By DALE LUIS MENEZES

The Real (Ethical) Challenge

The high-levels of Formalin, a carcinogen, found in imported fish have caused anger, deep anguish, and frustration amongst Goans. This is because the authorities and the elected representatives have failed to convey the truth to the masses, besides checking the irregularities. Goa's reliability on external sources for fish (in other contexts also for vegetables and grains) has spawned talk about self-sufficiency. Goa needs to produce its own food, this discourse urges. But it doesn't say who will produce this food, and there is no talk about improving the existing labor conditions.

Take for instance the viral #agrichallenge. It all started when images of an environmental activist group cultivating paddy circulated on social media. Soon many politicians cashed in, including a sarpanch, MLA, and ministers, and started challenging each other to cultivate paddy. While challenging each other to cultivate fields may seem like a new phenomenon, it is not necessarily so. The Rachol Seminary pioneered such exercises. For eight consecutive years, the priests and seminarians have been joined by locals from surrounding villages in cultivating a patch of land.

Members of the Rachol Seminary engage in the cultivation of not only grain and vegetables for the year, but – according to them – to also live as a community. The vision of Rachol Seminary is something that resonates with many Goans who believe that authentic Goan life is found through agrarian cycles. Thus, going back to the rice fields not only preserves a Goan way of life – *Goemkarponn* – that is cherished, but also buffers us from the onslaught of modern, capitalistic development. It is a way to renew, what many believe, the lost bonds of old community life of mutual affection and peaceful existence. Tied to the issue of community living and *Goemkarponn* is also the issue of employment. Many would argue that high unemployment rate is caused because land is not cultivated and the young generation migrates elsewhere. It follows logically that such 'going back to the fields' exercise will urge the youth to take up farming, mostly by claiming that it is very profitable to do so.

However, the solution does not seem to be so straightforward and there is no clear indication that harmonious community living is achievable through agrarian reforms. If one takes a long

historical perspective regarding Goa's problem of inadequate agrarian production, migration, and unemployment, it would seem that old events are being replayed for contemporary Goans. These combined issues had vexed Goan intellectuals who wrote in Portuguese, Marathi, and Concanim newspapers from the 1900s; many *tiatrs* were written during this time depicting the plight of the poor due to price hikes and adulteration of basic items like rice and other necessities. The reality is that, as in the past, there is an acute labor shortage in addition to the unregulated selling/distribution practices and poor quality of the products.

The crux of the problem is the treatment of those persons who provide this vital labor that produces and supplies the basic necessities. The person who does the hard labor, along with the labor or work itself, is disrespected. Generally, in Indian society, this person is forced to do hard labor, with very poor wages. Jobs such as cultivating and fishing/selling fish are viewed as the basest occupations, performed by the socially inferior; often the names of these jobs double up as insults in almost all South Asian languages. (I am not going to reproduce these insults here, but you know what I am talking about!)

So when politicians and well-meaning activists urge the youth today to take up farming and other such occupations, the big issue that they ignore is that these jobs are not considered as dignified labor. This is one reason why many would like to find employment in non-traditional occupations. Very often these are ill-paid jobs as well, and, even worse, they place one at the mercy and patronage of a contractor or a politician (sometimes one and the same) to find the space to work and sell the produce for a good price. For instance, the recent investigation in the manner in which certain individuals control the prices and distribution of fish in Goa, in tacit cahoots, or otherwise, with governmental and political authority, exposed how the laboring Goan was pushed out of getting a fair price for his hard labor. And it is not as if the 'outsiders' are the problem, because the lion's share of the labor of the 'outsider' is also cornered by a few kingpins. In Goa, they too are the laboring others who need better work conditions.

So where does this leave us in terms of our great desire for self-sufficiency? The problem of unemployment and self-sufficiency will persist so long as the mass of people provide labor for a pittance from which a handful will get rich. It will persist so long as there are laws that do not protect those who work, but on the contrary sell off everything to the highest bidder. In other words, an unequal and hierarchical distribution of wealth will forever ensure that the

laboring classes remain poor and the produce that the rest of us consume is of utterly inferior quality – sometimes even life-threatening. In such circumstances, one can understand why some seek greener and cleaner pastures. So if any demagogue tells you that he/she has a solution for these problems, it is safe to assume that it is empty propaganda. It is actually a slow killing propaganda, much like the formalin-laced fish.

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