

By AMITA KANEKAR



The run up to Goa's elections 2022 has been, as expected, like a bad joke, a circus of promises (the more bizarre, the better), defections, u-turns, allegations and counter-allegations, along with displays of the usual money- and muscle-power. And, whether you are amused or sickened by all this pre-election hoopla, the post-election scenario is not difficult to foresee, when it comes to the interests of the ordinary voter. While many Goans speak of the urgent need for change, we all know – given Goa's last elections, as well as elections elsewhere since then – that just voting may not ensure this. But what is even worse is the question of – if indeed the BJP is voted out – whether a different government will mean different governance?

There is no doubt that there will be some change; it would be surely difficult to be this bad. We could see less stoking of the communal fires, and hopefully some interest in the huge – COVID-induced but government-worsened – educational crisis faced by kids in Goa, and also some help – financial and otherwise – to those who have lost income and livelihoods in the pandemic.

All of this much-needed, without any doubt. But what about the bigger and long-term problems threatening Goans and their future? What about the casinos, the coal corridor, and Mollem? And the wholesale hill- and forest-cutting? What about the juggernaut of real estate development that even COVID could not halt? What about the burden of the agent-contractor-builder-politician nexus on every public work, infrastructure and facility, like medical essentials in the middle of COVID's deadly second wave? What about the ignoring of all social justice issues, from reservations to land rights, that has been happening for decades?

Rahul Gandhi has declared that Goa will not develop into a coal hub but into a tourist hub; but haven't we also had enough of the exploitative relations, land-grab, pollution, CRZ violations, and environmental destruction, not to mention gambling, prostitution, and drugs, that mark the tourism industry? Even if a new government is able to put a brake on some projects – and this won't be easy, given the corporate funding of political parties – it isn't enough. Goa needs a brake on ALL this kind of development, and a focus on social and environmental justice.

But none of us expects to get this, whoever comes to power. There's a reason for this cynicism – it's that the candidates who are likely to win are precisely those who are most invested in the status quo, whichever party they might belong to. That's the way this electoral system works; it usually throws up those with the most money, muscle-power and manipulateness. But, if we all know that there is no space for any real change via this



urgently. This was precisely the point made by Rahul Sonpimple and Cynthia Stephen in January, when they spoke at the Ambedkar Memorial Lectures 2022. Both of them pointed out how the current electoral system is designed to offer no real options to the vast majority of common people, especially the most marginalised castes and tribes, who most need political change.

One of the problems is the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system. Under this system, it is not the votes that count, but the seats won. So if a party wins a majority of seats, it gets complete power. The fact that it might have got less than half of the votes polled (like the BJP-MGP-GFP alliance government in Goa after the 2017 elections) does not matter; it is still the winner. But this means that more than half of the votes polled in the elections have no value, and no representation in power. Is this democratic?

Compare this to the system of Proportional Representation (PR), where parties get seats in power (i.e. in parliaments or legislative assemblies) based on the number of votes they poll. Even those parties who get a minority of the votes polled are represented in power, thus making each vote count. Various systems of PR have been adopted across the world today, especially in many countries in Europe.

The second issue is Separate Electorates. Rahul Sonpimple spoke of how the efforts to achieve genuine political representation for marginalised castes and communities has been thwarted in India right from 1947, because these communities usually comprise minority groups in their constituencies, and the winners of elections are always those chosen by the majority. In a caste society, one cannot represent the both the dominant as well as the oppressed castes simultaneously; their interests are often at loggerheads with one another. This was why Dr Ambedkar had demanded separate electorates for Scheduled Caste communities. The British government accepted this demand, but Dr Ambedkar was finally forced to withdraw it after Gandhi's fast-unto-death in protest. Thus, instead of separate electorates, what we have today is the reservation of seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. This has led, as Kanshi Ram put it in his eponymous book, to the '*Chamcha Age*'. He was referring to how, given that the voting in these reserved seats is also by nonSC/ST voters who are usually in the majority, the winning candidates are usually those seen as not against the interests of the dominant castes, not strongly representing the SC and ST population, and overall more amenable to the status quo, i.e. '*chamchas*'.

Separate electorates, on the other hand, would see the most deprived communities, like the SC and tribal communities of Goa, getting their own political representation while they also vote for general candidates in their constituencies, i.e. they vote twice. As Cynthia Stephen

pointed out, there are already such separate electorates in India – like the teachers’ and graduates’ representatives in some states. If you register as a teachers’ voter, you vote twice, i.e. for a general candidate and for a teachers’ representative. While many will wonder why graduates and teachers need separate representatives, there is no doubt that this same system should be extended to the scheduled communities who do need it.

The Proportional Representation system and Separate Electorates are the two critical electoral reforms which must be brought in, to begin with. Rahul Sonpimple also spoke of Dr Ambedkar’s proposal of separate settlements for oppressed communities. This would ensure that the needs of the latter don’t get ignored, as happens in Goa even under ‘ideal’ village development schemes; and also that their votes count. This is also worth considering, along with the right to recall elected representatives if they betray their constituents.

Remember, if today’s elections are a horrible joke, that joke is on us. We need to change the fundamentals, not just the faces.



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