

By AMITA KANEKAR



The recent news that bonded labourers were working on the infamous double tracking project

Of Bhumiputra Hype and Bonded Reality

of the Indian Railways through the Mollem forests should cause no surprise. The labourers were rescued from their abusive situation only because of complaints made by ARZ, a Goa-based NGO, and the efforts of an Adivasi organisation in Telangana. The Indian Railways now claim that the labourers were not bonded at all, but 'only' underpaid and ill-treated by their contractor. According to the workers themselves, the oldest of whom was a 72-year-old woman, they were paid less than minimum wages, were prevented from leaving and going home, and were forced to live right next to the tracks, without adequate shelter (in the monsoon) and without toilets either.

Who is responsible for this shameful state of affairs? The news so far is that the labour contractor has been arrested, but not anybody from the Railways. We are expected to believe that the Railways were completely unaware and horrified to discover that they were employing bonded labour, or at least underpaid and ill-treated labour, in their project. But the truth is that such things are common and the Railways hugely benefit by such underpayment and ill-treatment. The law actually demands that they be held responsible for this abuse, as it is their responsibility as the principal employers to ensure decent and legally acceptable working and living conditions for labourers on their projects. But this never happens.

And nobody expects it either, because ill-treatment of workers is the norm in India and Goa. The sufferings of these workers are actually typical of the real estate industry, where subcontracting and sub-subcontracting is the norm, so that principal employers can claim innocence and ignorance, put the blame on labour contractors, and get away scot-free even in massive man-made disasters like the Ruby building collapse in Canacona some years ago, where many labourers lost their lives but neither the principal employers nor the local authorities were held responsible.

Nor are things better elsewhere. Look at the tourist industry, the other so-called economic lifeline of Goa. According to a 2018 study by a student of the Goa University, as many as 7000 underage workers were employed in just the beach shack restaurants, including seven-year-old children, where they were overworked (sometimes working through the day and the night), miserably paid, verbally and physically abused, expected to sleep on the restaurant tables or on the beach, and poorly fed as well - in other words, treated like slave labour. The fishing industry also tells stories of poor living conditions, the holding back of wages on any pretext, inhuman confinement, and also abusive treatment during the Covid lockdown. The various lockdowns over the past year and a half have, in fact, starkly revealed the ugly underbelly of migrant employment in Goa, where non-Goans in almost every field of work had

to struggle for their very survival, with many denied their wages for work done before the lockdown, besides being thrown on the road and having no resources to even buy food; all of this with almost zero support from the government, even though the latter declared – but did nothing to ensure – that wages were to be paid even during the lockdown.

Against this backdrop of everyday labour abuse, even by government agencies and almost always of non-Goans (because locals will not accept it as quietly), the government expects us to believe that it is suddenly all for migrant workers! Or bhumiputras, as their new bill calls them. This proposed legislation ostensibly grants anyone with 30 years residence in Goa, and living in a not-more-than-250 sq foot house built before 2019, ownership rights to that house. The vaguely-worded but evocatively-titled bill naturally led to an uproar of protest, since it appears to threaten the interests of the landowning sections of Goa, as well as the powerful real estate lobby, while completely ignoring the plight of thousands of Goans who have been struggling for rights to the land they have lived on for generations, unable to even repair or renovate their old homes, or pluck the fruit from their own trees, as the land is owned by others, from big bhatcars like the Ranes of Sattari to many Hindu temples.

Now, there is no doubt that access to decent housing is considered a fundamental right by all civilised societies, which should not depend on one's wealth or background or place of origin. And there is no doubt that there are many migrants living and working in Goa for over thirty years without being able to afford a decent home. But, if the government was really concerned about this, surely it could take steps to ensure that everyone working here – even for one project, leave aside 30 years – is decently housed with all essential facilities? What was the need to bring in ownership of land, or a minimum residency period, and why term such 30-year-long residents as sons-of-the-soil, that too with a nonGoan and Sanskritised term like bhumiputra?

Well, simply because the whole thing is clearly a fraud. This was obvious in the hasty introduction of the bill, its colourful title but vague content, and how it was soon declared, following the protests, as withdrawn. Perhaps the aim was to gain migrant votes in the upcoming elections, as alleged by many. Or perhaps it was to distract attention from the Mining Corporation bill, introduced at the same time by the government, as alleged by others. Or perhaps it was intended as another route for the land-grab being encouraged across Goa. But that it has absolutely nothing to do with ensuring basic shelter for labouring communities, whether Goan or non-Goan, goes without saying, because that is something completely beyond the greed-limited vision of this political establishment.

As for its critics, i.e. those worried about injustice to the 'niz Goenkar', how about at least demanding land reforms in Goa, to ensure that all niz Goenkars get ownership of the land on

which they have lived for generations, whether it is comunidade land or bhatcar-owned?
And how about also demanding housing reforms, to ensure that housing construction is need-based rather than profit-based, before every last hill and valley disappears under swanky second or tenth homes for rich non-Goans, even as those who need basic shelter remain without?

For, let us not pretend that so-called 'bhaile' labourers are the biggest threat to the survival of Goa and Goans. The real problem is this extractive and exploitative economy, presided over by this government, in which privileged Goans are as invested as privileged non-Goans.

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