

O HERALDO

The Voice of Goa - since 1900

## It's a jungle right here

**C**oming across information of interactions/conflicts between wild animals and human beings in busy Goan settlements is fast becoming the norm rather than the exception, especially over the past few months. The year began with a gaur (Indian bison) straying into the heart of Ponda town during nightfall. While the incident sparked panic, there were fortunately no casualties as the few people who were on the streets rushed out of the bison's way. A whole two hours later, a rescue team of the forest department successfully led the bison back into its habitat. A few months before this, a woman in Bond-bag died after chasing a bison, mistaking it for a buffalo, when it attacked her. The tragic incident prompted the forest department to dig a one-kilometre-long trench along the village's border, which proved to be an exercise in futility as bison were seen twice after that in Ponda town searching for food and water during nightfall.

In March, a pet dog was reportedly killed by a leopard in the North Goa coastal village of Arambol. The owner said the dog was tied in the balcony of the family's home when the leopard appeared out of nowhere and dragged it into the jungle. The family said they saw the entire horror unfold on CCTV footage.

A black panther was killed early one April morning in an accident on the national highway at Connem-Priol after it was hit by a vehicle while it was crossing the road. When officials of the forest department at Ponda cast a net over the big cat, they found it was still alive. The black panther was then rushed to the nearest government veterinary hospital for treatment but later died.

The ever increasing incidents of wild animals straying into human habitation should be a cause for alarm for all, not only because of safety concerns but also because of the fact that the homes of these beautiful creatures are shrinking by the day as forests, hills and natural waterbodies are sacrificed at the altar of development, leaving them with nowhere to go for succour but to the settlements where their own home might have once been. We must realise that these beautiful creatures are not doing it on a whim. The increasing construction of highways and urban expansion near forested areas have virtually forced them to stray into human settlements to forage for food and water. This phenomenon is also having a marked effect on humans as residents in areas where wild animal sightings have become frequent say they fear moving out of their homes late in the evenings and during the early mornings.

Environmentalists have, time and again, urged the government to establish wildlife corridors to facilitate safe crossings for animals, which, they feel, will also ensure that the animals do not stray into human settlements. Forest department officials too have come on record to say that the proximity of some settlements, such as Ponda, to forested areas increases the likelihood of wild animals straying into bustling and active areas while crossing roads or highways. Also, illegal constructions are proliferating in certain areas, leaving no wild animals with no grounds for grazing and hunting and compelling them to venture into residential areas, environmental activists have said.

Up north, there is the looming threat of the future of the Mhadei river and the ripple effect this will create on the fragile ecology, and wildlife that the river system supports along its course. A well-known environmentalist has come on record to say that a man was killed at Revora, near Mapusa, by an elephant that had wandered from Karnataka's Dandeli. Two other people met with similar fates in the Pernem taluka, he said while highlighting that the elephants displaced by ongoing construction around the Kali river have now migrated to the Tillari river basin in Maharashtra, where they are reportedly wreaking havoc. A similar fate could unfold at the Mhadei river system amid the relentless water diversion battle among Goa, Maharashtra and Karnataka.

We must respect Nature and the lives she nurtures for our own well-being and for that of our future generations. Live and let live must be our life's mission, for if we fail, the jungle will come much closer to home and much sooner than we expect.

People are also getting transactional in this new economic environment where material acquisitions rule the roost. A new narrative of dependence on government schemes for anything and everything is the new normal



BY INVITATION

Sushila Sawant Mendes

## Introspection into our Statehood dreams

**A**nother Statehood Day is behind us. The Opinion Poll verdict in 1967 and the passing of the Official Language Act in February 1987 facilitated the conferring of Statehood on Goa. The grandson had fulfilled the promise of his grandfather, the first Prime Minister of our country. His mother, Indira Gandhi, partly fulfilled the pledge of her father on preserving the unique identity of Goa, by the only Opinion Poll ever conducted. The naming ceremony of a new child heralds excitement and hope in a family that the newborn will add to the name and fame of the family with the support of all its members.

We Goans also belong to one big family and were elated and had many expectations of being granted Statehood. It gave the people power to secure their identity and it kindled hope for more sustained development and prosperity. However, did this family remain united and nurture this small State to preserve and protect our Goan asmita, culture and heritage? Or did we depend on the government that we elected to take over from us, and having performed the sacred act of casting our ballot, believed that our duty was over?

