

By DALE LUIS MENEZES



The Meaning of Liberation in 2021

This is not the first time that Goans in large numbers have questioned if Goa is truly liberated. But this is the first time when a large number of peaceful citizens, including children, were detained by the police, for creating awareness about the destruction of Goa, right on 19 December, the day Goa was liberated from Portuguese rule! The recent protests, in a long history of protests in Goa, were sparked by the Government's decision to promote the double-tracking of the South Western Railway, and a power line and a new National Highway through Goa's lush green Mollem forest on its southern frontier. That the state government has received a grant of 100 crore rupees for the year-long celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of 'Liberation Day' only added to the irony of the situation.

The first time that any serious debate took place on the meaning of liberation in contemporary Goa, at least in recent memory, was about 4 years ago. In 2016, many responded to some unsavory comments by a group of freedom fighters, who asserted that Goans who had opted for Portuguese citizenship must be punished. The irresponsible comments by some Freedom Fighters opened a Pandora's Box and the ensuing debate highlighted that in a truly liberated Goa, the voices of the people would not be muzzled. In such a Goa, another strand of the same debate pointed out, the Goan landscape would not be destroyed by commissioning mega-projects in the fragile ecology of Goa.

In the current context, while Goans were debating if they truly enjoy liberty in their homeland, many people also remembered the Portuguese dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar. His memory is alive and kicking largely because many, including political opponents, view the Government acting in a highhanded and dictatorial way. A spokesperson for the Aam Aadmi Party, Sandesh Telekar, and the supremo of the Goa Forward Party, Vijai Sardesai, likened the current CM Pramod Sawant's repressive measures to those enacted by the Salazarist regime on the Goans who questioned Portuguese rule in Goa.

To an extent, remembering Salazar's dictatorial regime at this moment makes sense. Goans are witnesses to how their liberties are being slyly eroded by the state through its police, among other institutions. While the full extent of Salazarist repression in Goa is yet to be studied, what is important in this context is that his name serves as a shorthand for the highhandedness of politicians and governments who repress the citizen's right to free speech and dissent. The Sawant-led government's refusal to allow any protest, along with its refusal to scrap the triad of destructive projects, is clearly seen as a dictatorial way of functioning. In liberated Goa, definitely, representatives of the people should be more responsive to the grievances of the electorate as well as the integrity of the state's resources.

To his (dis)credit, Sawant is not the first Chief Minister of Goa to be likened to a dictator. His

mentor, the late Manohar Parrikar, whose portrait sat next to Sawant when he took charge, was the first CM to receive the dishonor of being likened to a dictator. Ever since Parrikar first took charge as Chief Minister, after a decade-long saga of political horse-trading in the 1990s, his dictatorial style of functioning became the hallmark of his government. His word, it was said, was the law, and many of his supporters even admired that, claiming that such a style delivered the 'good governance' that was desperately needed in Goa then.

But comparisons to Salazar started happening about 10 years ago more openly. For instance, a gag order of sorts was issued against the tiatrist fraternity in 2014. This move came after Parrikar was being widely criticized, with his aura of 'good governance' waning. The tiatrists had had enough of his style of governance and, as is their tradition, were subjecting him to stinging criticism. The now-rescinded guidelines were framed for performances at the Ravindra Bhavan and explicitly demanded that MLAs should not be criticized nor attacked personally. Such a gag order revived memories of censorship, for tiatr and tiatrists were indeed under censorship in the final years of the Portuguese regime.

It is no coincidence that new debates about the meaning of 'liberation' or 'liberty' were articulated simultaneously with a revival of memories of a dictator or dictatorial ways of functioning. Liberty cannot exist without freedom of speech and protest. And these are the fundamental rights that are being extinguished in the name of development, or in the name of citizenship (by refusing to see the benefits of dual citizenship for Goans), or in the name of cultural-religious politics (like indirect beef bans or frequent shortages, and increasing communalization of the society by political parties and their fringe groups). Freedom and liberty, then, appear to be a distant dream or an illusion, or something that, at best, can be found in the pages of textbooks or in politicians' speeches.

Goa's post-Liberation history has been one economic crisis after another. In recent years these economic crises have only deepened, and new social problems have added to the state's woes. The people of Goa have paid a high price of poor economic planning, an almost non-existent regulation of industry, and development of an extractive nature, be it for tourism, or in the iron ore mining, or in the unregulated growth of the real estate industry. The forcible promotion of projects and the destruction of Goa will only further erode the confidence of Goans of having any rights or protection in their own homeland.

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