

## O HERALDO

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## Indian Railways: Time to Restore People's Lifeline

Indian Railways has always been the beating heart of the country's transport system. For decades, it has played a pivotal role in shaping India's economic and social fabric. It is the mode of transport for millions of Indians daily, facilitating not just the movement of people but also essential goods across vast distances. Yet, in recent years, the state of railways has raised serious concerns. The transformation that began with the removal of the separate railway budget and the rise of privatization seems to have created more problems than it has solved.

Indian Railways, which once catered to every section of society, including students, senior citizens, and the poor, now struggles to meet the basic demands of passengers. The introduction of high-tech trains like the Vande Bharat Express is being hailed as progress, but this is not the reality for most train travellers. Many common people are left to contend with the dwindling number of regular trains, long waiting lists, and exorbitant ticket prices. The question must be asked: are we neglecting the railways, which have long been a vital lifeline for the masses?

Historically, the Indian Railway system offered various subsidies and discounts to make travel accessible to all. The special concessions for senior citizens, students, and journalists made rail travel affordable. However, with the changes that came with the Narendra Modi government, particularly with the merging of the railway budget into the Union Budget in 2016, the focus seems to have shifted away from social welfare to a more profit-driven approach. The common man is now burdened with higher fares, while essential services like Tatkal tickets have become harder to secure.

The decision to abolish the separate railway budget was a part of a broader strategy to modernize the system, ostensibly in an effort to enhance private participation. But the impact has been a series of unmet promises and deteriorating infrastructure. In the years since the Vivek Debroy Committee's recommendations, the reality on the ground suggests that the situation has worsened rather than improved. Accidents are on the rise, and safety features like the Kavach system, which were touted as essential, have seen limited implementation.

The increase in train accidents - nearly 40 each year from 2018 to 2023, and the 2.6 lakh fatalities over the last decade, according to National Crime Records Bureau data - raises alarming questions about railway safety. Lack of manpower, poor maintenance, and underutilized safety systems are at the heart of these issues. The introduction of modern trains is meaningless if the infrastructure remains in disrepair. There is no doubt that the removal of the railway budget has had serious ramifications, from funding shortages to the mishandling of safety initiatives.

At the same time, the focus seems to have shifted to initiatives that are more about optics than practical improvement. The inauguration of the Vande Bharat Express trains, with their extravagant spending on events and marketing, is a prime example of this. While these modern trains may look impressive, they cater primarily to the urban elite who can afford higher fares. Is this the future we want for India's railways?

The railways are not just a means of transport; they are a critical component of the nation's welfare. The land owned by Indian Railways, estimated at 48,600 hectares, represents immense potential. But this is not just about land - it's about providing a sustainable, affordable, and accessible means of travel for the entire nation. The multiplier effect of the railways is undeniable: every Re 1 invested generates Rs 4 in returns. The railways could be the engine of economic growth, but this requires prioritizing people over profits.

A dedicated railway budget is essential. It ensures that the funds allocated to the railways are used specifically for the improvement of the infrastructure, safety systems, and services that benefit the common man. Furthermore, the position of a full-time railway minister is crucial. Currently, the railway minister is responsible for three different ministries, diluting the focus needed to address the growing concerns in the railway sector.

While the government continues to push for privatization, the question remains: can we trust private players to provide the same level of service and affordability that Indian Railways once did? The history of privatization in the UK is a cautionary tale, with rising ticket prices and poor service.

The future of transportation in India must be rooted in the expansion and improvement of the railway system. With a growing population and increasing urbanisation, the demand for affordable, reliable, and efficient public transport will only rise. Air travel, while increasingly accessible, is still out of reach for most people, and the infrastructure for road travel is woefully inadequate. Railways, with their established infrastructure and potential for expansion, remain the most viable option for the future.

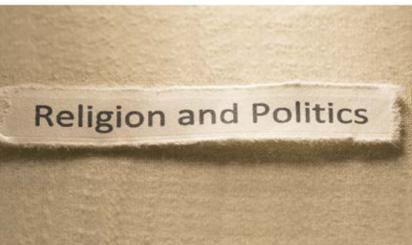
It is time to restore Indian Railways to its former glory. The upcoming budget should reflect a commitment to improving the railways for the common man, with an emphasis on safety, reliability, and affordability. A dedicated railway budget, and a full-time railway minister, are essential to achieve this.

