

By AMITA KANEKAR



## The Invisible, Unimportant, Expendable Pedestrian

While walking home in Panjim on the riverfront road from Campal to Miramar recently, I found I could not walk on the pavement. Now this road, originally the Rua de Boa Vista, renamed the Avenida de Republica, and re-renamed the Dayanand Bandodkar Marg, is perhaps the nicest road in Goa, perhaps even in all South Asia, thanks to its broad and accessible pavements, canopy of shady rain trees, road dividers, and service roads. But the pavements were completely occupied that night by parked cars. Pedestrians were forced to walk on the road, squashed between the parked and the speeding cars.

A big cultural event in Campal was apparently the reason for this need for extra parking space. The question however is, if the road area had to be used, why couldn't it be the vehicular part of it? The road has four vehicular lanes; why couldn't one or two of them be taken for parking? This would have slowed down the traffic of course, but at least the pedestrians would have been safe, instead of walking on the road right next to speeding cars.

But who cares about the pedestrian? Can you imagine this society ever inconveniencing cars for the sake of the pedestrian? Never. Cars are seen as a sign of money and power; and money and power get away with murder around here. That's how a caste society works. For a Dalit groom to ride a horse is to invite violence even today in some parts of South Asia, because horses—like cars—are part of elite privilege. Such atrocities may not take place in Goa, but the attitude is similar. To be in a car is a sign of importance; to be on foot is a sign of lowness, of unimportance and expendability.

You can see this in the way pavements in Goa function also as dumping grounds - for green waste, rubble from construction work, material and machinery of roadworks, municipal garbage dumpsters, spill-out of commercial establishments fronting the road, along, of course, with parked vehicles. Would anybody dream of dumping their rubbish in the middle of the vehicular part of the road, where it would obstruct cars? The very thought would shock, but dumping on the pavement, and forcing pedestrians to deal with it, is fine.

You can see it also in the way the pavement is disappearing. Post-1961 Goa, also known as 'liberated' Goa by some, has certainly been liberated from pavements even as roads have multiplied a thousand-fold. Where the Portuguese era boasted many broad pavements shaded by trees, post-1961 Goa has turned its back on these achievements. Almost every Goan village now has sleek new roads cutting through the paddy fields, but without giving a thought to pedestrians. The latter can be found walking precariously along the edges, doing a dangerous balancing act between the whizzing cars and the fields. In the rains, they do this while walking through puddles and getting splashed by callous drivers.

There are a few new roads with pavements, but most of them are useless. They are usually too high, as much as a foot from the road, e.g. at St. Inez, the Taleigao plateau, and Porvorim, making them inaccessible for seniors and children, and difficult for everyone else. They are often paved with slippery tiles; I myself have fallen on the pavements at Taleigao and Panjim's Altinho. One suspects in fact that these pavements were not built for usage at all, but more to grab land in road-widening, and also to spend public money on expensive materials.

But, if walking along the road is bad, crossing is far worse. Pavements nowadays sometimes have railings separating them from the road, especially at junctions, so that the pedestrian has to walk a long way from the junction before being able to cross the road, e.g. at Calangute. This phenomenon is on par with pedestrian bridges, as at Miramar, and subways, as at Bambolim and Nuvem. The idea is clearly that cars should not have to stop for mere pedestrians. Pedestrians, on the other hand, can be forced to do anything - walk extra, or climb up and down two flights of stairs, and so on—even though everyone knows that many pedestrians in Goa are poor people carrying loads, including vendors with heavy *patlos*.

Following the death of a senior citizen on Bandothkar Marg in 2014, after being hit by a car while crossing, some of us went to ask the Traffic Commissioner of Goa what he planned to do. He informed us proudly that his department was in the middle of a campaign to tell school-students to look both sides while crossing the road, to use zebra-crossings, etc. What about a campaign to educate car-users to respect the pedestrian, e.g. by slowing down when they see a pedestrian trying to cross, and by stopping behind a zebra crossing instead of on it? Nothing in sight or mind. So the campaign was really about telling pedestrians that they are at fault, for not looking both ways. Victim-blaming is always the easiest way!



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Such is the state of things here, even though everyone knows that pedestrianisation and public transport is the only way ahead, both for the environment and for public health. Pedestrians have to be given priority over cars. A safe road environment must prioritise safe and convenient walking spaces; it must lower vehicular speeds, punish speeding, and favour public transport over private cars. This is what is being tried, in various ways, in the developed world.

That Goa's roads desperately need change is obvious, after the killer month of April 2017. Why can't we also aim for a truly urbane environment which would privilege the pedestrian, instead of putting him/her in continuous mortal danger? Because that's how we are. Pedestrians do the world a big favour, but a caste society is not capable of recognising this.

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