

## O HERALDO

The Voice of Goa - since 1900

## Death of another Smart deadline?

Ten years after it was launched, the central Smart City Mission is scheduled to officially end on March 31, 2025. Meanwhile, three extensions have been given by the Central Government. Launched in 2015, the aim of the Mission was to create 100 Smart Cities. The cities were to be selected on a competitive basis. Panjim was one among the selected 100 Smart Cities.

The Smart Cities were selected between 2016 and 2018 and given a deadline of five years to complete their works. Since the works were not completed, the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs gave an extension in 2021 so that the works could be completed by 2023. The deadline for completion was

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further pushed to June 30, 2024. In its latest edition, the deadline has been further amended to March 31, 2025.

Due to the failure of the States to complete the projects, a 2024 report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs had proposed that State government would have to complete the incomplete projects at their own cost. Will the Centre stand by this?

Panjim is one of those cities which may default on completion of all projects before March 31, 2025. So, going by the Centre's decision, will

the State government have to complete the projects at their own expense? Or will the Centre relent and allow the States to utilise the Rs 48,000 crores which is pending with the Centre by way of approvals?

Panjim is struggling to complete its road works and sanitation projects. It still has to complete the sanitation and hygiene projects, Smart mobility (only electric buses have been introduced) and smart governance projects, forget about the Integrated Command and Control Centres, which are at the heart of the Smart City for intelligent monitoring of crime, accidents, parking, failure of services etc.

With just two days to go, the Smart City Mission has submitted that only road works could be completed before the March 31, 2025 deadline. All the other infrastructure works such as gutters, footpaths, beautification, etc. would be done by May 31, 2025. There are no deadlines set for sanitation and hygiene projects, smart mobility, smart governance projects and the Integrated Command and Control Centre.

Even with two days to go, the contractor/s have not shown any urgency and the work is sluggish, chaotic, disorganised and lack supervision, as pointed out earlier. Over the last two weeks, O Heraldo has been marking the countdown to March 31, and completion of the Smart City works. We must say that the Smart City Mission has been responsive to O Heraldo's campaign and filled up the dug up roads at least with mud, after the photographs have appeared in various editions over the last two weeks.

However, the road works, wherever they have been completed have been done with poor quality tar and the drains have not been completed. In these dire circumstances, one activist had made a tongue in cheek remark that along with electric buses, the Smart City must also purchase boats to save the citizens from the impending flooding in Panjim, with all the mud lying around.

As on date at least seven roads in the city are incomplete though motorable. From South of Panjim to North, they are the Taleigao-St Inez junction, which is dangerous and incomplete; the 18th June Road has been dug opposite Goa College of Pharmacy at two locations; the Mahatma Gandhi road near Don Bosco where the trench has been filled but a huge mountain of mud poses threat to commuters; the CCP Market to Geeta Bakery road which is in bad shape; the road between Mascarenhas building and Haroon island, near Delhi Durbar; and the road near Hotel Vinanti, near the Customs Museum.

All the roads are motorable but have been patched up with mud and are treacherous and not fully tarred to represent a Smart City. The only road which is completely closed for traffic is the cross road from Real Barberia to Café Ritz and from Café Bhole to Mascarenhas building. Here the work of concretisation of the road is going on and will certainly not meet the March 31, deadline.

After this huge spending of public money by raising taxes and crushing inflation, is Panjim looking smarter? This will be a question which the voters of Panjim will have to answer in the Goa Assembly Election 2027.

## comment



ROHIT SINHA

## The quiet disappearance of the village square

There is a peculiar contradiction in Goa today. On one hand, citizens are more vocal than ever, mobilising against environmental degradation, protesting unchecked construction and demanding accountability from those in power. The intent and passion is undeniable in the populace. Yet, despite this surge of civic energy, meaningful change remains frustratingly out of reach. Policies still favour a narrow set of objectives and priorities. The system, it seems, remains stubbornly indifferent to the very people it is meant to serve.

What explains this gap between intention and outcome?

