

By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA



When the Bell is Tolloed – Mangueshi women fight for their rights
At a time when divisive politics is taking root across the globe, simple ordinary women from the temple town of Manguxi in Ponda, Goa, India, have been leading the way in preventing these roots from taking hold. These women are refusing to be distracted by the trail being laid by divisive politics and are steadfastly focused on their goal against destructive development that will consume and destroy them.

They are diverse women – women who work in the fields, as nurses, as forest produce collectors, in offices, as homemakers or at various other workplaces or are students. They have one thing in common. The hamlet they live in, and where their ancestors have lived over generations, *and* a history. Legend has it that when there was a problem in the village of Mangueshi, a woman tolled the bell, which is ensconced at one of the windows on the top most row of the Deepa Stambh, the lamp tower, and got all the people together.

That tradition of tolling the bell continues to this day. Some time in 2017, when rapacious developers, flexing political and financial muscle, wanted to indulge in hill cutting, a woman took the initiative and rang the bell and gathered all the villagers together. The women knew that if the hill was cut, the water would inundate their houses in the monsoons, and their houses would have simply collapsed.

The women would have none of that. They agitated. All they were equipped with was the knowledge that hill cutting is illegal and their sharp political sense. They had no other weapons, as compared to the goons engaged by the developers with active political blessings, who had stones, glass pieces – to fling, *and* alcohol which could both give them Dutch courage and be the pretext for their acts of hitting back at the weaponless women. The sole aim of the weaponless women was to protect their hills, not just for their aesthetic value, but basically for what hill cutting can mean for their lives and livelihoods.

When it was clear that the women were keeping vigil and that it would not be possible to indulge in hill cutting for what was euphemistically being called development, the people who wanted to set the land up for grabs planned another strategy. They installed a statue of Shivaji, and they put together a group called Shivaji Premis (Shivaji lovers) and activated a local vigilante organization, which also doubles up as a political party and has Shivaji as their hero, to initiate the task.

But the women would not budge. They were clear. Theirs was a principled decision that they did not want the hill to be cut because it would affect them and their families and the community living there. Theirs was a principled decision that they did not want any development on the hill. They were aware that the statue was a pretext. They knew that on



the heels of the statue, a pathway to reach the statue would follow, and that in turn would be followed with lighting on the route, and then shops because it would now be converted into a tourist spot, and then scaling up the development. If the developers thought they were *xanne* (wise), the women were *dade xanne* (one and half times wise to put it literally). The women just stuck to their decision. They could see through these games that were a ruse to bring on, or rather, accelerate, the developers' kind of development, that would completely marginalize their existence.

The women said they loved Shivaji too, but the hill was not the place to put a huge statue of almost the size of the other at Farmagudi, a suburb of Ponda town in the same taluka. The proposed statue was placed on the hill after excavating a piece of the hill. The women went and lifted the statue from where it had been placed, and handed it to the men who were assembled to put it there at 1 a.m. in the morning. Neither the odd hour of night nor the weight of the statue nor the presence of thugs would deter them.

Their clarity shines the light for many of us through many a step that these women have taken earlier too. For instance, a well existing from times immemorial was suddenly filled and closed. Perplexed, the women questioned the temple's mahajans (who incidentally are Gaud Saraswat Brahmins and include persons occupying prominent positions). They were first met with a response that the well is not appropriately located. The mahajans took umbrage under God and the Vaastu tradition, to back their assertion. The women questioned this so called Vaastu wisdom, and wondered why 'Vaastu' should replace the wisdom of the ancestors, who had chosen to dig the well in that very location centuries ago. The women insisted that the well be rebuilt exactly where it was. And built it was. Ironically, the water of the well is now substantially used by the swamis of the Manguexi temple. Had the women not to persist, it would have been the beginning of a God-said-so-therefore-you-have-to-do-it logic which would be conveniently used and would have been the downside into a false and destructive development model, that privileges the rich populations from outside Goa, to the detriment of the local people's housing and livelihoods. Goa is currently witnessing a real estate assault on its environment and demography. The actions of these women of Manguexi are a trail blazing example of what people in Goa can do to protect the environment and their livelihood and maintain a healthy demographic balance.

The women are clear... they will continue to toll the bell and respond to the tolling as and when they perceive an attack on their way of life and their very sustenance. And no amount of divisive politics by the State and its agents will deter them in their fight to the finish for the protection of their lands, their lives, their livelihoods.

(A version of this article first appeared in the July 2018 issue of *Goa Today*)



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