

## O HERALDO

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# Come down hard on private passenger buses

**T**hursday's tragic accident at Queeny Nagar junction along the Verna stretch of the NH 66 is still fresh in the mind, particularly after the toll rose to two on Friday. The accident, which injured several passengers and killed the conductor aboard the bus, occurred when the packed vehicle - which was mostly carrying workers from the Verna Industrial Estate - overturned while on its way to Vasco. Witnesses said the bus was so packed that the conductor was unable to close the door flap as passengers were crammed even on the footboard.

Not only did the accident cause a severe traffic snarl along the already busy Verna highway but also evoked strong reactions from a whole spectrum of people who blamed the government in general and the regional transport office (RTO) in particular, for failing to ensure that all passenger buses registered with it adhere to the prescribed safety norms to protect the lives of passengers.

"Due to clashing timings and competition for passengers, drivers often drive recklessly, endangering lives," one local said. "Also, the RTO should be held responsible for allowing buses to get loaded with passengers beyond capacity."

Shockingly, the owner of the bus said that he had given the vehicle to another person to operate and that he didn't know who the driver was. He also claimed that he was unaware of the accident until he began receiving calls. What is most appalling is that the bus owner attempted to deflect responsibility by stating that the roads were not in great condition due to ongoing work along the highway, and, as a perfunctory gesture, went on to say, "Drivers must also take care to ensure passenger safety."

It was later revealed that the ill-fated bus had already been in the dock several times before. Superintendent of police (traffic), Prabodh Shirwaikar, came on record to say that as many as 14 challans had been issued against the owner of the bus by both the RTO and the police traffic cell too. "This is under district police investigation, but from a traffic point of view, we carry out enforcement on vehicles and will take the most stringent action against any vehicles that do not obey road discipline," Shirwaikar told the media.

Cortalim MLA Anton Vas, who visited the site of the accident on Thursday, confirmed to the media that the bus was packed beyond capacity. He also told the local police to conduct an inquiry and take appropriate action against the bus owner for endangering human lives.

The authorities and the government representatives appear to have made all the right noises following the Queeny Nagar accident, but most citizens have begun reconciling to the fact that hardly anything will change on the ground. The tragic accident is a mirror to what could happen on any other Goan road as passenger buses run by private owners across the length and breadth of the state are a law unto themselves. Many of these vehicles are not only operating beyond their prescribed lifespans but are also in extremely poor condition, posing serious risks to the lives of passengers and other motorists too.

Apart from that, the operators of such buses stop at nothing to ensure that every square inch of space on the bus is occupied by a person, sometimes cramming in as many as 30-35 standing passengers as opposed to the permissible limit of say 10. This invariably leads to people standing on the footboard of the bus - akin to passengers hanging on the doors of local trains in Mumbai - which is undoubtedly a recipe for disaster. Add to that the recklessness with which the drivers steer their respective vehicles in order to squeeze in one extra trip or to deprive the competition of passengers, and it is all but certain that such impunity can exist only because there is no fear of the law.

It is, therefore, time that the authorities concerned seriously address these and many other related issues pertaining to local passenger buses operated by private owners, lest the government wants another Queeny Nagar disaster to occur elsewhere.

India's smallest state is an almost insignificant little slice of the Konkan and its population even more negligible in size, but its granddaughters and grandsons across the oceans keep on having an outsized impact on the world

BY INVITATION

Vivek Meneses

# Leon gets the Gold

LEON REBELLO



Valeriano, Leon and Liddy Rebello on election night

Compared to India, mainstream political discourse in Australia is mostly conservative across the board. However, Mascarenhas is broadly of the Left, where the Goan/Indian diaspora in "the West" has traditionally felt most comfortable

party. He responded equally directly: "Australia is the most successful multicultural nation in the world. I have always found Australia to be accepting and welcoming of people from all corners of the globe, and I think it sometimes receives an inaccurate and unfair reputation in Indian media. Australia has always embraced my family and given us incredible opportunities, for which we are forever indebted. Throughout my life, I have always strived to be judged on my abilities, as opposed to my race, gender or background. Coming from a Goan background is entirely consistent with my membership of the Liberal National Party. We are the party that believes in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. And like many Goans, we value reward for effort, freedom of the individual, small business, and family as the key building block of our society. The Liberal National Party should be viewed as the natural home of multicultural Australia."