The answer may lie not in the absence of democratic values, but in the slow erosion of the spaces where those values are practiced. Democracy, after all, is not just about elections or institutions - it is about the daily interactions that sustain it. And in Goa, as in much of the world, those interactions are fading. The village square, once the beating heart of public life, has been reduced to a relic - a place we pass through rather than inhabit.

In a recent lecture at the London School of Economics, political scholar Pratap Bhanu Mehta made a distinction that resonates deeply with Goa's current predicament. Democracy, he argued, is often caught between two competing visions. The first treats it as a method - a way of resolving disputes or clashes of values. The second sees it as empowerment - a way for people to shape the world around them. As Mehta sees it, "democracy needs both values and empowerment"

**Goa's middle ring is fraying... The people next door, the ones who share our streets but not our social feeds, are slipping into the background**



Goa has no shortage of the former. We have procedures, committees, and laws. We have a civic minded populace looking out for the commons. But the latter - the sense that ordinary citizens can influence their own futures beyond the election cycle - has withered under the weight of bureaucracy and centralised decision-making. Seeing citizens come out and protest against government mishandling is a symptom of the deeper dissatisfaction that arises of feeling

disempowered.

This is not a call to dismantle institutions, but to recognise that institutions alone are not enough. Democracy needs breathing room. It needs spaces where people can gather, debate and act without waiting for permission. Historically, the village square served this role. It was where news was shared, disputes were ironed out, and collective action was born. Today, those functions have been outsourced - to social media, to government offices, to the opaque machinery of governance. The result is a democracy that feels increasingly hollow.

The decline of the village square is part of the broader unraveling of community ties. Sociologists sometimes speak of the 'middle ring' of relationships - the layer between close family and distant acquaintances. These are the neighbours, the shopkeepers, the familiar faces of daily life. They are not intimate friends, but they are the glue that holds society together. The middle ring is key to social cohesion. The village square is our best arena for practicing productive disagreement and compromise. In other words, the space where a healthy democracy flourishes.

Goa's middle ring is fraying. We know our intimate circles well, that is our families, our close friends. And thanks to technology, we are more connected than ever to like-minded strangers online. But the people next door? The ones who share our streets but not our social feeds? They are slipping into the background.

This matters because democracy is not just about big ideas; it is about the capacity to live alongside difference. The village square was where that capacity was nurtured—where disagreements were tempered by familiarity, where compromise was not an abstract ideal but a daily necessity. Without these spaces, politics becomes polarized, governance becomes distant, and civic energy dissipates into frustration.

The good news is that the village square is not lost. It doesn't have to be a relic of the past, but seen as a necessity for the future. Across the world, cities and towns are recognising the value of vibrant public spaces - not just as amenities, but as critical infrastructure for democracy. From Barcelona's 'superblocks' to Bogota's 'ciclovía', the lesson is clear: when people have places to gather, they find ways to collaborate.

The village square is more than just a physical space. It is a particular kind of third space - one that exists neither in the privacy of homes nor

the formality of workplaces, but in the shared ground between. Third spaces have distinct qualities. They are neutral ground, where hierarchies soften. They are accessible, requiring no membership or invitation. Most importantly, they foster unstructured interaction between different kinds of people. The village square, in its ideal form, embodies all of these. It is where political discussions happen naturally, where differing views are moderated by the simple fact of having to face one another day after day.

None of this happens by accident. If we are serious about reviving the village square, we must be equally serious about creating the conditions for it to thrive. This is where institutional imagination comes in.

The Chief Public Realm Officer, as proposed in these pages earlier, could be the first step in this direction. The role would not be about imposing top-down solutions, but about enabling communities to reclaim their shared spaces. A CPRO could streamline the bureaucratic hurdles that currently make even simple place-making efforts needlessly difficult. They could ensure that panchayats have the resources and guidance to reform underused public land into vibrant hubs. It would recognise that democracy is not just something that happens online, but in the streets where life unfolds.

