

By AMITA KANEKAR



The Usefulness of Tiger Deaths

Vishwajeet Rane, minister in the Goa cabinet and MLA of Sattari, says that he was in a state of shock at the news of tiger deaths in his constituency. The chief minister Pramod Sawant has also expressed deep pain, sadness, concern, and everything else possible, while promising a high-level investigation to find out the reasons for the tragedy. Could these worthies be so shaken and stirred because they've suddenly realised that it's their own rotten development policies that are responsible for the tiger deaths? Of course not. But if you think that the expressions of official shock and outrage are all just drama for the cameras, you would be mistaken as well. No, this outrage is intended to achieve more than a picture in the press, for tiger deaths – provided they result in enough public anger – offer a very convenient way of land-grab.

And, as pointed out recently by activist Rama Kankonkar, land-grab is what this government is all about. Speaking at a public meeting organised by Goa Sudharop at the end of December 2019, Kankonkar pointed out that all the policies of the government are essentially about land-grab. This is can be readily seen in so-called 'development projects' – whether marinas or IT parks or golf courses, for tourism, or for real estate development, or for infrastructure – also in land-management policies like the Regional Plan or the Planning Development Authorities or the Coastal Zone Authority. Can it be a coincidence that all of these swallow up land owned or occupied by small farmers, or householders, or small businesses, or indigenous communities? And this is even more true – and on a much bigger scale — but it is even true for ultra-nationalist policies like the National Register of Citizens (NRC), where your Indianness will be questioned, but not the Indianness of the land you happen to own or occupy. So, when you can't come up with proof of your Indianness, and get arrested and imprisoned as an illegal foreigner, your house and land will go to the authorities! Kankonkar's incisive argument was thus that, whether through economic means or political ones, the system ensures the transfer of land from small folk and indigenous communities, or from the commons and the wildlife who inhabit it, into the hands of the authorities and the elites they really represent.

When you look at it that way, it is clear that the tiger deaths are nothing less than a great opportunity for the powers-that-be. Look at who is being blamed. Five men, all forest-dwellers belonging to the indigenous Dhangar community, were arrested, supposedly suspected of poisoning the tigers after the latter killed their cattle. It is useful to note that the government did nothing to compensate the families for the loss of their cattle, even though complaints were made to the local authorities soon after the attacks. It takes weeks to complete the paperwork, was the explanation. And how are subsistence-level communities expected to live

for those bureaucratic weeks? Not the problem of the government.



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Now, however, the government is acting at full-speed. Within days of the discovery of the tiger deaths, not only were the Dhangars arrested, but the Chief Minister also announced that the Dhangar families would be immediately 'rehabilitated' out of the tiger areas. Yes, we know what rehabilitation means - it means you get thrown out first, while the compensatory land or jobs or houses show up, if at all, much later and always less than promised. This will save the tiger, so we are expected to believe, except that - as Vishwajeet Rane himself pointed out - the government will never agree to declare the same area a wildlife reserve. Because, as he explained, wildlife reserves have stringent restrictions on development, and people, according to him, want development. Who are these development-hungry 'people' he's worried about? Obviously not the Dhangars - they are being thrown out without a second thought. No, development means using that same tiger homeland for mining, quarrying, highways, tourist resorts, coal corridors, everything that fills the bank accounts of those who matter. The big cats who remain can be happy within the narrow little 'tiger corridors' bestowed on them, or they can be damned.

And damned they will be, for this is precisely the great 'development model' that caused the tiger deaths in the first place. Why are tigers preying on livestock if not because their forest base and natural prey is shrinking? It's not just tigers - all Goan villages can confirm to the growing invasion of wildlife, from monkeys to leopards, bison, crocodiles, and pythons, in recent years. And this self-proclaimed wildlife-loving Pramod Sawant government - instead of taking steps to halt the horrendous environmental destruction wreaking havoc on Goa of late - is continuing it full-swing, including massive deforestation, hill-cutting, and filling in of khazans and natural waterways. Just look at the year 2019 that has just ended: in February, the government announced that 3500 trees would be cut for road-widening; then we heard that 5500 more would be lost to MOPA airport; and then, in December 2019, comes the announcement of a mammoth 50,000 further to be cut for infrastructure projects which are planned to take up land in even forests and wildlife sanctuaries. Yes, wildlife sanctuaries. Where is the wildlife supposed to go? It doesn't matter - they, and the nearby communities whose lives and livestock they impact, and indeed the future of all of us on this earth, are all collateral damage at the altar of 'use-and-throw' development.

It is worth noting here that the indigenous peoples, the traditional inhabitants of their territories, who nurtured the land and all its life forms, and who are the worst sufferers in this cold-blooded game of land-grab, are also among the most vulnerable of communities. The Dhangars have been discriminated against both economically and socially in Goa, fighting unsuccessfully for decades to even be notified as a Scheduled Tribe. Being notified does not

automatically mean benefits, for Goa is notorious for not implementing the Constitutionally-guaranteed rights to notified communities, but at least it provides a Constitutional route towards better representation. But this government which bends over backwards to fast-track a 'development' that will swallow the Dhangars' forestlands, has had no time to deal with their life-and-death problems, not in the past, nor now. Profit is all that matters.

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