



By DALE LUIS MENEZES

Mormugao to Mopa: A Case of (Ob)noxious Development

There should by now be no doubt in our minds that any large infrastructure development in India happens only through the destruction of resources like land, water, and air. This economic system is largely the legacy of British colonialism and Nehruvian socialist policies that promoted large scale land acquisitions and mega projects such as massive dams and industries. The many protests and demonstrations that one witnesses against polluting industries and wholesale land acquisitions in India is a fallout of this process initiated by the British Raj and followed through – ostensibly due to national interest – by the independent nation-state of India.

The excellent reportage by Smita Nair (in a reputed national daily and also published in *O Herald*) on the coal transportation corridor from Mormugao Port to Bellary clearly reveals that people – through whose houses and villages this new corridor passes – have no say whatsoever in governmental policies even when they destroy their lives and livelihoods. Several studies that predict an ecological disaster and even a massive public hearing – unprecedented in the history of India – which provided enough testimonials on how the expansion of coal handling would affect (and is affecting) the people of Goa, seems to have fallen on deaf ears. In short, ‘development’ as it currently unfolds in Goa is a destruction of life-sustaining resources and a direct assault on the lives of the people.

The responses by those who are affected by the developments in Vasco and other areas, through which the coal is transported by road, rivers, and rail, is indicative of a shift in the debate. For this reason, it is important to dwell on these responses together and understand their implications for the future. I have selected these responses dealing only with the need for infrastructure such as roads, public transport, and hospitals. These responses indicate to us that we do have a way to prioritize the needs of the locals over and above everything else.

Lumina D’Costa Almeida is categorical in her understanding that the Goan way of life is antithetical to the development of the government-corporate combine: “You bring highways and a sense of hurriedness. You won’t appreciate susegad (a ‘quiet’ life) and its importance for a healthy living. Your definition of development is different from ours”. This development

is often promoted without any proper information given to the public. As Dan Vaz says, “The highways are being made into four lanes, six lanes. No one is telling us what they are being widened for. When we say we do not want such unplanned infrastructure, we are told it is in the national interest”. Obviously, the locals see no improvement in their lives, as Meena Barretto asserts, “Without expanding public transport for locals, they are building highways for the trucks”. That the basic infrastructure needs of the locals are not satisfied is clearly visible in Zulema Barros Pereira’s plea to “[g]ive us a hospital first”.

If one puts together these various views, what is the picture that emerges? First, the state has grossly failed to provide basic infrastructure to the public. Despite this obvious and glaring shortcoming, the state is reluctant to recognize its fault. Rather, the state chooses to cover up its shortcomings by promoting mega projects that further deplete the quality of life of its citizens. Secondly, the state does not view the citizens as stakeholders in the economic and political future of the land. If indeed the citizens were seen as stakeholders, Goa would not have witnessed the government-corporate combine trying to bulldoze its way through villages and forests.

But why do we need all this development if its effects are disastrous? Stated in another way, how is such development justified in the first place? The simple answer to this – one that politicians often give – is the need to create jobs. The casino industry can be a good example: while it was promoted or justified as creating employment for locals, the recent migration of peoples from the ‘northeast’ regions of India to service this industry indicates that local Goans either don’t want to, can’t find or are not given employment in this sector. The same is true of the five star hotel industry. And now we are witness to the same ‘it-will-create-jobs’ rhetoric as far as Mopa airport is concerned. Some days back, some 15 persons, each belonging to 15 Dhangar families affected by the Greenfield airport, were given appointment letters – to what post exactly? – by the private firm that is developing the airport. Only 15 so far in an airport that projects to service millions of passengers. Obviously, many more people will be needed from outside the state to service the airport once it is ready.

But the point that needs to be stressed is how the pattern of development is similar in the cases discussed above: entailing the widespread destruction of natural resources. Environmental damage, whether caused in Vasco or Mopa, will impact other places. What good are jobs when people will not be able to breathe properly?



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The notion of development needs to change within Goa and Indian politics. Thus, rather than a vague idea of development led by government and corporate, every election needs to see people demanding a collective future for Goa, one that is infused with the vocabularies of human rights, people's participation, and the privileging of the local people - and not just one section of the populace over the other. Goa's decades-long struggles for protecting its identity and environment have led us to collectively ask the right question today: whom is this development for?

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