

## O HERALDO

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## Govt must get a move on tackling abandoned vehicles

The North Goa District Magistrate's November 2024 proclamation to auction vehicles lying abandoned along roadsides in the talukas of Bardez and Tiswadi appears to have fallen on deaf ears as almost no one has come forward to claim the deteriorating vehicles. The six-month deadline to stake claim ends this May, so it remains to be seen if heed is paid at all.

This long-standing problem was highlighted recently when the NGO, Goa Civic and Consumer Action Network (GOACAN), wrote to the Corporation of the City of Panaji that abandoned cars, motorbikes and other vehicles have turned into a nuisance as they continue to occupy prime parking spaces in the State capital, including in the bustling business hub at Patto. Interestingly, the letter claimed that among the violators were government departments too.

GOACAN's concerns are valid. It said that abandoned vehicles not only occupy precious parking spaces in Panjim but are also fertile grounds for mosquito breeding, fire hazards and even double up as great hideouts for antisocial elements attempting to flee from law enforcers. Then there are even some vehicles that are abandoned after having been used in the commission of a crime or offence, allowing the criminals to escape scot-free.

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A few days ago, the same issue cropped up at Margao after a survey by the authorities concerned found several abandoned vehicles alongside the bustling commercial capital's highways and ring road that not only obstruct free flow of traffic but also sit on prime parking spaces without fear of being penalised. Most of these vehicles are old and include large trucks, due to which minor accidents have even taken place.

A former chairperson of the Margao Municipal Council claimed that a few years ago, public notices were issued instructing owners to remove such vehicles within 15 days, failing which the vehicles would be removed and auctioned by the authorities. Fifteen days went by and the days soon turned into 45 months, but no action was taken, the ex-chairperson said, which has led to violators taking such notices with a pinch of salt while the common man loses hope.

Unfortunately, the menace of abandoned vehicles is not limited to Panjim and Margao alone. It is a wide-spread problem affecting almost the entire State, especially the coastal villages where vehicles, mostly rental cars or scooters, that are damaged in accidents are simply abandoned by the roadsides and lie there through rain and shine while obstructing traffic and eating into possible parking slots. It is obvious that a mechanism needs to be put in place for citizens to report the existence of such abandoned vehicles, if any, in the areas that they frequent. Else, the government will be none the wiser as it is clear that the authorities concerned are yet to embark on a State-wide drive to locate such vehicles.

Also, as all vehicles are easily identifiable even if their number plates have been removed, the authorities concerned should use the chassis number of a vehicle to generate details of its owner. Once that is done, strict and consistent action must be taken against the owner by way of fines or other punitive measures to ensure that the vehicle is not only removed but also that its owner is adequately pulled up for indifference to the laws in force.

The Transport Department is soon likely to issue notices to owners of abandoned vehicles once more. It is also likely to reduce the six-month period given to owners to stake claim to their vehicles in order to speed up the process of removing and disposing of them as it sees fit. It is hoped that this time around, the department actually means what it says and that it works in tandem with the other authorities concerned to ensure that decrepit and rusting automobiles no longer stick out like sore thumbs all across the State.

## Twitter World

Rajdeep Sardesai @sardesairajdeep

Section 247 of new IT bill says: 'any information stored in any electronic media or digital system' has the same revenue significance as any books of accounts or other documents. So during a search op, officials could go through all your messages including personal info. Even WhatsApp messages could come under purview. Very dangerous. And potentially draconian power with the government.

## comment



BINAYAK DATTA

## The One-Side-ONLY... Coin! The Railway Budget 2025-26

A hundred and thirty years ago a bright young inner-temple barrister remarks of a "customer" at the Natal Indian Congress, South Africa "We are not doing him a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us the opportunity to do so." That was none other than the young MK Gandhi.

Very few that I knew of in the Railways, looked upon passengers as "customers" in any case, judging from those terrible visuals of Maha Kumbh passengers jostling in train-coaches bursting in their seams!