The disappearance of the village square is not inevitable. It is the result of choices—choices to prioritise efficiency over engagement, to mistake governance for control, to forget that democracy depends as much on culture as it does on constitutions.

We do not need to romanticise the past to recognize what has been lost. The village square will not return in its old form, nor should it. But the need for spaces where people can come together, where differences can be aired and resolved, where democracy can be lived rather than just debated—that need remains as urgent as ever.

Goa does not need grand experiments. It needs to return to a simple principle that public spaces should serve the public. The village has always been central to its administrative functioning, perhaps it's time to reimagine the panchayat as the place for dialogue, not just ceremony. It means treating the village square not as an afterthought in planning, but as its starting point.

*(The author is a strategy consultant and writer living in Goa)*

## Women's safety still significant concern

Recent incidents of a woman jumping off a running train to escape an assaulter and a pregnant woman, who was pushed out of a train following an attempted rape and suffering a miscarriage in the process, are clear indicators that women's safety still remains a serious concern in our country. Women in India are becoming the most vulnerable section as far as their safety and security are concerned. The increasing crimes against women are a jolt to their confidence, to our society, and to our judicial system as a whole.

Reforms in our legal system are the need of the hour, with stringent punishments meted out to the offenders in such a manner that the crimes are treated as non-bailable offenses. If we truly want to end crimes against women, we need to focus on changing the mindset of society.

This involves initiating meaningful conversations, raising awareness, and treating the problem with the seriousness it deserves. By doing so we can prevent more women from falling victim to the vicious cycle of violence. Only then can we create a future where women are not just safe in their homes and communities, but are also free to live without fear, enjoy-

ing the rights and respect they deserve.

**Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai**

## Stories in Silver: St Francis Xavier

"Stories in Silver: St. Francis Xavier", a coffee-table book was released during the XVIII Solemn Exposition of the Sacred Relics of St. Francis Xavier, popularly known by all Goans as "GOYCHO SAIB". The author, Pantaleao Fernandes, is a well-known personality from Benaulim. I was eagerly waiting to see the book and to know its contents.

A few days back, the author gifted me a copy and no sooner I opened the book, I could simply not close it until I finished reading it. The stories hidden in the silver plates around the Casket "are an unmatched treasure, to unearth the life, and the mission of St Francis Xavier", writes Bishop Simiao Fernandes in the Foreword. The stories are really so inspirational and mind-blowing, as most of the facts researched and presented by Pantaleao were new to me. And many of them still may be unknown to our people, especially the mira-

## letterstotheeditor

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cles of resuscitations of the dead. Most of us are only familiar with the miracle of the crab coming from the sea to return his crucifix that had fallen into the sea. The author has really taken great pains to present the thirty-two plates in a story form in his book and inform us so much about our beloved saint. He has made it so interesting that, once one opens his book, one can't close it until one finishes reading the last episode from the life of St Francis Xavier.

Fernandes also minutely describes the Casket. I have been at the feet of St Francis Xavier umpteen times, but never did I observe it through the eyes of the author of "Stories in Silver". He has aroused enough curiosity in me that next time I visit Bom Jesu Basilica I will spend more time just admiring the Casket and its rich significance to understand better Our Goycho Saib.

**Tony Savio Fernandes, Carmona**

## Eradication of TB by 2025

Tuberculosis (TB) has reportedly resurfaced in Navelim with eight active cases confirmed, most of them among migrant

labourers residing in rented premises. The disease, though serious, is fully curable. TB continues to pose a public health concern, especially among the economically weaker sections of society. It is a communicable disease as it can spread from person to person, primarily through the air when someone with active TB coughs or speaks. Incidentally Goa has relatively fewer TB cases as compared to some other states in India, with approximately 2,000 cases being reported per year. With the country setting a target to eliminate tuberculosis by 2025, Goa too has initiated steps to achieve the target. A cause of concern is that young people, mainly alcoholics, and those with uncontrolled diabetes are reporting with TB. It may be recalled that Goa has been the first state in the country to replace microscopy with rapid molecular diagnostic tests in 2020.

