Turning the place where we live into a…
SPECIAL CORNER FOR SOCIALISING

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As the years roll by, past investments made and growing expectations of citizens lead to greater awareness of material surroundings where people live, socialise and enjoy life.

Many times, adding charm to living requires little work and money. Useful ideas may spring up from selective focus and sensible argument. A few may get implemented while others will wait until someone finds interest to foster them.

Those holding public office in the administration of cities and villages must be keenly aware of their duties. Delivering them may bring about much-needed transformation of the territories under their jurisdiction. A few are listed below:

a) setting up a regular garbage collection and processing system that takes care of urban cleanliness. Commonly found garbage heaps are made worse by heat, rain, settling and fermentation of waste, spreading foul smells and attracting disease-carrying insects and rodents. A matter that India must take very seriously. Companies need to set up the logistics for adequate waste collection, treatment and recycling.

They will generate many jobs and a waste treatment economy, proved to be important.

b) tending gardens to grow flowers and lush plants in them;

c) laying out small or big parks where people may leisurely stroll and rest, equipped with benches and outdoor PT apparatus;

d) properly building pothole-free levelled sidewalks where everyone may feel comfortable to walk confidently;

e) routinely trimming trees bearing no branches below a certain height or growing in places where they might be hazardous to passersby or vehicles;

f) ensuring the elimination of sources for carrying and spreading disease such as water puddles or breeding grounds for mosquitoes and other insects;

g) finding lodging for displaced families living on the streets in shacks or under the sky, ensuring that children attend school when they want.

Fortunately the city of Delhi boasts a large forested green, garden-like as well. It balances out the extreme cold, heat and pervasive pollution. And across India there appears to be a strong culture geared to tree planting; trees are seen bordering the highways, railways, in places that have been spared concrete-built infrastructure, etc., and in the backyards of many private homes too.

How then to routinely provide urban services professionally and not randomly? Municipal and local layers of administration need to be strengthened. They have to be empowered, resourced and charged with solving very specific issues that impact the lives of millions. The administrative body should offer tenders aimed at small local companies assigning them with different types of jobs; they should perform strict oversight and demand that quality standards be continually met. Each will have a budget to manage and will be made sharply aware of the tasks expected of them. Importantly, they will know about their relevance for the well-being of the population.

The principle of subsidiary should be applied. Decisions of limited scope should be made closest to the problems they seek to address. Bids and tenders must be opened to all candidates and their launching free from overbearing bureaucracy.

Participation of the local population to spawn valuable ideas is welcome for two significant reasons: more focused minds enhance the thinking process by identifying problems faster and finding feasible solutions; also, regular meetings between interested parties educate the young who may later readily replace those currently on duty.

As in business, cities and regions should employ people in Planning. They would define priorities while finding matching resources. Brainstorming may eventually be advisable to determine people's aspirations and a prioritised to-do list. Thereafter, tasks and responsibilities ought to be allotted and each person should be encouraged to carry out his duties diligently.

An organised local institution may easily obtain support to keep it running smoothly. If, on the other hand, it is found to be chaotic, progress will be achieved only when direction and control have been addressed first.

City and village neighbourhoods should have attractive fully-equipped meeting places. Citizens would willingly feel like sitting inside sheltered from the sun or the rain.

Social interaction may help develop friendships, improve neighbourliness and mutual help. Loneliness is thus overcome nearly effortlessly. And citizens would often find themselves undertaking common initiatives whose impact on society is priceless.

Will Modi's 'achievements' help BJP in 2019?

AAKAR PATEL

Aakar Patel

Narendra Modi is the most talented politician of our times, not just in India but also farther afield. It is not easy to come up with names of elected leaders who are so popular. I can think of Putin in Russia and Erdogan in Turkey, who are somewhat similar. I do not understand the politics of those nations to any great extent, but I do know that the support enjoyed by them is similar to Modi's in one sense. The individual leader in all three instances is more popular than the party because he has broadened the traditional base.

Modi regularly polls an approval rating of over 70%. I recognise that such polls are inaccurate and to a large extent unscientific but even so the consistency with which he achieves this is remarkable given that his party has only ever got 31% of the all-India vote at its peak, which was in 2014. Anecdotal evidence, meaning the people I speak to about this, also confirms that he is a popular leader.

