

By AMITA KANEKAR



The election scenario before Goans has perhaps never looked grimmer. We need change, most ordinary Goans would agree. But does this election offer a chance for change? Or is it that, given what happened after the last elections, as well as in other states – and despite the plethora of unlikely parties jumping into the fray, making the strangest of promises – is it that, whoever we vote for, we are going to get the same rotten governance? The same destructive projects, land-grab, and environmental destruction? The same casinos and similar attractions for the depraved tourist? The horrifying neglect of essential health services, and the equally criminal neglect of school education? The same lack of jobs, opportunities, and respect, that drive Goans abroad?

You don't need to be very smart to know that things do not look good. What, then, is the way forward? Perhaps, the only way is to focus on the issues. Let us focus on the things that we need – the things that we desperately require in order to survive with our families and communities, along with our land and future – and put them centre-stage in this election. This is not to say that we will achieve them by this, but it might help us to change our focus, from candidates and their parties, to the actual things that should be achieved through our political choices. This change of focus could well be the first step towards achieving our goals.

What, then, do ordinary Goans really need? Not free visits to religious sites in India, definitely; nor any more hugs between Modi and the Pope or other religious/political leaders.

Here are a few things. First of all, a moratorium on ALL 'development'. Enough filling up of cultivated and cultivable fields by hook or crook, enough cutting forests to 'replace' them thousands of miles away, enough declaring barely-surviving wildlife as 'vermin' that can be exterminated. Enough of pushing us deeper into cataclysmic environmental loss and climate change. We need a stop – a complete halt on projects, old and new, till we have a system of evaluation of projects and so-called development itself.

Enough of taking Goa, bit by bit, out of the reach of local communities, through central laws like the National Waterways Act (2016) and the Major Ports Authority Act (2021), antiquated laws like the Railway Act (1989), and policies like the Smart City Mission. Such laws and policies have to go; the control of Goan fields, forests, waterways, and other resources has to legally reside with the communities who have lived and worked here.

Then, a focus on education and health. We have to end this shameful situation where casinos and clubs blithely welcome maskless crowds, while schools remain closed and online schooling dysfunctional. We want a government that is concerned about education, that will

work out methods of conducting school education in the COVID era, not one that sends education online without sparing a thought (or paisa) on basic infrastructure. Live schooling, designed for COVID safety, has to be re-started for all. At the same time, students in online classes must be provided with free mobile phones, charging, and internet connectivity, along with targeted academic support.

Health care has to be bumped up, so that we never see the horrors of this year again. We need a focus on open and accountable supplies of essential medical equipment, adequate numbers of decently-paid and respected medical and healthcare personnel, and a healthy green environment that helps prevent illness in the first place.

Then, we need the proper implementation of caste-based reservations in education and jobs, as mandated by the Constitution. What this means is an end to the many scams and frauds, the 'errors' of omission and commission, in applying reservations in Goa, all to facilitate the grabbing of reserved positions by the privileged, even as the marginalisation of the most vulnerable communities continues.

We need Romi Concanim to be accorded not just official recognition, but also official primacy among all Goan languages. This will not only recognise its rightful and historical position, but will also help to end the current discriminatory attitudes towards Catholic Bahujans, who are the main users of this language.

And we need an immediate reversal of the new OCI regulations of 2019 and 2021, removing all the new restrictions on OCIs, and the connected threat of losing this status.

Finally, Goa needs Special Status, as provided for in the Constitution of India. Thanks to the lack of a Constitutional compact when Goa was incorporated into the Indian Union, there has been no recognition of the unique history of the Goan people, a history completely different from those who were a part of British India. For example, we need a recognition of the Goan right to Portuguese citizenship, a right enjoyed by the Goans before 1961 but abrogated when India took over. Dual citizenship is not something strange or unheard-of today - many peoples in the world have this right. Goans have a long tradition, that continues till date, of working abroad - to earn a decent income as well as respect, both sorely lacking in the employment available in today's Goa and India. With this goes an equally strong tradition of close ties to their homeland, consisting both of their financial support, and of their annual visits and retirement here. The problematic consequences of the lack of dual citizenship, not to mention the demonisation of 'Portuguese citizenship' by our political establishment, is that the Goans who have opted for the latter, who are 'sons-and-daughters-of-the-soil' in every single way (including their 'foreign' jobs), have no say in their homeland. Thus making it easier for those trying to plunder Goa. Saving Goa means that every Goan must have a right

to decide what happens to their homes and villages.



Goa Elections 2022: A time to focus on issues

There could be more issues, especially specific and local ones, which must be brought centre-stage. The present governance has been a horror story: not just the almost unbelievable medical disaster; and the callousness about all the losses, of lives, livelihoods, or education; but unrelenting environmental destruction too, shutting down of people's questions, plus (according to their own ex-governor) unbridled corruption. This is the crux. We don't need just a change of face, or person, or party. We need a complete change of governance.

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