Rebello graciously agreed to answer my questions after the veteran Kenyan-Goan-Australian journalist Cyprian Fernandes connected us. In our exchange, he struck me as palpably sincere, shared how his family "migrated to Australia around 35 years ago from Goa, and like many migrants, they came in search of opportunities and a better future.

Throughout my childhood, my parents made every effort to ensure I [stayed] connected [and] I visited Goa many times over the years and had the opportunity to spend quality time with family and cousins, while being immersed in beautiful Goan culture. I've witnessed first-hand the impeccable work ethic of Goans. From their small business culture, to their labour-intensive practices of meal preparation and manufacturing, Goans are an incredibly hard-working people. Australia provides an egalitarian society that encourages its people, including new migrants, to aspire to be the best they can be. My parents represent the culmination of both this Goan work ethic and Australian aspiration. They gave me a deep appreciation of my cultural heritage, but they are equally proud of the lives they built in Australia, and are the proudest Australians I know."

It is an admirable feeling story and Rebello is an excellent advertisement for Australian multiculturalism, as his hometown Gold Coast Bulletin newspaper puts it: "Leon Rebello once poured glasses of water for federal MPs as a part-time job while studying at university. Now, he's set to not just become an MP but the youngest member of the House of Representatives." He "fell in love with politics while working as a cham-

ber assistant at federal parliament where he assisted MPs from all parties and worked in the mail room." Now "he is understood to be the first person to have risen from that position to being elected in his own right." Rebello was inspired by working with the former foreign minister Julie Bishop, while still studying law at Australian National University: "She had an impeccable work ethic, which we were taught, and that is something I relished. With her, I got to see much of the country and fell in love with Queensland along the way."

What does all this tell us about Australian meritocracy? To get a long view, I reached out to the distinguished Sydney-based author and academic Roanna Gonsalves, who moved to Australia as an international student in 1998, whose 2016 *The Permanent Resident* is an outstanding evocation of migrant life beyond model minority clichés. She said "it's not surprising that we have people like Zaneta and Leon in Parliament. The reasons are complex. They are hard workers, of course, but they are also both beneficiaries of the significant resources and branding of the two major parties. They tick boxes for the major parties, and the major parties tick boxes for them. That said, representational democracy should not be only about the representation of skin colour, or cultural background, but about the representation of values. We have quite a few politicians from minority backgrounds in Australia, but whether or not their values align with the communities they come from is an entirely different matter. Running for political office can involve glory, but also a lot of sacrifice for candidates and their families. This would be even harder for first and second-generation immigrants who may not have deep roots in this country yet. So, it's commendable that people of Goan backgrounds stand up to represent their electorates, which comprise of all backgrounds, not just Goan. I would hope that such Members of Parliament would remember to further the cause of social equity and justice for all, not just for businesses or for individuals "getting ahead" at any cost."

(Vivek Meneses is a writer and co-founder of the Goa Arts and Literature Festival)

## A Pope for the poor — but who are the poor in Goa?

**H**istory has unfolded in Rome with the election of Pope Leo XIV, the first American-born pontiff and a man forged in the

fires of pastoral service in the rural hills of Peru. There, he lived among the poor — not as a benefactor, but as a brother. He spent over two decades walking with indigenous communities, learning their language, celebrating their culture, and standing up for their dignity. His ministry wasn't shaped in corridors of privilege, but in dusty roads, broken homes and shared pain.

In many ways, this legacy is a continuation of Pope Francis, who dared the Church to move from being an institution of rituals to a field hospital of healing. Pope Francis didn't just speak about the poor — he repositioned them at the very heart of the Church. His vision was uncomfortable for many because it required not charity, but change; not pity, but proximity.

