

While in Panjim's Campal area the other day, I passed the Luis Francisco Gomes Garden. Now this old public park is a pleasant place, partly for its setting under shady rain trees planted around a hundred years ago, but also for its friendly design of low walls, plentiful seats, and bandstand. Campal was an elite residential locality at one time, whose residents probably were not very welcoming of 'commoners', but the garden design certainly was. The low broad walls are especially notable, inviting one to sit or even nap on them, or easily hop over them into the garden without bothering to locate the (many) gates.



Or rather, they used to be. Now however, the top of the walls is covered with closed-spaced sharp stone pieces, set vertically. Touch the walls at your own risk.

What kind of public attitude does this renovation betray? Only someone who belongs to the elite, with private resources for relaxation and a car to commute in, and who is infused with brahmanical ideas of treating non-elites shabbily, could have come up with such a heartless transformation of a user-friendly space—where a tired pedestrian passerby might take rest—into something that will injure you if you try. But this is the norm nowadays, with the 'public' in public parks referring more to funding than usage. Our new parks—with their high walls, forbidding gates, no shade, water-guzzling lawns adorned with 'keep off the lawn' signs, and commercial events for the spending classes—are clearly aimed at elite users who come in the evening with cars and jogging shoes. All that remains are fees and those pipe-benches which discourage seating for more than two minutes.

This unfriendliness of our public spaces may seem unimportant when compared to the big issues facing Goa today, from rampant land grab, the Mol fight, malignant casino tourism, the marginalisation of nonHindu cultures, shortage of decent jobs, and so on. But, in the event of the forthcoming elections, all these issues are linked together by a question: can parties led

and dominated by upper castes really bring change to Goa? Brahmanism is at the root of why India has not been able to create a real democracy. Can we solve this with people of the same privileged, conservative and elitist background sitting at the helm? The Aam Aadmi Party and Goa Forward claim to be alternatives to the BJP and the Congress in Goa. Their leaders talk about the need for change, but can they really bring change when most of them come from the same caste and class?

Almost all the issues facing Goan bahunjans today see them up against Goan elites. For example, as Raghuraman Trichur pointed out in a recent lecture, Goa is becoming the Florida of India, with wealthy Indians buying second homes or setting up businesses that cater to other wealthy outsiders, even as many locals are fast losing their first homes as well as livelihoods. But at the heart of the land-grab in the villages, and the rash of real-estate development over the plateaux, are Goan land-owners, business partners, developers and brokers, eagerly flogging every last bit of Goa to the highest bidder. What stand would any of the upper-caste-dominated parties take on this conflict, especially when so many of their leaders are connected to real estate and related businesses themselves?

Another example is the Mol issue, where parents of children in government schools are not being allowed to choose the medium of their children's education, and where the future of bahunjan Goans is being sacrificed at the altar of the baman-bhas, Nagri Konkani. All because of the desire of Goa's bamans to proclaim an Indian language of their own, even while their own families study in private English-medium schools. What change can we expect here, when GF's leaders are known to be close to the Nagri Konkani lobby, while AAP's Valmiki Naik claims to support both sides?

Corruption is always a buzzword for those speaking of change. But corruption is of many kinds. One often condemned by upper castes is freebies during elections. But seriously, is it such a problem if poor people are provided free transport to political rallies, or money/biryani before they vote? It is only the elites who believe that such gifts swing elections, who think that the poor do not have the sense to accept gifts—perhaps the only things that these politicians do for them—and still vote as they wish. To demonise these gifts is to continue the illegalising of the poor which upper caste politicians and media have always done.

But another kind of corruption rampant in Goa is the subversion of the reservation rules mandated by the Constitution of India, in which upper castes have been blithely usurping the jobs and educational seats meant for the most deprived sections of Goan society, viz. dalits, tribals, and OBCs. Will these upper-caste-led parties take up this huge corruption issue?

One thing seems certain: Bahujan Goans are not going to benefit from another upper-caste-dominated party in power. What we really need is a party that is not just led by dalit-bahujan-tribals, but which sees dalit-bahujan-tribal interests as primary. Only through this can we have a meaningful and inclusive democracy, and the potential of development reaching all.

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