




The Goa government will surely wish us a Happy Women's Day today. There will be celebrations of womanhood to mark the day, mostly superficial. There will be women's discounts at malls, and women's specials at restaurants, for the moneyed. There will lists of women achievers, largely elite. Most women however—the ordinary ones—won't figure in this hoopla at all. In fact, the government seems to be working overtime to make their lives worse. Goans are surrounded by big disasters—of land lost (to resorts, airports, mining, widened roads, you name it), of alienated rivers, unaffordable housing, morbid tourism, deadly pollution, scam infrastructure, and, not least, the complete lack of decent and paying jobs. But along with these are also many small, hardly-noticeable, daily disasters. One of them is how public access to space is shrinking.

There are many examples of this, thanks to the privatisation of land all around, but a tiny one worth mentioning is of publicly-owned land, viz. the decision by the Directorate of Agriculture, a few days ago, to stop public thoroughfare through its Panjim premises. Now these large premises extend from the St. Inez Road to the Law College Road, and pedestrians would commonly walk through, using an open side entrance and without entering any building. It was not a heavy traffic by any means, but one that saw the daily passage of The Rosary School students with their mothers, fish and vegetable vendors with loaded baskets, and domestic workers and municipal sweepers, from homes in Taleigao's Camara Bhat and Peterbhat to work in Miramar's elite colonies.

It is difficult to see how this traffic could have hurt the Directorate. Even if the officials feared some mishap, they have enough security people (and can easily employ more, given the low salaries of such contract employees) to prevent any untoward incident. Instead, they have blocked public entrance into the plot. And the law, of course, allows them to do this. According to the law, the Directorate is the owner of the land, and so the people are trespassers.

The result is that these pedestrians, mostly women and children, have to use the long route, walking down one road and up a second, with small kids, school bags, or heavy baskets. But ¹

 this extra walk is not the real problem. The problem is that both the roads are short of pavements—one has none, while the other has a discontinuous one on only one side. And both have speeding vehicles, with a high occurrence of near-‘accidents’.

Any civilised society would thank people for commuting on foot, instead of using fuel-guzzling and polluting vehicles. In fact, many city councils in the UK provide public right of way over even privately-owned land, in order to facilitate pedestrians going to work, school, or even for recreation. But a caste society like ours sees pedestrians as lowly losers, fit only to cower at the roadside, to get splashed by vehicles, or to run for their lives while crossing, even if carrying a load. Only such a society would allow roads to function without pavements in the first place, seeing them as belonging to vehicles alone, and the pedestrian effectively as a trespasser again.

No surprises then that the best pavements that Panjim still has are those built before 1961. Alice Santiago Faria mentions that streets with sidewalks were laid out here as far back as 1854 (*Panjim between the Past and Modernity...*, 2007). The result was that Panjim was the first modern city in South Asia, with wide and accessible pavements, tree-lined avenues, and shady public gardens without walls, or with low ones that could be sat upon or climbed over.

Now, however, even these old facilities are in danger of disappearing, like the Campal pavements—often used as car parks, and now taken over for some construction activity as well. The last is apparently under the AMRUT scheme, a part of the Smart City mission for Panjim. But will this Smartness benefit the common woman?

Of course, says the gung-ho Mission Statement on the Panjim Corporation website, which promises the moon, i.e. improved public transport, housing, open spaces, and facilities for pedestrians and cyclists. But also improved car-parking, tourist facilities, and—this is a priority—economic growth of the city. The question is: can all of this happen together? Can you encourage pedestrians and cyclists without cutting down on the space and facilities for cars? Can you further facilitate the tourist overload, except by denying locals? Can ‘economic growth’, measured in financial profit, really go with mass housing, profitable only in terms of human well-being?



Choices will have to be made, and no prizes for guessing what they will be. It is illustrative that the Smart initiative currently on the anvil is for a network of surveillance cameras across the city. Panjim is hardly known for street crime, so who is supposed to benefit by this exorbitantly expensive investment (paid for by the public)—besides the companies selling the equipment? All it will mean is the build-up of state information about the public, especially vulnerable sections but also people's movements. And with this comes huge potential for misuse, including discriminatory targeting, blackmail, stalking, and voyeurism, especially with women as the victims. Human rights groups have found that it also drives people away from public spaces, thanks to worries about 'being seen'.

Real smartness would be to build on the strengths of our pre-1961 urban landscape. Instead, we're going back to the village. Yes, the village. We may talk about Smart Cities, but what we're aiming for is the good old South Asian caste village, in a high-tech avatar perhaps, but where caste might is right, and where elites enjoy the right of way along with the lion's share of all resources, even as they keep a close watch on everyone else. And in this, as in the caste village, it's the common woman who will bear the brunt.

Reference:

Alice Santiago Faria, 'Panjim between the Past and Modernity: Building the City of Nova Goa 1771-1921', *Journal of Architectural History and Theory*, July 2007

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