We needed to take advantage of the many bounties that came with this decision. Since 1987, Goa now had more financial and political autonomy to take decisions about its own future. Statehood empowered the elected government to take faster decisions which facilitated speedier implementation of welfare programmes. People's trust is shattered when, in the name of development, MLAs change their political affiliations. Individual defections were always there in Goa, but in recent times, the change has become en masse to the winning side. Once there is a trust deficit between the people and their representatives, then every act is looked upon with suspicion. The only aim is to amass fortune - to hell with Goa! We deserved statesmen, not politicians. When ministers help families with low-grade jobs as their only achievement - what sort of employment policy is this?

After the granting of Statehood, the Department of Art & Culture became the focal point for all art and cultural activities. It has been working down the years to promote folk and contemporary



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music, dance, drama, painting and other art forms. Unfortunately, this space is the centre of controversy as the quality of the repairs and refurbishments done are criticised as not commensurate with the amount of taxpayers' money spent on it. Goa has potential to become the No. 1 destination for filmmakers. The successful organisation of the International Film Festival has added to its credibility.

The public health system in Goa has made quantum leaps, especially in some of the super-specialty departments of the Goa Medical College, which has ensured that most health facilities are available in Goa. Education has reached every nook and corner of the State, but education and health have become top-heavy. While the Goa Medical College and the government colleges have set a reasonable benchmark, the government-run primary schools are pathetic, both in their infrastructure and learning. The less said about the primary health sector, the better.

The recognition by the Sahitya Akademi and Konkani's inclusion in the Eighth Schedule was the first step for promotion of Goan literature. In the language agitation, both Devanagari and Romi script lovers came together with one objective: to make Konkani the official language of Goa. It was necessary to secure the basic idea of Goa and secure the identity of Goa, which led to Statehood. The government introduced the Devanagari script to make Konkani the official language of Goa. The Romi script lovers were left disillusioned, and for them, Statehood is still a mirage!

We needed policies and laws that would protect the pristine countryside and preserve our city heritage. However, there was a paradigm shift in these objectives. The very idea of Goa was lost forever as tourism activity boomed and Goa became a real estate piece. Land became a major source of political corruption. Changing a few plans and a few digits in the law could yield huge political returns. We are losing our environment, our natural resources like land and water. Mhadei is the best example, where we can see our politicians paying lip service to this issue. With 28 MPs, Karnataka seems to be a stronger pressure lobby in Parliament. We have failed to protect our waters and jetties. The NITI Aayog survey placed Goa at the lowest level in managing water resources, irrigation, potable drinking water and groundwater. The government, therefore, needs to survey the carrying capacity before permitting new constructions.

The greatest threat to Goa is the silent change of land use pattern - the zone changes and conversion of land for non-agricultural use. The consequent entry of private interests has destroyed the very face of Goa. We believed that our destiny would be decided in accordance with our will, but what is happening is just the opposite. The high command has become so powerful that the State players have become almost puppets. Sections 16B, 17A and 39A of the Town and Country Planning Act give too much arbitrary power to convert land and place it on the lap of builders, who then de-

stroy our hills, mountains and agricultural land. Our highly qualified and competent administrative officers become 'Yes Ministers' - the elected representatives and the bureaucracy together need to preserve and protect the landscape of our green Goa, the very brand or USP that our State is known for.

Earlier, it was the bureaucracy that played a key role and the politicians were kept at bay - or rather the politicians were also committed to doing what is good for Goa and agreed accordingly. The TCP department is assuming overwhelming powers and is accused of granting permissions to construct buildings even on agricultural land and in eco-sensitive zones. With Statehood came the hope that we would be better able to protect our land and people. However, when ruling party members and ministers speak loudly of corruption in government, and when the first shower of monsoons brings the State to a halt, it only shows the pit we have fallen into!

The people of Goa had a dream. It was already considered the Rome of the East. The rivers, green fields, mountains and tall coconut trees swaying gently in the background were iconic spaces that made Goans proud. It was this idea of Goa, along with its rich and secular culture, that accepted Goans with open arms throughout the world down the ages. Goans had personality traits both of the Orient and the Occident - that's why they could adapt to both societies in India and abroad in their workspaces and adopted societies. This was a cultural heritage worth clinging to, as it provided a jumping start to life and living. Have the dreams and aspirations of the people of Goa been fulfilled? People are also getting transactional in this new economic environment where material acquisitions rule the roost. A new narrative of dependence on government schemes for anything and everything is the new normal. The sons and daughters of Goa should not look the other way as Goa is put on sale by vested interests and their very own whom they trusted.

