



Goa's taxis: Scapegoats for a hyper-elitist transport model

India needs to focus on ease of travel, declared Prime Minister Modi while inaugurating Goa's new airport last month. The PM's declaration might have sounded like a joke to some, given that his own one-day-long visit to Goa, just to inaugurate the airport, created utter chaos in the traffic here, with some commuters reaching their destinations three hours late, and official announcements that movement of even emergency vehicles would depend on the position of the VVIPs.

But there was no irony in the PM's statement. Because he wasn't referring to common folk at all; this government never thinks beyond the elites. Ease of travel, is ease of travels for the rich. Just look at the transport options for air travelers exiting the new airport. They get not just a government-organized taxi service but one with practically unlimited choices, including four different fare groupings, from the cheapest hatchbacks (offering Wagon R, Santro, Celerio, etc.), to middling saloons/sedans/etc. (Swift, Baleno, Jazz, Swift DZire, etc.), higher SUVs (regular and premium), and finally the highest premium level (Mercedes, BMW, Audi, Land Rover, etc). All in all, the airport's taxi information signboard mentions a whopping 42 different car model options for the discerning and moneyed tourist. There are also airconditioned buses from the government's Kadamba service, for those who want to slum it. How's that for a caring government?

Meanwhile, look at the state of public transport. There was a time when Goa's capital city of Panjim was served by normal-sized public buses. Insufficient in number and overcrowded, they were at least spacious, with a double seat along one side and a triple on the other. A few years ago, however, they were replaced by mini-buses. These mini-buses have mini-double-seats along both sides, which cannot seat two adult persons well, whatever the size of the person; the mini-aisle is further cramped by the protruding legs of the seated. And these smaller buses are as insufficient and overcrowded than before.

The reason for the shift from bus to mini-bus was surely the need to reduce road congestion, be it at the cost of the comfort and health of the bus users. The same reason was given when hand-carts were barred from the roads, despite the fact that these were non-polluting vehicles and often the means of sustenance of their low-income-group users. No argument – these users had to sacrifice livelihoods for the sake of smoother traffic. But what of the private cars? Till now we have not seen any restriction on them. Not only are the numbers of private cars growing exponentially on Goa's roads, among them are increasing numbers of giant-sized vehicles, taking up a huge amount of space, belching out hot fumes from their air-conditioning, and often carrying just one passenger. With the roads choked around the clock, parking has now taken over many pavements. Pedestrians have to manage as best they can

- they are nobodies, so who cares?



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Look at all the discussion in the media and social media – almost nothing about public transport, but complaints galore about Goan cabs and how expensive they are. Thanks to the recent altercation at Mormugao — where taxi-drivers apparently objected to a tour operator organizing buses for cruise tourists instead of employing taxis, resulting in the tourists cancelling their tour of Goa and returning to their cruise ship — the abuse of local taxis is once again at high decibels.

Taxi-drivers are being regularly referred to as a mafia, extortionists, and rogues, not to mention destroyers of the tourism industry, by everybody from the tourism minister to newspaper editors, tourism operators, lifestyle media, along with various privileged individuals. Dominant-caste Indian tourists and settlers especially express disgust over how Goans tolerate the 'exploitation' and 'loot' by the 'lazy' taxis. There were calls for tourists to use locals' cars instead, or to drive rental cars themselves, rather than being 'at the mercy' of taxis.

A question to ask is, why are only taxis being targeted? It is interesting how taxis are condemned for supposedly exorbitant charges, when hotels and airlines who also raise their rates sky-high in the tourist season – and are never low to begin with – are not condemned for being expensive. Taxis are a mafia because they want to be paid well by the elites who use cabs. How come the top government employees are not a mafia with their gigantic high salaries and huge perks – all paid for by the public? Or the builders when they overcharge like crazy for real estate, so much so that most Goans cannot afford houses in today's Goa? The critics of taxis apparently feel that it is okay for big businesses and general bigshots to fleece their customers, but small players should stay humble and undemanding.

One can, of course, understand the horror of Indian tourists and settlers. Back home, they are used to such service-providers earning only crumbs. Taxi-drivers who expect to earn well for their work, who live in decent houses and send their kids to college, is something that most Indians just cannot stomach. Send them to Calcutta and they will be very comfortable with the scrawny cycle-rickshaw drivers straining to pull 2-3 fat *bhadrolok* around for a pittance. But taxi-drivers who don't want to work non-stop, who instead enjoy a game of cards between well-paying jobs, are unacceptable. The much-celebrated 'work-life balance' is only for some, i.e. the privileged castes and classes; everyone else must be a low-earning slave. And privileged Goans are only too happy to echo such sentiments.

Is Goan tourism really being destroyed by pugnacious taxi-drivers? Hardly, going by the footfalls. But maybe it will be hurt. And maybe it should be. The taxis would be surely doing the whole of Goa a favour if they cause even a few tourists to cancel their trips, cutting into

the profits of the casinos and other rackets that make up this increasingly sleazy industry,  
and causing a general rethink.



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