

By AMITA KANEKAR



So Goa is among the states with the highest number of government employees per capita of its population – as per the census report of government employees from the state government’s department of planning and statistics. The finding was reported by the press in shocked tones. There is one government employee, they said disgustedly, for every 25 residents in the state.

But what’s actually shocking about this? If government jobs are the best-paying and best-regulated jobs in the country, doesn’t it make sense to have more of them? It’s become the norm to sneer at Goans for wanting government jobs – with one of the biggest sneerers being the Chief Minister of Goa. Pramod Sawant regularly comments disparagingly on how Goans “hanker” for government jobs, which is ironical since he holds the top government position in the state himself, and shows no intention of giving it up. Goans should be more self-sufficient, declares the man whose whole existence – from lavish residence and plush car, to expanding entourage – is paid for by the Goan people. But, he insists, it is just not possible for everyone to have a government job.

Why not, is what we would like to know. If it is okay for him and others to be on the government payroll, why is it impossible for everyone else as well? Surely there is plenty of work that needs to be done in Goa. Almost everywhere one turns, you can see under-staffing of institutions, and overloading of existing employees, even in life-and-death situations like at the GMC and the other government hospitals. So why not create more jobs?

Because the government has no money, is the usual answer. But why doesn’t the government have the money?

What Sawant will never admit is that a big reason for why the government doesn’t have money is because of the way the government wastes money. An infamous example is the swearing-in ceremony of his own government which, according to the RTI enquiry filed by Aires Rodrigues, blew up an unbelievable Rs 9 crores of public money on just the one single event. Another area of waste is incessant, lavish, and unnecessary construction projects – like the recent decision to build a new Raj Bhavan, the ghastly ‘beautification’ of Miramar beach, etc. But perhaps the biggest problem, because it is a regular and ever-expanding one, is the cost of the current employees – and not all employees, but particularly the fattest of the fat cats on the government payroll. A good example here is how Sawant’s predecessor, Parrikar (celebrated in the press as a ‘good administrator’) hiked the government payment to Goa’s then attorney general, Atmaram Nadkarni, to up to Rs. 8 lakhs per month, making him the highest-paid state attorney general (serving the smallest state), earning more, apparently, than even the President of the country.

Parrikar's largesse (at public cost) was not restricted to Nadkarni, but extended to all the MLAs, ministers, governor, and himself, given the fact that he presided over two massive pay rises for all these worthies. Just to give one example. Goa's governor saw a salary rise from Rs. 13.20 lakhs per annum in 2015-16, to 28.2 lakhs in 2017-18, i.e. more than double. To this was added Rs. 67 lakhs for travel, including 10 lakhs for foreign travel. Along with this were discretionary grants of Rs 20 lakh, up from Rs 5.45 lakh in 2014-15, i.e. a hike of nearly 400% in 3 years. All these figures will have climbed much higher by now. Add on all the other big earners - MLAs, ministers, judges, IAS officers, directors of government bodies, etc, etc, not to forget the attorney general - and you understand why the Goa government has to regularly borrow money for salaries.

This kind of spending is especially disgusting when there are thousands of people struggling to make ends meet in Goa, despite working full-time and more. They even include government employees - except that the government does not consider them as employees. Working in government institutions as anything from gardeners, cleaners, watchmen, to clerical staff, librarians, and even professors, these employees earn less than half the official salary, or even less than that, depending on whether they are on contract, or daily wages, or hourly rates. Thus, for the same hours of work, a professor on permanent tenure might earn over Rs 2 lakh a month, a professor on contract might earn 60,000, a clerical employee on permanent tenure might earn 30,000, while a cleaner on contract might earn 10,000 - all in the same college. How can such huge differences in pay be justified?

What is even more interesting is that it is the people earning the most, the Grade-A category, who decide the salaries for everyone, including themselves. That is why there are regular pay commissions for the permanent staff, which have taken Grade-A salaries to astronomical heights; the Goa government has admitted that one reason for its financial debt is the last (7th) pay commission. But the same commissions provide nothing for the non-permanent.

With the government itself running this kind of top-heavy, discriminatory, and exploitative employment system, it is hardly going to ensure anything better in the private sector. That's why nobody listens to Sawant when he advises Goan youth to look for jobs in the hospitality sector, where, he claims, two lakh jobs will be available over the next two years. Two lakh jobs paying what salaries? Offering what conditions of work? What dignity? Employment conditions in the private sector are so poor and unregulated for most employees that many prefer contract jobs in the government, hoping to one day become permanent.

So, there is no need to feel ashamed about the high percentage of government jobs per capita in Goa. In fact, this high percentage, along with remittances from NRI Goans, is surely what makes Goa a comparatively well-to-do society. And there is no need to castigate Goans

for wanting government jobs either. They are not aiming to earn as much as Sawant does, nor to live in the lap of public-funded luxury. All they want is to earn enough, and with dignity, to make ends meet. The (real) scandal of government employment

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