The land of 'fun and frolic', as Goa's tourist advertisements used to portray it, appears to be bursting at the seams with newer and newer kinds of rot. Many might actually see today's Goa as the land of lawlessness, given the unlimited land scams and now job scams; the number of top 'public servants' suspected of breaking the law, like the former Chief Secretary; and now the way police are actually assisting prisoners to break out of prison. But on the surface, and surely thanks to the powers-that-be, Goa is nowadays depicted as a land of festivals – almost continuously celebrating something or the other. There were always the old festivals, most of them religious, many centered around individual shrines across the region, like the *fests, zatras*, and *urus*; the Hindu temple celebrations, in particular, thanks to Hindutva in power, are expanding and being increasingly sold to Indian Hindu tourists as attractions to rival the churches of Old Goa. But these traditional sites and celebrations cannot compete with the host of new and ultra-new festivals like Serendipity, the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), the National Games, Lok Utsav, and the latest Proud Ponjekar (!!), besides food festivals, wine festivals, heritage festivals, music festivals, you name it… increasing every year, and almost totally focused on tourists.

On the surface – and for the tourist – it all looks very 'happening' and consumption-worthy, a tremendous expansion of the fun and frolic beyond the beaches, raves, casinos, and the heritage zone of Old Goa. Some locals too attend some of these events – like those who throng the Lok Utsav, and those, like this author, who enjoy the films at IFFI. Which only proves that the ancient 'Bread and Circuses' scam still works today, at least among the privileged.

For, can anything be developed under these powers-that-be without costing us dearly, besides stinking to the high heavens?

Thus it is that every single one of the new festivals is clearly designed to be, first of all, a monumental siphoning-off of public resources – much of it probably into the pockets of those in power. Just witness the colossal expanse of street decorations and fancy lighting in Panjim for IFFI, not to mention food stalls, music, and ridiculous parades that block ordinary traffic and create problems for residents for hours, the inflated bills for all of which must be running into many crores, and all completely unnecessary for any serious film festival.

But behind this colossal waste and equally colossal padding of pockets, is the much more insidious issue: land grab. Practically all of these festivals involve the transfer of public lands into private use, or government-controlled restricted use, or elite use. Witness how IFFI (and the Inox theatre, when IFFI is not on) have taken over the former site of the Goa Medical College, making Panjim probably one of the few cities in the world without a single public hospital. And how Serendipity and Proud Ponjekar have taken over a host of public spaces,

including large and centrally-located Portuguese-era buildings, and converted them (using huge amounts of money) into lavish art spaces visited only by elites; with state-of-the-art and round-the-clock lighting and air-conditioning, even as Goan villages give up hope of ever seeing regular electricity and water supply. And how the National Games not only stopped public use of the public swimming pools, but also banned traditional fishing communities from the beaches for days on end, not bothered that such bans would hit their livelihood and even create survival issues for these vulnerable communities.

The list can go on. Each new festival needs space, and the government is generous in providing this out of the best spots in the public domain. If the festival stops tomorrow, will this land come back to the public? Dream on!

But are the traditional festivals doing any better? Not by a long chalk, going by recent news that the general body of *mazans* (owners) of the Shantadurga Fatarpecarin temple at Fatorpa has voted in favour of not allotting stalls to any Muslims in the bazaar that is set up during the annual *zatra*, and further, that no stall holder would be allowed to sublet it to any Muslim vendor or hawker. The idea apparently originated in a memorandum given to the committee by members of various "Hindu organisations", about "banning non-Hindus" from the annual *zatra*. The reason, according to the President of the temple committee, is that Hindus are being treated badly in Bangladesh. In other words, the temple *mazans* want to emulate those who are treating Hindus badly there, by treating Muslims badly here.

Now, Goan Hindu temples are not exactly known for inclusivity even otherwise. They are casteist institutions, which enforce caste in ownership, management, employment, access, and worship, even today. One might have expected that, with education and contemporary thinking, not to mention the awareness of the ideals of the Constitution of India, *mazans* would realize the error of their old ways. Or that others would realise this, as is happening at the Navdurga temple of Marcaim where Bahujan villagers (who are not *mazans*) have united against the Saraswat *mazans*, demanding that the temple be removed from the latter's control and declared a public institution.

The Fatorpa *mazans*, however, seem to want to compound the social discrimination practiced earlier instead. Perhaps they also want to prove their Hindutva credentials to the powers-that-be, given that the ban in question follows Hindutva practices in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka.

What is noteworthy is that this anti-Constitutional and fascist decision has been made right in the middle of what it, unarguably, Goa's biggest festival of all: the decennial exposition of St Francis Xavier's relics. Biggest in terms of the number of visitors – consisting of more worshippers and devotees than tourists – and the *fest* bazaar; both including people from all

backgrounds, including religions, castes, regions, and nationalities. In other words, this is probably the festival for our times, being inclusive and not a cover-up for land-grab. In fact, if land grab is happening here – and it is, because this is Goa after all! – it is in the opposite direction. Land is being grabbed not by the festival, nor in its favour, but by private parties and the government too, eating away at the supposedly-protected heritage zone, supremely confident that they will not be stopped. This is Goa, after all.

(With thanks to artist Angela Ferrão for her insights into this subject. A shorter version of this essay was first published in *O Heraldo* on 21 December 2024.)

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