

Bastora attack exposes deteriorating law and order in Goa

Hi amchi paristhiti (this is our fate). Just three words uttered as a lamentation by an elderly woman following the assault of a man and his expectant wife at the Bastora junction recently, aptly sums up the increasing lawlessness and helplessness the average citizen is faced with in public settings in the once peace-loving state of Goa.

What sparked the assault of the couple was a mere argument over parking at Moira earlier that escalated into a full-scale ambush by a mob of at least 15 people at the Bastora junction, resulting in injuries to Vivek Shirodkar and his three-month pregnant wife, Shruti. It must be noted that this happened in full public view, with bystanders crowding the area not to stop the attack but to just watch the ‘drama’ unfold, and of course, to whip out their phones and record it for hits on social media platforms even as three lives were almost lost to a rain of blow and kicks right before their eyes. “She (Shruti) kept pleading with the 30-odd people watching us being beaten up for help, but none dared come forward as the group pulled her by the hair,” Vivek said, in an apt description of the heartlessness that the average onlooker has descended into.

While three men were arrested – Kaushal Shetye, Ranganath Shetye and Vinod Shetkar – what needs to be addressed urgently is the rapid erosion of civility and the shocking rise in the impulse to attack first and answer later. Going by reports, an argument over parking certainly did not merit a merciless assault on the Shirodkar couple, but the grim reality is that Goa is steadily turning into a jungle-raj like Bihar, where the law is but a paper tiger and the real power lies in arm-twisting, attacking and doling out ‘justice’ through public assaults, abuse and ambush in as little time as it takes to prepare instant noodles.

“Initially, I did not understand what was happening, but when they started hitting my husband, I flung myself in front of him and covered his head with my hands. It looked like they were going to kill him,” the valiant Shruti later told reporters. She said that despite her intervention, four-five men kept raining blows on the couple and the others formed a circle to cordon off outsiders. “My biggest fear at that moment was, would I manage to bring a child into this world without a father,” she said. “I pray that our baby will not be psychologically scarred by my trauma.”

The couple was so rattled by the attack that fear took over when they actually should have marched right into the police station to lodge a complaint, until a relative intervened and insisted that they report the incident to the police. Had this not happened, the brutal assault would have been watered down enough to be remembered as just another village ‘kestao’, not only traumatizing the couple but also emboldening the perpetrators enough to replicate their muscle justice tactics on other hapless people in the future.

What the Shirodkar couple says added to their anguish was the deafening silence of the onlookers and the extent of their apathy. Had even one person from the crowd decided to intervene, the mob of 15 attackers would have easily been overpowered and would have been forced to relent. But it now appears that such a move, although perceived to be the most obvious and humane thing to do, will only happen in a utopian setting where laws are abided by and civility trumps all else. A citizen rightly commented, “Goa has reached a stage where politics becomes important, when all that is expected is a token of care.”

If the state machinery isn’t set into motion immediately and if justice and punishment aren’t doled out quickly, it is almost certain that the length and breadth of Goa will turn into a goonda raj on the lines of Bihar, which has reported cases of a farmer and his son being killed by the farmer’s brother because of a land dispute, of a radio station manager being murdered due to a dispute over a tender, of a family of four persons being killed by dacoits who struck their house by nightfall, and other such gruesome attacks and murders over the years.

