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Water pollution: A cesspool of negligence

Just last year, the state government notified an amendment to the Ground Water Regulation Act, which stated that a fine as hefty as Rs 10 lakh would be slapped on those polluting or contaminating groundwater by injecting treated or untreated water into the aquifers.

"If any person or user pollutes or contaminates groundwater by injecting treated or untreated water into the aquifer systems or obstructs the groundwater officer or any other person authorised by him to exercise the powers under this Act, shall be punishable with a fine of Rs 10 lakh and the well, if any, sunk, shall be filled and permanently sealed and the expenditure incurred thereto shall be recovered from such person/user," the Act states.

The legislation was further amended to levy a fine of up to Rs 10 lakh on anyone involved in illegal sinking of borewells or illegal transportation of ground water.

A fast-forward to the present day, however, shows that precious little has been done to punish those who pollute or exploit the precious resource despite there being strict laws in force. Recently, a resident of Cunchelim, Mapusa, said that his age-old well showed glaring signs of contamination during the monsoon last year, with the otherwise clear water now murky and having a layer of oil on it. Upon complaining to the authorities, officials of the health department collected samples of the water for testing and concluded that the water - which the resident would once use for drinking, cooking and bathing - had been contaminated by E coli bacteria (which is found in faeces). Many chemicals had sullied it further, according to the report, rendering the water unfit for consumption. A subsequent test by the Goa State Pollution Control Board confirmed the presence of petrochemicals, which the resident suspects have seeped into his well from a nearby fuel bunker.

One would have expected an investigation and consequent punishment to be swift and stern, since the laws for such a transgression are already in place. But the Cunchelim resident claimed that he has been trying his level best to get the authorities to address the situation for the last seven months, with no solution in sight yet. He said he is yet to get a response from the authorities even as his drinking water source dies a slow and silent death.

He is not alone. Several other wells across the state, dating back to decades, are meeting with a similar fate as the aquifers get destroyed and water tables get increasingly polluted by leachate, sewage and other such dangerous pollutants that are silently let out by residences and commercial establishments alike through concealed drains, and in some cases, blatantly through the stormwater drains built by the government.

Goa's aquifers haven't been spared either, thanks to the booming real estate industry plumbing the depths of the state's topography to lay foundations for highrises and mega projects. Aquifers are the underground layers of rock and sediment that hold and transmit groundwater, while groundwater itself flows through the aquifers. Hence, it is amply clear that the depletion of groundwater is proportionate to the destruction of aquifers.

With the state struggling to provide potable water to its local population and barely managing to meet the demands of real estate projects mushrooming in almost every nook and cranny of the topography, it is but obvious that the water table and aquifers should not only be protected from destruction but also be kept free from all types of pollution, as the resultant health problems will have a domino effect on the state's healthcare sector and in turn, on its economy.

The law too, should be enacted without hesitation, else nothing much will change and those affected will be left to fight a losing battle all on their own.

It is not only in the best interests of the population but also for the sake of the already depleting natural environment of the state that the government and its agencies should get their act together.

Beyond children's homes: Investing in families for a better future

Goa's children's homes were meant to be a last resort—a temporary shelter for children in crisis, those abandoned, orphaned, or in immediate danger. But today, 80-90% of children living in these institutions have families. Their parents are alive, many struggling to provide, but still willing and capable of raising them—if only they had the right support.

So why are we seeing children being placed in institutions not because they have no one, but because their families lack resources, access and support? Why is institutionalisation still the norm when globally, child protection systems are shifting towards family-based care?

The answer is as troubling as it is avoidable. Goa has done little to promote alternatives to institutionalisation and the reality is that many institutions—particularly long-standing faith-based organisations (FBOs)—continue to operate as if institutional care is the only solution. While their intentions may be rooted in historical models of service, few have evolved to align with modern child protection frameworks that prioritise family and community-based solutions over institutionalisation.

To make matters worse, many of these institutions operate without registration, unmonitored and in clear violation of child protection laws. With no accountability or oversight, who is ensuring the well-being of these children? The lack of regulation has resulted in poor standards of care, overcrowding in some homes, while others remain half-empty, and a complete absence of structured reintegration plans.

The result? A system where children are being placed in institutions simply to keep the structures occupied, rather than ensuring they grow up where they belong—in families.

An Outdated System: Why Are So Many Children Still in Institutions?

Over the decades, institutions have been built across Goa, often with the belief that they were the best way to provide for vulnerable children. But times have changed. Research, policy and global best practices now emphasise that children thrive best in families, not institutions.

