



Goa, according to a 2018 study, has the highest number of road fatalities per capita among all states in India. But is Goa's government – frantically building more roads, and widening old ones to monstrous proportions – concerned about this?

Highways to Hell, Courtesy the Government

No. Or rather, their concern is only that the victims of these fatalities should take the blame on themselves. I discovered how deliberate and blatant this blame-game was a few months ago, when I was approached by two neighbourhood kids, who asked me to sign something for a school assignment. It's about safety for pedestrians, they said. It turned out to be a list of promises that I had to make about how I would walk on the road. One of them was 'I will always use the footpath'. We were standing on a road without footpaths. It was followed by 'I will also use zebra crossings.' I couldn't remember when I had last seen a zebra crossing in Goa; the students did not even know what it was. But one of the most interesting ones was 'I will not walk under load.' The students showed me a Goa school board textbook which also repeated the expression more than a few times, describing it as a dangerous activity. It was clear that it was intended to mean 'I will not carry loads on my head while walking on the road.' People, according to this government and its textbooks, are apparently deliberately choosing to walk with loads on their heads, out of fun or mischief! Or, at least, this is what they want students to believe.

I have written before on the dangerous state of affairs for pedestrians in Goa. Roads are usually constructed without pavements, even though there are many pre-1961 roads with wide and accessible pavements in Panjim, Vasco, and Margao. Vehicles meanwhile are free to move at high speeds and far too close, without any concept of stopping when pedestrians are trying to cross. Hierarchy is, after all, everything in caste society, so the vehicles (and the 'high' folk within them) enjoy right of way while the lowly pedestrian can wait forever, or take courage into her hands and run across. Where the government does intervene, it is always by inconveniencing the pedestrian, e.g. by creating pedestrian subways or bridges which require extra effort and energy to use, or by enclosing pavements with railings so that pedestrians cannot cross where they need to, or by making pavements so high that they are more like seats at the side of the roads.

And do the government's textbooks ask vehicle-users to promise anything, as they ask pedestrians? Perhaps something like – I will give priority to pedestrian safety while driving? Or I will learn how to drive properly? The kids had not heard of this, because the answer is obviously no.

So we now have yet another way to marginalise the pedestrian – by victim-blaming. Make

the pedestrian vow to do things which are impossible. How do you walk on a footpath when there is none? How do you transport your goods if you are selling fish or vegetables door-to-door? Is the government willing to offer a car, or even a cart?

Obviously not. In fact, carts have actually been banned on Panjim's roads, because they 'obstruct traffic'. What is this all-important traffic which must not be obstructed? Private cars, of course! Yes, the same private cars that hog the road space that should belong to ALL, even as most of them transport just 1-2 people, and all of them guzzle precious resources like petroleum, create pollution, and cause vast numbers of injuries and deaths, of people and animals. And no problem at all that some of them are giant-sized - how can the authorities interfere with the sacred (i.e. caste-based) right of big-shots to swallow all the road if they want?

Cart-pushers, on the other hand, may produce no pollution, noise, or danger, but they are nobodies for the authorities, whose carts can be easily banned even if this means they lose their daily earnings, or have to now dangerously 'walk under load'. It is only their fault if they get hurt.

But, if the condition of Goa's roads was already unfair and dangerous, it is now set to get much worse. Thousands of crores have apparently been set aside by the Central government for 'improving' Goa's road infrastructure. This improvement doesn't mean increased pedestrian safety, of course; it means faster connectivity with the rest of India, and with the BJP-Congress' pet projects, like the new Mopa airport (thankfully on hold). Rumours are now rife of a new highway towards the port's coal hub, to be commenced after all the others have been built or widened to satisfaction; it is perhaps only then that we will find out the real reason for all the 'improvements'.

Goa is already covered with broad red gashes on both sides of many existing roads, cutting through villages and towns, slicing both buildings and hills willy-nilly, and adorned by multiple flyovers. As it was, villagers living near highways were scared of crossing them, with newspapers regularly reporting so-called accidents. (They are not really accidents at all, because something that is expected and predicted by experts is not an accident.) Now the same killer roads are doubling in width, allowing many more vehicles, more pollution, more speed, and more bad driving. And they are destroying not just homes and villages, but also Goa's forests and khazan wetlands. The result for the moment is increasing floods every monsoon, climate change, and displaced wildlife invading the villages. But the khazans are the lifeblood of coastal Goa, and if they disappear, say environmentalists, it won't be long before the whole of Goa does as well.

This hell-in-the-making is 'development', according to those in power today and many hoping

to be in power tomorrow. Their vision is nothing short of a plan to wipe out the land and the people – via highways, land-grab, coal-dust, casinos, etc. – ensuring loss of livelihoods and social fabric, and demographic transformation, so that Goa simply disappears into an increasingly ugly India. It is a plan that has to be stopped. By casting a decisive vote in the coming elections against those presiding over this disappearance, to start with.

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