

By DALE LUIS MENEZES



Of all the misplaced priorities of successive Goan governments, the most recent is the Misplaced Priorities: Profit at the Expense of Goa Vibrant Goa summit. The summit aimed to attract investment in the areas of pharma, tourism, IT, and real estate. Even a cursory glance at the industries that the Goan government is promoting should make the alarm bells ring. For it is precisely these industries and their unregulated promotion that causes economic, social, and cultural problems in Goa.

The problem with the government's promotion of such business schemes lies in the non-recognition of the environmental cost on Goa and its people. Some weeks back, a tanker carrying the poisonous naphtha chemical, docked at the port in Vasco, drifted and ran aground in Dona Paula, posing a severe threat to the lives and livelihoods. We are still anxiously hoping that the poisonous chemical will not leak in the Goan waters, which are already polluted by MPT's coal handling. The tanker drifted because the October retreating monsoons brought with it the cyclone Kyarr, causing much damage to life (in addition to trees and animals) and property.

The government's response to disasters, whether man-made or natural, is inadequate. Governmental authorities do not display the initiative that one expects of their government to regulate and prevent disasters. It is not the first time that a ship has run aground. The infamous MV River Princess at Candolim and the barge hired for a wedding reception at Arossim have cause irreparable sand erosion at both these places. Cyclone Kyarr is not the first time that cyclonic winds have battered the coastline of Goa as well as caused floods. The government's preparedness is almost nonexistent, which is to say that in times of crisis Goans can only depend on good fortune and the divine.

When the government is so inefficient to provide disaster management as well as the usual utilities like clean water (recall that Ilhas had no drinking water for 8-9 days in August and Ponda for even more this year) and regular electricity, it is beyond ridiculous that it promotes business and investment in Goa. How do you expect people to work if they do not have clean water to drink?

A note also on the Vibrant summits, the brainchild of the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and a 'Gujarat model of development' is in order here. The claims of economic boost through the Vibrant Gujarat summit are at odds with the realities on ground. There is simply no accountability of the investment brought in by the thousands of MoUs signed in Gujarat. Compared to Goa's 17 MoUs, Gujarat Vibrant summits have signed thousands of MoUs with business houses since its inception in 2003. The most recent assessment of the Vibrant Gujarat summit, with about 28,000 MoUs, confirms that it has not delivered on its lofty promises. And so, the question emerges: why does the government, assisted by the business

community, engage in such shambolic 'development' and business practices?



Misplaced Priorities: Profit at the Expense of Goa

The answer is startlingly simple: profit at any cost. By 'profit,' I do not only mean 'greed' of individuals but also a systemic problem wherein the social and political order rests on the extraction of natural resources by displacing the poor communities and an absence of fair redistribution of wealth. Demands for job creation or abysmal employment rates are then used as a smokescreen to promote businesses that do not care about worker rights and welfare. The government also does not display any seriousness in protecting worker rights. The result is an economic system that can collapse at any moment with catastrophic effects. Hence, it is a systemic problem that causes the most damage. Here's how.

The government makes laws, such as those that create Special Economic Zones (SEZs) or Investment Promotion Boards, which give businesses incentives like tax breaks and a free hand to operate how they choose. Through its policies, such as trying to attract investment, the government abdicates its regulatory role—otherwise business houses refuse to participate in 'boosting' the economy. The government, as well as the business houses, circumvent the will and consent of the people on whose lands or in whose immediate vicinity these industries are established. Ignoring the irregularities, or rather actively promoting them, leads to massive losses to the exchequer. The exchequer also loses cash if the projects fail as the government, through a contractual binding, frees the business houses of all liabilities. In the case of the failed SEZs in Goa, the Goan government owes damages worth crores to the private business houses!

The systemic promotion of profit through law and policy is today, unfortunately, sustained by electoral democracy. Most people participate in the electoral democracy for basic amenities such as water, electricity, roads, and job security. But the result is opposite: both the government and business houses fail to deliver a stable economic system. Hence, the blame that individual voters are responsible for voting for the wrong guy by taking bribes, even if it is the case, does not explain the cause of my present situation. The vote of the honest voter also results in a systemic failure. Every government in power does the same thing, without fail.

Thus, we need to change our thinking about profit and economic growth. Stock market statistics are not a sign of progress and prosperity. As long as businesses demand unfair incentives, and as long as the government (party affiliation notwithstanding) humors such demands, the economic and social ills will continue unabated. Both the government and business houses must think of a 'slower economy of life,' meaning not a slow down of economic progress but a stable system that offers redistributive justice.

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