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BY INVITATION

Vivek Menezes

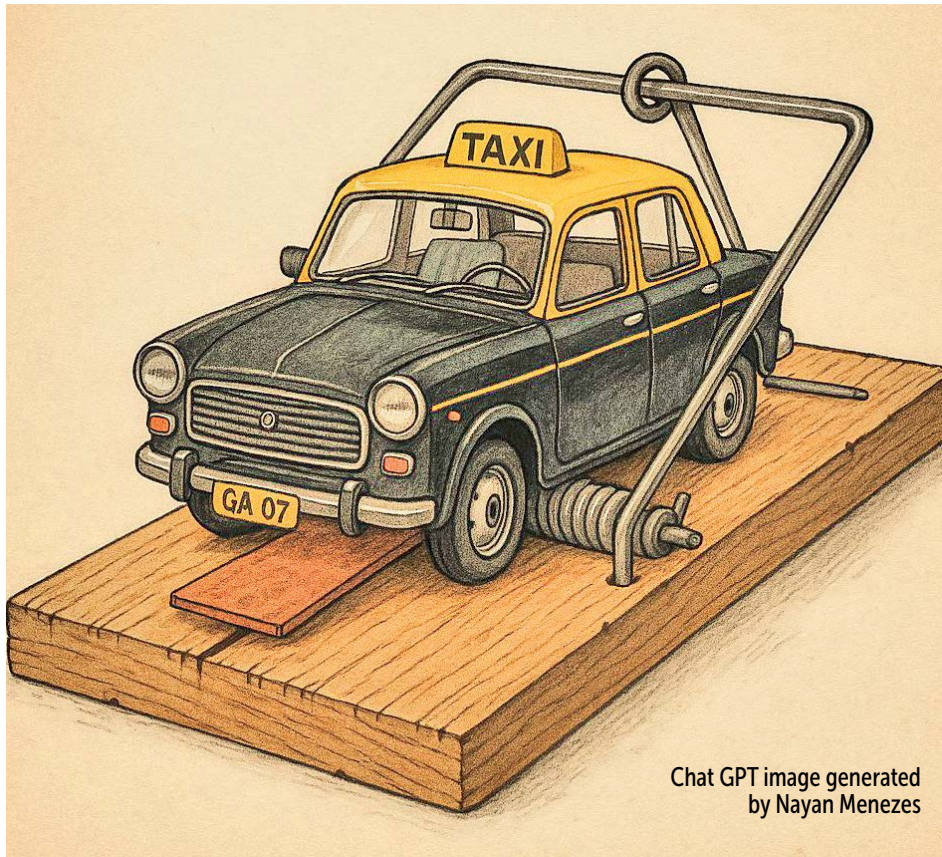
TAXI APP TRAP

Taxi and rickshaw rides in Goa are the most expensive in the country, with the added inconveniences of unpredictable service and arbitrary pricing. Tourists get cheated all the time – there is no denying it – and their bad feelings about transportation woes have kept getting worse in the ceaseless post-pandemic “revenge” vacationing binge that has overwhelmed India’s smallest state. It’s a thorny problem, because taxis and rickshaws are an important bastion of local agency in an economy otherwise bent to benefit “outside investors.” Sadly, it is also yet another area where the State has grievously bungled its responsibilities: denying the issue, ignoring it, manipulating the drivers lobby, first backing the thugish element then betraying everyone.

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I appreciated how the sharp young scholar Kaustubh Naik – he is a doctoral student at University of Pennsylvania – framed his opposition in a series of posts on social media: “I have been following the Goan taxi community’s opposition to app-based cab aggregators closely, and I stand firmly with the taxi drivers. However, what strikes me is the limited scope of the discourse surrounding this issue. Consumers focus on convenience, while taxi drivers highlight reduced profits. But the issue runs much deeper—perhaps even sinister. Goa undoubtedly faces a transit crisis, but will app-based aggregators solve it? The answer is a resounding no. These platforms, propped up by venture capital despite incurring massive losses year after year, are not here to solve transportation problems. Their aim is to dismantle mass transit as we know it. They enter the market as an alternative, exploit their financial clout to eliminate competition, and eventually lock users into their ecosystem.”

