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Microplastics are not fantastic

Microplastic. A tiny particle that can cause gargantuan problems, as is evident in the grave threat it is posing to estuaries of the Sal and Tiracol rivers. A recent study conducted by the Goa University after analysing samples from these water bodies has found that fishing, raw sewage discharge and plastic waste disposal into them are the major triggers for microplastic pollution.

As its name suggests, microplastics can be up to five millimetres in diameter, and enter water bodies after plastic litter breaks down, or from plumbing and sewage run-off, among other sources. When ingested by marine life and birds who feed on fish, microplastics have been found to have toxic effects and can cause anything from a reduction in food intake to suffocation in such birds. It has also been discovered that the ingestion of microplastics can trigger behavioural changes and can even alter genes.

However, apart from entering the food chain just through seafood, microplastics can be inhaled by human beings from the air, ingested from water and even absorbed through the pores of the skin. In the recent past, several international studies made waves when they declared that microplastics have not only been found in various human organs, but also in the placenta of newborn babies.

From the way both the state government and Goa's residents are progressing, it is clear that we either have our heads buried in the sand like ostriches, or are suffering from yet another bout of 'not in my backyard' syndrome where microplastic contamination is concerned. We are failing to understand that this extremely serious type of pollution is no longer a 'them' problem. It is an 'us' problem that has not only reached our doorsteps but has entered our homes and digestive systems too. For all we know, that lip-smacking fried fish we intend to relish at lunch or the '100% pure' water we chug down the moment we wake up in the morning, could be teeming with microplastics that will spell certain doom for our bodies and overall health.

The Goa University study found microplastic fibres more prevalent in the Tiracol estuary, while fragments were abundant in the Sal estuary. Consequent polymer analysis pointed to polyethylene, polypropylene, and polyamide in samples from both sites, the primary sources of these non-biodegradable components being fishing equipment, plastic products used in everyday life, sewage discharges, packaging materials, and ropes. Estuaries of both rivers showed that the microplastics were 5-1mm in size, therefore barely being visible to the naked eye.

According to the study, the Sal's estuary faces greater pressure from fishing jetties, untreated sewage discharge, and contaminated tributaries. It stated that while the Tiracol estuary is contaminated as well, it appears to be less severely impacted.

What we mustn't fail to acknowledge is that the scope of this study is limited to just two water bodies, one each in the state's two districts. It is all but certain that if such a study is carried out on all the state's water bodies, particularly two of its crucial rivers, the Mandovi and the Zuari, the findings will be even more astounding. It should also be noted that microplastics are even found in cigarette filters, and with cigarette butts being the most common plastic litter on beaches, these fibres reach every corner of the world. Upon them breaking down, they release microplastics, heavy metals that severely impact ecosystems' health.

If that is appalling, what's even worse is that the very clothes we wear are also carriers of microplastics, what with plastics such as polyester, acrylic and nylon comprising approximately 60% of all clothing material. Microplastics are shed from such fabrics when they are frequently washed, get worn out or are subject to abrasion. To reduce this, it is widely recommended that clothes are re-worn more often and are washed less often.

The world is drowning under the weight of plastic pollution, and one of the most damaging and long-lived legacies of the plastic pollution crisis is microplastics. We thus have to take steps, even if they are micro steps, to ensure that we can provide the healthiest possible life for ourselves and the generations to come.

ATTACK ON VIP CULTURE: FALLOUT OF THE GMC EPISODE

Victor Hugo's famous quote, "No power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come," describes the power of ideas to times of change. It suggests that when an idea is in keeping with the sentiments of a society, it will gain acceptance. Throughout India's history, both social and political reforms, gender equality and technological changes have demonstrated that when the time is right, no force can prevent them from reshaping our nation. On 18th June 1946, the demand of Dr Ram Manohar Lohia of the right of the people of Goa to speak, think and act freely, was "an idea whose time had come" after over 400 years of colonial rule. The heavy rains that day did not deter thousands of people to face the threat of bullets and flock to Margao from all over Goa.

An "idea whose time has come" is a movement that resonates deeply with the people, especially in today's fast-changing world, ideas commensurate with the spirit of the time become unstoppable. The recent GMC agitation though began with the arrogant attitude of the Health Minister opened a Pandora's box on the question of VIP culture.