## comment



SOTER D'SOUZA

Since religion has a huge influence over citizens in this country, for clean politics to emerge the cleansing has to first start in religious institutions



The New Year 2025 was ushered in with a controversy around religious authorities not speaking truth to political powers and breaking bread with controversial political figures. An article by a pastor Jarrod Mckenna titled, "Religion and politics is like ice cream and manure: they don't mix", published in the Sydney Morning Herald, turned into 'spiritual tourism' centres, probably a spiritual ice cream on Goa's economic manure of booze, drugs, sex and casino culture.

The lack of a rational response from citizens to all the political abuse is not solely related to consumerism or individualism. The silence and falling in line of citizens with oppressive political powers is the fall-out of blind obedience and unquestioned collaboration imparted by the systems within religious institutions. While the abuse in religion remains veiled due to the instilled fear of divine retribution and guilt, the abuse in politics is more likely to get highlighted. It's not just politics which is the last resort of scoundrels; authorities within religions could be no better.

The lack of a rational response or meek surrender by the public to abuses in politics and religion is nothing but a behavioural pattern which emerges in dysfunctional institutions. The victims develop such irrational behaviour as a coping mechanism after being subjected to the manipulative tactics of F.O.G - Fear, Obligation and Guilt - over a period of time. Abusive behaviour all around begins to look normal after some time. It's the 'each one for himself and God for all' attitude and behaviour which becomes the norm. This is how sound pollution and other nuisance in the name of religion get condoned by the public.

The 'dharm khatre mein hai' and 'desh khatre mein hai' are two sides of the same coin - manipulation by institutional powers. When the bitter truth stings, the 'hurt to religious sentiments' weapon gets deployed to threaten and distract. It's the model of thinking with emotions instead of reason cultivated by religious leaders to control the followers which sees its successful replication in politics. The bi-product is emotional reasoning in citizens which fuels the abusive systems. The subjugation of followers into a

like corporate CEOs. Religious devotions and related events are about quantity, not quality. What counts now is the input in terms of market share which is determined by measuring footfalls for events and counting pieces of silver in the coffers. The output in terms of spiritual impact on the day to day life of the devotees or followers hardly matters.

Religious events are now curated and choreographed for that 'wow factor' or showcasing someone's 'first time ever' creative genius, more of social media sensationalism which has begun to resemble a tourism festival. The only play is with terminology of 'pilgrims' and 'tourists'.

All the political and religious 'hungama' (uproar) with the power centres resorting to blame games and scapegoating is only to entertain the crowds.

## Religions and Politics - any different in manipulative abuse?

If colonisation by foreign powers for exploiting the spices and mineral resources got rationalised and justified under the banner of propagating religion, the tool of nationalism employed by crony capitalists to control political power and commerce is now sanctified as religious and cultural revivalism of Bharat. This is why places of worship are now being turned into 'spiritual tourism' centres, probably a spiritual ice cream on Goa's economic manure of booze, drugs, sex and casino culture.

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state of docility and servility by the powers in religion perhaps led Karl Marx to label 'religion as the opium of the people'.

There are lessons to be learnt from the various hostile incidents highlighted by a Filmmaker Nathan Appfel in his attempt to unearth the 'Church business' in some of the prominent Churches in the U.S. It is the extent of transparency and accountability in systems within the institution which determines genuine religious leaders from the frauds. This will apply to political leaders too. Any adverse reaction and resistance from those in authority to a reasonable request for accountability and transparency about money and assets accumulated through people's contribution is a sign that all is not well. Religion is a democracy as long as people worship and fund religious institutions without questioning. No sooner it comes to accountability and transparency there may be a caveat with something like 'Church is not a democracy'.

It is not our intention to deny the importance of religion. The goal of religion is about guiding human kind to the realisation of the path to the Higher Power or Supreme Being; "to realise the essential oneness" says Mahatma Gandhi. What leads to the contamination of this noble mission of religion are those individuals who hijack these institutions of power for money and selfish ambitions. These authorities manipulate everyone to remain at the centre of control. Since religion has a huge influence over citizens in this country, for clean politics to emerge the cleansing has to first start in religious institutions. Systems that encourage critical thinking and behaviour of speaking of truth to power and the practice of accountability and transparency need to be put in place within religious institutions.