(Dr. Sushila Sawant Mendes is a professor and author of history and an independent researcher.)

## Share with gentleness the hope that is in your hearts

**T**he World Day of Social Communications was established by Pope Paul VI on 7 May 1967, two years after the Second Vatican Council. This annual celebration was an encouragement to reflect on the opportunities and challenges that the modern means of social communications offer and how the Church can better communicate the Gospel message.

On 24 January 2025, the feast day of St Francis de Sales, the Patron of Journalists, His Holiness, then Pope Francis, released his message for the 59th World Day of Social Communications, a message urging everyone to share with gentleness the hope that is in our hearts. Unexpectedly, this turned out to be his last message.

The Holy Father Pope Francis, addressed a heartfelt appeal to journalists and communicators, to put into practice their courageous commitment needed today more than ever, in this time marked by disinformation and polarisation. To put at the centre of communication the personal and collective responsibility towards your neighbour and be communicators of hope, according to the theme of the Jubilee, starting with a renewal of our work and mission

MOLLY FERNANDES

in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel.

The theme "Share with gentleness the hope that is in your hearts" calls for a shift away from aggressive and divisive communication towards a more compassionate and dialogue approach. The Pope emphasises the need to disarm communication, prioritise hope and foster a sense of community. This message reminds us that sharing faith requires humility and gentleness, building bridges rather than walls.

Disarming communication

The Pope highlights the prevalence of aggressive and hostile communication in modern society - both online and offline. Instead of engaging in tactics that provoke or hurt, he desires to focus on building bridges and fostering understanding. To counter fake news with integrity because fake news spreads misinformation, distorts truth, and fuels division. Pope Francis urges responsible communication, truth-based reporting, and critical thinking to counter deception, ensuring words build unity rather than discord.

Sharing hope with gentleness

UPFRONT

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This call to disarm communication naturally leads to how we share hope. The theme is deeply rooted in 1 Peter 3:15-16, which urges believers to interpret their hope with gentleness and reverence: "In your hearts, sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

The Pope draws three key reflections from this passage:

1. In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord

The hope of Christians has a face - the face of the risen Lord. His promise to remain always with us through the gift of the Holy Spirit enables us to hope even against all hope, allowing us to perceive the hidden goodness quietly present even when all seems lost.

2. Be prepared to explain the hope that is in us

Significantly, the Apostle tells us to give an accounting of our hope "to anyone who demands" it. Christians are not primarily people who talk about God but rather those who resonate with the beauty of His love - a love lived out in daily life, inspiring

questions like "Why do you live like this? Why are you like this?"

3. Communicating with gentleness and reverence

Our response to this question should be steeped in gentleness and closeness, like conversation of companions on a journey. This was the approach of Jesus of Nazareth, the greatest communicator of all time. Walking alongside the disciples on the road to Emmaus, He spoke with them in a way that made their hearts burn within them, interpreting events in the light of Scripture.

Hope as a community project

Hope is not just an individual virtue but a shared experience that calls for a community-based approach. The Pope invites believers to live out their faith in a way that inspires others and fosters unity.

Caring for the heart

In the face of technological advancements, Pope Francis invites individuals to cultivate their inner lives, caring for their hearts through mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and deeper spiritual reflection.

Promoting non-aggressive communication

The message calls for a culture of care - one that prioritises compassion, empathy, and understanding over aggression

and hostility. This means resisting the temptation to engage in online arguments, offering words of comfort and support, and speaking truthfully and fairly.

The power of personal communication

Beyond written and digital communication, there is an irreplaceable depth to face-to-face interactions. A kind word spoken in person, a gentle touch on the shoulder, or a warm hug in times of distress - these simple gestures carry profound healing and hope that no social media exchange can match. Yet, it is troubling to see family members retreating into private zones, each absorbed in their own digital bubble - earbuds in, music playing, chatting away in online spaces. The Pope's message calls us back to true, personal presence, reminding us that hope flourishes best in human connection, not just in virtual spaces.

A hope-filled call to action

On this day, let us become communicators who reflect Christ's hope through our words and actions - promoting peace, truth, and human dignity with the gentleness of true discipleship. Through mindful, compassionate communication, may we build bridges, foster unity, and radiate the love of Christ.