

By AMITA KANEKAR



Crimes in Goa tend to attract a standard public response. It may begin with a lament for a mostly fictitious and long-lost Goa where crime was unknown. But it surely continues into an abuse of our favourite scapegoats – the *bhaile*. And, as has been explained in this column before, although the word *bhaile* actually means outsiders, it is usually used pejoratively for only non-Goan labourers, not all non-Goans.

This happened as usual with the latest crime to shock Goa, the recent daylight murder of a businessman in Margao. Even after suspects were arrested, and they appeared to be Goans, every report mentioned that one of them was a resident of Moti Dongor, the working class settlement in Margao, with a lot of non-Goan and Muslim inhabitants, which is regularly stigmatised as a centre for crime. And calls were even heard for removal of ‘make-believe beggars’ – even though not a single of the arrested was reported to be connected to begging. One can just imagine the level of hate that might have spewed if the suspects had turned out to be indeed labourers or beggars from outside Goa.

In fact, the unfortunate Margao murder was not the only kind of violence that Goa witnessed recently. Just a day or two earlier, there was a shocking video in circulation on social media, of a man secured to a pole by a heavy metal chain around one foot. The chained man turned out to be a non-Goan worker on a fishing trawler, while the person who had chained him turned out to be his Goan employer, who had ‘punished’ him for ‘creating a nuisance’, and who has since been arrested.

How could such inhuman treatment – actually chaining a person – take place, or even be considered, unless you believe this is someone of no value, who deserves no respect? But this is how many of us see non-Goan labourers, or rather how we are encouraged to see them. And this isn’t difficult either, because they are known to charge less for their labour, as a result of which they have taken up all the badly-paid and disrespected jobs in Goa. The question that needs to be asked is: why should any job be badly-paid or disrespected? But, instead of asking this, we focus on hating the *bhailo*, thus turning a blind eye to those responsible for this situation, whether it is underemployment and poorly-paid jobs, or now the Margao murder.

In Margao, the anger vented on *bhaile* who were not even involved was followed by vociferous demands for instant and capital punishment of those arrested. Which means that, once again, we conveniently ignore the bigger picture, to the relief of those responsible for Goa’s deteriorating law-and-order.

This bigger picture is that, in the name of tourism development, Goa is now a hub for all

kinds of questionable and criminal activities. Questionable activities like the casinos, where big gambling is legal even though small scale *matka* gambling remains banned in Goa, and even though this is a huge black money racket – remember Parrikar telling us that casinos cannot be expected to go cashless? Criminal activities like drugs, with reports of hauls, and swoops, and stashes almost a daily affair; the latest rave party arrests would have caused not even a yawn in Goa, just cynical conviction that the required graft must have not been paid. Sex tourism is similarly illegal but in your face, with tourists openly asking all and sundry where they can get it, and millions of results for internet searches – while the government and its internet watchdogs act clueless about it all.

The entire coastal belt is today hostage to this industry that caters to a different kind of *bhaile*, flocking to the hotels or their own old Goan houses, even as Goan villages become unrecognisable. There was a time when Goans used to grumble that the coastal belt was full of white folks, though the latter mostly respected the law; now they have been replaced by big money from Delhi and Bombay, who are a different breed altogether, sometimes so different that locals don't have the guts to even grumble.

When you have this kind of tourism dominating the economy, fostered by every government for the past 3 decades, is it a surprise that criminal activities are flourishing in Goa? With a slow but steady erosion of law abidance on every front, from illegal constructions to illegal fishing, and with much of this being passed off by the powers-that-be as economic lifelines for Goa, what can crime become but a reliable avenue of employment for Goans?

Just look at the scene now. Today, six months into the pandemic, the government has nothing to offer people in terms of sustenance, even as rave parties have begun. With so many job losses as well as badly-hit tiny businesses, you would expect any serious government to be thinking up solutions for how people are to survive, or at least relief packages to tide over bad times. But we see nothing. Meanwhile, what can online education mean for a society without decent internet access for all, except a boom in drop-outs? Where will all this frustration and anger go?

Agriculture is the solution, say many experts; the government has surely heard of this. But, far from thinking of how to strengthen agriculture so that it can employ more people, perhaps even turning Goa into a centre for organic agriculture – as some have suggested – the official focus remains on destruction-as-development. Whether at Mollem for coal transport, or Melauli for the IIT, or by restarting mining, or so many other ways, the government's plan is to continue cutting forests, dredging rivers, destroying water resources, increasing human-animal conflict, and worsening environmental degradation, thus finishing the agriculture that currently exists. If this isn't madness, what is?

Coming back to Margao – if we want to end crime, let’s stop demanding vigilante justice, or instant punishment. Letting the law take its own course, as the phrase goes, means at least making sure that those charged have actually committed the crime. Given the quality of policing and official investigations in Goa, there is little doubt that mistakes can be and are made. Vigilante justice can sometimes mean no justice at all.

Crime will not end through harsher punishments, more police, or increased CCTV coverage. This is known the world over. It will also surely not end by targetting or attacking *bhaile*. Because the problem is actually fundamental to the economy and culture of today’s Goa. It would make more sense to discuss how we could change from an economy based on satisfying the desires of money-bags, and from a culture of disrespecting and robbing labour, whether Goan or not. That would be a start.

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