



By AMITA KANEKAR

What Government Demolishes Homes in the Pouring Rain?

What kind of government demolishes homes in the pouring rain? A government that is confident that the chattering classes will not be bothered. It is not only the Parrikar government that is to be condemned for an attack on the very lives of people, especially the aged, ill, and children among them, whose houses were recently bulldozed in Baina, Vasco, during the downpours of July. One child in Baina was 6 days old, according to a newspaper report, just home for the first time from the Chicalim nursing home, when his house was demolished. Now his mother, weak after a tough delivery, is ill and cannot care for the baby who huddles in his grandmother's arms under a tarpaulin sheet.

The responsibility for this lies not just on the administration, but us well-off folk, secure in our warm dry homes, along with of course the media we pay for, who, as veteran Goan journalist Govind Potekar pointed out recently, give reams of attention to proclamations for and against bikinis, but hardly any time or space to an atrocity against the poor.

In the few discussions on the topic, the consensus in Goa seems to be that while it should not have been done in the rains, it had to be done. They repeat the government claim that the houses were within the high tide line and 'demolitions were done to protect the people'. What an oxymoron! And as environmentalist Claude Alvares asked, why haven't we heard of the demolition of the big bungalows and hotels that are also within the CRZ? Why take action only against the poorest and most vulnerable?

Well, the answer is that that's what we're good at. And we bolster this tendency by tons of unsubstantiated reportage about how such informal settlements harbour criminals and anti-social elements. It is not that we really believe this rubbish; any fool in this country knows that the real criminals are to be found not there, but in much more secure and protected and even lavish homes, which are never demolished.

But it is not that we are always so uncaring. An example of a different response was that met by the Campa Cola Compound case in Bombay. This large upper-class and illegal apartment complex in the plush Worli area was condoned for years, even after an order for demolition.

And when the Campa Cola issue was discussed in the media – which was frequently – one could see the genuine sympathy of the reporters for the bank managers and businessmen who were losing their flats and penthouses, even though they had chosen to buy them in a building with no municipal clearance. Contrast this to the Baina settlement, which was demolished less than 2 months after the people were given notice; the demolition was described by many press reports as Parrikar’s ‘cleaning-up drive’, implying that the residents are some kind of dirt.

The lack of empathy goes well with a lack of intelligence. These settlements don’t come up anyhow. A popular upper-caste adjective for them is ‘squatter’, which implies people just settling down freely on a spot and making it their own. But slums in Goa and India are not squatter settlements, for they are paid for right from the word go. Nobody can sit for half an hour anywhere in an Indian city without being questioned by the cops. Nor do slums come up anywhere, but usually on waste or wet lands unfit for development — a major reason for allowing them is thus also about making the land ready for other real estate projects.

The pattern – perfected in Mumbai but visible in Goa as well – is of the new settlement being laid out in advance by local agents in cahoots with the authorities, then sold to homeless buyers, usually migrants. Huge amounts of money are paid by the buyers for water, electricity, and other facilities, legal or otherwise. Everything happens in broad daylight, with the full knowledge of the local authorities, including the police, and the payments that are made are part of the oily system of graft on which the bureaucracy thrives. And so homes are built and lived in for a while, with local problems of water seepage and soft soil being dealt with by the settlers. And then one fine day the houses are broken and the people thrown out, the nicely-solidified and dry land is used for other things, while everybody else looks shocked and wonders who allowed them there. And the cycle goes on.

Slum-dwellers are vote-banks, is the other complaint of the middle-class, it’s the politicians who back them. This again is a perversion of the truth – as though these settlers are beneficiaries instead of victims. The real problem is that the politicians *don’t* back these settlers; that they don’t oppose this extortionist cycle which keeps people insecure and dependent.

Slums are not caused by the poor. They are caused by bad urban policies, which give no importance to public housing. In other words, they are caused by the rich and the powerful who make our policies and rules; they are caused by us. If you want to employ people — domestic workers, drivers, sweepers, watchmen, errand-boys, gardeners, labourers, doing all the hard or dirty work of every kind – but you don't want to pay them enough to afford the market rates of rent, and those people have no other options but to take your low-paying job, and the government just twiddles its thumbs in the meanwhile, what do you expect?

Most civilised societies in the 20th century realised that basic public housing was one of the jobs that cannot be left to the profit-driven real estate industry; it has to be handled by the government. But we have yet to still learn that in Goa, where the government has land for all kinds of money-making projects, including posh vacation homes which are used for 2 weeks in the year, but not for mass housing. In fact, the Parrikar government has just announced that those who got land illegally for SEZ's – criminals, in other words — will be allowed to keep 30% of it! Why – because Goa has “enough” land, apparently. Why can't we then build cheap rental housing? Or create schemes where people can buy small serviced plots, on a low monthly payments, and build their own houses? Surely it's not that difficult to plan and implement, unless one envisages all land as reserved for either cronies or profit-spinning enterprises.

Goa has all kinds of *bhaile*, or outsiders – tourists, hoteliers, real estate developers, moneyed folk who like the slower life. But the most maligned, in word and deed, is the one that contributes the most, viz. the labourers. Can Goa do without migrant workers for even one day? Isn't it then time that we started thinking about how to develop a more equitable, inclusive and civic-conscious society, rather than following the inhuman traditions of Indian metropoli?

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