



How about Back-to-Basics, Rather than Back-to-Normal?

Goa's government finds itself the butt of almost constant ridicule nowadays. From the widely-appreciated twitter-thrashing of Mauvin Godinho by Tamil Nadu's Finance Minister P. Thiagarajan, revealing, among other things, the former's anti-people support for GST on COVID19 drugs and vaccines; to the surrealistic declaration that the government wants to forest areas in Madhya Pradesh to compensate for forests destroyed in Goa; and the unbelievable announcement that Goa is a top performer in the Niti Aayog's Sustainability Development Goals' (SDG) ratings, every bit of news about this Sawant-led government gets greeted with disbelief, scorn, jokes, and memes, not to mention hashtags like #PramodSawantMustGo.

The problem is that, bizarre as all the news sounds, it's not new. Even this long-distance-forest-compensation which does not compensate Goa or Goans at all, has actually been done before, in Karnataka. And Mauvin Godinho already had an unsavoury history of criminal charges, a disproportionate assets case, and party-hopping, long before he was exposed by Thiagarajan. As for the SDG ratings, we already know how low the standards are in Indian states, also how our government lies. According to the ratings, Goa is the only state to have already met the 2030 target of 100% access to safe and affordable drinking water, sanitation facilities, and hygiene for all – which is a blatant misrepresentation of reality. Not only the villages of Goa, but even the capital city of Panjim, which was represented by chief minister Manohar Parrikar for more than two decades, fails here; with more than a few people living in poor quality houses, without basic facilities like water and electricity. People were expected to stay home during the curfew, and wash hands and masks regularly, when their homes lack water supply; but the government wins laurels for lying about it.

So, it's not that the government has reached new depths of incompetence or callousness. This is how it has been, always. And that's what it plans – back to normal, as soon as possible. The problem is us, the Goan people. For many Goans, after the terrible pain and losses of the last few weeks, the very thought of back-to-normal is repulsive. That's why the government's repeated reassurances, especially regarding its readiness to face the predicted third wave of COVID19, ring hollow. As indeed they should. Because, although the government's promise of readiness is limited to just medical preparedness, the promise that Goan hospitals will be able to take care of Goans who fall sick, even this limited promise looks way beyond their capacity.

Can this government throw out their own normal and rotten systems of functioning? These rotten systems, which are responsible for the recurring shortages of basic and life-saving medical facilities, and for the neglect of the sick, range from the under-the-table wheeling

and dealing in medical goods, to the opaque pricing of these goods, the shortage of medical staff, and a shortage of decency in how staff are treated.



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A PIL case was filed recently at the High Court to get the Goa government to ensure basic facilities, like drinking water and seats, for attendants of patients at the new Super-Speciality COVID19 Wing of the Goa's premier public hospital, the Goa Medical College (GMC). I myself know, from personal experience, how important patients' attendants are, at the GMC. In fact, when my mother was admitted there this March, with me as her attendant, the ward doctor instructed me (when I was unable to lift her by myself) to have one more attendant present, because one was not enough! The ward was already full of relatives-as-attendants, crowding the barely-one-metre-wide space between the beds, masks under noses – all this during a pandemic, when the ward was already overcrowded with increased patients' beds. It was shocking, to say the least, that relatives were handling things that need at least paramedical training, like watching over oxygen consumption, lifting patients onto trolleys and testing machines, and keeping them clean. It was also difficult to imagine how patients manage if they have no willing relatives/friends, and no money to hire private attendants.

Health Minister Vishwajeet Rane needs to explain why the GMC can't employ enough trained staff to do away with these amateur and incompetent attendants. Don't Goans need jobs – or is it that Goans don't want these kind of jobs? Because, a second and related question is, why aren't those staff members who do do this kind of work treated with respect? Where in the world do you hear of hospital staff referred to by all others in the place as 'ward servants'? The old British term 'ward boy', still heard in Bombay sometimes, was demeaning enough in its juvenilisation of adult employees, but this is probably worse. The official title, as used in the GMC's recruitment advertisements, is 'multi-tasking staff'. So how did multi-tasking staff become servants? All employees are surely expected to serve in whatever capacity that they are employed, so why call only some as 'servants'? Is it to show that they are lowly, or at the beck and call of other employees?

A rose by another name would smell as sweet, Rane might argue. After all, the 'ward servants' at GMC are probably earning much better than the 'housekeeping staff' at Manipal. Maybe that's why the offensive title – to ensure that their halfway-decent pay and job security doesn't encourage them to forget 'their place'? Whatever the twisted, or casteist, logic – for casteism will ensure traditional hierarchy and humiliation in the most modern environment – the title reflects a deliberate disrespect to these staff members, which will obviously translate into less respect for their work, by them and others, the credit for all of which must lie with the Health Minister, as well as the State's Disaster Management Authority.

But such basic issues as increasing employment while also increasing respect and dignity, are not important for this government. They have no interest in the basics, in keeping people physically and mentally fit, gainfully and dignifiedly employed, eating well, and surrounded by a green and health-boosting natural environment. Far from it. All they want is to convince us that they will have enough oxygen when the next COVID wave arrives. They want us to forget the institutional genocide of last month, and trust in their promise that this kind of direct murder will not recur.

One doesn't know how many Goans are convinced. But one thing is for sure – unless the focus shifts to the basics, things won't change much. Whether direct or indirect, whether called Covid deaths or something else, the stink of this rotten system will not be easily hidden.

(A shorter version was first published in *O Herald*, dt: 7 June, 2021)



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