

By DALE LUIS MENEZES



Environment and Culture: Taking Stock of 2017

Standing on the cusp of the New Year, it is useful to reflect on the year gone by. This we do with the hope that the inevitable new beginning will be better than what we experienced in the past, in terms of our personal and public existence. And in that spirit, I think, we should take every opportunity to evaluate our political, social, and cultural existence during the past year.

Environmental and cultural concerns can be argued to have dominated the political discourse in Goa in 2017. Indeed, the protests articulated in places like Mopa and Sonshi demonstrated how environment and culture influenced the present discourse on Goan identity. The year witnessed a massive public hearing on an environmental issue. Choking on coal dust, many gathered in Vasco to make their grievances heard. This unprecedented event signaled yet again the growing sense that Goa's environment and ecological health is endangered, and, if not addressed urgently, will lead to an unmitigated disaster.

Similar to the urgency to address the issue of coal handling and pollution to stop Goa's environment from deteriorating, the resistance to the development of mega infrastructure projects, such as the new greenfield airport at Mopa, in Pernem, was also in the news. We are also witnessing opposition to other projects, like the double-tracking of the Konkan railway route, the re-starting of mining and the effects there of. This time around, many activists have successfully tried to shift the discourse to demonstrate how aspects of Goan economy fit in a larger system of global capitalism. An increasing number of Goans can be said to have realized that they are being reduced to cogs in the larger system of capitalism. There is awareness that a remote Goan village is not isolated, on the contrary it is linked to distant industrial or commercial hubs. However, the awareness of how global capitalism is a continuum of feudal (or feudal like) system of land ownership and control prevalent in Goa is still lacking; one hopes that it will be a part of mainstream political discourse soon.

There are instances where the issues are old but the sites of protest and resistance have shifted to new villages or areas. Nonetheless, it is becoming increasingly clear to all that urban and rural Goa is categorically speaking out: Goa's ecology and the quality of life of

Goans are under threat.



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Concerns with the environment were closely linked with those of preserving Goa's culture. In fact, one's identity cannot exist without the interplay of the environment and cultural productions. Identity, then, was a common thread that ran through the various protests and grievances articulated in the course of this year, as it has been over the last several years. The allusion to the intertwining of identity and environmental issues does not simply refer to the utterly cynical politicking over the coconut tree – being de-notified and re-notified on governmental whims – but rather upon instances wherein Goa's identity and the belonging of Goans in a wider world was debated; indeed the discussion only deepened by acknowledging the complex history and culture of Goa.

António Costa, the Portuguese Prime Minister, who visited India in January, provided the occasion for re-thinking the cultural belonging of Goans; particularly their connections with Portugal and other Lusophone spaces. Costa, who has Goan ancestry, was celebrated in Goa as well as in India for possessing Indian roots. Minor details like Costa or his father, Orlando Costa, having no connection with the modern Indian nation-state did not deter the grandiose celebrations of homecoming. Even those most critical of Goa's continued contacts with Portugal and Portuguese culture maintained a somewhat uneasy silence. Of course, it helped matters much that Costa came with the intention of fostering business ties with India and Portugal. But even while Costa's Indian roots were celebrated, one thing became inevitable clear: Goa and Goans are still undeniably connected with Portugal through history, culture, and migration.

The major events within the spheres of environment and culture – the protests, debates, and discussions of future visions – occurred within a political system. This is the system that needs to hear our grievances and resolve them. We, the people, elect our representatives who are entrusted to run the system. Indian democracy that is built on periodic elections is based on the assumption that one person – or one citizen – has one vote, and this vote has one value. This means that everyone in the country, who has the right to vote, indeed exercises this franchise, are equal with other citizens of the country. This, however, is not the case in reality as caste and class differences obstruct the true realization of democracy in India.



In 2017, because of the existing social and economic conditions, the political system is unable to represent the interests of all – or at least most of us. Laws and policies are therefore made not to protect the interest of all constituents in the polity, but only to further the interests of a few. This is why one witnesses draconian laws enacted and executive fiat being issued that impinge on the rights and livelihood of millions of people in the country. Of the many challenge in the New Year, and those that will follow in the years to come, the most important one is to make good of the promise that political representation would lead to the empowerment of all citizens.

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