



The Goans v/s Migrants politics is hurting us: Looking Back to Look Forward

My mind goes back to the time when the same Goans v/s Migrants rhetoric was used to manipulate the people of Vasco to support evictions there. The Government said it was 'cleaning up' Baina, ostensibly to rid the area of "bad women", so that the children of "decent, respectable" residents can then go to the Baina beach. The State therefore 'cleaned up' Baina under the guise of cleaning up the place of 'outsiders' so that 'insiders' may have access. What the people were not told was that the Mormugao Port Trust (MPT) already had its plan ready to build a compound wall right around the area and render the beach out of bounds for everyone. The fact-finding report, "Evictions in Goa: Case Study of Baina," brought out by Bailancho Saad, pointed out the above and more, way back in November 1997. At that time, no one bothered. No one paid heed. The Government's rhetoric sounded appealing. The rhetoric of Goans v/s Migrants had made a strong impression.

Pertinently, the fact-finding report began with the famous quote of Martin Niemoller, which reads, "First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I was not a Communist, Then they came for the Jews , and I didn't speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for trade unionists and I didn't speak up because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I was a Protestant and so I didn't speak up. Then they came for me, and by that time, there was no-one left to speak for anyone." What began panning out was exactly that: the first targets were the women in prostitution and the more marginalized sections of migrants, which included the fakirs, then another set of migrants which included workers on trawlers, followed by the local fishing community, and then the people of Vasco, and now in 2020 the people living alongside the proposed coal routes of roadways and railways and then the people of Goa at large, from what will happen to the waterways and the rivers.

"The attempt to evict the residents of the Baina slum which is a red light area is not linked to any social welfare concerns but to the pressure on the Government from the MPT Authorities who wish to get on with the construction of the link road and expansion of the port, now that their various projects are being approved by the Government of India. The pressure is also from some vested interests who want to put the land to some commercial purpose, either a hotel and shipping complex or a resort. It is a reflection of the growing commercialization of the economy in which the Government (both the State and Central) is more and more willing to sacrifice the interests of the politically powerless, be they some Goans or the poor, or the 'outsider' or the shack owner or the red light area residents for profits", reads the Report (pg.

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Today sixteen years later, we are on the horns of the same dilemma. Many of us rave and rant about migrants, and see them as the source of our ills. What we are doing is akin to the itch being somewhere and the scratching happening elsewhere. Will we learn our lessons from the past, and realize that what is actually happening is a corporate takeover of Goa, accompanied by a gentrification that leaves little scope for just and equitable lifestyles? Using the language of 'outsider' occludes the real problem. By its very nature, it is about seeing a person as the 'other' either without understanding the systemic processes at work. In the case of people who see the presence of non-Goans and therefore see only the superficial scenario and not the real reasons and blame the superficial facts. In the case of corporates and the politicians and the acquiescing bureaucrats, it is about deliberately hiding the processes at work.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the MPT Chairman called Goans "outsiders" at the public hearing for the proposed expansion of Berths 5A and 6A at Mormugao Port intended to increase coal transportation. He was referring to people from Cansaulim, Chicalim, Cortalim, Colva, Cuncolim, Curtorim, Dona Paula, Loutolim, Navelim, Nerul, Seraulim, Taleigão and various other parts of Goa who had come to make their submissions at the public hearings. The MPT Chairman Jeyakumar was calling Goans from outside Vasco outsiders, as if coal understands village and municipal boundaries. It is precisely because it does not understand human boundaries that regulations require that those panchayats within a certain radius of the proposed project be intimated about the project. Further the water sources are connected, therefore this has further repercussions for other parts of the State.

Clearly the berth expansion is meant to facilitate expansion of coal transportation activities. All projects are not meant to benefit the communities residing along the coast or communities that are stakeholders. Yet, to one of my objections at the hearing on Proposed Development of Fishing Jetty, Multipurpose General Cargo Berths and POL Terminal at Mormugão Port which ran as follows, "Whose interests must be prominent? How can you talk of prominent area being occupied by fish landing platform and the need to shift it? The local people MUST have the possibility to continue to occupy prominent areas/their commons` It has been so for centuries in Goa. Why should the use of prominent space by the fishing community be lost to big traders' and corporates' interests?", the MPT's response was simply "No remarks". This can be seen on the following website of the Goa State Pollution Control Board:

I had occasion to hear a similar chant about 'outsider' from the Taleigão MLA when I had gone to Marivel near Dona Paula to assist the local fisherpeople (at their instance) in finding

out from the horse's (i.e. the administration's) mouth what was being done about the naphtha tanker that had run aground and was lying precariously against a cliff. If not removed, it could, in the event of an imminent cyclone, shift and crash against their houses, with life threatening consequences for the residents. The MLA was seen accusing the people of being instigated by 'outsiders' (which according to her, were the media and those not resident at Marivel), which in fact was an insult to the intelligence of the fisherpeople and the migrant workers actually staying at Marivel.

This language of 'outsider' and the manipulation of migrants, is deployed by MLAs to divide and rule. In 2006, we had occasion to see how two prominent religious communities of Goa were weaponised using precisely this ground. The people who have been settled at Sanvordem for a long time, were faced with a scarcity of water. The long-time residents of the particular area, are persons of various communities, mainly Hindu and Muslim and a few Catholic, who had originally migrated in order to be close to their work in the mines or with mining related activities. Despite this fact, they would have to individually beg and were forever kept at the mercy of the local politicians for access to their basic amenities. They could lose any facilities given to them, if they dared assert their rights as citizens or as workers on the mines. When on being tired of having to submit in this fashion, the people got together across communities and made a joint representation for what was their right, this was not convenient for the local politicians any more. The result? Engineering of communal riots pitting the largely Hindu and small Christian community against the Muslim community and projecting the latter as this monstrous 'outsider'.

What we must look at are situations that compel people to migrate, by examining why so many Goans are migrating. Goans look down on fisherpeople, fishworkers, labourers, domestic workers and manual scavengers and act in a condescending manner towards them. There is a compartmentalisation that is there in areas of socializing between communities. To add to it is the lack of employment opportunities. Therefore those who did that work have migrated from Goa to other countries where they may be doing the same work, albeit with at least a better take home pay and possibly also a dignified treatment.

It is the same with the migrant workers who have migrated here. It is a situation of the circumstances of the poor migrant workers that has compelled them to migrate. Hence, we need to address the machinations that create conditions of forced migration for Goans having to migrate for overseas as well as for those from other parts of the country forced by circumstances to migrate to Goa which promises to be a safer haven in comparison.

There must be appropriate work conditions that will enable people to develop roots and work along in engagement with land and various resources collectively and cooperatively. This

way, people will have stakes in their work, and the chances of using the resources sustainably will be much higher, provided they have the power over the resources and the same are not under the control of a limited few. In this context, this is to be distinguished from gentrification which causes another set of discontents by displacing local people to pander to the lifestyles of the rich and famous who descend on the community.

In the Government's eyes, everyone who dissents or asserts rights or affirms people-centric solutions is an outsider, indeed an outsider to a model of development that privileges profits over people. Yes, Goa deserves better. Yes, Goa is also a land worth fighting for. Yes, Goa is different. Goa has a different legal and political history. But the difference cannot be used to exploit Goans or migrants and play divide and rule, while corporates laugh their way to the bank and beyond. If basic human rights of all are met, people will not be at the mercy of politicians who will weaponise them to win elections, by forever keeping the carrot as well as the Damocles sword dangling over them.

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