

By DALE LUIS MENEZES



Water reserves are dangerously low owing to the delayed rains in most parts of the country; in some places, reservoirs are bone dry. Scientists express fears that in 3 or 4 decades, most Indian cities will be unlivable as they will run out of water. The delayed rains and the disruption of the seasonal cycles is another aspect of climate change, and it should be clear by now that such a change has dire consequences for the survival of life.

The climate change that we confront today is the product of human intervention as opposed to the climate fluctuations experienced by our ancestors. While bad seasons are a part of the natural cycle, the issue today is not the occasional natural disruptions but continued and increasing problems due to human intervention in nature, as well as a dire need for an efficient response to disasters or disaster-in-the-making by governments. As the problem is a man-made one, its solution lies in a sincere and creative response to the crisis by the government by taking into confidence various communities, especially marginalized communities.

In Goa, the almost-dry June is unprecedented in recent memory. The delayed monsoon has sparked fears of the scarcity of water and the disruption of the agricultural cycle in the future. The situation in Goa is grave because successive governments and profit-hungry business interests have destroyed the environment and the landscape at an unparalleled rate—politicians and bureaucrats call such destruction ‘development’. This ‘development’ involves unnecessary and environmentally destructive mega-projects, be they bridges, roads or highways, real estate in eco-sensitive areas, the cutting of trees and mangroves, the destruction of hills and mountains that act as water catchment areas or reservoirs, and rampant mining that forever destroys forests and water resources.

A stoppage in the destructive ‘development’ creates conditions where the environment heals to its previous condition. Following the ban on mining activities in Goa, many farmers reported a better yield as the groundwater table improved considerably. But though the ban on mining had given some respite to the forested areas of Goa, construction of mega-projects in other parts continues with the axing of thousands of trees.

The regularity of rainfall depends on trees and the forest cover. It is not enough that forests are preserved within the borders of Goa. What happens in the neighboring regions, too, affects the environment in Goa. The Maharashtra government, for instance, announced that the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train project will affect more than 54,000 mangroves. The NGO Vanashakti, which released their findings last month of monitoring forests and eco-sensitive areas of the Konkan, says that within four years - from 2014-2018 - almost 1,600

acres of forests were lost to industry and mining.



Almost every environmental clearance from the government or an independent body involves the destructions of thousands of acres of forests. The ruling politicians and those who benefit from such mega-projects claim that the government bodies carry out compensatory afforestation. The Government of India until recently had a policy of afforestation, which the BJP government made into a law. However, the policy and the law does not work in reality as it does on paper. Sometimes the land earmarked for the compensatory afforestation displaces forest-dwelling communities, in other instances, it is unsuitable for plantation, or the compensatory afforestation project suffers from the apathy of the forest department.

The future, therefore, seems to be clear: Goa (as many other parts of India) faces rampant deforestation, and consequently a disruption of the seasonal cycles. While activist and civil society groups are finding some small but significant successes in their fight for the preservation of the environment, the question of the best way, or ways, to tackle environmental destruction still confronts the people of Goa. Successive governments have not adequately performed its duty in protecting the environment, nor have they shown goodwill towards the Goan environment by making strong protection policies and laws and implementing the same in letter and spirit. How, then, do we safeguard our future?

If we want to avoid delayed rains and other catastrophic climate change issues, we need to think of environmental concerns together with social concerns. In most occasions, the destructive 'development' is promoted in areas where communities of lesser socio-economic status live—land and water bodies are grabbed without any concern for the life and livelihood of such communities. For instance, in Goa's mining areas, tribal and agrarian communities have lived for centuries; their lifestyle was seriously affected by mining. For the promotion of tourism, fishing communities, as well as agrarian ones, have suffered the ill-effects of high-end projects and upmarket 'development'. Often the government and big businesses exploit the differences between different caste and class statuses, between those who own the land and those who are tenants—playing these sections against one another, and often using the legal procedures and the people's lack of knowledge of these legal procedures to promote non-sustainable economic activities.

Currently, policy decisions by governmental bodies concerning the environment do not integrate the people—thus destructive policies displace communities, considering them as extraneous to the process of policy formation. Contrary to the governmental vision, environment-related activism in recent times in Goa is progressing in the right direction. The agitation against the increasing handling and transportation of coal, for instance, has integrated the concerns of the fishing community, some leaders of the movement earn their

livelihood from fishing—a reason such efforts meet with success. Environmental activism can deepen their respective movements by subverting the caste and class fractures in Goan society.

Delayed Rains are the Cost of 'Development'

Thus, stronger vision for a better environment and better politics needs to combine ecological issues with sociological ones.

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