



## Recent State Decisions and Recommendations: More Nails in the Coffin for Goans and for Tourism?

By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA

Commodification of the environment for tourism in Goa is reaching endemic proportions. It has the potential to kill the very goose of environment that could lay the golden eggs of revenue and income generation from tourism. The Government dismisses such critical ecological concerns as the work of naysayers, and argues that no development can occur if every time a new project is proposed, environmental concerns are brought to the drawing board to oppose it. However, if people's concerns about environment are not addressed, then the insensitively planned projects that follow have the potential of completely destroying the livelihoods of people in Goa, and putting their health in jeopardy.

A clutch of decisions taken by the Governments of India and Goa portend further disaster and the continued destruction of Goa. The decisions have been taken in a technocratic fashion that ignores the lives and living systems of the people living in the area.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, for instance, recently granted clearance to the 18-hole golf course and eco-tourism resort project at Tiracol, on the northern tip of Goa, under the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. This followed a report in July 2017 from an expert appraisal committee for clearing the project. The Clearance has been granted on the basis of an Environment Impact Assessment Report which considers the project site as almost barren. This is in sharp contrast to people's perception of the area as filled with natural flora, including bushes, shrubs and trees, making the place rich in biodiversity. But it echoes the advertisement brought out two years ago, when resistance to the golf course acquired state level dimensions, by the promoter of the project, Leading Hotels Pvt. Ltd.,



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and captioned “From Barren to Beautiful”. This “beautiful” does not end up being preserved for the consumption of the villagers, but for that of those residing in concrete jungles of Delhi and Bombay, hoping to lap in the sun and greens in Goa at the cost of the livelihood of Goan villagers.

The Governments sitting in Panjim, or Delhi, are in no position to judge the resource value of the land. The people of the area/village always know better. What seems barren might actually be grazing areas, left so deliberately. Or perhaps, the villages leave many plateaus in Goa as they are because they serve as rain water absorption areas, which fill up water tables of villages. Usually bureaucrats and planners tend to judge the potential of the land by assessing the area which falls within the range of the project. This is an inchoate development model, which deliberately ignores the overall contribution of the project land to be acquired to the larger area of the village.

The conditions set out for the environment clearance appear to be an eyewash and in total disregard to the sustenance of the natural environs known to the local people. One of the conditions is that the Leading Hotels Pvt. Ltd., the proponent for the golf course and eco-tourism resort project, will have to plant and maintain a minimum of one tree for every 80sqm, giving preference to native species, and, in case of felling, plant three trees for every tree cut. So trees are like a technological fix: you can remove them, fix them, replace them, replace them with junior versions, relocate them, and it is all the same. Why does the Ministry selectively forget that trees take an age to grow, that the woods are not technology that can be installed and removed at will? Why does the Ministry forget that woods such as these sustain life and living in the area? To the extent that it has made a reference to some trees, how can it not take into account the rich undergrowth of bushes, shrubs and wild grass, in assessing the environment. Moreover, the people of Tiracol have lived, tenanted the agricultural lands, engaged in fishing, and also dabbled in tourism and heritage-



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conservation to the extent of working at the nearby Fort, and are uniquely placed to engage with the land and share their wisdom on the sustenance of the village over the years. Environment Impact Assessment which does not include the traditional knowledge of villagers is but a mere bureaucratic, oops, technofascist, process to bulldoze true democracy. A democracy must begin at the grassroots level (pun intended).

Sample yet another provision in the clearance: the natural drainage system of the site has to be maintained to ensure unrestricted flow of water. What this provision mischievously conceals is the excessive consumption of water required for these golf courses. What is more, this unrestricted flow of water, through the drainage system also means unrestricted flow into the drains of chemicals sprayed on golf courses to keep the lawns green apart from the pollution of groundwater resulting from the leaching of these sprayed lawn maintenance chemicals. These toxic waters will then make way to the villages, poisoning the wells as well as the underground water. In the long run, the villagers are bound to lose their land, and also be impacted by the toxic environment these projects create. Really, where is the interface with the people in drawing up these environmental impact assessment reports, except to reduce the concerns as bullet points that are being addressed by the technological fixes envisaged?

A couple of years ago, the World Wildlife Fund Turkey ran an advertising campaign about the environmental impact of golf courses that sought to give a sense of how the destruction by golf courses played out. One of their posters carried the vivid symbol of a sponge which when translated into English reads: "A golf course means the absorption of 15000 cubic metres of water! Millions of cubic metres of water will be spent for the irrigation of the new golfing facilities to be built on our southern shores. The water resources of the region are indeed too limited to meet the needs of the new facilities. Help us to prevent this." Another poster had the picture of an axe. The words below it said, "200,000 trees with one strike!



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Millions of cubic metres of water will be spent for the irrigation of the new golfing facilities to be built on our Southern shores. The water resources of the region are indeed too limited to meet the needs of the new facilities. Help us to prevent this.”

