

By AMITA KANEKAR



The Centre has given the Goa government 300 crore rupees to celebrate 60 years of “Liberation”. This generous gift, apparently three times what the state government had requested, throws up some questions.

Not, of course, about the reason for the generosity. After all, elections are coming up in Goa next year. Even otherwise, the end of European colonial rule is a topic that can be used to pump up unquestioning nationalist pride, which – with the help of lights, music, and so-called historians spouting dubious and self-aggrandising versions of the past – helps to forget all the failures of the present. ‘Bread and circuses’ was a term used to describe the Roman empire; here it is just circuses, the more the better.

But Goans are not exactly in the mood for celebration. Thus the question that was immediately asked by many was: what will the money be used for? While corporate types spoke of the need of sops for COVID-hit tourism businesses, many others felt that the money should be used to help out people who had lost jobs and incomes last year; on ensuring that children in Goa get a decent education, even if it is online, by making sure that each one (including those who were forced to drop out last year) has a mobile/laptop and internet connectivity; and on improving public health infrastructure in Goa, which proved to be seriously inadequate during the worst of the pandemic. Still others pointed out that the expenditure should be done in an open manner, not like the Rs 200 crore of a decade ago, which was similarly handed over with much fanfare by the Centre to the then Digambar Kamat government to celebrate 50 years of Liberation, only to vanish from public and media memory once the initial hype was over.

Behind all these excellent suggestions, one can clearly read disillusionment, even anger. Nobody really expects this government to do anything worthwhile with the money. No wonder CM Pramod Sawant suddenly sounds all concerned and conciliatory. The money will not be used only for celebrations, he claims. It will go, he says, to improve social and physical infrastructure, especially at sites connected to Liberation, and for honouring freedom fighters, and to support ‘weaker section of society’ affected by COVID.

Now the first part of this plan is not a surprise, because infrastructure usually means construction activity, and construction activity is what these governments love, both at centre and state. In fact, the anger simmering in Goa is all about infrastructure development projects as at Mollem – and the fact that increasing numbers of Goans want to be liberated from them. The recent success of the anti-IIT and anti-marina struggles show that the government is finding it difficult to ignore this anger. Pramod Sawant may huff and puff about ‘external forces’ all he wants, but it is the internal forces on the ground that are making him

blink.



300 crore. Whose money? Who's celebrating?
Honouring freedom fighters is absolutely par for the course too. What better nationalist ritual can you have, providing the opportunity to foment more anger against the colonialisms of the past, while forgetting those of the present?

It's only the third part that sounds unreal. But since Sawant has not explained who he means by 'weaker section of society', it's safe to assume that there will be no surprises here either. Because the last time his government supported those affected by COVID and in need of government help, it was not those who had lost jobs or income, nor those pushed out of school, nor even those with unpaid wages for work done. No, it turned out to be the poor casino-owners, who were gifted a whopping Rs 277 crore waiver in fees owed to the government.

Which means owed to us. For, the critical question really is: whose money is all this? Obviously not Sawant's or Modi's or Sitharaman's. This is public money, extracted primarily through taxing every single person in the nation, either directly or through the greater, more devious and relatively undiscussed, indirect taxes. This is money that belongs to those poorest and most marginalised, with absolutely no say in how it is utilised, not even when it is used to upturn their own lives. In fact, 300 crore rupees is just peanuts - Goans are right now, thanks to our governments, indebted to the tune of around 25,000 crore and rising. And this is debt incurred in the name of development projects, i.e. for projects that do not benefit but actually harm the majority of taxpayers, by taking away their land or livelihoods or future.

Pramod Sawant claims that he is dedicated to making Goa a 'progressive state'. For this government, a posh IIT campus sprawling across village lands, while educating not one single village kid, is progress. But the villagers of Melaulim who opposed the IIT, and are now struggling to get formal rights to their lands, are not seen as progressive. They are, in fact, charged with serious crimes for facing off with the police in their struggle to keep their lands - even though it was the government who ignored their petitions and pushed ahead with the land take-over, leading to a physical confrontation. Is this a progressive way of functioning, Mr Sawant?

There are thousands of Goans today who have lived and worked on their lands for generations but without formal rights, often without basic infrastructure like toilets (despite Sawant declaring Goa open-defecation-free), and with the sword of eviction always dangling over their heads. Why can't some of the 300 crore be used for solving this long-pending human rights issue, thus liberating Goans from the control of bhatcars and feudal lords, like the Ranis, as well as the incursion of new bhatcars like the Adanis and Ambanis? Or is this

the kind of liberation that the government does not want to celebrate?



The launch of the 60th anniversary celebrations, on 19 December 2020, saw many Goans, including youngsters, arrested for protesting against destructive development. At the rate at which the state government is ignoring public protest and distress, quite a lot of the 300 crore might have to be reserved for arresting even more Goans protesting next December, or even earlier.

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