By DALE LUIS MENEZES

In Goan politics, the politician is an indispensable cult figure, one whose image is more important than his or her ability to discharge his or her public responsibilities. The unexpected presence of the ailing Pandurang Madkaikar, Cumbharjua MLA, for the first time in public in 11 months, at the floor test of the BJP government, a few weeks ago is a case in point. Madkaikar, who suffered a brain stroke last year, has been away from public life all this while. Despite his ill health, Madkaikar contributed, or was forced to contribute, to the cutthroat power struggles, even though he has not discharged his public responsibilities and was dispensed from his minister's post since last year.

In the images beamed by local news channels, Madkaikar looks cheerful although he is clearly not fully fit. Two attendants hold him steady as he slowly inches his way to his seat. Once seated, he does not appear to be comfortable. But he manages to joke and chat with his colleagues while two uniformed guards keep a close watch throughout. During the decisive moment of the floor test, Madkaikar raises his hand with difficulty—another attendant helps him.

To be fair, Madkaikar is not the only one who has clung to power despite ill health while being unable to function in a public capacity. There was former MLA of Mapusa, the late Francis D'Souza, who clung to his position. It was common knowledge to his constituents in Mapusa that D'Souza would frequently be away for treatment. The former CM, the late Manohar Parrikar, is, of course, the most recent example of clinging to power as the CM. In Parrikar's case, the BJP and the Chief Minister's Office went on a propaganda blitzkrieg to convince all that the CM was in good health.

In the farce that is contemporary Goan politics, Madkaikar's public appearance at the floor test showed the BJP government in poor light. There was simply no able second-rung leadership—a comment oft repeated following Parrikar's demise as well. Surely, the people of Goa deserve better. Especially since the in-fighting amongst various elected representatives has plunged Goa into an uncertain political future while the destruction of its people and landscape, initiated by various governments, both present and previous, is continuing unabated.

The lack of substitute leadership stems from the fact that Goan politicians jealously cultivate their own cult. They make themselves apparently indispensable to the voters as well as their followers. Many political commentators have stressed that Parrikar was the one who cultivated a cult following for himself more than anyone else. Parrikar's close friend and mentor, Subhash Velingkar was one of the commentators who gives the best insight into

Parrikar's functioning. Reflecting on Parrikar's political career, Velingkar noted to a local news channel that Parrikar was "dictatorial" by nature. He was often unable to work with the rest of the leadership in his party.

Velingkar and many other commentators allude to the 'cult of the personality'—a figure like the kings and queens of olden times—in Parrikar's functioning and rise to power. In fact, all politics in Goa operates through the 'cult of the personality'. The constituent or the voter is expected to be beholden to the politician in a patron-client relationship, while in a democracy such a relationship is theoretically and legally not necessary. Parrikar, though the best example, is not the only one who assiduously cultivated his own cult. Others, like Madkaikar too, cultivated their own cults.

Whether driven by naked ambition, a greed for power, the persistence of their supporters, or social circumstances, politicians like D'Souza, Madkaikar, and Parrikar enable and sustain a politics of the 'cult of the personality'. This leaves truly little room for efficient leadership to emerge and thrive. Rather than having *leaders* who lead, we only have *rulers* who want power and nothing but power. These rulers, in fact, serve those who fund their campaigns more than the people who vote for them. As such the most important function of democratic politics—to govern society efficiently and look after the welfare of each of its members—becomes a marginal issue in the grand scheme of cutthroat power struggles.

Think about Parrikar's compromises with the casino and mining companies which have almost destroyed the rivers and forests and think also about his belief in Hindutva which has furthered the already existing social and communal fractures in Goan society. To think, then, of Parrikar's legacy as an indispensable leader and cult figure is to realize the damage done by cult figures to the social fabric, culture, environment, and polity.

One of the reasons why the 'cult of the personality' marks our electoral politics is because our society is fundamentally stratified by caste and class. The severely stratified society makes it easier for politicians from dominant groups to become godfathers to leaders from the Bahujan underclass. The leaders from the Bahujan underclass find it difficult to rise and survive unless they compromise with the agendas of their groups. The result is dismal for a democratic polity: subaltern groups are further marginalized and minoritized simultaneously with environmental and cultural destruction.

In life and in death, the careers and legacies of politicians have lasting scars on the landscape, the culture of the land, and the future of the polity.

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