

By DALE LUIS MENEZES



## The Denial of Dignity in a Casteist Society

Pratapsingh Rane's assertion that Goans abroad are doing no better than cleaning toilets, in the Goa State Legislative Assembly in the context of the resumption of mining activity, has received a lot of flak. Many Goans - via video blogs - said that there is no shame in doing any job so long as one brings an honest wage back home. As the anger over Rane's comment have cooled down, it would be more apt, as I have highlighted in previous columns, to focus on employments opportunities, working conditions and labour justice as issues that Goan society needs to discuss and address.

To be fair, Rane is not the first to make such a statement. Indeed, it is quite common to hear Goans referring to migrating Goans as 'toilet cleaners'. Why, it is quite possible that any one of the many readers of this article might have made similar comments. The fact that the people in Goa have been so casually calling migrating Goans as toilet cleaners is extremely shameful, and urgently calls for a change in our collective mental attitude.

This doesn't mean that Rane can be excused; he is an elected representative of the people of Goa and he cannot be spewing casteist venom on the people originating from the very state that he is an MLA. We can understand that his comments emerge from an identity and location in which feudal privileges have ossified over centuries. In any case, it is quite educational to ask why such a comment is demeaning. What is so fundamentally wrong in cleaning toilets that makes it apparently shameful, that mentioning it is an insult?

Everything, if one hails from South Asia. In South Asia, the dirtiest jobs are forced upon the lowest of the low who are forced to clean the filth created by others, often without any protective gear. Thus, a horror like manual scavenging is routine and normal for most in South Asia, particularly in India. There are communities that are condemned to do this job because they are forced to accept it as their way of life and their *dharma*. It is precisely because such practices are so widespread and entrenched in the social life of India that one finds one of the most horrible attitudes towards waste and its disposal. One would be lucky, in the subcontinent, to find a clean public toilet; one would be even luckier if one could find no garbage rotting alongside the roads and street corners. Because in the end it is not the

duty, or *dharma*, of members of dominant castes to keep public spaces clean – someone else will be forced to do it. Thus, what is the difference between cleaning toilets or disposing garbage in India and elsewhere?

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It is, again, everything. Or even if the difference is slight – for cleaning occupations are not necessarily high paying ones – it could still mean that the shame and humiliation are not as severe as in India. The cultural attitude that demeans people, condemns them to a life of slavery, and creates an insult out of what – as a society – we should have considered as valuable service is not necessarily one that blue collar workers have to suffer abroad. This is why a number of Goans could retort, “Look Mr. Politician, we do not feel demeaned for doing this work and we can provide for our family with dignity”.

Enjoying dignified working conditions abroad doesn’t mean that things get more hunky dory back home; it doesn’t mean that in our own backyards we do not participate and perpetuate the same casteist culture that Rane articulated. Other professions that are elevated as eminently Goan ones – that are iconic of *Goemkarponn* – such as fishing and agriculture have also been sneered at in public. The reasons are plain to see: these jobs are performed by those on the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy.

With the tourism and real estate boom, Goa has witnessed a huge influx of migrant labor. Often coming from poor regions and deprived backgrounds, these persons are exploited for their labor. In the absence of any proper regulation of labor relations these people often have the worst of working conditions – in fact, the lack of protective gear makes these jobs extremely dangerous. The denial of any dignity to the work that they do, and to their person, further adds to the problem. It is remarkable that a government that claims to tackle the problem of unemployment does so by making policies/legislations that remove roadblocks in capitalist investment, but never make any laws that protect the rights and dignity of the workers.

In this sense, our attitudes towards certain jobs are related to larger concerns of our society because the real issue that affects all is about proper wages and dignified working conditions. If one turns this formulation on its head, Goa is witnessing large scale migration, pathetic

working conditions, and dysfunctional public spaces/utilities (including public toilets), it is because as a society we have not jettisoned these utterly demeaning and undignified attitudes towards persons whose labor makes our society possible. Yes, there are no good jobs in Goa. Which also means that there is an absence of good working conditions in Goa. Hence, one can understand the desperation which causes Goans to migrate abroad, and also the desperation which causes others to migrate to Goa.

The outrage over Rane's comment is welcome, but its usefulness and the terms in which it is being posed is a matter of debate. Rather what we do with this outrage will make all the difference between our present condition and a better future, between casteist practices and decent work with a fair wage. Otherwise demeaning and humiliating attitudes will continue to proliferate. Sadly they are a way of life in India.

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