

By DALE LUIS MENEZES



Idle Trucks, Striking Taxis, and a Broken System

The recent ban by the Supreme Court of India on mining activities in Goa for a second time reminds us of the plight faced by those dependent on the mining industry. But the court order also brings to mind other Goans stuck in a similar situation of facing economic uncertainty and the consequences of large-scale illegalities. For instance, it is, I think, useful to compare the mining industry and the tourism industry as both have been touted as the ‘backbone’ of Goan economy, and both these industries witness conflicts and illegalities in equal measure.

When the Supreme Court banned mining activities for the first time in 2012, it is estimated that there were about 25,000 trucks servicing that industry. The case of the mining truckers provides the best illustration of how harmful excessive ‘development’ can be to the people of Goa. When the mining boom happened a few years before the first ban, and countries like China were in desperate need for iron ore, the mining companies in Goa began to expand uncontrollably. However, they did this by shifting a good amount of the liability onto the people of Goa. Thus, the people in the mining areas were incentivized to invest in trucks and other mining equipment with the idea that the millions of dollars made in profits would trickle down to the truckers. This was how the mining industry “share[d] the spoils” of an ecologically-damaging and short-term, profit-driven industry.

Those familiar with the mining-affected areas would be able to confirm that the windfall of profits that trickled down to the persons who had invested in trucks and machinery created a profligacy of sorts. The sudden surge in income led to extravagant spending; suddenly SUVs were seen zooming on the roads of these areas along with the trucks. However, the sudden crash in the industry exposed how shaky this new prosperity was; loans could not be honored and the luxury products had to be sold at a price far lower than in normal circumstances. This was an artificial prosperity created by and for the benefit of private mining firms.

The crash also brought with it a human tragedy. At least in the Quepem-Sanvordem-Curchorem-Sanguem belt that I am personally familiar with, one witnessed families breaking up, deaths due to alcoholism, and suicides due to the mental pressure (which have not been

reported properly). With the trucks sitting idle and no place to sell them off to, the mounting debt left the people vulnerable to exploitation. Some of the trucks were contracted for garbage collection to a Bangalore-based company. While the payments were diligently made for the first few months for the contracted trucks, it soon stopped, aggravating the situation further.

Cut to the taxistas, and one realizes that the issue – and perhaps, scale – is similar. In the aftermath of the strike by the taxistas in January, it was estimated that nearly 20,000 cabs had gone off the Goan roads. The demand for more taxis comes on the heel of successive governments increasing the tourist footfalls in Goa – beyond the carrying capacity of the resources available in Goa. Thus, one can argue that the reason so many taxis are required is because the tourism industry has grown at a rate that is not feasible for the economic betterment of the Goan people.

Just like in the mining sector, the people were encouraged to invest in cabs – the liabilities, of course, are those of the individual owners. While the ‘development’ of the mining sector was for the people in the hinterlands of Goa, that done through the tourism industry seems to be for the people on the coast. In both these cases, the population was, by and large, either traditionally from the working classes or engaged in agriculture. Many of the people who had invested in the trucks during the mining boom and others who are now servicing the tourism industry by operating taxis hail from *mundkar*/tenant backgrounds. Often times, the taxis were paid for by the land developer in return for forfeiting the tenancy rights. In other words, in the recent decades of Goa’s much touted ‘development’, these individuals and their families have had no access to decent employment. With artificially booming industries suddenly collapsing – as happens in a neoliberal economic setup – these individuals and groups are further marginalized with nowhere else to go. Like the mining truckers in the event of the crash, one has to suffer in silence should the economy crash.

In this sense, one can think of the resistance of the taxistas to the various policies of the tourism sector and the government as ways to ensure that the plight of the mining truckers does not become their own. To be honest, in their own flawed way, members of the tourist taxi associations have been demanding a fair system in response to allegations of fleecing, for some time now. They have also alleged that the hotels over-charge and claimed it not fair that only the taxistas be singled out as fleecers.



None of this is to argue that the taxistas don't engage in reckless driving; some do, and so do a greater number of GA-registered private cars along with two-wheelers and the non-Goa-registered private cars of tourists (AP, MH, KA and so on). In the current scenario, reckless and dangerous driving seems to be the only recognizable fault. The point is that like the mining truckers, the taxistas are also part of a system that is not only working against the interests of these groups, but against the interest of all the people of Goa.

(First published on *O Heraldo*, dt: 14 February, 2018)



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