



There is a tourist hostel in Anjuna called Prison, which also calls itself a party hostel. Because, what better place to party than a prison? At Prison, so one hears, guests are called inmates, have to change into striped clothes and get their mug-shots photographed with boards mentioning their names, get locked up in their rooms by staff dressed like security guards, sleep on metal bunk beds, and so on. All for fun, of course. Fun for those with money to burn, and a need for new thrills – because just beaches, coconut trees, and cheap alcohol can get boring – not to mention the conviction that they will never really be imprisoned themselves.

Just fun, except that the fun is had at the expense of an ugly reality faced by others, i.e. the horrible state of real prisons in India. Those paying to be prisoners for a night are not actually expecting to be beaten up or tortured, or crowded into filthy cells. But that's what Indian prisons are like for the majority who are incarcerated. Not everybody, of course. But most of Indian prisoners also happen to belong to the most discriminated-against communities in the country, and this treatment continues in jail too. And bunk beds – who in Indian prisons gets a bunk bed?

That's why it was perplexing to hear a recent statement from Home Minister Amit Shah about human rights in India. While addressing the National Human Rights Commission, Shah announced that human rights are intrinsic to traditional Indian values, and so 'Western' standards of human rights shouldn't be 'blindly' applied to India.

Now, nobody will associate India with any standard of human rights, even before the current Home Minister. Just yesterday saw a report of one more death in police custody, of Pradeep Tomar in UP, where an 11-year-old child had to watch his father being beaten to death, after being arrested for questioning. And this is hardly unusual. International human rights organisations report regularly about the routine violence, humiliation, and discrimination faced especially by the poor in India, especially those of Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim communities, and especially women among them, at the hands of the authorities as well of society at large. Dalit and Adivasi children routinely face casteist humiliation and violence at school, forcing many to drop out; the torture continues in college and even university. Adivasis routinely face displacement and homelessness due to 'development' projects. Torture by the police – especially of the poor – is so accepted that it has been normalised, or even valourised, in popular and family entertainment. Impunity of the armed forces is another old issue. Murderous caste-based occupations like manual scavenging, continue to kill, injure and poison people belonging to Dalit communities every day, even as Modi boasts that India is now 'Swachh' because it is Open-Defecation-Free (ODF), ignoring also the admission of his own Chief Minister here in Goa that claims of ODF – including his own about

Goa – are all lies.



What's new is the attitude of the BJP government. Hypocrisy used to always be the norm earlier, right since 1947. Whatever might be happening within India, the country was presented to the world as one that was struggling to achieve everything progressive and modern. Like human rights, free speech, women's rights, a ban on child labour, reservation for discriminated-against communities, labour rights, mass education, land reform, you name it. The intention was there, asserted Congress governments; it's just taking time to achieve. Now, however things are somewhat different. Now we have a government brazenly admitting that that India will not uphold internationally-accepted norms in human rights.

Is it an improvement to have such a brazen government, one proud of being completely useless? Perhaps it is. Perhaps such brazenness is necessary for us to see the government, and the establishment it presides over, for what they – and we – are. Many of us privileged Indians have fooled ourselves for a long time that the rights and protections we enjoy are not because of our privilege, but because India is a land where citizens have rights and protection. The honesty of the current establishment forces us to recognise the truth. As Amit Shah says, this is a land where traditional family and village values are there to protect you. Yes, those traditional values – which can be summed up simply as caste – are precisely what has protected us privileged folks all this time, while violently discriminating against others.

The test of a society, someone said, is in how it treats its weakest members. A prisoner is probably one of the weakest. While describing his imprisonment in Aguada jail in the 1950s for his participation in the anti-Portuguese movement, Suresh Kanekar (my father) mentioned the bunk-beds in the prisoners' cells, and how, as the youngest in his group, he always slept in the top bunk (*Goa's Liberation and Thereafter: Chronicles of a Fragmented Life*, 2011). When I visited the same prison – then Goa's Central Jail – more than half a century later, in 2013, while doing a study of the architecture of Aguada Fort, a brief interaction with the prisoners, along with a peep into their cells, resulted in the discovery that they were now sleeping on the floor, and also under leaking ceilings. Bunk-beds under the Salazar dictatorship; no beds at all but dripping ceilings under Indian democracy, and after more than 50 years of 'liberation'!

The prison authorities tried to explain things away by telling us how old the buildings were and how difficult it was to keep them going. But Goa's other prison facilities are little better, with regular news of overcrowding, squalid conditions, disease, gang wars, violence against prisoners, and attempted suicides by the latter. And the Central Prison has now moved out of Aguada to a brand new facility in Colvale, built at a cost of Rs 100 crores, and inaugurated in 2017. We hear though, from reports in the media, that the cells in this supposedly state-of-

the-art facility not only continue to have no beds, but also have leaking roofs, just 2 years after inauguration.



Of Human Rights and Indian Values

Clearly our Indian standards of human rights are being upheld, along with our Indian standards of building construction!

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