

O HERALDO

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More Money, Less Accountability ?

On Monday, the Central Government sanctioned a significant 24% salary hike for Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha MPs. This decision, which also extends increased allowances and pensions to former MPs, underscores a stark irony. Politicians who often clash on policy matters in Parliament found uncommon unity in approving their own pay raise. With barely a word of opposition, MPs across party lines ensured that their monthly salary surged from Rs 1,00,000 to Rs 1,24,000, along with additional allowances: Rs 70,000 for constituency expenses, Rs 60,000 for office maintenance, and a daily session allowance increase from Rs 2,000 to Rs 2,500. And, as a cherry on top, this hike is applied retroactively from April 1, 2023.

Contrast this with the reality of an average Indian citizen. The nation's per capita income stands at Rs 1,84,000 annually, translating to Rs 15,000 per month. This means an MP's salary alone is eight times the average Indian's income, not accounting for additional perks such as government-provided residences, 50,000 units of free electricity, and subsidised water bills.

For two decades, the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) has been demanding an increase in pension benefits, yet those pleas have largely fallen on deaf ears. Meanwhile, MPs secured a substantial salary hike in just five years without resistance. Adding to the irony, a government that encourages young men and women to serve in the armed forces under the Agnipath scheme where they are retired after just four years to avoid pension burdens; seems unperturbed about the financial strain imposed by a lavish salary structure for MPs

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The argument that MPs deserve a fair wage to prevent corruption is valid in principle. However, this raises a crucial question. Should salary hikes be linked to performance? In most other professions, pay is commensurate with productivity. Shouldn't the same apply to lawmakers? Unlike MPs in countries like the UK and the US, who work an average of 164-167 days a year, Indian MPs are expected to work only 110 days annually and in practice, many fall short of even this benchmark. When questioned about their productivity, MPs often dodge accountability, relying instead on the obscurity of their performance metrics to justify periodic raises.

A rare voice of dissent emerged from BJP MLA Umakant Sharma, who refused his salary and allowances, citing public service as his only motive for being in politics. But how many such idealists exist in today's Parliament? If MPs truly wish to follow the principles of Dr Punjabrao Deshmukh, who argued in the 1950s for fair salaries to prevent corruption, must also embrace the spirit of accountability that his argument entailed.

Criticism of these salary hikes is often brushed aside as misplaced cynicism against politicians. Some argue that a 24% increase after seven years is not excessive. However, the real issue is not the pay hike itself but the lack of justification for it in a country where the majority struggle with economic hardships. The Modi government took a step in 2018 to depoliticise the process by linking MPs' salaries to inflation, eliminating the need for them to approve their own raises. Despite this, the optics remain problematic especially when MPs continue to receive perks such as free domestic air travel (34 flights annually), first-class train travel, subsidised utilities, and an annual MP development fund of Rs 2 crore, which is often misused or underutilised.

At the heart of this debate lies a simple question. Are these raises justified in a country where economic disparity is rampant? Shouldn't there be a stronger link between an MP's pay and their performance? Instead of simply opposing salary hikes, citizens must demand greater accountability and transparency from those in power. If MPs believe they deserve a pay raise, let them prove it through legislative effectiveness, constituency work, and a commitment to genuine public service. Until then, such hikes will continue to be seen as yet another example of a privileged class enriching itself at the expense of the common citizen.



comment
JOHN DAYAL

Fraternity is, in fact, one of the core building blocks in the Preamble of the Constitution. And we have failed to build upon it, to spell it out, and how it spells out and lives out in everyday living in India



It was Jawaharlal Nehru who said that education must be for everyone—not only primary education, not only a shoddy education, a poor education for the poor and a good education for the rich, but a good education for everyone.

And all these came about through the other instrument that Nehru built, which was the scientific ethos, a scientific

Minorities and the dialogue of life

Independent India was born from the trauma of Partition and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, events that left deep scars on its social fabric. The Republic, however, was built on the ideals of socialism, scientific progress and inclusivity. These principles helped shape the policies that aimed at universal education, healthcare and economic equity. Yet, the question remains: How robust is the Republic today in protecting its minorities, and what does the future hold?

The scars of Partition surface several times every year, whenever there are major incidents of religiously targeted violence or when two groups of young people clash in what is colloquially known as a riot.

Not still a republic, the country also survived the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. This was a core moment for the country and the people.

These twin 'rites of passage' were soaked in the blood of minorities, Hindus and Sikhs on the Western and the Eastern borders in what are now Pakistan and Bangladesh, and Muslims in what is now the Indian mainland. This has defined much of what has scarred or scalded the social fabric.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the Mahatma for giving us, in his sacrifice, the sustenance and moral strength to quickly knit back the torn social fabric.

And the fact that our great Republic has been built on a bedrock of socialism, rising colonial regime to an independent, thriving nation. The promise of universal education was an integral part of this socialism, in fact for the first time in its long history cultural history.

ic culture. Education, science, technology, and medicine are all fruits of a scientific temper.

