



*Bhaile* that oft-used and pejorative Konkani word, literally means outsiders, but has been invisibilised *Bhaile* and exposed *Bhitorle* usually used in Goa to mean nonGoans. This is however changing, with the wealthy nonGoans with second or tenth homes in Goa rarely called *Bhaile*. These are the sorts who managed to escape from the supposedly sealed 'red zones' during the nationwide lockdown, to drive in their personal cars to the 'green zone' of Goa, where they got star treatment, including free Covid19 tests (reserved, according to the Supreme Court, for the poor), before retiring to their luxury retreats. These Delhi-ites and Bombay-ites are obviously not *Bhaile* at all but very much *Bhitorle* (insiders), in fact more *Bhitorle* than most Goans, so much so that one phone call from some of them can nowadays help a Goan get her or his work done in Goa.

So *Bhaile* no longer refers to nonGoans. It refers to what it literally means: outsiders. Stigmatised as flocking to Goa, squatting wherever they want, forming vote-banks, dirtying our '*Bhangrachim Goem*', and so on, these *Bhaile* are actually bahujan labourers from outside Goa, thousands - or tens of thousands - of whom work in Goa's mines, on fishing trawlers and construction sites, in tourism and other industries, in security, sanitation, and domestic service, and elsewhere. And they come to Goa to work not just because of their need, but also because they are preferred by employers - both Goan and nonGoan - who openly complain that Goans are 'difficult' - which means that Goans expect a halfway decent deal, while migrants expect next to nothing.

But they are not the only *Bhaile* of Goa. The bahujan Goans might be celebrated as the daughters and sons of the soil, but they are in reality outsiders too, outsiders to today's economic and political system, outsiders to development. Working either in various industries (despite the miserable wages) or in traditional occupations or small businesses, they barely earn enough to keep body and soul together, often surviving thanks to support from family members working abroad.

It is thus the local bahujans and the migrant bahujans who together keep Goa going, but for very meagre returns and little, or no, security. The struggle of both these *Bhaile* is clearly one, but they are cleverly pitted against each other, with the poor earnings of the locals conveniently blamed on the migrants, when the real reason is the *Bhitorle* - Goans and nonGoans - the privileged section who dominate this society and benefit from cheap labour, with interests and profits in maintaining this exploitative, oppressive, and casteist system. An example is how dominant-caste Goans resent the rates charged by taxis and auto-rickshaws in Goa; they would prefer them to charge much less and be as impoverished as the taxi- and auto-drivers elsewhere!



This real *Bhaile-Bhitorle* contradiction, between those looted by the system versus those who are the system, gets invisibilised under the fake one of locals versus migrants – the better to divide and rule. But it has been exposed by the lockdown disaster of today. The Indian government's response to Covid19 has exposed in the starkest terms who are the insiders of this nation, and who the outsiders.

Thus the government's first response was of instant lockdown, followed by various spectacles: ritualistic plate-banging and lamp-lighting, all to be done on your balcony while you stayed home and safe. While other countries announced packages for the poorest and most vulnerable, we got messages about the importance of yoga and meditation.

The *Bhaile*, migrant and non-migrant, were ignored as always. The migrant *Bhaile* in Goa, instantly losing earnings and the ability to buy food and pay rent, found themselves destitute; being arrested and incarcerated in camps; trying government helplines and not getting through; struggling to pay inflated rates for train tickets home when they themselves are still owed months of arrears in wages; being forced to accept charity from NGOs or go hungry, even as the central government's food go-downs overflow with grain. Outside Goa, of course, things were far worse. *Bhaile* walking for thousands of miles. Being beaten up. Being drenched in bleach. Being killed.

The non-migrant *Bhaile* of Goa were only a little better for being at home. With earnings gone, meagre savings, and no government help, fishers, farmers, vendors, and a host of other essential producers and service-providers saw their lives go for a toss. Many reveal that they lived on *pez* and black tea for days after the lockdown began, that they survived thanks to kindly neighbours and community support. Outside Goa, once again, things were much worse. Like tribal communities, who have been reportedly pushed towards starvation in many states, with the lockdown stopping the collection of traditional forest produce, and closing local markets too. The government belatedly announced extra rations for ration-card-holders under the PM Garib Kalyan Package, a promise so badly implemented that a whopping 200 million ration-card-holders are estimated to have been left out. And what of those without ration-cards? Not just migrants, many non-migrants are yet to be granted this basic facility, like seven lakh tribal households in Jharkhand. *Bhaile*, after all, don't matter.

Now the lockdown is being lifted, with many *Bhitorle* claiming that this is for the benefit of the poor. And perhaps some *Bhaile* might be happy to see earning restart. But this is the same economy that has always kept them at borderline destitution, that used their labour for the benefit of the *Bhitorle*. This is the society that ignored their very existence, even when in dire need, that locked them up when they only wanted to go home. Now the *Bhitorle* insist they get back to work. For their own good, as construction companies argued in Hyderabad,

building site, without even being paid months of arrears in wages. The workers said that they did not want to work any more, they just wanted to go home. The response was a lathi charge by the police. We'll pay their arrears, say their employers shamelessly, but only after they come back to work!

Many Indian states, including Goa, have now announced they are going to break the hard-won international norm of the 8-hour working day; the working day will now be 12 hours long. This was of course happening anyway in many places in India, but illegally; now it will be legal, so the actual working day is likely to be even longer. Uttar Pradesh has thrown out most labour protection laws, including the environmental safeguards flouted in the recent Vishakhapatnam gas disaster, and basic ventilation regulations that would restrain the spread of viruses, not to mention rules laying down toilet breaks for workers. Other states are following suit. The economy has to be revived - at the cost of the *Bhaile*.

Let us end with a poster photographed on a US street (and shared via social media): 'A system cannot fail those it was never designed to protect.' The poster is about the US, where the lockdown is in the process of being lifted despite an escalating death toll, a decision which, according to some, is the result of the realisation that Covid19 fatalities are hugely from working-class Black and Hispanic communities.

But the poster works for India too. Dalit-Adivasi-Bahujans are the *Bhaile* of this system, to be used and discarded. That's how it was, and that's how the *Bhitorle* expect to continue. But many *Bhaile* are angry and want change. And if this persists, it might mean nothing less than a new postCovid19 world.

(First published in *O Heraldo*, dt: 14 May, 2020)



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