Yet, in Goa, institutionalisation continues as if the space hasn't evolved. And why?

The lack of government effort to strengthen family-based care is one of the biggest failures. Despite the clear legal mandate under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which states institutionalisation must be the last resort and only temporary, Goa has done practically nothing to promote family-based alternatives. Where are the investments in kinship care, foster care, or community-based



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childcare programs? Why has there been no structured effort to help struggling families keep their children at home rather than being forced to place them in institutions?

Additionally, many faith-based organisations (FBOs) and institutions remain focused solely on institutional care. While many FBOs have played an important role in child welfare historically, very few have adapted to modern child protection standards. Most continue to focus solely on running institutions, with little to no effort directed toward family strengthening, community-based childcare, or reintegration programs. There are negligible organisations in Goa that actively work with families to prevent institutionalisation.

A serious problem is the number of institutions operating without proper registration and oversight. While the Juvenile Justice Act mandates that all childcare institutions be registered and regularly monitored, many continue to function without legal compliance, without child protection policies and with minimal government intervention. These unregulated homes not only violate child rights but also leave children vulnerable to neglect, abuse, and exploitation.

Another alarming concern is that institutions are seeking to stay full rather than seeking solutions. Many institutions, built over decades, now have half-empty or even unused structures, yet instead of shifting to family and community-based care models, they continue promoting institutionalisation. Children are being placed in institutions simply to sustain these structures, rather than because they truly need to be there. If the goal is child protection, why are we not seeing more initiatives to reintegrate children back into their families?

There has also been no real

assessment of the impact of institutionalisation in Goa. No serious effort has been made to track children who grew up in these homes—Did they succeed? Were they able to reintegrate into society? What struggles did they face? The system continues without data-driven policies, operating simply because "this is how things have always been done."

The cost of institutionalization

No matter how well-meaning institutions may be, they can never replace the love, security, and emotional connection of a family. Children in institutional care suffer long-term consequences, including emotional trauma, delayed social development and difficulties integrating into society once they leave.

Separation from parents leads to anxiety, depression and attachment issues, making it harder for children to form healthy relationships in adulthood. Without a family structure, many struggle with decision-making, emotional regulation and independence. Institutions also fail to provide children with proper life skills and transition plans, leaving many completely unprepared for adulthood once they age out of the system.

Perhaps the most heart-breaking reality is that most of these children didn't need to be institutionalised in the first place. Had their families been supported, they could have grown up at home instead of within four institutional walls.

What needs to change

Goa must stop treating institutions as the default answer to child vulnerability. Instead, we must prioritise family-strengthening interventions that prevent unnecessary separation.

The government must actively fund and promote programs that support vulnerable families, ensuring that poverty or lack of childcare is never a reason for institutionalization.

Expanding daycare and after-school support for working parents can help prevent unnecessary separation. Providing financial and housing assistance to struggling families will ensure that children remain in stable homes rather than being sent to institutions out of desperation.

Additionally, Goa must urgently develop a structured foster care and kinship care system. Instead of institutions, children without stable homes should be placed in family-based settings, whether through foster care, kinship care, or other non-institutionalised alternatives. Unfortunately, Goa has virtually no well-structured foster care system, despite legal provisions allowing for it.

All childcare institutions must be required to assess every child's potential for reintegration with their family and actively work towards it. Institutions should transition into family support centers, helping parents and guardians rather than replacing them. No child should be institutionalized indefinitely.

The Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) must actively monitor institutions and ensure compliance with child rights laws. All childcare institutions must be evaluated, and those that are unregistered or failing to work toward family reunification should be restructured or phased out.

Child's right to family must come first

The current system in Goa is deeply flawed—not because of bad intentions, but because it has failed to evolve. While institutions once played a crucial role, we must now acknowledge that institutional care is not the best option for children in the long run.

Yet, the government remains largely inactive, failing to take meaningful steps to develop family-based alternatives. Institutions, many built decades ago, continue to operate without asking, "Is this truly the best we can do for these children?"

The reality is simple: Children belong in families. They deserve to grow up with love, stability, and community—not in an institution just because the system hasn't changed.

It's time Goa moves forward. It's time we put an end to the over-reliance on institutions and start investing where it truly matters—in families. Because the best place for a child is not behind the walls of an institution, but in the warmth of a home.

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BY INVITATION

Peter Borges

We will make a difference for the sake of our children

As a parent of two children, a seven and thirteen-year-old, I am in a unique position to understand the gaps in their education, and where the system has failed them.