Naik has been travelling widely in Europe, the USA and India in his PhD studies. “Drawing from my own experiences using these apps in India and abroad, as well as research on platform labour and the gig economy,” he says, “there is a misconception that app-based taxis standardize fares. In reality, these apps thrive on unregulated and erratic pricing



Chat GPT image generated by Nayan Menezes

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models. Users often encounter surge pricing, which can triple the fare during peak hours or adverse weather conditions. This unpredictability benefits the platform, not the consumer.” Also, “Goan taxi owners argue that app-based models are suited for metro cities, not for a region like Goa, where demand is uneven. Initially, I agreed. But further research into the conditions of drivers in metros revealed a harsh reality: these models fail even in metropolitan areas. Drivers endure gruelling work hours under exploitative conditions just to break even. Stakeholders – including government officials, media, and Goan taxi drivers – should visit metro cities and engage with drivers using these platforms. They would find disillusionment rather than satisfaction. Globally, in cities like New York and London, these apps have decimated conventional taxi systems, displacing countless workers.”

Identical pain is 100% on the cards for Goa, after the drivers lobby has been backed into a guaranteed losing position, but there is still time to escape the trap, save their livelihoods, and come around to providing the reliability, predictability and simple dignity that all consumers (and not just tourists) deserve. With an essentially insignificant investment – two/three lakhs

– they can very quickly power up their own zero commissions “direct-to-driver” mobile app like the fully open source Namma Yatri ride-hailing service across the border in Karnataka. Simple, elegant, equitable, rigorously committed to community involvement, with 100% access to all data and source code – it is easily replicable in Goa, and can be up and running by the end of this month itself. Instead of risking further unpopularity, this is the last best chance for taxi and rickshaw operators to acknowledge the necessity for improvements, yet stay organized, strong and sustainable while turning around the prevailing narratives about rampant cheating and criminality.

In this regard, of course, it must also be acknowledged that taxi and rickshaw drivers have also become convenient scapegoats to distract from vastly more destructive forces that threaten not just Goa tourism but Goa itself. As an acerbic commentator pointed out on Kaustubh’s post: “Taxi drivers are a soft target. They’re not more scammy, corrupt, or unreasonable than any other Indian business or even the government, it’s just that they’re easier to criticise.” What is more, they are mostly vocal locals in the grim current scenario clearly favouring silent migrants, and so the

political and economic elites of the state have wasted no time in turning their backs. It has been an object lesson in political expediency to watch how the stakeholders of this significant sector – and hugely significant contributors to the Goa’s tourism success over decades – became marginalized, and abandoned by even their most recent champions.

The unmaking of the state will not be fixed by any cheap taxi app, and greater conveniences for budget tourists will make no difference to Goa’s economy, society, environment, culture or human development. Instead, all these – each one an integral factor in what makes the state attractive to locals and tourists alike – are in catastrophic decline, and literally falling apart in the overall collapse of governance. For just one example, the government has just conformed that Goa lost an unconscionable, almost incomprehensible 20% of its tree cover in just the past decade. How can you allow that – and conspire for even worse until the High Court intervened – and still claim you’re interested in “high value” tourism? People pay attention, and when destinations seem degraded they move on. This is why casinos have been the kiss of death to Goa – even beyond horrific murders like the one last month at the Marriott in Miramar – because their relentless vulgarity degrades the entire tourism brand. They drive away families, and only attract the worst kind of clientele. No app is going to change that.

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

The world has moved on-why hasn’t Goa’s taxi system?

We have been out of Goa for the last two months and have been travelling extensively in the UK and Europe. But we have been constantly in touch with international and national affairs and read O Heraldo wherever we are travelling to keep abreast of Goa news and obituaries.

We were reading O Heraldo dated June 5 which brought out the viewpoints of the Vice Presidents (North and South) of the Goa Taxi Unions Valencio Savio Goes. Yes, I totally concur with a couple of his points, namely poor connectivity and lack of infrastructure, viz. roadside toilets and food outlets. Yes, even the installation of the meters was a big farce, and the government must take responsibility for the same and improve these facilities immediately.

