



By JASON KEITH FERNANDES

Mercês, Stereotypes and the Broken System

A violent altercation in the village of Mercês between a busload of tourists from Maharashtra and about four residents of the village caused a stir across Goa.

There were a number of reasons why this incident garnered the attention it did. First was that the incident involved the use not merely of brute force, but of weapons including a sword, chopper and a club. Then there was the scale of the violence. The bus utilized by the tourists was also set upon by this group resulting in smashed windows and the like. And finally, as reported by the press, was the fact that it was not just men who were attacked but women and children as well.

What is interesting is that the site of the incident was considered a significant detail in the debates within Goa. As was obvious in discussions on social media, the residents of Mercês and the surrounding villages are said to be known for their violent behavior and their “goondaism”. In other words, the location was a confirmation of the guilt of the accused and the innocence of the tourists. Initial reports suggested that the four residents attacked the group of tourists over a petty incident. As it turns out, however, the tourists may not have been particularly innocent given that CCTV footage from the restaurant suggest that it was the tourists who began the altercation.

The focus on the residential identity of the perpetrators of this crime, and the manner in which the tourists were presented as innocent, demonstrates the processes of political injustice in our state. The people of Mercês and surrounding villages, just as the people of Salcete, are routinely held up as examples of rowdy and violent political behavior. Echoing the arguments of Vivek Dhareshwar and R. Srivatsan in their essay on the ‘rowdy-sheeter’, I would like to point out that the identification of the residents of these areas as rowdy elements is not innocent. Rather, it is deeply rooted in their caste, class, and religious identity. The residents of these villages tend to Catholics, not from brahmanised Catholic caste groups, former tenants of large landlords, and members of the working class. The tension in Goan politics since at least the ‘80s has been to harness the energy of these groups and make them serve the agendas of the elites, as in the case of the pro-Nagari

Konkani language movement. The moment they disagree with elite opinions and seek to assert themselves, they are branded as rowdy.



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The systematic and persistent denial of a voice in the formal institutions of democracy, and by extension a denigration of the rule of law ensures a rise in violent forms of protest and vigilante justice. Indeed, the incident in Mercês also assumes significance because vigilante (in)justice has come to dominate the Indian political scene. Whether it is lynching persons who are presumed to be transporting cows for slaughter, or persons who are innocent bystanders, vigilante actions seem to be a rising trend in the country.

Whether in the case of the incident in Mercês, or instances across India, vigilante actions can be traced to the fact that there is in fact a systematic destruction of institutions of law and order in the country. While the silence of the Prime Minister, and the active choices that the BJP seems to be making in nominating leaders definitely seems to have opened the flood gates of unlawful violence, it needs to be emphasized that the undermining of the institutions of justice delivery has been ongoing for decades. For example, had there been a firm commitment to the rule of law in our state, the initial altercation begun by the tourists would have been reported to the police. The locals would not have been toughs, and nor would they have taken the law into their own hands. People are encouraged to take the law into their own hands primarily because they see the organs of the state as unreliable in resolving violence, or complicit in violence.

My argument is buttressed by the fact that our Chief Minister has himself pointed to the possibility of a police-goonda nexus in the Mercês incident, only underlining the fact that the police are seen as an ineffective organ of justice delivery. Left unarticulated, however, is that the intervention of elected representatives in the functioning of the police system is another one of the reasons for this perceived ineffectiveness. In addition to the possible police-goonda nexus, one also has the police-politician nexus, as suspected in so many cases, not least that of the rape and murder of Scarlett Keeling.

But it is not just politicians who are to blame; as many have remarked Goan society suffers from a profound lack of morality. Thus, whether politicians are the cause or the effect, the

fact is that Goan society shamelessly indulges in immorality. Take, for example, the fact that a response of many Goans to the incident was that this incident would give a “further beating” to “Goa’s reputation as a tourist-friendly State”. If on the one hand the tourist in Goa is seen as an object to be used for the generation of money alone; on the other hand, under the guise of ensuring law and order the tourist is also often used as a way to destroy the guarantee of legal rights. Take, for instance, the way in which rather than address the larger issue with regard to public transport in the state, civil society groups seek to crush the taxi driver unions using the tired argument of the damage to the tourist trade. One is not concerned about rights, neither of the local, nor of the tourist. At the end of the day this cynical use of tourism only serves to further hollow out societal morality.

In various interventions in the press I have consistently pointed out that rather than being merely one way through which Goans earn money, tourism has become the *raison d’etre* of our existence. It is as if we exist, and Goa exists, merely to service tourists. Rather than addressing the question of rights, the issue becomes one of the impact on tourism. Even the issue of beef ban evokes responses that claim that the tourism industry will be affected. Rarely are the rights of locals to choose their diet, mentioned when criticizing the ban. The incident in Mercês should concern us not because the victims in this case were tourists, but because this incident is a demonstration of a breakdown of law and order, where both state and society systematically ignore the question of rights and justice, and people believe it is acceptable to take law into their own hands.

(First published in *O Heraldo*, dt: 27 June, 2017)



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