Many of you, who wouldn't have noticed an innocuous footnote on your railway-ticket that reads for the last seven years... "IR recovers only 57% of cost of travel on an average." (The percentage never changes!)

**Very few that I knew of in the Railways, looked upon passengers as "customers" in any case, judging from those terrible visuals of Maha Kumbh passengers jostling in train-coaches bursting in their seams!**



I thought I'll structure my thoughts on Customers' Focus on major Eight Areas: a) Customers' Safety; b) Punctuality in Services; c) Irregularity of Services; d) Quality & Decency of Food and Linen to Customers; e) Accessibility of Railway Stations; f) Adequacy and Productivity of Human Capital; g) Cost Competitiveness in Freight and h) Ongoing and New Projects. And I'll try and see how the Railway Budget addresses these.

I rummaged thru whatever I could lay my hands on; in the Union Budget Publications and I tried to match them with the "Eight Focus Areas" above.

**(i) Customers' safety, punctuality and regularity of services:** I need not recapitulate here the unenviable track records of the Railways during the last five years. They might have been just splendid than last century, but we're more interested in today! In summary, over the last five years, 351 persons died and 970 were injured in 200 consecutive railway accidents, (source: Indian Railways). From head-on to end-on collisions, from detachments to derailments, from falling off of locomotive batteries

to trains running without a loco-pilot, from botched up communications to virulent stampedes...the Railways have had it all! Till last year we got accustomed to hearing of a certain "Kavach" Anti Collision System, sadly there's silence in this Budget! Yet only 1,500 route-kilometres I understand are covered till now, that's about 3% of the total! The average late-running of Vande Bharat Trains increased by 21% last year. It's 17 minutes on average. Late running in Rajdhani trains increased by 15% last year and they are late on an average by 36 minutes (BS). (Last year's numbers, no Maha Kumbh traffic). During 2018-19 the number of delayed trains increased by 43%. (TOI)

But I'm lost, if I look at the actual spendings last year and the Budgets of 2025, the actuals were both around 85,000 crore last year of all safety projects, track and signalling, over-bridges, approaches, Safety Fund Transfers, etc. If add inflation the actual provision would be perhaps 4% less! Materials for repairs and maintenance are allocated 18% less than last year.

**(ii) Customers' amenities (food and linen):** Whereas receipts from customers increased by 12.6% over last year (over year before last), The budget marks a further increase from him by 16% Budget Year. Against this, customers' amenity spendings were less by 17% of Budget last year and a further 7% from actuals last year. As a consolation there's a meagre 5% hike in Catering. Meanwhile blankets are washed just once a month, the Lok Sabha was informed recently (after 2,100 people used each).

**(iii) Customers' accessibility at Railway Stations:** I couldn't find where this item is included, but this was of specific mention by the Prime Minister in "Sugamya Bharat Mission", years back. I'm happy that Margao Station will be getting an elevator in the Island-Platform but there's very little sign of priority in Vasco or several other stations that I noticed.

**(iv) Adequacy and productivity of human capital:** The Railways recover 57% of total costs from us customers, so they claim, and they pay 42% as salaries. Good we pay for the salaries at least, but 42%? Has any industrial engineering been ever done

after digitalisation and implementation of expensive projects on reengineering of operations? Even if for argument's sake that 43% "under-recoveries" were ever to be billed, the operating-ratio at current productivities would still be around 82%, add interest charges of say 20% of costs, (the percentage in the Union Budget Profile), its more than comparable air-fares! Productivity and efficiencies are the mantra!

**(v) Cost competitiveness in freight:** Our current logistic costs per the NCAER adds up to 15%; whereas to stay internationally competitive we should be no more than 8%. Railways would have been the answer. But I find, the receipts from freight are budgeted just 4% up from last year's actuals. Of what service then, are the huge investments in highway-links, bridges, direct freight-corridors of trillions? Coming back to allocations, New Lines get 7% less allocation than that of last year and the allocations for the dedicated freight corridors face curtailments of 90% over last year, puzzling!