If we examine the case of Modi, we can discern the following types of people who are attracted to him and his style of politics. The most important is his base of upper caste, middle class and urban voters. The BJP sweep of the cities in Gujarat confirms this analysis: even when the party's policies are failing in the rural and semi-rural areas, it is this base that remains firmly behind the BJP, and to a larger extent, Modi personally.

The reasons for this support are several. The middle class is convinced that this country is run poorly and needs to be straightened out through radical actions. The idea of a strongman coming in to do this has always found appeal in this section, and as someone who is almost 50 years old I can report that this has been the case for at least three decades. This perspective of course is reductionist and simplistic, but I don't want to discuss that today.

The anti-reservations stance of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and its Brahminised view of culture are in alignment with how this group broadly sees the world around them. This community is highly nationalistic (they are the people who flock to the events that Modi holds with the Indian immigrants when he's abroad), which fits in with the posture of the BJP. The powerful nationalism means that they are almost totally brainwashed on the issues of Pakistan and China. Fortunately, this missing ability to engage with complexity also falls into place with the BJP's outlook.

Economically, this is the community that depends on high GDP growth, an expansion of white collar jobs, investments in modern infrastructure (example: bullet train over rural roads and airports over state transport buses). It is not easy to generalise on the matter of minority rights. However, while accepting that the dislike of minorities is something all South Asian communities have, an excess of violence will trouble this community, if only because it clashes with their perceptions about India. The pure idea of 'secularism' does not appeal to them to any large extent and this is essentially a construct. Not many Indians vote for secularism.

Being middle class and therefore salaried for the most part, this group sets great store by 'merit' and is attracted to Modi because he is self-made unlike dynastic Rahul. The second category of Modi supporter is the regular BJP supporter, who gravitates towards the party because he comes from the dominant caste that supports the party, like the Lingayat in Karnataka, the Patidar in Gujarat and the Rajput in Rajasthan. The third one is the Indian who is attracted to Hindutva and believes that the enemy is internal and needs to be sorted out before India progresses.

I don't think either of the latter two categories is particularly important or interesting for this argument because they will remain with the BJP no matter who the party is led by, whether Modi or anyone else, and now or in the future. It is the charisma and belief in Modi as an individual with the ability to deliver that separates the first category from the others.

We have all of 2018 before us, the last full year before the elections. The data is in on Modi's economic performance: he's a flop. Manmohan Singh has pointed out that Modi will be unable to match the average rate of growth delivered by Singh over a decade. In the corporate world (which loves Modi), where the chief executive is judged by quarterly results, Modi would have been fired. To me the important data point is this: in 2009 the world's economy contracted because of the financial crisis. Today it is booming and growing at 3%. But even in this environment, India's growth has declined. This is because of the deliberate slowing down induced by eccentric actions like demonetisation.

This failure will influence Modi and the BJP negatively when they prepare the pitch for the 2019 elections. There is no economic achievement to speak of (when was the last time you head the 'fastest growing nation' line?) and I don't think there will be a positive campaign like the Achche Din type of 2014. It will be vicious and divisive. As an Indian it will be depressing. As a writer and observer of our society, it will be utterly fascinating to see how the first category, to me the most important pillar of Modi's personal support, reacts to it.

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Around the *Poço de Padeiro* in the 1940s

VALENTINO VIEGAS

When we meet in Portugal from time to time, my friend Homem Cristo and I remember our childhood years, lived in the neighbourhood of the Poço do Padeiro in, during the decades of the 1940s and 1950s. This small neighbourhood, with perhaps less than two dozen Catholic and 3 Hindu families, lived harmoniously around the illustrious, huge and deep well, whose precious water quenched the thirst of its inhabitants.

Only one family in that locality had a radio and since children didn't have even four annas to spend, could eat the bhaji-puri at Café Tató only when accompanied by the parents. Yet they developed creative capabilities and used the incalculable wealth of their imagination to have fun.

The neighbourhood was teeming with joy, because the numerous kids, who had total freedom of movement, enlivened their space by inventing entertainment and exploring the surrounding environment.