This opinion is a tribute to those religious leaders in Goa who through their life example, despite the backlash from those in authority, dare to show us how to differentiate a Living Faith from a Fossilized Faith, a Progressive Faith from a Regressive Faith.

(The author has worked with community initiatives related to Drug and Alcohol Abuse Prevention, HIV/AIDS Prevention, Panchayati Raj, Anti-Corruption, Environment Protection and Social Justice.)

## people's edit GRANTING EXTENSION IN SERVICE TARNISHES REPUTATION

Once upon a time, the employment exchange was the backbone for any job-seeker in Goa. Unfortunately, over the years it has become redundant as most of the jobs for every post in the government department seems to have been auctioned as recent job-scandals that rocked the state suggest. Paying for a job is one thing but paying for even getting extension in service is now a fashion. And that should give you goosebumps for any aspirant candidate.

Government positions, regardless of the department, carry an implicit duty to serve the public interest and contribute to the state's welfare. Unfortunately, recent Goa Government's trends suggest otherwise—individuals who fail to uphold these principles are often glorified, rewarded, and granted extensions. This not only tarnishes the reputation of the entire department but also dampens morale among hard-working employees.

First and foremost, extensions should be reserved for those who genuinely treat work as worship, whose contributions are visible and acknowledged by the public and their peers. From a junior employee to a senior officer, only those who have demonstrably upheld the values and responsibilities of their role should be considered.

A particular concern arises with individuals who have earned promotions through reservations but fail to honour the legacy of Dr B R Ambedkar. These benefits were intended to uplift and empower, and not to be exploited for personal gain. When such individuals misuse these opportunities, they tarnish the reputation of the system designed to ensure equality and fairness. This behaviour is detrimental to the department and the ideals Dr Ambedkar envisioned.

A thorough and regular assessment of every employee's performance, focusing on both their accomplishments and shortcomings, is crucial. This practice would allow deserving officers to rise while ensuring that undeserving ones do not block progress.

Unfortunately, many extensions seem to serve only the self-interest of those who receive them. These individuals often suppress their colleagues, stifling opportunities for promotions and creating a toxic work culture.

It is imperative for senior officials to recognize and reward the contributions of their subordinates rather than exclusively honouring themselves.

The government must also address the unethical practices of some officers who prioritize securing their own extensions over the welfare of the department.

It is time for the Goa government to wake up and take corrective action. A thorough review of departmental work-environments and regular open forums with employees could help identify and resolve such issues.

As the question looms, the third extension, for that matter any extension, should not be granted to those who are trying to influence the government through unfair and unethical means. Government should act wisely and see that such officers who are detrimental to the department are sent home with the right message. I hope and pray our Hon. The Chief Minister will act in his wisdom and do the needful. This new, unfair, unwarranted culture should be stopped immediately. And that would be seen as a progressive sign of governance.

## Will peace ever be restored in Gaza?

I refer to the editorial, 'Gaza's Fragile Ceasefire Is A Pause Not A Solution' (Herald, 21 January).

With respect, the tragic situation in Gaza cannot be resolved without addressing the core of the Israel-Palestine issue: the world's failure to recognise its part in the scandalous injustice inflicted on Palestinians. A horrific crime was perpetrated by Europeans on European Jews. The Palestinians, who played no part in that monstrous crime, were made to compensate the victims with their ancient homeland! That's gross injustice.

Consequently, European Jews arrived by boat and plane in the 20th century; staged a genocidal ethnic cleansing involving mass murder and rape of Palestinians; expelled 80% of them to refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza and across the Middle East; helped themselves to 78% of Palestine; Palestinian homes and land established an apartheid Jewish state with 60 plus apartheid laws that privilege Jews and reduce Palestinians to less than second class citizens.

In 1978, Israel marched in and occupied the remaining 22% of Palestine and maintains a brutal occupation, annexing Palestinian villages to build settlements and set up multiple checkpoints to harass Palestinians on their way to work, school and shops.

