



By AMITA KANEKAR

Big Corporates and their Political Minions need the Boot

Monkeys are taking over village roofs across Goa, from Pernem to Canacona. According to Rama Velip, environmentalist and anti-mining activist, this is just one of the ways his village of Colomb has changed over the last decade. Most of the paddy fields and coconut plantations were damaged by mining run-off. Water availability went down; with heavy pollution of the river and wells running dry, the winter paddy cultivation was stopped. Increasingly erratic and unseasonal weather changes routinely cause crop failures. On top of all this are unwanted visitors: hoards of monkeys, along with leopards, wild boar, and bison. In fact, with bison attacks becoming common in the talukas of Bicholim, Sattari and Sanguem, some villages have demanded a drastic change in the classification of Goa's state animal from 'protected' to 'vermin', which would allow them to be killed.

But is killing wildlife a solution? All these problems are the direct result of the destruction of Goa's forests, the natural habitat of these animals, the source of Goa's once-abundant water, and the regulator of our climate. And this is a destruction caused purely by human greed – of the mining companies and the real estate developers, and their political backers who claim the destruction is development. Yes, common people are also involved in these destructive enterprises, but as employees, and in a situation where there are few decent jobs in the state.

Colomb is a village in Goa's now-silent mining belt, which saw some of the first public protests by local communities against rampant illegal mining. Mining was suspended across Goa in 2012, followed by a restart of the same illegal leases and methods in 2014, renewed protests and petitions, and a second and complete closure in 2018. The river looks slightly clearer these days, says Velip; it will take a lot of time and patience for nature to fully recover. But who's going to allow that? Almost every member of Goa's legislature, led by the ailing Chief Minister, has expressed support for an immediate restart of mining in Goa, via a continuation of the same leases declared illegal by the court. Nobody among Goa's politicians is bothered to ask how on earth can those proved to have wilfully robbed the exchequer and destroyed the environment be invited to continue their crimes. Everybody acts as if there is no option, given the loss of livelihood of the 'mining dependents', the people who used to be employed in mining. Everybody is silent on the simple fact that this loss can – and must – be

compensated for by making the mining companies pay for their crimes.



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The Goa Foundation filed a petition in 2018 to recover about Rs 21,000 crores from just Vedanta (the biggest miner), as part of a total estimated Rs 65,000 crores worth of illegally-extracted ore during 2007-2012. The Goa government itself had issued show-cause notices to the lease-holders demanding around Rs 3000 crores for causing loss to the state, but it does not seem really serious about recovering this money. Following the Goa Foundation petition, the courts ordered the government to decide on the recovery of dues from Vedanta within eight weeks. But the government, which claims financial difficulties because of the closure of mining, has asked the court for more time – another eight weeks – to think about whether to ask for the money!

It is, of course, unsurprising that – as the courts themselves have noted – the Goa government appears to represent the mining companies rather than the people. This is the way the corporate world works. According to *'Vedanta's Billions: Regulatory failure, environment and human rights'*, by Samarendra Das (published by Foil Vedanta, 2018), a report of the environmental, social, and financial impact of Vedanta's activities all over the world, the company has flourished by lavishly patronising anybody and everybody in power. The report starkly reveals a brazen pattern of illegality, environmental havoc, and all kinds of human rights abuses by Vedanta or its subsidiaries in Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Chattisgarh, Rajasthan, Punjab, and also Zambia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, besides Goa. The money power of the company can be seen in the way governments back it, even with cold-blooded violence, as seen in May last year outside Vedanta's Sterlite Copper plant at Thoothukudi, TN, where thirteen people were killed in police firing on protesters demanding the plant's closure for criminal environmental pollution and endangering of public health.

It is notable that this is the same Sterlite plant which had tried to set up in Goa, but was thwarted by public protests over the potential pollution. The plant was also rejected in Maharashtra and Gujarat for the same reason. According to the report, the Thoothukudi plant set up a new smelter in 2004 without obtaining statutory consents under the Air and Water Acts; in 2006 it got permission to expand its production by making false claims of having adequate land. The 10-fold expansion took place on the same site by cutting corners with respect to pollution, e.g. no mandatory greenbelt and no increasing of chimney heights, heavily polluting the surrounding settlement. As the report says,



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'In 2013, following a gas leak which is alleged to have killed one person, as well as hospitalised up to 100, the Supreme Court of India found the company guilty of serious environmental violations... The Supreme Court order and fine had little effect on Vedanta. It continued to operate its plant in violation of the law, by handling, transporting, and disposing [sic] hazardous wastes without valid authorisation. The company has also been pulled up for dumping 350,000 tonnes of copper slag in, and on the banks of, the river Uppar in Thoothukudi. This directly caused heavy flooding in upstream areas in 2015.' (pages 8-9)

Goa truly owes a lot to its environment warriors! But Vedanta has still left its ugly mark here, with the village of Sonshi in Sattari hitting the headlines in 2017 after protests over massive air, water and noise pollution caused by the transportation of ore from six mines belonging to Vedanta and Fomento. This transportation of ore through the centre of the village was at the rate of one 10-tonne truck every 3 seconds, according to anti-mining activist Ravindra Velip.

What is the way forward now? Rama Velip believes that mining should be done the way his forefathers did it: lightly, with minimal extraction of ore and destruction of nature, and also only for the benefit of local communities. The option championed by our politicians, of continuing with the corporate crooks, is obviously not going to achieve this. But what about a state mining corporation, as suggested by others? This too hardly makes sense, given how our current political establishment is busy selling Goa's natural resources downriver, via the coal hub, nationalised waterways, Mopa airport, increased village settlement zones, needless widening of roads, and now the loosening of coastal protection. There is thus only one sensible option, which is to leave things in the hands of the local communities, as envisaged in the Panchayats (Extended to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996. This would mean encouraging the growth of local enterprises, like the Sadhana village co-operative of Caurem-Pirna, Quepem, set up in the face of bitter opposition by the mining companies and their political minions.

It is true that such enterprises will not be easy to start or sustain, given opposition from without, and also – since many Goan villages are divided by caste and class – from within.

Even so, local communities who have worked on the land and engaged with natural resources in a sustainable way are Goa's best hope for developing a sustainable and people-oriented mining industry. Big Corporates and their Political Minions need the Boot

Killing wildlife is not a solution to any of our problems today, and neither is the return of the mining companies. Both will further degrade the environment, and our future with it. The people of Goa need long-term, equitable, and sustainable development, and there seems to be little option but to bring this about ourselves.

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