Located far above the well and concealed atop the hill above the neighbourhood was the deactivated lighthouse of the Alto dos Pilotos and its access was a challenge that the children craved to face. Boys, some less than ten years old, preferred to risk their lives and climb through slippery and unsafe slopes rather than to climb the endless steps of the stairwell. The aim was to have the courage and boldness to leave the house alone and reach the lighthouse, through more difficult and secret paths, and then climb the dozens of rusty stairs and stand on top, and boast loudly, proclaiming: I am no longer a child.

On weekdays in the evenings, life got more exciting, as the number of young people increased, coinciding with the end of the tuitions given by the well-known teacher Lina. Then began the crazy running down the stairs, from the house of the teacher to the improvised football field: the largest space on the street.

A few barefoot, others with sneakers, all did shoot the ball made of old socks enrolled around a stone, in the opposing goal, demarcated by two tall stones. Anyone who hurt his toe would tie it with a cloth and continue to play. To balance the teams, the partners were chosen as follows: two players stayed at a certain distance and then advanced to each other, alternately placing one foot after the other. Anyone who first set his foot on top of the opponent's foot chose the 'Ronaldo' of the group. The other had to be content with the second best footballer, and so forth until the turn of the smallest who was usually chosen as goalkeeper.

What is more curious is that the birds and the rooks sprang from branch to branch, as if they wished to observe the movements of the players, and the Arabian kites circulated in the firmament, releasing regularly their characteristic cry that even sounds today in our ears.

Other childhood activities included *picmand* (with cashew nuts), *folé* (with two sticks of different sizes), ring and sometimes scenes of films recreated, with long sticks to simulate swords, or tip of the index finger to imitate the pistol of Roy Rogers, the idolised singing actor cowboy, screaming: hands up!

When the heat heightened and the parents rested, two or three boys opted to make a quick game of *goddes*.

Since only one house had a tennis table and candidates wishing to play could reach a dozen, it was decided that all rotate in a row around the table, each player having the opportunity to place the ball on the opposite side of the net. And if someone eliminated one of the most feared opponents, by passing the ball in an irrecoverable way by hitting the corner of the table, the triumphant and deafening shouts echoed down the street.

Two annual occasions often remembered are the nightly street races and the carnival, with the famous *cocotadas* that were combats between neighbourhoods throwing paper cartridges stuffed with soft earth and lime. There were fighters who came forward, full of pride, armed with a cardboard shield.

Homem Cristo reminded me that one day we went to an evening movie. Since the eight *annas* we accumulated was sufficient for only one ticket, one of us watched the first part of the movie and the other the second after which we recounted to each other what we had seen. Full of enthusiasm, we let the time pass and we returned home late. Cristo's father forced him to undress and presented him with a monumental thrashing with a branch of guava tree. His cries came to my mother's ears, who thought it best to do Solomonic justice, which made me also scream loudly.

While the monsoons poured out the water and filled the well, the younger ones were filled with envy as they witnessed the boldest jump into the well to commemorate St John the Baptist's Day.

On one occasion in the dead of night, a hunter broke the respectful silence and brought the sleepers to a start. With the help of a head torch and a twelve-calibre gun, he killed two or more huge bats, who slept safely in the huge banyan tree. Their meat made a tasteful *"xacuti"* the next day.

The green that enveloped us not only embellished but also provided healing. The hot water bath from the infusion of green *ordoxó* leaves containing quinine taken from one tree in our neighborhood was a holy remedy for the high fevers caused by malaria.

In conclusion, I mention only four people from that neighborhood.

The water bearer Helena, wearing *choli* and *gaghró* with her clay jug, tied to a rope, pulled the water out of the famous well and distributed it to the neighbours. Even when a public water fountain was introduced, she remained faithful to her well water customers; the tailor Master Menino, famous specialist in shirts and suits and whose house today is abandoned; Dona Joaquina, who made the delicious *miskut* of mango that made the neighbourhood famous; and Peténce, whose real name I am not allowed to mention, and only known among friends by this nickname. He got this epithet for having imitated the sound of the machine, where his father worked: peténce, peténce, peténce!

