

Last week Goa's government approved a hike in the allowances and pension of the members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), via a bill, the 'Goa Salary, Allowances and Pension of Members of The Legislative Assembly Bill, 2023', which was immediately passed by the Legislative Assembly despite Opposition protests. The government's response to the protests was that the Opposition MLAs are free to not take the increased allowances and perks. Incidentally, it was the BJP's Digambar Kamat who first demanded the hike during the general discussion on the State budget - it hardly took any time for a bill to be made on the issue and passed as well.

Just to give you an idea of the nature of this hike, which is expected to cost the state coffers a whopping Rs 19 crore: the MLA allowance on the days when the Assembly is in session has increased from Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000; car loan limit from Rs 15 lakh to Rs 40 lakh; house purchase loan from Rs 30 lakh to Rs 45 lakh; MLA's pension from Rs 15,000 to Rs 30,000 per month, with the annual hike enhanced from Rs 2,000 to Rs 4,000, up to a ceiling of Rs two lakh instead of the existing Rs 75,000. Allowance for fuel has also been increased, from 300 litres to 500 litres. And MLAs are allowed seven staff, instead of five.

A rather generous gift to themselves, right? And at the cost of the Goan public. Of course, one knows that there are few limits of decency or dignity that this BJP government of Goa will not cross, but what exactly is this gift for? For facilitating land conversions for the benefit of builders? For turning the state into the playground of real estate developers crowing over their 'conquest of Goa'? For cutting every last tree, not to mention the hills and forests? For sending mass education down the drain? For ignoring the huge problems plaguing ordinary Goans - soaring inflation, lack of decent jobs, denial of basic facilities like toilets in many villages, worsening floods every monsoon, declining water supply, crumbling government schools... the less said about the achievements of this government, the better.

One is not arguing, however, for zero remuneration to MLAs. The question is who and how much. The nineteenth-century demand for payment to elected representatives was based on the idea that this would allow people from poor and labouring backgrounds to stand for electoral office, and stop political power being monopolised by wealthy elites with the personal resources to spend their times in legislatures and parliaments without worrying about earning a living. It was intended to be a stipend, nothing more. The problem is that the wealthy have still managed to monopolise power in India, and are grabbing such benefits as well which were never intended for them. Shouldn't there be some economic criteria to decide whether these legislators are eligible for public largesse - a 'creamy layer' category of MLAs who are not entitled to anything? Why do the millionaires and crorepatris in our Goa Assembly, not to mention landed magnates like the Ranés, need stipends and pensions every month from the beleaguered Goan public? Why can't the senior Rane just take home a big

plaque or something, commemorating his decades in power, instead of burdening us by a whopping Rs 2 lakhs of pension every single month? Why should the Goan public (many of whom struggle in overcrowded buses that pass for mass transport here, and whose houses are collapsing in the rains) provide more cars for people who already own fleets, and more houses for those with mansions?

On another note, how many people in Goa are allowed to decide their own salaries, and when to increase these salaries? If we are not allowed this, why should it be allowed to MLAs and top government officers? Why is it that only top-level bureaucrats, judges, etc. get to man the regular pay commissions and other bodies that not only jack up their own salaries, but also decide the salaries of all other employees - contractual, part-time, and hourly—basis? If a permanent government employee can decide their own salary, why shouldn't a contractual employee also decide theirs, and an hourly-rate employee as well? Why this discrimination? Is it to ensure that all the big salaries and benefits are only for the 'creamy layer' i.e. those with permanent posts, while the big work burden is for the majority of insecure government employees who work for years on miniscule payment?

If you look at countries in the developed world, there are very few where the elected representatives are allowed to decide when, and by how much, to increase their own salaries and perks. Most countries have independent committees to take such decisions. In the USA, although elected representatives can increase their salaries, this increase cannot be implemented till after the next election, which means that they themselves may not benefit from it, especially if their constituents do not approve.

There is also the question of what such salaries, perks and increases are based on. Many countries peg salary-hikes to inflation rates; while the salaries themselves are pegged to other salaries, often to that of top-level government officers (as in France), or corporate salaries (as in Singapore). The idea behind this was that high salaries result in less corruption. But India offers the best proof that this just doesn't work. High salaries have not kept government officers honest; the opposite, if anything.

These top officers - both elected and non-elected - are, as we have seen, the very people responsible for the poor salaries and difficult situation of everyone else in society, which means it would make much more sense for them to be pegged to the bottom level of salaries in Goa. So, the Chief Minister finds it acceptable that a watchman, or sweeper, or gardener, employed on contract or hourly basis by a government office, is paid just Rs 10,000-20,000 a month? Which means not even Rs 1000 per day, and without any perks or pension? Then is exactly what the Chief Minister himself should get, and no more.

Giving our elected representatives only the lowest wage in the state, or at least the lowest | 2

that is paid to contractual employees by government offices, might ensure that this is actually a decent wage. Just like making it compulsory for MLAs to use mass transport, public health care, and government education facilities, and especially the facilities in their own constituencies, might improve those too. It sounds like a dream today, but surely better than the nightmarish reality they have created for us.

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