



I resume this column after a gap of six years, three of which – thanks to the pandemic which prevented smooth international travel – have been spent outside of Goa. Returning to the *patria* after these same three years has, therefore, been something of a shock. From the moment one leaves the airport one is witness to numerous grade separators, elevated expressways and other infrastructure. The change has been so huge that in some cases the new landscape is virtually unrecognisable, and one gets the sense that one is in uncharted territory.

What is clear, however, is that for some of the local population these changes represent a triumph that is to be celebrated. Some of these locals do so because to them it represents the accomplishments of the current central government. To these, this infrastructure is celebrated because they are seen as monuments to the new regime, the new, bold and developed India that is supposedly being inaugurated. There are others too, not necessarily beholden to the regime, who also celebrate the infrastructure for reason of what they say about India. In this manner the second group underlines the fact that this infrastructure is the result of decades of commitment by the Indian national elite, and more importantly the technocrats that run the country. There are others too, who welcome this infrastructure because it gives them a much-needed relief from the traffic snarls that had not been a part of the Goan condition earlier but were increasingly something Goans had to deal with. These new expressways now allow one to zip from one location to another, and also bypass the villages completely, allowing, to some minds, these villages to be freed of highway traffic and thus to return to their calmer ways of life.

These assumptions are, sadly, grossly mistaken. A simple evaluation of how this infrastructure interacts with the local road network reveals all. All too often, these new roads simply run through the local road network, ignoring their needs and realities completely. Indeed, often there is no signage that directs traffic to the exits from the highway. This results in an infernal mess at these points of contact, as multiple roads meet, and traffic of varying velocities encounter each other. The poor pedestrians, are of course, not accounted for at all. This confusion is not without reason, since these monuments have not been built *for* Goa, but to get traffic *through* it. Goa is merely a place to be got through. Bypassed, if you will, as fast as possible.

Neither can we really celebrate the fact that we have more space on the roads, since the fact is that broader roads only offer a limited reprieve. Planning experts from Tokyo to San Francisco know that in time vehicles increase to take the extra space. The logic of road-building is cyclical and relentless: we build broader roads, and we buy more vehicles to fill up the space. This will happen in Goa too. Indeed, as Pawan Mulukutla, Programme Director – Integrated Transport, Electric Mobility and Hydrogen at World Resources Institute India –

argued in the context of Bangalore recently, “The city [Bangalore] has been investing in flyovers, road widening and junction improvement projects, but this has only resulted in more congestion. It is apparent the city needs to move away from the current ‘traffic management’ approach to embrace transformative solutions.”

However, in the creation of a temporary reprieve, the new road infrastructure could in fact be a dubious blessing, offering us the space to embrace transformative solutions. We need to recognise that the only sustainable long-term response to the traffic crisis that Goa is witnessing is to use the few years of reprieve to build a solid public transport system. The transport system that we currently have is one that in essence dates from the 70s or 80s. There does not seem to be any desire on the part of the state to improve the bus services, nor any demand from the citizenry to obtain a better service and a wider, more reliable public transport system.

Having spent years outside of India, in cities where one did not need private transport to get around, I know from personal experience how liberating a reliable and dignified public transport system can be. And so, I have a dream for Goa. The dream of a public transport system that connects every part of Goa from five am to past midnight, a system where at any stop in densely populated zones, or peak hours, a passenger does not have to wait more than fifteen minutes. One that offers reliability, and above all respect, to both, the employees of this public transport system, as well as the passengers. The ability to rely on public transport to get around, no matter where in Goa, will not only relieve the pressure of private vehicles from the roads, it will also divert money wasted on private vehicles into other sectors of the Goa’s domestic economies.

It is not as if the need for an improved mass rapid transport system has not been felt by Goans. Indeed, more recently a member of the legislative assembly suggested that “major cities like Margao-Vasco-Panjim-Mapusa should be connected with Metro or similar project to ease traffic congestion”. To many of us, fatigued by the scams run by politicians, this articulation sounded like another. There is no need to explore the metro, when we have not even explored an expanded bus service for the entire state, one that offers exclusive lanes for public transport, primarily buses. Where buses do not need to fight for space with other traffic, they would turn out to be a preferred option than private transport. For a start, how about reviving the Kadamba shuttle service, with a focus on the dignity of the passengers?

Further, it is not merely the large cities that need to be connected to each other. We need to provide reliable bus transportation between villages, and major hubs, as well as transportation *within* villages and cities in Goa. Intra-city or village public transport is virtually non-existent in the state forcing persons to use private vehicles to travel within villages and

destroy the famed calm of the Goan village.



Such an expanded bus service system would create a substantial increase in employment opportunities and could well be a way to resolve the taxi crisis in Goa. It is fashionable to dismiss the demands of the Goan taxistas, and one has to admit that their methods are less than orthodox, but it is possible that their demands are also the result of the ridiculous situation that they find themselves in. Too many taxis fighting for a small segment of the market. Let us not forget that this glut in taxis was in fact fomented by politicians as part of their patronage of the constituents, without a thought to the larger economic consequences. Could we divert persons, who are in a capricious position into a state-run public transport system, where they can rely on regular salaries and working conditions? This is not to say that taxis should be done away with. A healthy taxi service is a part of the public transport system and should operate in conjunction with this system.

I will end paraphrasing the words of Mulukutla; Goa is at a crucial juncture. Decisions and projects implemented today will be “locked in” for the next 40-100 years. As the state focuses on large-scale infrastructure investments, it also needs to look at more far-reaching, equitable and sustainable solutions that will make navigating the state smoother for all.

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