**(vi) Ongoing and new projects:** Press Reports indicate the 41,000 crore Udhampur-Banihal rail link and the 530 crore new Pamban Rail Bridge projects are complete and inspected, why they are not being fully commissioned is a mystery.

**One last point:** I see some performances mentioned by the PIB in its note in December last, for example, "Indian Railways loaded 1,473 MT of freight in 2024, achieving a 3.86% growth, with EDFC and WDFC facilitating over 72,000 train runs, but what I missed was, is it good or not that good, how much was targeted? How much is the benchmark?

The "customer" in my view as Mahatma Gandhi must have envisaged, must see actions visibly in line with directions set out in priority for him. The question is of Visibility!

And before I part, A report in the Financial Times sometime back stated Indian Railways "earned" an amount of Rs 1,377 crore from penalties on ticketless freewheelers in 3 years. This is interesting. Just imagine how much it actually must have lost then, if even 10% was actually caught!

Isn't that an important task for the Railways?

(Binayak Datta is a finance professional)

## people'sedit

## SMARTPHONES IN SCHOOLS: FINDING THE BALANCE

ANANTHA PADMANABHAN

In a recent ruling on February 28, in response to a petition filed by a student challenging restrictions on smartphone use, the Delhi High Court issued guidelines for regulating smartphone use in schools, shifting from blanket bans to a framework of regulation.

The nine-point framework includes provisions for schools to provide secure storage for devices, such as lockers or designated areas, prohibitions on classroom recording, mandatory digital literacy education, permission for safety-related use, stakeholder consultation, and transparent consequences. The ruling provides a framework for schools to manage smartphone use.

Following this, stakeholders —teachers, students, and parents —reported varied reactions.

Some educational professionals highlighted smartphones as potential teaching aids, while others raised concerns about monitoring and misuse.

Parents were worried about increased screen time, and students questioned the feasibility of enforcement, particularly regarding online resource access. These reactions underscore the complexities of regulating device usage in schools.

The Delhi ruling mirrors a broader conversation taking place both within India and internationally regarding the role of smartphones in education.

Expanding beyond India's regional variations, a significant global trend has emerged regarding smartphone management in educational settings.

Across Europe, various nations, including the Netherlands, Belgium, Hungary, UK, France, Denmark and Greece, have adopted policies ranging from complete bans requiring phones to be left at home or collected at the start of the day, to restrictions on phone use within classrooms.

This aligns with a broader European trend where countries like Germany and Italy have implemented varying degrees of phone bans or restrictions in schools.

Driven by concerns over distracted learning, cyberbullying, and the sharing of violent content, a bipartisan movement across at least eight US States is implementing new laws and rules to curb student cell phone use during school hours.

With a majority of high school teachers reporting phone distraction as a "major problem", these State-level efforts aim to create more uniform restrictions, moving beyond individual school policies that are often difficult to enforce, and addressing the negative impacts of rampant phone usage on student concentration and well-being.

Reports from schools implementing these policies indicate observed changes in student behaviour, including claims of improved focus and reduced cyberbullying.

However, it is also noted that reactions are mixed, with students expressing a sense of loss from the absence of their phones and parents raising varied concerns.

These mixed reactions highlight the complexity of the issue, making the debate over smartphones in schools akin to traversing a complex maze, where each turn presents a new set of challenges and considerations.

Ultimately, striving for a balance between the risks and benefits of phone use in schools remains essential.

This entails fostering responsible digital citizenship, implementing clear guidelines, and integrating technology meaningfully into the curriculum.

It is not simply about banning phones; it is about teaching responsible use and ensuring a conducive learning environment.

Experts observe that disrupted balanced screen time influences behaviour. Parents seek safe and enriching online experiences for their children, while schools explore focused learning environments.

Therefore, the global movement towards regulating smartphone use reflects a growing recognition of the need to protect students from the potential negative impacts of excessive screen time while harnessing the benefits of technology in education.

Beyond the classroom, how will today's smartphone policies shape the digital citizens of tomorrow?

This warrants careful consideration.

