



Taxis and Tourism: A Mess Made by Goan Governments

The Goan public sphere has been rent with polemics following the seven-day long strike called by the Association of Tourist Taxi Owners of Goa with the support of All Goa Yellow Black Taxi Association to protest against the Government of Goa's decision to support the Goa Miles app service. Struck by the viciousness of the polemic directed against taxi drivers (taxistas), we believe it is important to make the following seven observations.


To begin with we condemn the way in which the taxistas have been referred to, even by legislators, as a mafia. The taxistas have merely exercised their legal right to strike and this right must be respected. Many, if not all, of our contemporary rights have been won by the exertions of the working classes precisely through strikes, and it behooves us well to avoid false accusations of criminality against the associations of working-class groups and their struggles.

This labeling may hark back to the kind of class and caste relations that marked Goan society in the past, particularly the unequal and oppressive relations between landlords and tenants. The tendency for the dominant groups to see the genuine demands of the tenant class as illegitimate, and thus create a situation where there was (and is) largely no option for the tenant but to acquiesce or revolt, draws from unequal class and caste relations. As such, our first intervention in the on-going debate is that the caste dimensions of this conflict be taken into consideration.

In a caste-based society like India, the working-class man and woman is expected to labour for the privileged castes, often for meagre remuneration. When the formerly bonded castes now demand decent wages and better working conditions, it is not only difficult for those not from the laboring castes to comprehend the change in status quo, but as we can see in this conflict, they are also outraged. Indeed, the calls to "break the back" of the taxi association is very similar to the phrasing of feudal lords faced with recalcitrant peasants.

The second issue we deal with is the suggestion that the taxistas charge too much, that they refuse to submit to governmental regulation, and that this behavior is negatively impacting the state's tourist economy. These suggestions, especially from the government, are hypocritical, given that large portions of the Goan economy, and not just the tourism economy, have been marked by blatant illegalities. The fact that there seems to be a popular middle-class support to "break the back" of the taxistas makes it clear that, while the big fish get away scot-free, it is the traditionally marginalized who bear the brunt of public outrage.

We emphasize that the root of the problem facing the taxistas is the government's inability to



regulate the industry for all players. The tourism industry is utterly unfair when it comes to the persons who do the blue-collar jobs. Additionally, by peddling tourism as a lucrative employment option, the government has systematically shrugged its responsibility of job creation in other sectors. That things have come to a head in the manner we see today is, therefore, the result of decades of misgovernance. Thus, the taxistas cannot (and must not) take the fall for the misdeeds of the rest of the polity.

In fact, if there are so many taxis in Goa—about 26,000 in all—it is because of the Goan government's misguided plans to increase the tourist footfalls every year. Successive Goan governments have ignored all warning regarding the 'carrying capacity' of a small tourism destination like Goa. To service the ever growing tourist footfalls, the Goa government and starred resorts have encouraged Goans, especially the working-class sections in the coastal parts, to invest in taxis, and simultaneously also encouraged the business of hiring out cars and bikes to tourists (who often disregard both traffic rules and basic courtesy on the road, causing grave danger to other road-users). The result of such a faulty and misguided plan by the government is what we are witnessing today—and not just with the taxistas.

We know that the above argument may be met with the retort that, merely because the whole system is flawed and criminal, does not mean the taxistas should be allowed to rob as well. Because what the taxistas are doing is not robbery at all. They have taxes and fees to pay, and amenities to introduce in their taxis too, besides having to deal with the corruption that is endemic in the regulation regime. And this is the third issue that we would like to highlight. Burdened with interest that they have to pay on the loans for buying 'new and luxury taxis' that they are *required* to ply, high airport parking fees, a corrupt regime, the taxistas are unable to earn a decent living even with the current rates charged. Such a financial burden is testified by the fact that so many Catholic taxi drivers have moved and are still moving to the UK despite Brexit, and also by the fact that no taxi driver wants his children to inherit his trade, the way a doctor or an engineer or a business-owner would.