As exams approach, my seven-year-old comes home dejected and exhausted. The heat drains her energy and spirit, the revisions happening in school don't help. She is struggling with her multiplication tables. In spite of writing them innumerable times, the answers are not quite at the tip of her tongue. She knows she's learnt how to spell the word 'thousand' or 'forty' but she still makes mistakes because it's difficult to think under pressure...and as a seven-year-old, she is feeling the pressure to perform for a group of grownups who think all these numbers and spellings and what-not are really important for her. All she really wants to do is eat watermelon and oranges and play with her dog and friends and hopefully get in a bit of water time. But as per instructions from her mother, she has to practice her times table and her spelling and her Konkani writing and the names of the planets and reading and division and fractions.

My thirteen-year-old wants to read books to help her escape her reality

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which is actually getting very complicated. Apparently, having a group of close friends is more complicated than it previously was... the group keeps splitting into friends and foes, liars and truth seekers. Everyone talks about 'crushing' on someone else... will I also start 'crushing' sometime? Wonder what the fuss is all about. And apparently her body has also decided it will branch out in different directions...paths previously unexplored. If she had a choice, she would choose to spend her day swimming in a lake, catching and observing life under water and roasting marshmallows and nuts on a fire.

But as per pressure from her mother, she has to prepare for her future. Become more independent, give her daily routine structure, do chores in the house, help with the dogs, settle her room and be nice to her sister. And she also has to study a lot to keep up with the growing pressure of the academics.

I oppose the commencement of the upcoming academic year in April. While I support the school fully in having affordable summer activities on the school campus, I am opposed to the change in the Academic year commencement. If the education depart-

UPFRONT

I will not accept these ad-hoc changes anymore. I want to see the research, understand the thought process and have a discussion on the pros and cons of the change before I agree to the change. My children are not yours to pull and push in whatever direction you choose. I will defend my children's right to an effective and enriching education

ment or any other person or persons have a different opinion, I am willing to discuss this at length and understand the value over the course of the coming year. But I will not accept these ad-hoc changes anymore. I want to see the research, understand the thought process and have a discussion on the pros and cons of the change before I agree to the change. My children are not yours to pull and push in whatever direction you choose. I will defend my children's right to an effective and enriching education.

The NEP has lofty goals, most of which seem to be aligned to what I

want for my child's education. But how it is implemented in schools should be a discussion between parents and the teachers.

Excerpt from the NEP 2020...

"The teacher must be at the centre of the fundamental reforms in the education system. The new education policy must help re-establish teachers, at all levels, as the most respected and essential members of our society, because they truly shape our next generation of citizens. It must do everything to empower teachers and help them to do their job as effectively as possible. The new education policy must help

recruit the very best and brightest to enter the teaching profession at all levels, by ensuring livelihood, respect, dignity, and autonomy, while also instilling in the system basic methods of quality control and accountability."

The Department of Education, NCERT, SCERT provide the tools, expertise, research, training and accountability, but at the end of the day on ground level, the schools need to be empowered to work with the parents of all school going kids to find the right way to bring NEP to our children. The School and Staff need to have autonomy to make decisions like 'what are the local languages that are relevant to the community that comes to this particular school'. The Teachers need to feel in control of the portion and syllabus they have been asked to teach. Giving them textbooks that cannot be effectively completed in time allocated for that subject means giving the teacher tools that are too big for the task at hand. Textbooks in Science, Math, Geography and History have to be easily attainable goals for the teachers with room for them to add their own magic, creativity, research and engagement.

Language studies should be fluid and led by teacher and parent interaction, wherein teachers can tap into other available literature outside the

prescribed textbooks, so also where they can tap into music, art, theatre, dialogue, jokes and laughter to get children to enjoy using the language with their class mates.

The decision of what makes a language a local language, mother tongue, home language, spoken language needs to be firmly rooted where it belongs...with the people, the parents, the children, the teachers and the village around them who are speaking and using the languages.

Goa's heritage and history cannot be denied, even if it is only for certain segments of society. Our children have a right to study the language that was spoken by their parents and grandparents. They have a right to study the language that is part of our "legal system" and they have the right to learn how to read the language used in archival property documents and birth and death records of their ancestors. If they live in a village that speaks what some call a 'foreign language' but for them it's quite 'local'.

They see and hear it all around them, menus and sign boards are in the supposed 'foreign language'. They should have the opportunity, the autonomy to talk to the school and see if they can get a good education in this 'foreign language' that is actually pretty 'local' to them.