destruction of forests, and unlimited land grab, all for the benefit of the corporate fatcats, and at the cost of local (and migrant) Dalit-Bahujan-Tribal communities.



It is noteworthy that the only other election issue in Goa is the death of Parrikar, as if people would miss having a representative and Chief Minister who was in ICU for all of the past year, when he was supposed to be working for them. And who, when he was able to work, was precisely promoting and fast-tracking the kind of destructive development that the majority of Goans do not need or want. It is illustrative that every bit of election propaganda material of Goa's BJP has not only got Parrikar's face on it, but also an image of the new Mandovi bridge. Because at the end of Parrikar's political career, that's all that his admirers can show: a white elephant of a bridge that is already being exposed as a huge scam by the opposition. But then that's surely better than showcasing the latest casino, hill-blasting road, felled forest, coal-covered Vasco, and massive landgrab of Mopa and every other village, not to mention the fact that Panaji under his watch was transformed into a car-jammed, garbage-laden, high-rise-filled mess in the day-time, and a base for drunken, black-money-spewing, and pissing-at-will casino patrons at night. But, of course, now that he is dead, we are expected to feel sad and vote for more of the same!

It is not that the dominant castes – even the Hindu dominant castes – do not have problems with the present dispensation and its stinking development model. The block lies in their Brahmanism: their need to stay on top, which requires keeping others down, any which way. That is why they choose English-medium education in private schools for their own children, but insist on Konkani/Marathi-medium education for Dalit-Bahujan-Tribal students in government schools. That is why they bemoan the decline of merit caused by the (actually miniscule and subverted) implementation of caste-based reservations in Goa. That is why they are thrilled by promises to 'beautify' St Inez creek with joggers' paths and kayaks, without bothering to question the promised rehabilitation of the people who currently live on its banks – how and where will this rehabilitation take place, and will it be done with or without the people's consent? That is why they can't desert the BJP – because they know that, even if the lumpenised party now stocks drugs in its own office-bearers' godowns, and advertises Goa on its tourism app with images of bikini-clad white women, it will always stand for traditional caste society, for big brahmanical cars whizzing along its giant bridges, leaving the Dalit-Bahujan-Tribal trudging along on her own two feet far behind.

Except that the latter now refuses to stay there. The people of Goa, be they villagers or migrants or environmentalists or fisherfolk or whatever they identify themselves as, are already teaching those who would rule us – whether BJP today or others tomorrow – that actually *ami* (the people) *asa, mhunn tumi* (the politicians) *asa*. And it may not be long before they decide they've had it with this empty-pre-election-promises-followed-by-destructive-and-inequitable-development model of democracy, and decide to take matters directly into their own hands.

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