This has ensured that Goa's health centers are detecting TB and helping patients to start treatment early. However, Goa, like the rest of the country, is struggling to achieve the ambitious quest to eradicate the disease by the end of 2025. The

## people's edit

## BRATMAN AND COCO: A STUDY IN RETIREMENT, REDEFINED

ANANTHA PADMANABHAN

Retirement, traditionally envisioned as a period of leisure, took on a significantly different character with the arrival of my grandson, Bratman (a nickname derived from his occasionally boisterous demeanour).

Managing Bratman and Coco, my docile three-year-old pet dog, became an exercise in applied art, revealing the multifaceted challenges of parenting in the digital age—a stark contrast to my own daughters' upbringing. The constant need to balance digital stimulation with traditional play presented a unique challenge.

Following my daughter's return to work after maternity leave, I volunteered to care for Bratman at my residence rather than employ a full-time maid. This arrangement, involving daily commutes for my daughter, established me as Bratman's primary caregiver. For the past ten months, six days a week, his daily needs—morning milk feeding, two evenly spaced meals, a fruit snack, and nappy changes as required—have been my priority. The society's kids' play area became a regular destination, and my mobile phone, a record of Bratman's daily activities, facilitated immediate sharing with the family via WhatsApp.

Beyond the structured routine, the daily interactions between Bratman and Coco formed a significant part of the dynamic. Bratman's curiosity about Coco's ears and tail resulted in frequent, playful encounters, while his rapid mobility added complexity to managing them both. There were days when Bratman and Coco's wake-up times coincided, necessitating simultaneous feedings—a logistical challenge.

Adding to the routine's inherent unpredictability, certain events, such as the doorbell ringing, would disrupt the normal rhythm, triggering immediate movement from both Bratman and Coco. Managing their respective responses while attending to the door became routine. My neighbours, observing the daily activity levels, expressed surprise at the relative lack of audible distress. Despite the evident activity, a degree of control was maintained. Further complicating matters, the housemaid's unpredictable appearances contributed to increased interaction between herself, Bratman, and Coco.

To maintain a semblance of order in the house, unwritten rules—including restrictions on phone calls during Bratman's waking hours (with my phone generally on silent/voicemail mode) and a twenty-minute daily limit on television screen time—were implemented. I also found myself frequently keeping Bratman's favourite rhymes playing in the background as he napped, while quickly consuming my coffee or food.

The return of my wife and daughter from work marked a shift in Bratman's focus. He would typically direct his attention towards them, temporarily disregarding my presence. Both monthly visits from my son-in-law and festival visits to his paternal grandparents also resulted in increased activity levels for Bratman.

The experience of caring for Bratman and Coco has redefined my expectations of retirement. The only area where I failed was my attempt to successfully bathe Bratman, which resulted in a display of vocal opposition that deterred any further ventures into that aspect of childcare. This experience, including the occasional setbacks, has led me to contemplate updating my LinkedIn profile with "Open to work as a nanny," as I have developed a new appreciation for the rewards and challenges of "digital childcare!"

state's mortality rate among TB patients has reportedly been relatively higher than the national average for two successive years. Since migrant labourers could be carrying the virus, it is necessary to make health cards mandatory for them which can keep a check on those suffering from the disease.

**Adelmo Fernandes, Vasco**

## The silent death of workers in India

Lack of teeth in labour laws and a callous attitude towards the implementation of even the existing ones make the lives of the workers the most vulnerable. A contractor allegedly employed a 16-year-old minor boy to clean a water tank at a housing society in Thane. The boy died from an electric shock while doing the job on March 20. This incident laid bare two deadly menaces namely the prevalence of child labour and the deadly working conditions. Often, workers are forced to work without adequate safety equipment. As a result, deaths after falling from scaffolding or while cleaning a septic tank or in a tunnel happen frequently in India. Is this the reward they should get for building our homes, roads, tunnels, and bridges?

**Sujit De, Kolkata**