A demand to end VIP culture at hospitals, PHCs and clinics which can compromise the treatment of serious patients was made. Jumping of queues, favouring the non-serious over the more serious patients were important concerns as those without any influence suffer

In a show of strength, over 600 doctors, consultants and interns staged a protest on the campus and demanded justice. This was after the Minister had apologised on the social media as well as his "studio apology" to a local media house. The Minister mentioned repeatedly that he has no ego but has refrained from a public apology to date. The Goa Association of Resident Doctors (GARD) demanded a formal public apology and an assurance that a climate of fear and intimidation will not be repeated. A ban was demanded on videography or photography in the hospital especially in the emergency and casualty departments. A demand to end VIP culture at hospitals, PHCs and clinics which can compromise the treatment of serious patients was made.

Jumping of queues, favouring the non-serious over the more serious patients were important concerns as those without any influence suffer. The General Practitioners Association of Goa (GPA-Goa) and the Federation of All India Medical Association (FAIMA) termed this incident as an insult to the entire medical fraternity. The Minister accepted later that "the tone and words could have been more measured". What is incomprehensible is how an administrator or head can take a decision without hearing both sides of the story and unilaterally term this as an act of indiscipline and does it require a high IQ to foresee that the release of such a video would do more harm than good? The language and tone was in-



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cusably unparliamentary. The new VIP's in the Health Services are "all the Baba's men" who strut like peacocks and even the learned doctors don't cross their paths. Every politician knows the value of each vote, it all begins from there. It goes to the credit of the doctor community of Goa that the crisis was diffused with a MoU signed in the presence of a pro-active CM who had to douse the flames that all future issues will be handled through established protocols. The idea that doctors deserve respect in their work spaces is an idea whose time had come.

'Very Important Persons' (VIPs) often involved politicians, senior government officials, celebrities, multi-billionaires and other powerful figures. The PM had recognized this in one of his Mann Ki Baat address that there is an atmosphere of hatred for the VIP culture in the country. Putting a stop to the Lal Bhatti culture on VIP cars from 1st May 2017 was an attempt to end this culture. However the mindset of people to VIP culture needs to change.

A few years back, there was a shocking video depicting 'ordinary' devotees being jostled at the sacred Lalbaugcha Raja Ganesh pandal in Mumbai. VIP's were afforded ample time for paying respects and photographs. VIP darshan tickets is done at the renowned Tirupati temple. Many temporary pandals frequently display a 'VIP Line'. This culture I did not witness at the Golden temple but the surging crowds can result in a stampede almost everyday.

10 newborns lost their lives in Jhansi some years back due to a hospital fire and many

were battling for life. While the parents of these deceased children were collecting the dead bodies, videos surfaced of workers marking roads for VVIP visit of a minister. In tragic circumstances of the recent AIR India crash when young medics were fighting for their lives and every minute mattered with shocked and anxious parents pleading to be with them in their last breathing moments coupled with relatives being called in to conduct DNA tests, waiting patiently for the charred bodies of their loved ones, VVIP visits had no place. Nobody can enter till the VVIP leaves. At such moments, politicians needed to bow down to sobbing relatives and parents and gently step back, to do their photo shoots later.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the steel city of Jamshedpur in Jharkhand to inaugurate the new Vande Bharat trains intensive preparations led to the closure of platform No. 1 and the railway station parking lot was converted into a rally venue. When the PM visited Goa for canvassing for the last Lok Sabha elections the road speed breakers were flattened en route of his public meetings and later replaced. To prepare for this event of a few hours in Margao, a huge tree that took years to grow was cut down in the middle of the night.

India has significantly invested in developing road and highway infrastructure nationwide and the concept of toll ticketing on roads has improved. Prior to each toll gate, a life-sized green board notifies traveler's that the President of India, the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers,

and ministers are exempt from toll fees. This does not happen anywhere in the world!

An online survey has revealed that the VIP culture is visible in many places including government offices, on roads, hospitals, places of worship and public events. Two in three Indians find VIP culture to be all-pervasive. The survey, which covered 8,881 respondents across 362 districts, revealed that 14% believed that VIP culture had risen significantly. The report revealed that 83% said that Government offices were ridden with VIP culture, the same held true of religious places and hospitals, (73%) and over 70% point to misuse of VIP powers in property related violations. In many government offices citizens have to use non-functional or leaky lavatories while the clean facilities are locked for private use. In Europe every public toilet is clean and tidy for all at all times.

Discrimination between citizens is a violation of the rule of equality enshrined in the Constitution. The Supreme Court has recently decried the preferential treatment for VIP's in temples but stopped short from passing appropriate orders. Thus institutionalization of India's discriminatory VIP culture thus still continues in temples. In today's free and democratic India, the hierarchical structure of the political and executive establishment must be eradicated. Its existence reflects the country's socio-economic and power gaps. VIP culture however continues in public life, leading to sentiments of simmering anger among the people. The irrational belief that regulations and laws are applicable solely to the poor and middle class while the influential evade consequences, has been questioned over the years. The idea is certainly ripe for this egregious throttling of VIP culture to go.