Unless the world applies sanctions on Israel to end its Occupation and the 17-year air-land-sea siege on Gaza, allow expelled Jews to return to their ancient home-

land, dismantle the settlements and multiple checkpoints in the Occupied West Bank and scrap the apartheid laws, there will never be peace.

Israel must also release the 10,320 Palestinians including 320 children and 88 women it has abducted in the West Bank and placed in Occupation dungeons and torture chambers.

There can never be peace when people are subjected to apartheid, occupied, oppressed and dispossessed as the Palestinians are.

David Albuquerque, Panjim

## Is women's safety just a topic of discussion?

Is anyone doing anything about women's safety or just talking and giving big speeches? The ministers in Goa are so busy to promote tourism, development, and the real issue of women's safety is ignored and the question rises when a mentally challenged girl was brutally gang raped by five youth in a guest house in Cansaulim. The authorities should wake up and handle the issue with an iron hand and control crime.

Anita Fernandes, Verna

Wholesale fish market sans storage facility

After years of redevelopment efforts, Goa's only wholesale fish market at Margao is finally near-

## letterstotheeditor

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ing its much anticipated commissioning which could take place sooner than later. However what comes as a shocker is that one critical component reportedly remains conspicuously absent, which is the cold storage. It must be said that a cold storage facility is a crucial feature for the market's functionality and long term success. The market is proposed to assist local fishing communities such as ramponkars and fishing boat owners for which the cold storage facility is vital to store surplus fish. It is learnt that the funds allocated by the central government for the redevelopment project was reportedly primarily to fund the cold storage unit. However this vital necessity remains unaddressed. The livelihood of the fishing community depends on the efficiency of the market infrastructure. Be that as it may, it is a known fact that cold storage is important for perishable food items because it extends their shelf life and keeps them safe to eat. Consuming stale fish can lead to food poisoning, most commonly causing symptoms like nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal cramps and headache. There are several types of toxins in contaminated shellfish that can cause illness. Toxins may be found in mussels, oysters, clams, etc. It would hence be prudent to commission the wholesale fish market at Margao only after the cold stor-

age unit has been installed and made functional keeping in mind the health of fish-eaters and the loss that will be incurred by the fishing community in absence of such a unit.

Adelmo Fernandes, Vasco

Kudos to SP Sunita Sawant

Reading the news of the heinous disgusting and gruesome crime committed by the 5 young and insensible men, and that too on a mentally challenged girl, sent a chill down my spine, as it surely must have done to many more. This sad and disgusting news brings to attention the downward trend that Goa is spiralling into in the recent past, the moral decay we are encountering and the insecurity that we will have to encounter in the future.

The silver lining in this case though, is the swift action carried out by our otherwise lethargic Police Force. I wish to congratulate the Police Department led by the SP Sunita Sawant for acting swiftly and nabbing the culprits. I pray and hope that the perpetrators are dealt with accordingly and justice done to the affected- in fact to the entire Goan society- I hope and pray that this case does not die an unjust death, marred by political and financial interference as is the situation in many before.

Jaret de Silva Chandrapurkar, Chandor



## Turning challenges into opportunities

Donald Trump's policies on immigration, H1B visas, and tariffs pose challenges for India, particularly for undocumented workers and software companies relying on H1Bs. However, these hurdles can serve as a catalyst for India to implement transformative reforms and strengthen its global standing. To capitalize on this opportunity, India must focus on economic liberalization. Deregulation, fostering innovation, and developing Indian-owned intellectual property are critical.

Strategic FTAs, protecting sensitive sectors like agriculture while enhancing market access, can bolster trade. Manufacturing and service sectors must be scaled up, leveraging US-China tensions to position India as a global supply chain hub. Attracting top Indian-origin talent, encouraging return migration, and investing in emerging technologies like AI and IoT can fuel domestic innovation.

Strengthening the pharmaceutical industry to develop high-value drugs and vaccines will also boost self-reliance. Political reforms like One Nation, One Election (ONOE) require compromises, such as greater fiscal devolution to states, to ensure acceptance. Learning from the 1991 economic reforms, bold and market oriented policies are essential.

Gopalswamy J, Chennai