Take the Goa scenario. As assessed by Central Water Commission (CWC), the water resource of Goa has been measured to be 8570 MCM. The Government has used the pretext of not having enough water for irrigation to build dams, including the Selaulim and Tillari dams, and yet the water from the Tillari canal, the EIA Report says, will be used for the golf course. The MoEF of course, is not concerned, because it is looking at the clearance myopically, without contextualizing it in the bigger picture of Tiracol and Goa. The MoEF by its decision of clearance has willfully taken a decision that will further fritter away the water resources and pollute the rest. Besides, the chemicals sprayed on the lawns of a golf course are known to contain carcinogens which enter the water sources.

Now the matter doesn't rest there. The approval from the Ministry of Environment and Forests means that the Leading Hotels Pvt. Ltd. can move the file (or is it already a fait accompli as this goes to the press?) to fetch the scheme called “ Large Revenue Generation Scheme“. This Scheme was in principle sanctioned to Leading Hotels, but it probably ran aground until this time for want of clearance from MoEF. These concerns about golf courses are apart from appropriation of huge spaces for golf that Goa, with its limited land resources and still more limited control with the people who live on the lands and till the lands, can ill afford.

Revenue at what cost? This is a question that is never asked. So, irrespective of what needs to be invested in the industry and who needs to pay the price for the State to ostensibly get



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this revenue from the tourism businesses, the State plods on. The casinos are of course another example of this so called revenue generation by losing and expending revenue before and after, though I will not go into the details here.

Another instance of the commodification of the environment for tourism is the possible unintended consequence of the writ petition filed to protect the Bondvoll Lake at Santa Cruz. The Expert Appraisal Committee has submitted a report to the High Court of Bombay at Goa regarding the pristine character and historical and geographical importance of the Bondvoll Lake. This lake extends over a large area which includes a disputed property. Calling for the Report and ensuring the furnishing of the Report is indeed significant. But the Report does not limit itself to its brief. It goes a step further in recommending tourism activities like boating to boost the revenue which could be generated for maintaining the dam. What we may not understand is that this will slowly entail State takeover, and loss of control from people's hands. The Report is already suggesting that it may not be possible for this maintenance to be handled by the people, making a case for a Government take over. Making the Bondvoll lake a heritage landscape does not mean per se that it will be protected. We have to have the mechanisms and monitoring and governance systems in place that will ensure this maintenance and protect the lake and its environs from tourist hawks. Will we have a form of tourism there that will deface the face not only of the surrounding lake but the face of Santa Cruz itself, with tourists trashing the spot and its environs with plastic bags, cans and alcohol bottles? We have already seen this happening at other sites – Surla another verdant site being a most avid example.

The proposals for coal hub that are slowly but steadily being pushed By the Governments both at the Centre and at Goa, would spell another death knell both for Goa's tourism. Indeed, it would speall the death knell for the very goose of an environment that could lay the golden egg of income for the people and revenue for the State. Who wants to come to



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Goa to invite respiratory problems on themselves, which is exactly what they are trying to escape from their hometowns? Who wants to go on coal cruises and boat through mining barges and view an obtrusive wall of godowns and warehouses on the shores, which the National Waterways Act is guaranteeing? The *New Indian Express* reported on 25<sup>th</sup> October, 2017, on conducting a special investigation, that nearly 25 million tonnes of coal would be unloaded each year at the Mormugao Port Trust by 2020, just three years away. It quotes Dolvyn Braganza, a teacher and part time paddy farmer and vegetable grower in Utorda saying “Nobody likes a black Christmas”, this being an obvious reference to the soot that will be settling on all the trees along the coal route.

Ironically, the Statement of Objects and Reasons of the National Waterways Bill, that was presented to Parliament at the time of introducing the bill, also had the story of its utility for tourism woven in it. This Bill has now become law. In the Statement of Objects and Reasons, it was spelt out that the inland waterways mode of transportation has immense potential for domestic cargo transportation as well as for cruise, tourism and passenger traffic.

Finally, I will end with the poignant words of Lumina Costa e Almeida, a long time activist who I know from the times of her active involvement with Konkan Railway Realignment Committee: The fight against coal does not concern just Vasco. The railway lines are to be doubled to carry coal across Goa, so now coal enters the railway corridor and affects the people living near the tracks. Are you among them? No, so you think you are safe. Do you live near the roads which are newly built, or expanded? Well, coal will touch your lives now as it is transported through trucks. The lucky few who escape the rails and trucks are laughing. Not so fast. Our rivers from Tiracol to Galgibaga all of them are to be privatised. Means you cannot use them they will be sold to some rich company to build jetties and transport coal. Land on either side of the rivers upto a kilometre will be acquired to store these piles of coal. So what if you are asked tomorrow to give up your house, or your



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village? You want to fight it then, you will have to go to the International Court (an obvious reference to the Investment Treaties that the Government is signing and a mega treaty called RCEP that it is on the verge of signing which will oust the jurisdiction of the local courts). Do you have the money, will and strength for this? That is why we are asking you to join us and fight before it is too late.

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