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BY
INVIATION
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When protection is missing and predators are one click away!

When Protection Is Missing and Predators Are One Click Away

PETER F BORGES

reaches out with a trembling voice. One more child has been hurt—groomed online, exploited, coerced into something they didn't fully understand. The gateway is always familiar: Instagram, Snapchat, Telegram, YouTube. The story unfolds in hotel rooms, bedrooms, tuition classes, behind locked screens. But what's most heartbreaking is not just that it's happening—it's that it's happening everywhere, every day, and we're still pretending it's rare.

Two adolescent girls were recently lured through Instagram and sexually abused in Goa. These are not exceptions. They're warnings. And they're becoming routine. But 95 percent of such cases never reach the system. Why? Because shame chokes disclosure. Because fear overshadows justice. Because our children, their families, and even our institutions have absorbed the belief that silence is safer than seeking help. In the end, what gets reported is only the tip of a devastating iceberg.

The trauma doesn't fade just because it's hidden. In fact, it deepens. Most of these children carry it quietly for years—into adolescence, adulthood, into marriage, motherhood, fatherhood. Into a lifetime of anxiety, broken trust, and sometimes self-harm. And we, as a society, have let this continue. Not just by our silence, but by

UPFRONT

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the sheer failure of the system that's supposed to protect them. Let's be brutally honest: in Goa today, the child protection ecosystem for online abuse simply does not exist. There is no real system. What we have are fragments—departments acting in isolation, without training, without coordination, and worse, without urgency. Our government departments lack the digital expertise required to handle these cases. Police units, with few exceptions, aren't trained to understand the nuances of online grooming or sextortion. Schools still treat these incidents as moral slip-ups, not violations. And NGOs—many of them—have not yet caught up to the digital shift in child sexual abuse. No dedicated unit. No state-wide protocol. No action plan. Meanwhile, the children are left to figure

it out themselves. Many don't even realise they've been abused until much later. Some blame themselves. Others bury it. And in the rare case that a child speaks up, they're met with disbelief, shame, or worse—punishment. Girls are often scolded or made to quit school. Boys are mocked or told to "man up." Families are urged to "settle it quietly" to protect their name. And the system, which should rise to their defense, is absent.

We're also seeing an unsettling shift: many of the perpetrators are not much older than their victims. In some cases, they are peers. Teenagers recording and sharing explicit content of their classmates. Adolescents luring younger children into "daring" acts on live camera. The digital playground has turned predatory, and yet our laws and institutions still treat abuse as something that

only happens offline, between adult men and powerless children. But now, power is held by anyone with a phone, an audience, and ill intent.

So what do we do when children abuse other children? When harm is peer-to-peer, when the shame is overwhelming, and when the law doesn't provide easy answers? The truth is: we do nothing. We look away. We pretend it's a misunderstanding. We move the child to another school. And the trauma—once again—is left to grow in silence.

The truth is, most adults are afraid of the online world their children inhabit. Parents feel helpless. Teachers feel unprepared. Police are overwhelmed. And those who are supposed to lead—our policymakers—seem to have no roadmap. We've allowed a culture to grow where children are handed smartphones before they're taught about consent. Where sextortion thrives before we've taught digital boundaries. Where tech platforms serve sexualized content to minors, while claiming safety filters are "on."

This isn't just a gap. It's a collapse. We need to acknowledge that this is the biggest child protection crisis of our time. And we need to respond with the urgency it demands.

Every school in Goa must include digital literacy—not as an add-on, but as a foundational part of value education. Every

teacher and school counselor must be trained to recognize signs of online grooming and trauma. Every SJPJ officer must undergo capacity building specifically on tech-enabled child sexual abuse. And we must build safe, anonymous, and supportive reporting mechanisms—because as of now, the majority of children are choosing not to speak, and we are giving them no reason to believe that speaking will lead to healing.

And let's not forget the need for trauma-informed care. When a child is brave enough to disclose, they must be met with empathy, not suspicion. With support, not silence. We need psychological first responders, trained legal professionals, child-sensitive shelters, and fast-tracked justice processes that centre the child's dignity—not bureaucracy. Let's also hold the platforms accountable. If Instagram, Telegram, or YouTube are the mediums through which harm occurs, then they must be part of the solution. Algorithms that recommend sexualized content to minors, delay in taking down child abuse material, and lack of cooperation with local law enforcement—all of these must be called out and regulated. Finally, let us remember that child protection is not a department—it's a collective duty. The government, schools, parents, NGOs, tech companies, media—each one of us must see ourselves in this fight. Be-