

By AMITA KANEKAR



Wheeling, Dealing, and Genocide

As Goans deal with the chaos, despair, and complete absence of governance of the present moment, a question comes to mind: what is the government for?

It's not as though this disaster has suddenly arrived. No, it is a year old, a year of terrible governance. Who could forget those horrific scenes of the nationwide lockdown, the millions of migrant workers who became jobless and homeless overnight, who, denied government support, denied even their own wages, were forced to walk thousands of kilometres home, beaten by lathis, sprayed with disinfectant, killed by trains. Criticism led to even more government callousness and inefficiency, including 'shramik special' trains notable for running without food or water, or even apparently a route map to their destinations.

And then there was the zero government support also for people who lost livelihoods at home, and for students who lost their education when it went online. And the big welcome mat laid out for richie-rich folks to flock from the so-called 'red zones' of India to their second or tenth homes in this 'green zone' after the lockdown was lifted, to resurrect infections which had actually dropped to zero, and start off fatal ones too. How many Goans died last year, as a result of their government's stupidity, greed, and unpreparedness, not to mention decades of poor health investment? Too many.

But what about afterwards? At the end of 2020, with COVID a year old, one whole year of the most horrendous blunders and callousness, what had our governments, at state and centre, learnt? What especially did they learn from the fact that, although infections and deaths decreased here by the end of last year, new waves of infection and huge death rates continued to surge on a daily basis in some of the richest countries of the world - countries with at least one hundred times better public health infrastructure than Goa, and surely more than a thousand times better than India?

Did they, at long last, plunge into improving health care, especially of public health facilities which have been starved of funds, space and infrastructure, even as corporates were encouraged to turn health care into a profit-spinning business? Did they try to ensure that, given this era of 'social distancing', every one gets internet connectivity, at least for essential services? Did they spare a thought on school education, which has become a big zero in this year, with many children - especially of the most vulnerable communities - getting no education at all? Did they at least make a plan for if and when India - like many parts of the world - sees a second, or third or fourth, wave?

All of this sounds almost funny. Our governments and do this? Unimaginable. They couldn't even ensure a serious universal vaccination drive. And none of us even expected them to do

any better.



And so we watched the central government getting back to the interests of the Adanis and Ambanis, to the Ayodhya temple and the Kumbh melas, to winning power by hook or crook. Back to normal, in other words. Even when hundreds of thousands of farmers demanded a repeal of the new pro-corporate farm laws, protesting on the Delhi streets from before the freezing winter all the way to today, putting their own and other lives at risk from the virus, nothing changed. Hundreds of protesters have died; the Centre has not budged.

The Goa government has been no less. Not only in its support to all Centre-backed destruction, but also with its back-to-normal enthusiasm for 'development'. No new state-of-the-art hospitals but new state-of-the-art luxury resorts; no tree-planting but overnight forest destruction; no opening schools with care and caution, but throwing open casinos with no worry at all. Casinos can't be expected to follow SOPs, said this government; tourists can't be expected to test before arrival; film companies, New Year parties, pub-crawlers, beach-throngers, and nudist attention-seekers surely can't be expected to wear masks! No, of course not. So Goans can expect to die.

The ongoing genocide has resulted in unheard-of global criticism of the Indian government, giving courage to even the meek and terrorised media at home. The PM has been accused of more interest in saving face than lives, of being arrogant, ignorant, vainglorious, narcissist, and a superspreader himself. Social media is now full of calls for him to resign, even to be convicted, just as there are for Sawant in Goa.

But what then? Will the replacements be different? We have come to expect very little from our governments, even in a small place like Goa where there is a personal rapport with our political representatives. But all the friendly chitchat on first-name terms doesn't stop these representatives from sticking a knife into the back of ordinary Goans on behalf of big business and corporate destroyers; from condemning the casinos in public while actually supporting them tooth and nail; from sweetly promising to protect our traditional foods, while allowing formalin in our fish. It is not just that they are making money; they are actually killing us – slowly till yesterday, fast now.

And this is what we have come to expect. Our expectations from them are so little, that it's like they are doing us a big favour when they get us a water or electricity connection, or a job, or a passport, or even fill the potholes before the rains. The quality of life goes down every day, we complain but accept.

But now, with death staring every one of us in the face, we have to answer these questions. Who is responsible for timely procurement of stocks of life-saving equipment like oxygen

cylinders, ventilators, medicines? What about timely and prompt engaging of medical and paramedical personnel, not to mention adequate support to other frontline warriors like sanitation workers? What about ensuring a green and healthy public environment? What about developing state-of-the-art public health centres, and also government schools? What about expanding and strengthening GMC, to cope with whatever is around the corner?

Who is going to ensure all of this? It has to be the government, but it will happen only if we work on changing the nature of government, especially to make it transparent and seriously accountable to the people.

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