

By AMITA KANEKAR



Another educational institution has been announced, again very prestigious. As always, it needs huge amounts of land, and, as always, the government of the tiny state of Goa has more than enough to offer – and on long lease no less, which means practically free. The project is a new India International University of Legal Education and Research, to be run completely by the Bar Council of India (BCI). This proposed university requires 2,00,000 square metres of land, which Goa's government says it has already identified in Dharbandora taluka. A state bill has also been passed, formalising the setting up of this university, one of whose objects – according to the bill – is to reserve 20% of the university's seats for 'permanent residents of Goa'.

Nor is this the only 'advantage' to Goa courtesy the project. In a meeting held in November 2020, between a delegation from the National Law School University in Bangalore (the first law university of the BCI) and Goa's Chief Minister, the former explained how the project would contribute to Goa's aim to be a knowledge hub, and would attract international law firms into Goa, improving the service sector of the state. Plus, it aims to provide law/policy research and consultancy to the State. and also stimulate State tourism, catering to international students, lawyers and adjudicators.

And our Chief Minister (CM) was apparently so impressed with this, that the barely-functioning state assembly, which has not spent even one single minute in the whole past year to discuss the huge problems being faced by students in the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels of education, found time during the fleeting monsoon session to pass the bill launching this new tertiary level institution. And this, when the same government has just sanctioned Rs 10 crores for the construction of the new Manohar Parrikar School of Law and Public Policy in the state. So how does yet another new law university make sense? Why can't the curriculum and functioning of this proposed new university – if these be so wonderful – be adopted by the Parrikar School itself? Why give up more land and resources for another new law university, when you already have a brand-new school coming up?

Perhaps it is because of the many advantages promised by the former; let us look at these for a moment. The most prominent and highlighted one is of course 20% of the students seats for 'permanent residents of Goa'. But what is a 'permanent resident of Goa'? The bill does not bother to explain, but the usual meaning is of residence for a minimum length of time (sometimes less than 10 years). So the wards of native Goans working outside Goa cannot avail of this 'benefit', while those of non-Goans living in Goa can. And we are not talking about migrant labour here, but of the many rich non-Goans with a base in Goa and the bank balance to afford a posh international-standard university education.

What is interesting is that, while this 20% reservation is highlighted as nothing less than one of the objectives of the new University, there is no mention of the Constitutionally-mandated caste-based reservations anywhere in the bill. Is this mere oversight? It is useful to note that Bangalore's NLSIU itself implements only SC and ST reservations, not OBC; and even this is not seriously implemented at the faculty level. If the Goa government was really serious about creating a great opportunity for Goans, shouldn't it have ensured 50% reservations for SC, ST, and OBC communities of Goa, both at the student and job level? But who can forget that this government has itself a miserable record in implementing caste-based reservations in its own institutions, with a large chunk of reserved seats in professional colleges going unfilled and taken over by dominant-caste and -class candidates.

So what kind of 'knowledge hub' does the Goa government envisage? And does the ongoing failure to provide 100% internet coverage to school students in the state, more than one year after online classes were launched, sound anything like a knowledge hub? The quality of mass education at the primary and secondary level has completely collapsed in Goa, as a result of going online without ensuring the basic minimum infrastructure, like smartphones and connectivity. This has affected students from poor and vulnerable sections the most, despite efforts from the more committed schools and teachers, as well as non-governmental organisations and volunteers. Who among these children - struggling to remain in touch with their classes, and being promoted without ensuring that they have learnt anything - are going to dream of high-flying professional courses at the tertiary level?

But our government has zero interest in such problems. Because it's clearly not a knowledge hub that is being planned, and certainly any attempt at knowledge for all. It's a knowledge club. Yes, Goa as the site of an exclusive knowledge club for Indian and Goan elites, with IITs, Law Schools (the more the merrier), and other elite tertiary education centres, all focussed on the 'meritorious', as the privileged like to call themselves.

And this knowledge club is what will bring in all the other so-called benefits. Like increased tourism, thanks to a wealthy student community and visitors from the legal world, happy to enjoy all the pleasures of this 'tourist paradise'. What does it matter that booming tourism only means badly-paid and poorly-respected jobs for locals, besides all kinds of tourism-linked vices? An international arbitration centre will also be established in the state, says CM Sawant. For the corporate world, obviously. When Goans themselves needed an arbitration centre - specifically the Green Tribunal - to fight against the destruction of their environment, the Pune-based tribunal was shifted not to Goa, but to distant Delhi, and courtesy Goa's then CM, Manohar Parrikar, whose name now graces the School of 'Law and Public Policy'!

As for the promise of law firms setting up here, will they bring jobs? Not a hope. Just an increased demand for office or residential spaces, and thus a boost to the real estate market. Making its products even more unaffordable to the average Goan - but then they were never meant for her in the first place.

With such benefits, you don't really need losses. Even so, giving away land means hammering the local rural communities, vulnerable as most of them already are. It means hammering wildlife too, and increasing man-animal conflict, with wild boar already destroying crops and monkeys taking over Goan villages. The government solution is to declare these homeless creatures as 'vermin', allowing them to be killed at will. As for the bigger picture, of intensifying and violent climate changes as a result of more such 'development' - who's bothered? There is just too much money to be made, so solution here is to just call them natural disasters and blithely carry on.

So, all hail the new knowledge club, even as it clubs us on our heads.

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