



As kids growing up, we would be presented with two similar pictures and asked to spot the difference. While that was a good exercise for sharpening visual observation, our political acumen should have driven us to take that skillset to another level, to detect the political hypocrisy, chicanery and cunning of today.

Sometimes, the scenarios may seem the same visually, and only the people may seem to be different, but there is in effect more difference than that. Or alternatively, there are situations where, visually, the scenes are clearly different but the Government would have us believe that they are tantamount to the same thing.

Take the most recent example. A roadway is made, and the people are up in arms (or with fingers on the keyboard) questioning the cutting of trees for this roadway, for the benefit of a starred hotel. A protest by way of planting trees on the road is announced, but an hour before, the MLA of the Constituency, who is also the Revenue Minister, and her son who is the Mayor of the Corporation of the City of Panaji, land up on the spot and make out that they are doing the same. When confronted by a rival woman politician who is also an activist, the Revenue Minister tries to belittle her stating that she only knows how to shout.

The citizenry were quick to spot the difference. First of all, these are part of governance. Secondly replacing trees can never substitute for cutting trees. One only ventures to cut trees or to permit the cutting of trees, if it is inevitable. And today, even if the situation were one where this is inevitable, we do have systems whereby the trees can be carefully removed and settled near by, within the same ecosystem. But most importantly, the State is first accountable for preventing the illegal activity, next in acting swiftly to stop the illegal activity once started, and third to take action against those responsible for the illegal activity.

It is quite another thing when citizens, in order to draw attention to the issue, plant trees. The people are not in governance. They may or may not even constitute the electorate, depending on several factors, not least among them being the way the constituencies are delimited, or the way voices are being denied in the decision-making process, in the process of affirming their Portuguese citizenship as a passport to survival and dignity.

Although in the present case, it was not even a solution by the State and the powers that be, there have been times, when the State, in order to benefit the big corporates, has sought to camouflage their licences for illegal activities such as constructions within CRZ or for cutting trees, with technocratic sounding solutions, which can hardly replace people-sensitive eco-friendly solutions. Afforestation, for instance, at a location far and distantly removed from the location where the trees are cut, is another example of the difference that the authorities try

to deny. The Central Government's approval for the cutting of trees for the proposed power transmission line through Mollem, without looking at its implications for the ecosystem, is a case in point. Afforestation of degraded forest land in Karnataka and far-flung Madhya Pradesh cannot compensate deforestation in Goa.

At another level, Governments try to pretend that they are substituting green for green. So for example with the Miramar Beautification Project, the Government at that time, headed by then Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar, had proposed to have a garden on the beach in lieu of the sand dunes. Can there be anything more ridiculous than that? But the Government pretended that it was the same.

Years ago, as college students, when we were witnessing the starred hotels invading the Goan sphere, I heard an argument on the part of the Government that the sand dunes that were being destroyed through the construction of one hotel were going to be replaced by the hotel itself, because it would help prevent soil erosion and was in fact more effective, being bigger than the sand dune. In other words, implying sand dunes and buildings are the same for stopping erosion. I did not know where to look, nor imagine where one could begin arguing with them. It seemed like they were completely ignorant of the buffer zone role of sand dunes, as well as the ecosystem around sand dunes, including the vegetation that prevents sand from drifting. Sadly, more than thirty years later, the same arguments are seen being canvassed by the State.

There are other situations too where the waters are sullied so we do not spot the difference. On the political front, many Goans, who have chosen to affirm their right to Portuguese citizenship, are portrayed as if they have no affinity to their land or that they have no stakes in their land. But the truth is that- they do, which is why they return to their land, again and again and again each year when they are working abroad with the jobs secured on the strength of their Portuguese nationality, and then return for good after they retire. So there is a difference there as well, between the depiction and the reality. These are the differences we need to spot. Blurring these differences has resulted in denial of their right to vote, and a threat of their voice being taken away by the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, which provides for processes of circumvention of existing laws in cancelling cards of Overseas Citizens of India.

The passage of time has only made successive governments use the same tricks to bulldoze Goa and Goans with so-called development. In the election season, one will increasingly find more and more issues being raked up, where the realities are being buried, and jingoistic statements and unresearched, un-evidence-based material is made to pass off as truth. We must spot the difference. Let not our teachers' efforts to train us to spot the difference have

been in vain.



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Spot the Difference



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