



‘Physical distancing’ is one thing, and ‘social distancing’ plus ‘not crossing the Lakshman Rekha’ quite another. In all publicity or educational material around COVID 19, the word social distancing is used, and in Goa, the Chief Minister of Goa has repeatedly told us that ‘the Laxman Rekha should not be crossed’.

Now I accept that physical distancing is a must on account of the stated manner of transmission of COVID 19. But social distancing is something else. Social distancing of sorts is embedded in existing power structures in Goan society, and in society in many different parts of India, Asia and the world. Where people distance themselves from certain sections of society and discriminate against the particular sections on the basis of caste, class, place of origin, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age.

So also *Laxman Rekha* is a patriarchal Brahmanical convention of protection, of lines drawn by men who consider women as their possessions. Women are expected not to transcend these lines, supposedly for their protection. We find that such lines have been drawn since time immemorial for women by those who would control them. Therefore, when the term *Laxman Rekha* is used for physical distancing or staying at home, it is bound to signal an inconvenient boundary for many of us, which can actually trigger a contrary reaction. It is actually Hindutva politics.

So whatever approaches one adopts, they are all a reflection of some politics or the other. There is, therefore, also another kind of politics that is being articulated, namely, the politics of acknowledging interdependence and respect for all who make our living possible, be it various human beings or nature. If there is something we must learn from COVID, it is that we must transcend boundaries, not draw Laxman Rekhas in the interests of our own survival, peace and security. Therefore, we have to work on a ‘power with’ approach, not a ‘power over’ formula. We all need each other.

The State is disgustingly propagating more of social distancing and disruption, in the guise of addressing COVID19, where some people are seen as untouchables, some people are seen as dispensable. Even as we directly and indirectly benefit from the very services of these persons. The Government may have not been getting the seafarers stranded on the seas, because they do not want to shoulder the burden of quarantining the seafarers and treating them if necessary. Never mind that they have been a substantial source of contribution to Goa’s economy. The seafarers seem to have been perceived as dispensable, until a politics of assertion made the Government turn around and take note.

For instance, when due attention has not been given to seafarers’ concerns – and the

Government has not been transparent and come clean with what steps exactly it has been taking from 21st March — we need to hold the Government accountable rather than arresting anyone seeking to redress his or her grievances. This is a politics of suppression that can only be met with resistance. Has not it oft been said that repression begets revolt? Not to recognize the hard work of the seafarers and to dismiss them as well-off people who chose to be where they are, is to perform a politics of erasure. To then say don't do politics is to deny a political agency to seafarers and supporters to do a politics of visibilisation.

At another level, to ignore the sufferings of migrant workers despite their contributions to our economy and our physical structures, is also a politics of erasure which again has to be met with a politics of visibilisation. To grudge the meager Rs. 6000/- even for the few workers it actually may reach, that too, when part of it also has to be expended on masks and such, and when the prices of goods have been inflated, is not to recognize the contribution of workers by their work and by the many indirect taxes that they pay. It is not charity, it is their right after all the hard labour they have put in and after having been exploited by both the Goan and the non-Goan dominant class. To ignore the social wrath that the migrant in Goa has been subjected to is to play a politics of convenience and racism. It has to be met by a politics of seeking accountability and compliance with human rights standards.

When the Government through its policy responses to COVID 19 is displaying a total lack of sensitivity to issues of the people – be it to issues of Goan or non Goan socially or economically disadvantaged sections, it is replicating its usual politics of facilitating those who are affluent and socially and economically well positioned. Traditional women fish vendors, for instance, were prevented from selling through fuzzy regulations and police threats. On the other hand, existing schemes in the name of blue revolution are peddling support systems for corporates and their protégés by putting up the motorcycle-riding male vendor as the front.

Conveniently, the corporates weaponise the migrant workers at one level, and the politicians weaponise the seafarers at another level. The corporates weaponise the migrant workers with the active assistance of politicians, by providing unsteady jobs that are desperately taken, and fomenting distrust between local people and migrants too. They are well aware that the migrant workers will not unionise and therefore prefer to employ migrants rather than locals.

When contractualisation of labour occurs in the organized sector, it is a politics of discarding labour struggles. Enacting regulations that increase the work day from eight to twelve hours is an anti-labour politics. It obviously has to be resisted with pro-working class politics. To take undue advantage of the pandemic and allocate funds meant for the mining affected, for

disaster management, is also an anti-people politics. It is the new normal of Government



“Don’t do politics”. But why not?

Further, it has been reported that Vedanta’s plea to resume mining in Goa has the support of the Modi Government which sees economic revival in resumption of mining through these corporates. Pleas to consider the exposure of local barge operators, pilots, crane operators, workers, transporters and villagers who are exposed to crew members of the foreign vessel docking at MPT also fell on deaf ears, and they acquired permissions even during phase I of national lockdown to unload and load coal or pig iron at their Amona-Navelim plant. This is the politics of Business as Usual for big corporates, while there was no proactive support and protection for small business or traditional artisans to function.

It is also business as usual as far as the politics of representation on critical committees such as the economic revival committee (with no one representing the small businesspersons, the traditional fishing community, the motorcycle pilots, the taxi drivers, the migrant workers, the seafarers) and with no economists and sociologists on the committee. This has to be met with a resistance in support of participatory political representation.

Actually, therefore, everyone is doing politics. The question is whether it is a politics for a just and equitable society shorn of racism, casteism, sexism, ableism, ageism, communalism and class base, or a partisan exclusive totalitarian authoritarian politics. There is no value in scoring brownie points by saying someone is doing politics.

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