

I had commented on the poor state of primary education in Goa at the start of this academic year following the statement by Education Minister (also Chief Minister) Pramod Sawant that the number of students in government schools was dropping. Sawant put the blame on parents, for shifting their children to private or aided schools. What he chose to ignore, however, was the reason for this: the poor quality of government schools, including dilapidated buildings, leaking roofs, lack of playgrounds, shortage of teachers, and lack of instruction in the language of the parents' choice.

Four months down the line, what, might one ask, is Sawant doing about the problem, i.e. of students leaving his schools? Believe it or not – he's punishing the students who remain. Schools with few students can only be provided teachers on contract basis, announced Sawant a few days ago; teachers on permanent tenure are appointed only if the school has the required student-teacher ratio. This is because, he explained, schools with few students may see numbers drop even further.

But does this make any sense – can numbers not drop in the schools which today have enough students? And how does this justify a different quality of teacher? Contract teachers mean teachers who are paid less and whose future is insecure – which means that they could be doing a second job simultaneously, or could disappear in the middle of the term if they find a better opportunity. Is this not detrimental to their students? Why are students being punished when it is not their fault that their numbers are low? In fact, it is the government, and Sawant's education department in particular, that is responsible for making government schools so unattractive – but where's the punishment for them?

In any case, why should any school employ contract teachers for regular positions? Contract employment was intended ostensibly for short-term jobs, like temporary vacancies. If there is a completely vacant teacher's post in a functioning school, why should the teacher be on contract just because the students are few? Don't those students also have the right to a good education? There are places in the world where full-fledged schools have run just for the sake of 2 or 3 students – because even those 2 or 3 humans are considered precious. But here, we deliberately provide substandard education to our students – as policy. The intention seems to be to ensure that even these few students finally leave these schools, either by failing or in frustration, and the school can be happily closed down, following the example of so many other government schools across Goa.

The government's excuse will, of course, be that they cannot afford to employ tenured teachers for such few students. But is this excuse valid? Tenured school-teachers cost the government barely Rs 2-3 lakhs per year – and this is a government that offers its own MLAs now a whopping pension of Rs 2.5 lakhs a month, besides blowing thousands of crores of

rupees on new roads that locals do not even want.



It is actually the government's responsibility to create more and better jobs for Goans, rather than these poorly-paid and exploitative contract positions. But what we see is that contract employment has become common for jobs that are permanent, not just in Goa, but across all Indian government or government-aided institutions - as a solution to the huge burden of salaries. The unbearable burden of government salaries is actually thanks to the obscene salaries of the top cadre of government officers who earn in lakhs per month, i.e. much more than anybody needs, even to lead a luxurious life. For example, professors on permanent tenure in government-run and government-aided colleges and universities earn so much that they don't know what to do with their money, after individual cars, private education for the kids, foreign holidays, investment in real estate, etc. is all done.

The real need is to cap these bloated salaries - but who's going to do that, when it is these very officers, the ones at the highest level and backed by our elected representatives, who decide on the frequency and content of pay commissions? Their 'solution' is then to keep the number of high-earners limited to a chosen few, by employing most people on contract or hourly-basis, so that the same work gets done cheaply - who cares about quality or commitment, or the right to a decent income?

No surprises then to find growing vacancies in tenured teachers' posts. A whopping 270 posts were waiting to be filled in government primary schools, revealed Pramod Sawant last year; those posts remain vacant even today (and presumably filled by contract and hourly-basis teachers). As reported in April this year, the Union government has actually cut its aid to Goa for the payment of primary schoolteachers' salaries by 15%, from 3.3 crore to 2.9 crore, because of the unfilled vacancies in teachers' posts.

Last year, the release of the Union government's Ministry of Education's annual Performance Grading Index saw Goa rated at 521-580 points (out of 1000), a steep collapse from its earlier rating of 750-800. But the Education Minister is unbothered - he boasts instead about how Goa is becoming a 'knowledge hub'. What this means is that every possible private educational institution from India - including the most expensive schools, colleges, and universities, along with prestigious government ones as well - is building large campuses to set up business here, all for the education of Indian elites. The latest report is of one Maharashtra Academy of Engineering and Academic Research, supposedly a public charitable trust based in Pune, which has just signed a 99-year lease with the comunidade of Tivim to build a huge educational campus - including hostels, libraries, labs and sports facilities - on a whopping two lakh square metre plot in the village, which, according to villagers of Tivim, falls in a no-development hill zone.

This is not just proof of how Brahmanical is the education system run by Sawant - with international standards for some and no standards at all for others; entire hillsides for some, and not even a small playground for others. It's also proof that the only real interest of this government is in enabling land-grab, whether directly through the TCP department, or via the Tourism department, Infrastructure and Roads, or even Archives, and now like this, in the name of Education. Otherwise, why would so many unheard-of educational groups be suddenly rushing to Goa? Are these really educational institutions, or just fronts for real estate development?

So, who cares about the problems of Goan schoolchildren? Nobody in power. And they never will, not until they have to compulsorily send their own kids to government schools. This - the mandatory usage of all public facilities in their own constituencies, including education, health, and transport facilities - might be the only way to bring our so-called 'representatives' and 'public servants' back down to earth.

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