With Pope Leo XIV now assuming that same mantle, the global Church has been offered a second moment of reckoning. But what does this mean for us in Goa, a land deeply interwoven with the Catholic faith and its institutions? More importantly, will we simply

PETER F. BORGES

watch from afar and applaud this election — or will we reflect deeply on how much we have drifted from that same Gospel call to be with the vulnerable, the forgotten, the displaced?

**Poverty in Goa is no longer about hunger — It's about exclusion**

In Goa, poverty wears new masks. It is no longer just about hunger or torn clothes. It is about being left out of systems, conversations, and protection. The migrant worker who built our walls and washed our dishes but is now labelled a "nuisance." The woman in the unorganized sector cleaning our homes, raising our children, but with no maternity benefits, no identity papers, and no respect. The disabled youth who is still treated as a burden, whose access ends where the stairs begin. The tribal child born without documentation, therefore born without a future.

And then there is the rising number of urban poor — living in slums in Mapusa, Margao, Vasco, and beyond — whose children face abuse online and offline, whose youth fall into cycles of addiction and delinquency, and whose lives

### UPFRONT

Let us remember: the poor are not asking for pity. The vulnerable are not waiting for leftover kindness. They are demanding visibility, equity, and justice. And they are watching — to see whether our faith, our governance, and our institutions will finally walk their talk

are invisibilized under the glamour of Goa's tourism narrative.

This is not just socioeconomic marginalization. It is systemic erasure.

**Xenophobia is the new face of respectability**

What's most disturbing is the growing normalisation of xenophobic sentiments in Goa — sometimes subtle, sometimes loud, but always dangerous. Migrants are increasingly being "othered" — painted as threats to culture, economy, and safety. Their access to welfare is questioned. Their right to dignity is denied. Politicians, parties, and even respected community figures speak of them as burdens, not as fellow human beings.

And the Church, which once stood

as a sanctuary for all, now finds itself at a crossroads: Will it remain neutral in the face of hate? Or will it rise once more to say, "Blessed are the strangers, for they too are children of God?"

Our social programmes have become checklists — and that is dangerous

This exclusion is not just a matter of neglect. It is the outcome of a deeper crisis: the collapse of sincerity in our social responses. Many of Goa's social welfare programmes — be they from the state or civil society — have increasingly become tokenistic, bureaucratic, and boxed into rubrics. We've confused documenting with doing. Workshops are held, photos are taken, reports are written — but the lives of the most vulnerable

remain unchanged.

Parish outreach efforts are often limited to distribution drives during Lent or Christmas. NGO reports speak of "reaching the marginalised" — but few have walked the narrow lanes where real pain lives. Even some shelter homes have become spaces where children are institutionalised not because they need care, but because they help institutions survive.

This hollowing out of purpose — where form has replaced substance — is deeply dangerous. Because when systems lose their soul, injustice becomes institutionalized.

**The Call of Pope Leo XIV Must Be Realized**

Pope Leo XIV's election is not just a ceremonial moment for Catholics — it is a prophetic call for anyone who still believes in human dignity. His life testifies to accompaniment, to listening, to undoing systems that exclude. He reminds us that the Church — and by extension, society — is not meant to serve the status quo but to disturb it, especially when the comfortable forget the suffering.

For Goa, this means looking in the mirror. Are our Parishes inclusive spaces, or are they built for the already-integrated? Are our welfare schemes reaching the

child without a birth certificate, the woman without a ration card, the youth without a roof? Are we designing programmes that involve the vulnerable, or merely ticking boxes in the name of social justice?

This also means building bridges, not walls — between locals and migrants, between the literate and the excluded, between those with voices and those with none. Goa has always been a land of hospitality, of coexistence. But that legacy is being fractured by narratives of fear and entitlement.

Let us remember: the poor are not asking for pity. The vulnerable are not waiting for leftover kindness. They are demanding visibility, equity, and justice. And they are watching — to see whether our faith, our governance, and our institutions will finally walk their talk.

The papacy of Leo XIV begins with the memory of Peru's poor. Let Goa begin again by remembering its own.

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