

By DALE LUIS MENEZES



Amoral Economy: Trickle-Down Politics and Elections

The dust kicked up during the recently held Panchayat elections in Goa has almost settled down. As in all elections, this Panchayat election also witnessed massive power struggles. While it is true that the way power operates would continue in ways that destroy Goa's natural and human resources, yet in the meanwhile, we can still think why the system stays the way it does. One thing is very clear, a large number of people by participating in 'grass-roots democracy' are staking their claim for power – power that is otherwise concentrated in the hands of a few. One of the commonest reasons given for such power struggles, and the fair and foul means employed to gain power, is greed of the people. But is there more to the story? Can there be another explanation for the way the masses behave as they do?

The British labor historian, E. P. Thompson wrote extensively about labor movements in Britain. Of his many celebrated works, his essay on 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century' (1971) has some relevance when we talk about the nature of how power is brokered through an economy of gifts and favors. Thompson spoke about the public disturbances involving the working class and peasants, and argued that rather than viewing such violence as riots, they were in fact demands to safeguard customary and other rights that the state had failed to protect. Thus, the term 'moral economy' as understood by Thompson referred to the unwritten codes that bound the masses and the authorities in a system of recognizing the basic rights to food and fair prices.

As far as elections in Goa – as in many other parts of India – are concerned, one can suggest that there exists an 'amoral economy'. While Thompson's moral economy can be considered as political action against authoritarianism, an amoral economy can be considered to do the opposite. In an amoral economy dominant power cannot be easily subverted. Though flawed in its very structure, such an economy promotes a form of power that gets concentrated in the hands of the few. The masses that participate in this economy or are drawn in this economy are not necessarily the ones who control the reins of power. At the lowest level, say the Panchayat level, it is a person who, for various reasons, has a decent amount of 'supporters'. This hierarchy progresses upwards to Zilla Parishad members, municipality councilors, MLAs, Ministers, and other community leaders who are present at each of these levels. At all levels, the position of leadership and influence depends on one's caste and class

location and in some cases, on the financial resources available to negotiate this hierarchical game of power. The person who wants to be at the top of this hierarchy has to ensure that he has the backing of persons at each level of political representation. This is basically trickle-down politics!

What happens once elections are announced is that the masses, hitherto left out from power and influence, suddenly acquire a value because they can cast their vote. The vote, therefore, becomes a tangible resource that can be exchanged for short term gains and alliances. How this economy works for a large part of the masses – those that fall outside the boundary of the political class – can be gleaned from Sujay Gupta’s article on how favors were exchanged in four localities of Goa prior to the recently-concluded Panchayat polls.

In this article we hear about a candidate who feasts his supporters or potential supporters at a village tavern, as is the case in several other elections in the past. The next day this candidate approaches a “middle level but influential politician” for a hefty sum of a couple of lakhs, which he receives as “a grant or a loan”. Similarly, other candidates either seeking a re-election or a fresh mandate were reported to have purchased a large number of electronic items, such as LCD TVs, phones, tablets, and refrigerators. One thing is very clear, gifts and favors need to be exchanged. However, it is not necessary that the person at the lower level (for instance) will have the required resources and as such this person has to approach someone (mostly a few levels higher than him) to ensure that the unwritten codes are followed. On the other hand the person(s) at the higher levels receive the support from those at the lower level, as the latter owes a favor to the former.

I do not want to offer a sanitized picture of a well-tuned economy in which political and social relations exist in harmony. However, one needs to ask how does one survive, and in fact negotiate one’s basic aspirations – jobs, clean water, electricity etc, if one is stuck in an economy of unequal power relations. If there are multiple levels through which power is negotiated and brokered then the individual is often held hostage to the multiple levels of power. So the way towards gaining power and fulfilling aspirations for those at the lower levels of this hierarchy is a tortuous and winding one.

There is, I think, an element of greed in the amoral economy. But the further one goes down the hierarchy it isn't so much about greed but about survival, and ensuring that certain expectations and aspirations in life - such as accessing basic amenities - are fulfilled.

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