## Leather shoes and deforestation

Citing environmental concerns, the Directorate of Education has reportedly made canvas shoes mandatory as part of the school student uniform in government, aided, unaided, primary, secondary higher secondary and special schools, except during the monsoon season, when rainwear is permitted.

It is learnt that this is being done for the protection of the environment as leather shoes come at a huge environmental cost. It is a fact that leather is a by-product of the cattle industry and a major culprit of deforestation and Greenhouse gas emissions globally.

It contributes to significant biodiversity loss. Raw hides and skins may be contaminated with a variety of bacteria, yeasts, etc, and cause various diseases. Canvas shoes are lightweight and well-ventilated, making them ideal for warmer weather. However, they have a shorter lifespan than leather shoes as they are prone to wear and tear. Canvas shoes are also often affordable and available in a variety of colours and designs.

Crafted from breathable materials, canvas shoes are lightweight and perfect for long

hours of wear. Their soft fabric keeps the feet cool and comfortable even during warm weather. However, making canvas shoes mandatory for school students is a very minuscule step towards preventing environmental degradation.

In Goa it is a well-known fact that rampant deforestation is being carried out to make way for concrete jungles. Hill cutting and deforestation will have a much more negative impact on nature than students wearing leather shoes.

Adelmo Fernandes, Vasco

## Daylight vandalism

In recent times, vandalism has become a growing concern in Goa. Recently, our vehicle was vandalised in broad daylight while we attended the Ash Wednesday Mass. In spite of taking extra care & parking it in a safe spot this happened.

When the cops were informed, they had a wild theory that either a piece of gravel got hit on the window glass or stray cats were involved that led to the damage. Honestly, the cops be-

## letterstotheeditor

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All letters must contain correct postal address and telephone number. Letters are liable to be edited for brevity.

ing this naïve, doesn't surprise me. For formality sake, our complaint was filed & a copy was given for the record. And that was the end of the drama. As the saying goes "Raat gayi, baat gayi" & that's what has been happening for years now.

How do you expect crimes to stop if the cops themselves aren't bothered to get to the bottom of a crime? Why do you think some people in rage take matters into their own hands? One has fear of no one. This is today's sad reality.

Monaliza D'Costa, Curchorem

## Definition of a meaningful life

Helen Mirren once said: "I don't believe that if you do good, good things will happen. Everything is completely accidental and random. Sometimes bad things happen to very good people and sometimes good things happen to bad people. But at least if you try to do good things, then you're spending your time doing something worthwhile."

Life doesn't follow a script where good deeds are always re-

warded, and bad actions always lead to consequences. If only it were that simple. The truth is, life is unpredictable—sometimes cruelly so. We've all seen kind, selfless people face unimaginable hardships while others who manipulate and harm seem to thrive. It's frustrating, unfair, and difficult to make sense of.

But does that mean kindness is pointless? Not at all.

When we do good, we're not making a transaction with the universe, expecting a guaranteed return. We're making a choice—one that defines who we are, not what we get in return. Being kind, helping others, spreading positivity—these things don't always lead to external rewards, but they create something even more important: a meaningful life.

Vinay Dwivedi, Benaullim

## Gaza ceasefire

It is heartening to see the unity among the Arab nations at the Summit in Cairo as they presented their plan for the post war reconstruction of Gaza that would allow the Palestinians to live in their land.

The Western world must support it. Trump's idea for the US to take over Gaza and permanently resettle its population elsewhere is atrocious. It is what Israel wants. That's why it bombed Gaza relentlessly for the past 15 months and killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, majority of them women and children! And the Trump administration has now given additional twelve billion dollars in military assistance to Israel. To continue their bombardment? Now in the West Bank?

Israel has not started the second round of ceasefire talks, Israel has blocked entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza and food is in short supply. Israel has disregarded the resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly, the United Nations Security Council and the International Criminal Court which has issued an arrest warrant against its Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Western countries must stop arming Israel and aiding it in its genocide. The West must extend all support to the Arab League plans for the reconstruction of Gaza. And most importantly, the Arab nations must remain united.

Jennifer Viegas, Navelim