



One is often non-plussed by the way the word 'choice' is used, be it by Hindu Nationalists, by corporate fundamentalists, casteists and sexists. Whether it be in the rhetoric of the anti-farmer laws, or in the 'Love-Jihad' law, or Goa's relationship with the Union of India and the citizenship of Goans in India, the term choice is used in completely different frames.

The pro-farmer law arguments are full of the rhetoric of choice. The Government claims that the farmers will have a *choice* of determining the price for their produce and also choice as to whom to sell. What the Government does not say is that the farmers do not have the conditions to exercise real choice. To explain, the condition of the farmers, given the perishability of their produce and their immediate need for liquid cash, can very well be one where they are forced to sell their produce at low rates.

The Government does not state that through these farmer laws, a legitimacy is given to corporates, and that it colludes with the corporates to use arm twisting tactics, while not holding to account the not so effective Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees, which are supposed to protect the farmers from exploitation by large retailers. By what standards can this be called a choice available to farmers, when neither Minimum Support Price is guaranteed for various local crops, nor procurement is guaranteed, nor are the debts written off, even as there is a temporary measure waiver of casino fees?

Again, the Government, they say, exercised choice of legislating the three controversial farm laws after consultation. What the Government does not say, is that their consultations were with corporate traders, and not with farmers. Farmers' organisations claim that they have not been consulted. So what kind of a choice was that?

A similar situation had earlier arisen where the Government claimed it had had consultations with people based on which it *chose* to engage in negotiations for the 16 country Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, in a particular direction. What the Government did not disclose was again, that it had not had discussions with farmers' groups who had to be a critical part of the consultation processes. It took a concerted campaign by the Forum for Trade Justice and many other efforts to get the Government to withdraw from the negotiations.

As a matter of fact, trade has been always dangled as free trade, where the participants in the trading are on an equal footing - where there is choice in trade, without indicating that there are some with all the power and big budgets to market their products, which small farmers and businesses do not have, and therefore end up getting subsumed by the system.

Another dimension given to the word choice is where by legislation coupled with the rhetoric that precedes the legislation as well as in the implementation, love marriages by women, where the women from majority communities choose to marry men from minority communities, out of their own free choice, have great potential to be viewed from the lens of forced conversions – almost a presumption! So the choice of women who convert just before marriage, is viewed differently from the choice of men who convert before marriage, for a majoritarian convenience. Almost reminiscent of that familiar situation of ‘honour’, where the *izzat* (honour) of the majority community is seen to be in danger, when a woman from the majority community marries a man from the minority community.

I have been reflecting and more so in the sixtieth year of liberation from Portuguese sovereignty as to the choice Goans had or did not have in determining the nature of the relations with the Union of India. One, of course, upholds the Constitution for the basic principles it contains. But that does not mean the Constitution of India could have been foisted on Goa. There needed to be a special constitutional contract that the Union of India should have had with Goa, given that Goa was not part of India when the Constituent Assembly was in discussion, and given, therefore, that the contours of the relationship could only have been established later.

Yet, in discussions, it is always said that Goans had a choice. The choice was however only between being a separate territory along with Daman and Diu or merging into Maharashtra. Even in that, *all* Goans did not have a choice. There was never a choice of considering dual citizenship for Goans given the peculiar history where the former colonizer recognised the colonized as full citizens and that gave the Goans a passport to employment abroad, unlike the British who did not recognize Indians as full citizens.

I also recall some earlier debates about the illusion of choice – like the illusion of choice of medium of instruction. In many parts of the country, given that Government primary schools have only the local language as a medium, the choice of going for English schooling is nonexistent, because even if the poorer sections want to opt for English education, they cannot afford the exorbitant fees that the private schools charge.

There was also this debate about choice when it came to sex determination tests – that parents should have a choice in deciding whether they want or do not want to bring a female child in the world. It seemed right, if one heard their argument that they don’t have and would never have the capacity to give their daughter a dowry or take care of their daughters in a society that is increasingly unsafe for women. But the issue therefore that needed (and still needs) to be addressed is the question of the consumerist economy that brings to bear on the phenomenon of dowry.

Interestingly, the disability rights movement also brought up the question of the signal that one sends with a legislation that says that if prenatal examination of the foetus reveals a disability, then it should be eliminated. Are we supposed to be a fascist society that chooses who is superior and who is not?

Choice thus has many dimensions, and the faster we are conscious of them the better.

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