



The current COVID-19 crisis and the financial unpreparedness of governments worldwide in dealing with it are a cautionary parable. In Goa, the situation is no different. If there is a difference, the situation here is undoubtedly worse than in other places.

This Crisis was Foretold

Be it the global financial crisis of 2008 or the Corona crisis now, it is certain that the poorly-paid workers are the first and the most affected of the lot. Though performing the most essential tasks for society, such as cleaning, these workers are treated as dispensable. Nowhere was this more apparent, and willfully ignored, as in India. The daily-wage workers' barefoot attempts to return to their villages due to the lockdown should have haunted the country's collective conscience.

But it didn't! And the reasons are not hard to guess. The centuries-old and fossilized attitudes born out of an essential high and low within the caste hierarchy has seen most people condemned to remain poor and socially inferior. Of course, there have been moments when the underclass has rebelled, but the casteist system has survived, one way or the other.

In Goa, we hardly hear about how the pandemic has affected daily wage workers. In the grand narratives of megaprojects, like marinas, IITs, and coal hubs, these are precisely the people who are willfully ignored. Moreover, the government and big businesses want the land that belongs to agrarian, fishing, and daily-wage earning communities. The pandemic has surely deepened the financial problems for this section of our society.

And it seems that the pandemic and the financial crisis is ripping through the lives of even those who are not exactly poor or socially inferior. Recently, we read that in a small state like Goa, about 200 small businesses have asked for their trade licenses to be canceled. It is not surprising, though understandable, why small businesses made such a move. They are simply unable to stay afloat.

Also not surprising (as well as not ironic) is that while small businesses shut due to a mismanaged crisis, big businesses are expanding as if we are not in the middle of a health and financial crisis. News is trickling in of a major corporation, believed to be close to the ruling party, is planning to expand into e-retail, telecommunications, agriculture, and education. Another corporation wants to increase the volume of coal transported through Goa for generating power.

The state appears to favor big corporations unjustly. Nowhere is this partisan attitude more glaringly obvious than with the mining companies. Ever since the Justice M. B. Shah Commission made the startling revelations that Goa's illegal ore extraction was worth Rs.

35,000 crores, the government has been unwilling to hold accountable any of the companies involved. After about eight years from the first revelations, it is now reported that the state can at least recover about Rs 466 crores. It is a fraction of what was alleged in the Shah Commission report, but it appears that the state will once again drag its feet.

Today when small businesses are shutting down, and people are losing their jobs, the treasury could have enjoyed some fiscal stability from these 466 crores at the very least. The resulting benefits from this stability could have been passed onto the people of Goa. For instance, the recovered cash could have been easily used for medical equipment and life-saving drugs against COVID-19. But alas, all these measures are 'could have beens.'

Before or after COVID-19, the state never ensured that the exchequer was in good health. There were repeated warnings that the Goan economy was hurtling towards a crisis. For instance, the tourism industry's performance and management were sure signs of what was to come. The mismanagement of the shack allocations every year, the taxi operators' issue, and a general environmental crisis that is tourism-related took Goa to the tipping point.

Since the 1980s, successive governments have ignored warnings and recommendations that the carrying capacity—the number of people a tourist destination can serve yearly without environmental and cultural damage—should not be exceeded. But the governments want to increase the number of people visiting Goa each year continuously. Even at the peak of COVID-19 infections, both in Goa and the rest of the country, the Goa government announced that it was opening the borders for Indian tourists—even if they traveled from the Corona hotspots—while Goa itself had zero cases.

The role of the government in averting any crisis, with or without a pandemic, is central. If governmental policies make no provisions to withstand shocks and crises, then the government fails in its duties towards its people. Merely promoting multi-crore projects is a sure indication that more disasters will happen in the future. We are living in one now!

If one considers the last two decades of financial crisis and mismanagement, one gets the eerie feeling that our current crisis was foretold. True that there are some things that the government cannot fix; a vaccine takes about 18 months to be safely administered to the people, for instance. But be it a vaccine or safeguarding jobs and the economy, the government needs to be held accountable for an utter lack of fiscal stability. While people are suffering a pandemic and a financial crisis, the government cannot start building new monuments, like a parliament building or a Governor's residence. The government demonstrates its accountability by prioritizing its spending. For instance, now, it needs to spend on healthcare.

It isn't doing it now, just like it didn't do it then. So, a future and worse crisis is already foretold today, if the Government does not reverse these actions.

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