To come to the issue of religious minorities, I go back to 20 years ago, when all of us were working towards finding a common lexicon based on constitutional values and based on the language that was used by Gandhi, Nehru, and even Indira Gandhi in trying to reach a common platform for understanding, co-existence and peace.

This platform focused on civil liberties, human rights, and the Constitution as the guarantee for a secular space in which every religious community, every single linguistic community, every ethnic community had a base and a life compact to overcome minor problems, to overcome hate campaigns, to overcome isolation in every other way.

So, what should be the components of this language of peace, of this language of equality and fraternity? Certainly, one thing is we do not attack anybody. We do not use violence, we do not use abuse.

We visit a grammar and a vocabulary entirely built upon the teachings of Gandhi, Nehru, Buddha, and Jesus Christ, which has no place in it for hate, for mischief, for malice, and for any of those negativities that create problems.

The second important component of this new language is the dicta of fraternity, pointing out that India has a huge cultural background. The genome project has confirmed that communities and people have come from all sorts of places on the globe to settle down here.

In settling down here, they built on what was the cultural capital here and they have expanded on it. They have added to it. They have brought in culture from North Africa, they brought in culture from Europe, they brought in culture from Central Asia, they brought in culture from the Far East.

And in that culture, India as the melting pot evolved a language and an overall civilisational agreement which does not allow anybody to be superior or inferior to anyone else.

Today Fraternity is, in fact, one of the core building blocks in the Preamble of the Constitution. And we have failed to build upon it, to spell it out, and how it spells out and lives out in everyday living in India.

The third is, in fact, a very difficult thing. It's a question of equality. What will be the terms of equality? Can you measure it mathematically, or is it again how communities end up depending on each other? So, dependence on each other for survival, for growth, for reaching your maximum potential is important.

Therefore, we need to build

a platform where everybody is allowed to reach out to be equal—not artificially, but organically equal.

This is what I call the dialogue of life, but which can be called the dialogue of the citizen with each other—the dialogue of the citizen with the Constitution, the dialogue of the citizen with the instruments of the Constitution: the courts, the bureaucracy, Parliament, the media, the educational sector. It is in this give-and-take dialogue, finding out what are the needs, finding out what are missteps, and then correcting them and coming out. So this new language can learn from each other.

The Christian community in India has, in fact, not been very wise in trying to fight its battle against persecution all alone. It is a very small community and persecution mostly occurs outside its strongholds in Kerala and the Northeast. So, the persecution essentially is in areas where the Christian Community is in a minority, and in several of those areas, in fact, it is in a micro-minority, as perhaps best explained in Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and to an extent in Gujarat.

Therefore, wisdom would lie in Christians helping Muslims, Sikhs, and civil society in general to make common cause with them. Obviously, civil society would be able to make common cause with the Christians if the latter listen to the advice of the former, which is in taking everybody along, using language which is conducive, which spells and derives its strength from the Constitution, which is not supremacism, which is not sort of crying for a path alone, which is not claiming to be the best in the region.

Secularism is a fight for everyone in India, not just for the Christians. It's a fight as much for Muslims and Sikhs and Buddhists and the same segment of Hindus. All of them will have to work together. The Christian Community's educational quotient, at least in a section of it, is best suited to help people reach a minimum common program to challenge those who are cutting against the Constitution, who are being violent, who are using hate language against all religious communities and all marginalized people.

Therefore, in evolving this common minimum programme, in evolving a language based on the Constitution of India to fight communalism, to fight hate campaigns, and to fight violence is the best way going forward.

(John Dayal is an author, Editor, occasional documentary film maker and activist.)

people's *edit*

WINDS OF CHANGE

BY ASHLEY NORONHA

The climate in Goa with respect to various corporate sectors or other establishments is changing rapidly having a partial destabilising effect in the smallest state of the union. Everywhere you turn to, one will notice a sea of change has already taken or taking place. Banks which were once operating suddenly disappeared or merged with another more dominant one. Names of companies which existed before have vanished altogether and have merged with another under a different style and name, for operational purposes.

People are totally lost to find out when they discover of the new developments and to the whereabouts of their banks which once they transacted their business with, which stood in a certain place and is not there anymore. People have been subjected and made to undergo re-KYC with submission of all necessary documents and photos. One can't imagine but ponder as to why such rigorous draconian rules or laws are applied on old accounts, which public must go through all over again and which are periodically done from time to time.

Similarly some ATMs which once existed at certain outlets have suddenly disappeared and closed shop only to reappear at some distance away, totally upsetting the people's convenience of banking at the closest location of their choice.

Small shops and shanties which stood for ages with permanent electricity and water connections are bulldozed and flattened beyond recognition, uprooted totally, and in the bargain many people lost their jobs, adding to the unemployed force. Some owners who might have had high political connections and who seemed to skip or evade the onslaught of this unplanned and untimely demolitions, have not been spared this time. Some of these beleaguered businessmen who were once used as pawns in geopolitical games of vote bank politics in the past but now did not find favour or any sponsors, this time around.

There is change of school calendar and timings on anvil putting parents and their schooling wards at total inconvenience and hardship in the new norm.