However, may I categorically state that app-based aggregators for taxi service in Goa are an absolute must, and we must implement the same immediately. We are today connected with the world, and we connect and speak to one another as if we are in Goa itself. The whole world is galloping ahead and where are we in Goa, discussing what taxi apps we require?

CHARLES BONIFACIO

Come on folks, discover new places, see how tourism is booming. Here in Goa, tourism is on the decline because we are not keeping abreast of the times, technology and infrastructure.

All over the world there are taxi aggregators which are app-based and there are a dime a dozen.

Both my son-in-law and daughter go off to work after dropping the children in their cars and my wife and I are senior citizens. We do not expect to sit at home and relax. We book a taxi on the app, go sightseeing, shopping, have meals and come back at leisure.

Believe me, the taxi apps work in absolute real time depending upon the time of day, traffic congestion, accidents, peak hours, office timings, school timings, VIP movements and so many other factors. Do kindly note their pricing is dynamic.

We were a couple of friends and family travelling in Nice (French Riviera) a couple of weeks ago and we had different taxi apps with us. Some had Bolt, some had Uber. We tried checking prices on my Uber app and he on the Bolt app. There is healthy competition among them too. We used to book taxis that gave us the best prices.

UPFRONT

People from all over the world flock to Goa. Why? Because of its people, their warm hospitality and their inbuilt charm to make every guest feel at home. Even after so many years, we still get repeat guests who want to meet the same chefs, the same stewards, the same taxi drivers, and the same staff. Let’s strive to preserve this culture close to our hearts

We noticed the same while travelling to Monaco from Nice, so the pricing is fair, reasonable and competitive.

We had similar experiences with some friends travelling from Lisbon to Fatima and some of us travelling from Porto in Portugal to Fatima and thereafter to Lisbon.

In Lisbon, we used both the Uber and Bolt taxi apps, and we were very satisfied with the pricing, convenience of booking, and waiting time being less than 3 to 7 minutes anywhere. Moreover, taxis through apps are available 24 hours.

Having been in the travel and tour-

ism business for over three decades, I can categorically state that tourism is a very fragile business. If there was an attack in Egypt at Movenpick Hotels, charters paused coming. People travel where they feel safe and if they feel there is going to be trouble, they will go elsewhere. It has happened to our charter flights umpteen times.

The taxi drivers are the best ambassadors of the state of Goa. Wherever we have travelled in the recent past, the taxi drivers were our guides not only for sightseeing, but they also advised us on the best places for the type of cuisine we were seeking.

Most of the taxi aggregators provide ongoing training and etiquette sessions for their drivers, focusing on road safety, professional service, mobile etiquette and dress code.

Ride-hailing apps, like those we have used, have asked us to rate their drivers based on service, behaviour and constructive feedback. Some even requested if we wanted to give them an extra tip like 10 Euros, and since we were very satisfied, we did so. This also motivates the drivers to offer better services.

Now that the government has proposed to bring out this policy, the government should also heed their problems of infrastructure enhancement and implement the same simultaneously. The government should also implement initiatives to improve the taxi industry by providing incentives for drivers to adopt new technologies or improve their services so that they are courteous and act as true ambassadors of the state.

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Today, with social media like TikTok, Instagram, X, news spreads like wildfire. The world was thrilled to hear Goa’s Tourism Ministry, Transport Ministry, and the Government of Goa finally drafted a taxi policy for taxi-hailing—the absolute need of the hour.

And before I close, may I say that the public transport system in Goa must undergo a radical change. Besides taxi services, we should have effective train services between points and bus services between points until midnight. When we arrived from Heathrow to Nice in France, just outside the airport our options to get to the hotel were: taxicab aggregators Uber and Bolt, normal taxis in a queue, a tram station just outside the airport, a bus service every 10 minutes, a train connecting two points, and a very efficient public bus service.

The discerning tourist is the best judge, and he or she can choose whichever form of transport they or their family are most comfortable using.

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