



To feel citizenship is to feel belonged, to be able to take part in the decision making processes that shape that society. It means one should be able to leave and return to the country/ies of citizenship. From this lens of citizenship, if one looks at how the Government of Goa has treated its citizenry through actions taken statedly to address the COVID 19 pandemic, then it has left in its trail much to be desired. The pandemic struck, shortly after the people of Goa (and India as a whole) were up in arms against the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, the National Population Register and the National Register of Citizens (CAA-NPR-NRC).

The CAA was clearly discriminating against people on the basis of religion, directly and indirectly, apart from discriminating on the basis of history/work history, again directly and indirectly, by, for example holding a sword against OCIs, which includes those Goans who have reclaimed their Portuguese citizenship and consequently compelled to surrender their Indian citizenship. The enumeration for the National Population Register was scheduled to begin in mid-April. Even as this is being written, the Government is still adamant about starting the enumeration no sooner the pandemic restrictions are lifted.

To begin with, while furious campaigning for the Zilla Panchayat elections was on in March 2020, the Government had invoked section 144 Cr. P.C. in the name of the COVID 19 pandemic. This however did not prevent the Chief Minister and his colleagues from addressing large gatherings of people, thereby posing a threat to informed citizenship, and the right to vote in an informed way. One could not help feeling that this was not a step to address the pandemic but to prevent political dissenters from organizing. The Zilla Panchayat elections were then cancelled, after the Government was left with no option, given national pan country directives.

Then followed a saga of citizenship woes, that seemed like a continuum of the deprivation of citizenship. The Government of Goa, which had earlier announced a partial lockdown, had to fall in line thereafter with a Government of India Janata curfew on 22 March, that is, lockdown throughout the day, with the Chief Minister assuring that there is no need to rush for provisions thereafter. And all of a sudden in a jiffy, a 21 day lockdown was announced in India, but accompanied by local directives that mandated that even shops, grocers and markets had to be closed – without even so much as a warning to prepare!

What at best could have, and should have, been a medical emergency was soon made into a political emergency. When total lockdown was announced, it meant that suddenly people were left without food and health services. It did not need rocket science to see that COVID 19 and the lockdown were soon being used as a guise by the Government to act arbitrarily

and do what it otherwise could not do, in normal times, when there is a semblance of democracy. Now, all of a sudden, civil and political rights were completely thrown to the winds. People were not taken into confidence when making this decision.

Apart from many not having access to any food supplies till a system was put in place days later, there was the setting of police onto innocent citizens who had come out on the roads foraging for any food supplies. At this time, the poor who cannot stock food, especially daily wage migrant labourers, were the worst casualty. The Government even set the Central Industrial Security Force on the people, until citizen groups, through social media, forced them to call them off. (Initially, the lockdown was applied to media as well, but the restrictions were later relaxed. It is not as if the media has been playing a spectacular role. But they have in some situations).

One found that both the local people and the migrant workers were at the receiving end of the same stick, be it the stick of the police or the stick of the Government policies during COVID 19. It was not that inequities did not exist prior to COVID 19 but they multiplied manifold taking advantage of COVID 19. Normally, local people are pitted against migrant workers and vice versa. This again during the pandemic where for instance, fish sale was not actively enabled, while migrant door to door vendors who source fish from trawler catch were capturing the market for fish. So two sets of marginalized workers were scrambling for the crumbs that the Government policies were throwing. There was no thought also for the local daily wage workers like those who help with house maintenance like roofing, who cultivate and sell their produce door to door, small shop owners, motorcycle pilots, taxi drivers who had to suspend their business or lost their livelihoods. They were all left high and dry.

But at least some citizens were wise enough to see through the games that were being played. They recognised that whether it is Goans or overseas Goans- overseas citizens of India (OCIs) or migrant workers, they were all being deprived of rights that follow from citizenship. No active steps were being taken to get Overseas Goans, especially seafarers stranded on the seas, back home. Not until there was a furore, and the wife of a seafarer and others who had joined in endorsing her demands, were arrested and detained as a preventive measure. The Government claimed that it had been making the efforts, but no appropriate correspondence had actually been carried out, and no voices and suggestions were heard until a peoples' proactive effort. No active steps were being taken to make sure that the migrant workers stranded within their crowded homes due to the lockdown, could access basic goods and services, necessary for survival. No active steps were being taken to assist migrant workers who wanted to return to their home states in India, until much later, when also the efforts were half-hearted to the point that the Chief Minister went on board to say "We have captive labour in Goa; if other states take them back, ongoing works will be

affected". With such an endorsement of bonded labour where the Government otherwise portrays Goa as 'developed' to the world, whatever happened to the compliance with its obligations towards citizens? A New Normal of Citizenship with COVID-19

Also, a labour regulation was thrust on the people, ironically just after May Day 2020, without so much as the courtesy of even consulting with the trade unions, and with no means for labourers to protest and resist. The notification in effect resulted in labour working overtime on certain days, while benefitting the corporates in how the timing schedules were permitted to be organized.

Feedback on a notification pertaining to Environment Impact Assessment, was elicited in May 2020, to include provisions where holders of certain projects which were earlier required to hold a public consultation are exempted, and can circumvent the law by splitting the project into parts so that they are all less than the prescribed minimum limit required to hold a public consultation. No doubt this was a Central Government delegated legislation, but the Goa Government could well have given its inputs based on ground realities such as that hearings of piece meal projects held dangerous portents generally and more specifically for a small state with a proportionately large coastal belt where the ramifications are huge. But the Government failed to rise to the occasion. It took a massive concerted push by people to get the Government of India to extend time for feedback

So also all kinds of new projects were being cleared without the mandated hearings and without the possibilities of people raising their voices, organizing and protesting. These include the three linear infrastructure projects approved by the State and National Wildlife Boards that is, the expansion of National Highway 4-A, the construction of a transmission line, and the doubling of the existing railway line, all passing through the Bhagwan Mahaveer Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park at Mollem. This, with scant regard for what these projects meant for the land and the natural resources in Goa, what it meant for the livelihoods of the people, what it meant to their lives in effect.

The people of Goa are the stakeholders in the land and the resources but they were not being enabled, and were, in fact, actively being disabled from having a say in the decisions regarding the projects being undertaken during COVID 19. Protests or extension of solidarity to land and environmental rights struggles have been stopped by the police in the guise of violations of section 144 Cr. P. C., even when people kept safe distance and maintained a number less than four, while the powers-that-be continued to hold meetings among themselves without masks or safe distance.

And at another level was the issue of how actually the COVID pandemic was being addressed. After having done no preparations during the lockdown, which was the time when the public

infrastructure should have been built, the Government was busy proclaiming Goa as a 'green zone', conveniently hiding the fact that testing had primarily been done only of those with travel histories as other people were not accessing or, rather, could not access, medical services anyways because of the lockdown. So cancer patients, patients needing dialysis, and others were all left stranded, thanks to the vagaries of the powers-that-be.

A citizenry has a right to know what is going on in the interests of their safety but the Government was hiding more than it was revealing. There was no standard in the kind of statistics being put out. For example, Panjim almost did not figure although one of the first local cases was said to have been detected in Panjim. So also Taleigao. Official reports would mention Tonca, Panjim, or Camarabhat. Same with the South. It would be Mangor Hill Vasco or the like. And then came a death at Chicalim. Even though there was never a statistic about the cases at Chicalim. Were there vested tourism interests or the vested coal lobby who were worried about what this might mean for their anyways large size pockets? COVID deaths have been attributed to comorbidities. But of course, no one dies of COVID, like no one dies of common cold. They die because their immune systems are down and COVID renders them breathless and eventually lifeless.

The ray of hope was the aid groups that were set up all over. There was COVID Outreach Goa, COVID Help, Konkan Development Society, various Muslim groups, the Churches, Goa Sikh Youth, and so on, that were selflessly reaching out to citizens. There were groups monitoring the Government's response as well as reaching out, such as Goa Peoples' Voices: COVID 19 response. The petitions made by the latter are up on the Facebook page *Goa People's Voices COVID 19 response* and are a good resource to see how issues surfaced on a daily basis.

Similarly, the lockdowns were arbitrary. Even during the lockdown, the ports were expected to offload coal, and transport it. And trucks were permitted to transport mining ore. Workers working at those ports had to report to work from wherever they stayed. A carbon factory in South Goa also actively functioned using the exemption being available to some units that were characterized as essential. The test of essential was arbitrary, and the argument of functional economy was used in a facile way without factoring the dysfunctionality being caused by not taking measures with respect to the spread.

A new normal of citizenship has been playing out, the kind that will soon see that Goa does not even exist. Because what is Goa if not its people, and the coastline and the land that people have so sustainably maintained over the years? At the end of the day, what sense does Citizenship make when certain citizens are seen as dispensable and deprived of their rights? Or is this just a continuum of the CAA type discrimination?

Response.



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