Such rapid changes in working conditions or locations will do little good in generating GDP and will lack wealth creation like before when business was conducted in a well-entrenched or established business.

It takes ages to build a business by creating an amicable rapport with the local public who have invested considerable time, money, energies during their lifetime. Huge five-star bridges and highways in the form of flyover have run over old businesses potentially beneath them which are not visible from the top of the highway or might have even obliterated some of them, and decreased their businesses to a certain extent. Government assisted mass demolitions kill age old businesses to the core thereby reducing all forms of wealth creations, with a prospect of reduction of GDP.

The Ministry of Home affairs (MHA) has identified 4 new islands in Goa.. George Island, Grande Island, Pequeno Island, Conco Island to carry out holistic development and with this survey, many businesses might be relocated or some may self opt to locate in these islands with immense tourist potential. Tourism directly contributes 16.45% GDP and employs 35% of population in this sector. Goa's economic growth is driven by strong fishing, agriculture, tourism and pharmaceutical sectors, which should not be disturbed with economic maneuvering at all costs with all parameters to remain steady. New greenfield Mopa airport is vast and being groomed by increasing its capacity to handle 30 million tourists by phase 4, cancelling out on some of the Dabolim operations. Solar electrification which will be a revolution in rural villages which are carried out to bring electricity to areas where no grid connectivity is possible. State plans to give subsidies to 11000 EVs by this year, when we would see a significant shift from conventional fossil fuel powered vehicles taking place. Government plans to outsource its newer projects to local IT firms to boost its IT sector. The vexed Mhadei issue should move forward bringing it to logical conclusion and protecting all wildlife sanctuaries.

Church should back demand for Old Goa master plan

Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte on Tuesday said that the proposed Amenity Facilitation Centre at Old Goa is not a mall or a commercial project and that the work will not proceed until the ASI grants clearance and Church authorities approve of it. This is probably the most appropriate time for the Church to demand a Master Plan from the government to be put in place before any activities are carried out at this sacred place.

There is a lot of confusion regarding the proposed project. It appears that the government is shifting the responsibility regarding permission for the project and issuing of No Objection Certificates (NOCs). There could be several illegal constructions coming up within the protected area. The citizens need to be vigilant. There is the illegal bungalow built by a national politician which has attracted the wrath of the people. The Save Old Goa Action Committee (SOGAC) has reportedly stood firm on its demand for a comprehensive Master Plan for

the Old Goa world heritage site and also pressed for the return of the material that has been carted off from the excavated site last week which appears more like a daylight robbery. Our heritage sites need to be conserved. No construction activities of any sort should be allowed within the protected site. Citizens cannot come out on the streets every time an illegal construction comes up. A Master Plan for the heritage zone will bring all such illegal activities to a halt.

Adelmo Fernandes, Vasco

What's happening in Goa?

Is our golden Goa still the Rome of the East? Absolutely no. There is no law and order in the State with too much interference from politicians in the functioning of the police.

The Siddhi Naik's case is in cold storage. Houses of Goans are being demolished with the help of bouncers. Hills, fields, forests,

sand dunes, khazans etc are being blindly sold out to outsiders for a price.

Doctors are molesting not only young girls but young boys as well, police constables helping prisoners run away, professors are robbing question papers, excise inspectors smuggling liquor from Goa to Karnataka, some teachers are beating students mercilessly, murders on the rise, holy places are being shifted without proper protocol, activists are being arrested, beef being exported to Iran and jobs sold for cash are some glaring examples of crime and corruption haunting the State.

Goans are puzzled not knowing what exactly is happening around.

Natividade Fernandes, Cavelossim

Road to 10 bn: World population projections

Scientists have recently predicted that by 2050, world population may cross the 10-billion

mark and frighteningly enough the world will face severe shortage of food.

They have also predicted that in the next 27 years, the demand for food will have increased by 70 percent.

In such a scary foreboding scenario, the United Nations Environment Programme's The Food Waste Index Report 2024 says that in 2022, the world has wasted 1.05 billion tonnes of food, and that India ranks among the top contributors to this global issue.

There must also be coordination among food supply chain actors – farmers, handlers, processors and traders in collaboration with the public and private sectors and the civil society to prevent food wastage.

Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai

Political dominance and rising intolerance

That Indians are peculiarly thin-skinned has been proved on a

number of occasions. But the dubious honour of possessing the prickliest of skins must go to the Indian politician. Politicians love humour when they are holding the mike in hand. However, when somebody cracks jokes on them, they pull out the defamation lawsuits, threatening to take legal action. The violent reaction to comedian Kunal Kamra's humorous remarks about Maharashtra Dy CM Eknath Shinde is not merely a sign of rising intolerance, it also highlights how such intolerance can escalate beyond police cases into acts of vandalism and open intimidation, aimed at asserting political dominance.

It is an alarming situation where the State acts arbitrarily and sends bulldozers to level a location where a joke was made and the man who delivered the lines is chased, harassed and persecuted. The invocation of 'hurt sentiments' to justify violent loyalty has gone too far and these claims are being used to legitimise mob attacks, undermining the free and open space essential for democratic discourse.

Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai