

Politicians cannot stay away from publicity. They depend and thrive on it. Through propaganda, politicians suggest that the polity is in good health, even if the reality might be completely to the contrary. While at other times, this publicity culture creates dense smokescreens of misinformation, in times of a pandemic, it could be fatal.

The publicity culture unfolds in the following way. Often there will be a leader who is 'doing something.' This act is inaugurating a new public work or donating for a charitable or worthy cause. If it is an inauguration, the leader will pause a few moments before cutting the ribbon for the photographers. If it is a donation, the giver and the receiver will also pause so that their generous deed is recorded for posterity. The brief moment when these leaders and philanthropists 'pause' for the camera is the moment of publicity.

The most recent example of the dependence of politicians on publicity is the statements of Goa's Chief Minister, Pramod Sawant. While Goa enjoyed a relatively COVID-19-free April, at least going by official figures, the CM jumped the gun to declare Goa a 'Green Zone.' The reason was that no new cases were being reported in that month. However, it was common knowledge that many Goans, either in India or abroad, were to be repatriated in the first weeks of May. Naturally, there was a likelihood that more COVID-19 positive cases would come to light. And they did! By the end of May, the official number of cases rose from 7 to 70 (and counting). Now Mangor Hill in Vasco is a containment zone.

One wonders why the CM was so hasty to declare Goa a green zone. The reasons become apparent as one observes the positive coverage in the national press. The national press hailed Goa for being the first COVID-19-free state in the country. Perhaps the country needed some positive news, or it was good PR by the Goan government. But the Goan government and the national media discarded commonsense. They prematurely celebrated the absence of new cases for April. The result was a miscommunication of COVID-related information to the Goan public; people felt that they were safe from the disease.

The health and economic crisis created by the pandemic is a severe challenge to the leadership pretensions, one created by carefully crafted PR, of the politician. The Corona crisis tests a politician's ability to take decisive actions to ensure that the state or country does not descend into chaos. In times of crisis, one expects politicians to enact laws that protect the citizens; make financial resources available to tackle disasters; and provide the citizens with accurate information about the crisis. The shocks and destruction that the pandemic is leaving in its wake, as, for instance, in the migrant worker crisis, is proof that most of the elected representatives have failed the people.

But the need for publicity is not just a necessity of the politicians. Everyone who engages in a public act of leadership or philanthropy indulges in the publicity culture. I watched with horror



as many people reached out to the poor and vulnerable without any regard for the social distancing norms. The images of someone giving foodstuff or medicines to the older person, and thereby standing close to them for a photo-op, was a cause of concern. What if the corona virus was transmitted in the process of 'handing over' the foodstuff, medicines, or money?

And politicians, being leaders, are reinforcing such irresponsible and foolhardy behavior. So hungry are our politicians for publicity that social distancing norms are violated to gain publicity. Recently, the CM was pilloried for not following his own orders when he showed up to inaugurate the grade separator of a flyover in Dabolim. More than anything else, the inauguration of the grade separator was a move to earn publicity. The CM and his cabinet colleagues were standing close to each other, no doubt to be photographed as politicians 'doing something' for the people of Goa.

I am not questioning the charitable motives of all those who reached out to the poor and vulnerable without social distancing norms. It is important to reach out to the vulnerable and provide them with essential care and relief. Philanthropy is fine so long as it is not done merely for publicity—and in times of corona, done with social distancing.

Our leaders could have lived by example. In other words, they could have set aside the publicity-seeking culture, or altogether jettison it. Photo-ops are not necessary to show that the government is working for its people, or that the elected representatives are performing their constitutional duties. These photo-ops rather suggest that the government is not doing enough for the citizens. After the Mangor Hill cases came to light, the CM was nowhere seen, and the press conference was conducted by bureaucrats. The photo-ops also suggest that there will be no change in the political culture after the corona crisis.

We can easily see how a culture of publicity in our politics and public life could end up being disastrous. In times of severe crisis, our publicity-seeking political culture creates more problems than it solves. In other times, when there is no pandemic or natural disaster, the publicity-seeking culture leaves a trail of ruined or decaying public infrastructure projects. Who among us have not uneasily entered ramshackle buildings or driven over potholed roads? Funnily enough, these infrastructure projects were once inaugurated with fanfare and photo-ops. The commemoration plaques that gather dust and the photographs of the inauguration of any infrastructure project are a grim reminder that our leaders fail us daily.

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The Publicity Culture of our Politics