The fourth issue that we highlight is the high standard of living in Goa. One cannot expect the Goan taxistas to be fine with earning wages below the average standard of living in Goa. What the blatantly selfish middle class in Goa thinks of as exorbitant charges are in fact rates that allow the taxistas and their families a decent living in a place like Goa. The issue of a fair and sufficient wage is tied to the dignity of labor. By constantly harassing the taxistas and denying them a chance to earn a fair wage, Goan society and government are, in the end, denying Goan taxistas the dignity of their labour.

The fifth issue is the problem of an app-based taxi service. It is, we believe, no solution to the existing crisis. A good amount of the outrage against the taxistas is also because they are



opposing the entry of app-based aggregators. App-based aggregators like Uber and Ola in other cities in the country, and across the world, operate on the economy of scale. Drivers would be given benefits for completing more trips in short amount of time and the company offered the benefit accruing from such a system to the passengers (or riders, as they call them) by way of cheaper fares. In recent times, companies like Uber and Ola have stopped offering such benefits to the drivers, leading many to protest in metros like Delhi that they cannot make ends meet.

In a place like Goa, such an economy of scale is not possible. The demand for an app-based service rests on the seduction of cheaper price, and those who demand such a cheaper service forget that there is a person who performs the labor at a lower price. Drivers in Delhi, for example, work for 16-18 hours without a break to earn enough to pay their bills and instalments. Thinking solely of the convenience of the rider and not the interests of the drivers will surely affect the taxistas in the long run, as we can see how app-based services have killed existing taxi markets in cities across the world.

The government-supported app service, Goa Miles, has recently been on the PR offensive following the strike by the taxistas. Goa Miles is indeed offering cheaper options and is loudly claiming that it is in favor of protecting the interests of the drivers. However, we cannot think of such a PR exercise by Goa Miles as iron-clad assurances—it is not a legal guarantee. An enterprise driven by profit will not stop itself from raising the prices and overworking the drivers at a later time when opposition to the app will dwindle. When the going will get tough, and there is no doubt that the going in the Goan tourism industry will get tough in the days to come, it is the drivers and the riders that will pay a heavy price—in every sense of the term.

It is for reasons of destroying local livelihoods, while enriching distant speculators, as well as destroying the local infrastructure and making it vulnerable to attack by these same speculators that there have been calls to prevent the entry of these app-based taxis in various parts of the world. Indeed, it may well be that the taxistas are in fact ensuring the continued existence of a taxi network in the state. The app-based service does not address the demands of drivers for better working conditions.

As a matter of fact, as far back as 2007, the Federation of Tourist Taxi Owners and Drivers (FATTOD), assisted by Centre for Responsible Tourism (CRT) and the Sisters of Good Shepherd, had drafted a policy proposing a self-regulatory mechanism, approved and uniform fares, and that the State provide 30% subsidy for upgrading taxis, with the condition that they are owner-driven, 6 months repayment holiday for finance received towards upgrading taxis, and for interest rates to be 3% lower than normal bank rates. Further, they demanded pension similar to the Dayanand Social Security scheme available to motor-cycle pilots, and

health and life insurance. But clearly this draft policy fell on deaf ears, and the State traded the rights of the taxi owner-drivers away for a private operator.



The sixth, and perhaps a less serious issue, are the complaints of unsafe driving of the taxistas, and also boorish, or even violent, behaviour. But the solution for such rash driving and uncouth behavior of some taxistas, is not to “break their backs,” rather the solution lies in creating a positively fair and regulated industry.

Finally, there is an assumption that the opposition of the taxistas is holding back the development of tourism or of the Goan economy. Cleaning the mess of tourism or of the Goan economy cannot start with the taxistas. It must start with the government, followed by the big players like the starred resorts and their associated tour operators. The rest will simply fall in place.

(An #alzulajjexclusive)



Share this...



Facebook



Whatsapp



Print



Email



Twitter



Reddit