Goa's Model of Urbanisation

AVINASH TAVARES

Before the advent of motor vehicles, Goan villages and towns grew based on the 5 km per hour infrastructure. That's the speed with which people would access religious places, market areas, etc. A 15-minute journey was comfortable and that's why most village centres in Goa are 30 mins to 45 mins apart. Today Goa's infrastructure is designed based on 60 km per hour and even 100 km per hour architecture. If you don't have access to a vehicle, you won't be able to keep pace with Goa's development. Our towns are places designed for vehicles, not for humans. Ironically, humans have to pay a heavy price to reside and move around whereas the vehicle can reside and move anywhere for free. Goa's Model of Urbanisation is a failure; but before we can fix things, we need to take a closer look at what's wrong with the model.

Planning and Development Authorities are the Planners of Urban Goa. PDAs were envisaged in order to rapidly develop and urbanise an area which may be a subset of a city or village, or a single area covering parts of multiple villages. This concept was modelled on larger States of the 70s which had large urban centres with rapid population growth.

Unfortunately in Goa, PDAs have become an incompetent bureaucratic plague which has infected our ancestral towns and are now spreading their tentacles of illegal high rise construction, traffic congestion, sewage problems, etc, into neighbouring villages. They infringe on the powers of local bodies. "Planning" has been restricted to "arbitrary" change in land use for a hefty bribe. "Development" is limited to issue of pre and post construction approvals. Then there are PDAs like Margao which run fish markets. The PDAs are filled with draftsmen and civil engineers who have no competency of town planning. None of the PDAs in Goa have qualified Town Planners. No wonder after 44 years of the TCP Act, all the towns are in a mess. Can we accept and tolerate this model for the next 50 years?

Some claim Smart Cities are the solution to Goa's problem. The Government thinks by making Panjim City "smart", most of its problems will be solved. Smart Cities are expensive cities to live in. Residents pay a huge premium for maintaining this expensive infrastructure. Rs 6200 crores has been allotted for Panjim. That equivalent to 34 Mopa Airports, or 10 NIT Colleges, or 15 Mandovi Bridges and certainly more than 100 Panjim Market Complexes. If the Government builds infrastructure worth Rs 6200 cr for Panjim and we consider 2% as maintenance cost and the population of Panjim as 50,000, every resident of Panjim would be liable to pay annually Rs 24,800 just for maintaining all these projects. In reality, taxes and fees will go up, new fees and taxes will be levied and Panjim will become a very expensive city, both for its residents and visitors. The premise of Panjim Smart City initiative, that technology and infrastructure alone (without a comprehensive development plan) can make Panjim better, is unfounded, even if it is worth Rs 62,00,00,00,000.

We need to change the mindsets and the way we think of cities, right from planners to councillors to students. We need to learn from cities like Copenhagen which are similar to our towns. In the last 50 years, this city has been continuously improving. During that time, 18 public squares which were parking lots have been made into public squares only for people. They have permanently converted many internal roads to walking and cycling only streets. Copenhagen government surveys and documents life in the city. They realised that they need less motor infrastructure and more people infrastructure to improve quality of life of the citizens and therefore improve the city itself. That is how they have a measuring standard employed for improvement by the city planners and politicians. That's why how the politicians could boldly convert busy 4 and 6 lane roads into 2 lane streets with the rest of the space for 2 sidewalks, 2 exclusive bicycle lanes, and a substantial median, all to facilitate walking, cycling, crossing the street and sitting in a safe, civilised and beautiful environment. Copenhagen's vision is to be the best city in the world. Panjim City wants to be a world class city. Which city do you think will succeed in making its vision a reality? And in the mean time, what will happen to other towns in Goa?

In order to create an effective urban development model, we need urgent government reforms to implement better procedures and frameworks. We also need ideas and solutions. This won't come from overpriced consultants or councillors who go on state-sponsored tours or real estate lobbies. The best solutions to make our towns World Class can come only from its local citizens. We also need expert, open-minded and qualified town planners to prepare and implement these solutions. In the mean time, it is important that we demand that the government create a Comprehensive Development Plan for each PDA town before formulating the land use plan (ODP). Like the citizens of Copenhagen, let's take our cities and towns back from vehicles and develop it for humans.