

Some weeks ago, I had the misfortune of having to make a round trip by bus between Old Goa and Panjim. Oh horror!



A call for dignified and reliable Public Transport

Now, you must not understand my horror of this trip to mean a disregard for public transport. On the contrary, I have for the longest time been a proponent of public transport, for reasons that I will presently come to, both in Goa, in other parts of India that I have lived in, as well as in Portugal where I lived for a decade. My commitment to public transport has to do with a personal commitment to the democratic and republican ideal – offering all persons, whether rich or poor, the option of traveling in dignity and convenience from one place to the other. This is to say, there is no need for a poor household to spend on a private vehicle, when these resources can be better utilised on other needs – further education, for example. Having an efficient public transport system also means that there are fewer vehicles on the road, reducing the need to widen roads – to accommodate the growing number of private vehicles – as well as the unnecessary expenditure on the flyovers that we are increasingly seeing in Goa – not to mention the criminal number of road deaths that Goa is currently witness to.

The crisis that a non-existent public transport system puts on a poor household in Goa can be ideally demonstrated through a video I recently viewed on social media. It was clear in the video car was being purchased by a family that had never had a personal vehicle before. The entire family had shown up for the event. The video also captured the anxiety that the woman driving the car out of the showroom had. She was keen to ensure that a lemon was placed under the wheel as she started the car – the lemon being a way to drive away evil. Either the excitement got the better of her, or she was unused to driving a car, but the result was that right in front of the horrified eyes of the entire family, she drove the car straight across the road and into a ditch. The video was unclear if they were seriously injured, but what was clear was that this barely driven car was already a mess.

The point of this discussion is that this family – like so many others – was *forced* to buy a car because the public transport system in Goa is *absolutely* inefficient, if not non-existent. Worse, even if it exists, there is no way a person can travel in dignity, being forced to stand as they travel for long periods, and worse, stand squashed next to multiple persons. It is bad enough if you are a man, imagine being a woman and forced to stand pressed against unknown men. Not that the seating is any better, there barely being space for one person in the seats that are provided in the ageing buses that ply the routes.

I have no doubt that, like myself, the family I referred to would rather travel by public transport than spend precious resources on a private vehicle, if the public transport system in Goa assured us the availability of transport from the early hours of the morning until very

late at night, not just between major cities, but also to the villages in our state, as well as within the villages. This transport not only being available, but also regular and reliable, as well as committed to offering us dignified transport.

A good example of this kind of a transport system would be the shuttle service that the Kadamba Transport corporation used to offer us when it first began. Buses were regular, and everyone could sit in relative comfort through the entirety of the journey. Rather than being extended across the state, however, this system has unfortunately, and inexplicably, seen a decline in operation. Having said that, the recent introduction of Kadamba buses within the city of Panjim, and linking the city to the suburbs beyond is a welcome addition and one hopes that it will be expanded.

One fails to see why this system has not been extended, or indeed why the state of public transportation still remains where it was in the 1980s. Indeed, if popular opinion is to be trusted, it appears that things have gotten worse after the pandemic, with buses that went out of business not being replaced. An expansion of the public transport system would stand to everyone's benefit. It would offer an expansion of public sector employment, a desirable objective for both citizens and the politicians who benefit from offering jobs. It would enable poorer citizens of the state to enjoy a better quality of life and invest their resources elsewhere and in more profitable options. Furthermore, by reducing the number of private vehicles on the road, it would make Goa a much better tourist destination. After all, if Indian tourists come to Goa for an inexpensive European option, there is nothing more European than a regular, and reliable, public transport system that offers the user a dignified option of travel.

For too long tourism has been seen as something that works against the local. In fact, as so many of us have pointed out, better allocation of resources to ensure a higher quality of life for the local, will draw in more tourists, and perhaps a better quality of tourist.

Taxi operators might see the creation of an improved public transportation system as contrary to their immediate interests. The fact, however, is that it might in fact improve things for them. First it should be possible to absorb them into this new transportation system, offering an alternative from their irregular earnings. Second, the presence of a new and improved public transportation system would not mean that there will be no market for taxis. The rich, or those with specific needs, will always prefer private transportation. Besides, there will now be an option for taxis to offer shorter rides, removing the need for them to think about return fares.

In short, there is a crying need for a dramatic expansion of the public transport system. A system that offers citizens a regular, reliable, and dignified opportunity for travel within the

state. A system that operates from the wee hours of the morning to late in the night, from the tiniest village to the towns, and within these towns and villages. Such a system would not only increase the quality of life in Goa, but would also work towards reducing the huge number of deaths that take place on our roads. May those who have ears listen!



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