

By AMITA KANEKAR



## A Bahujan Challenge to the Mining Mafia

The ironies of the so-called development of Goa are indeed unlimited. On the one hand, the government and elites of this state hard-sell it to India as a place of unlimited 'good times', to be used for holidaying, partying, drinking, gambling, and other increasingly unpleasant pleasures, the price of which is paid in many ways by common Goans. On the other, the Bahujan communities, esp. Bahujan Christians whose culture is sold as Goa's tourism USP, are painted as anti-nationals by the Goan elites when they ask for their Konkani - i.e. Roman script Konkani - to be recognised as one of Goa's languages, or even for English-medium education for their children. As for the physical landscape of Goa, hyped as paradisiacal again for consumption by largely Indian tourists, it is disappearing before our very eyes. Whether it is destructive tourism of the casino and golf course variety, 'development' projects like DefExpo, the cancerous growth of second-homes and holiday-homes eating up the hills, or a refusal to mine Goa's mineral wealth in a transparent, sustainable and community-conscious way, Goa's ruling elites, in close collaboration with those of India, seem determined to squeeze out the maximum profit in the shortest possible time, leaving a desert behind.

But they are in a fight. Slowly and steadily, the many small and scattered oppositions are gathering strength, some with both better vision as also concrete plans to replace the destructive and neo-liberal developmental policies currently in place. The struggle at Caurem village is one such, where a people's movement to create a sustainable and equitable mining industry is growing despite virulent opposition from the powers-that-be, including the latest: a brutal assault on one of the leaders of the movement, inside the Sada Sub-Jail.

On 21st March, Ravindra Velip, tribal activist and panch of Caurem village, was arrested along with other villagers, after they stopped trucks transporting ore from the Fomento-owned mine in the village. They were released on bail but arrested again the next day, when they once again stopped the trucks. This time they refused bail and were hence remanded to judicial custody in Sada Sub-Jail, Mormugao.

The next morning, while on his way to the jail toilet, Velip was grabbed, gagged and blindfolded by what seemed to be four men, and carried some distance away. There he was

flung up into the air, so that he fell to the ground from a height, breaking his arm, after which fierce blows began to rain on his stomach and back, from boots and fists. 'You think you're a *dada*, do you?' someone taunted him. It was only when he managed to move the gag and scream for help, that the assailants ran away.

What was the reason for this murderous assault, carried out brazenly in the jail premises where nobody can enter without the permission of the authorities? The immediate issue was the illegal transportation of ore from mines in the Caurem-Pirla village panchayat. According to the villagers, many of these mines have been implicated in over-extraction of ore or violating the lease boundaries. But the Goa government has till date not investigated this illegal mining, nor recovered the stolen ore, nor prosecuted the perpetrators of the crime. The government has also not bothered to record the amount of ore currently stacked at the mining leases despite numerous petitions from the villagers. In fact, the ore continues to be in the possession of the same companies, even though the villagers have again repeatedly asked the government to take control of it, only again to be ignored.

On top of all this came the transportation of the ore out of the village, destroying evidence of these illegalities. This transportation seems to have been deliberately scheduled during the Shigmo festivities, when the locals are busy with traditional rituals which also involve travelling out of their villages. Despite this, Velip and others managed to halt the illegal transportation; but, instead of receiving thanks for saving the state exchequer from being robbed, they were themselves arrested.

Caurem: the heart of Goa's struggle against rapacious mining

Caurem is a Scheduled Tribe village; more than 95% of the population here belong to the ST community. The villagers here have been involved in mining since the days their forefathers mined iron ore with their bare hands and a few manual tools. But the same community is today up in arms against the mining companies and the government that backs them, having repeatedly attempted to stop the illegal mining that started in 2008, which, they say, is destroying the water, agriculture and forest resources of the village.

It would take too much time and space to describe the long struggle of the Caurem villagers



to stop illegal mining, including exposés of attempts to over-extract, to conceal ore as dumps, to make fraudulent inventories (showing quantities of ore much lower than what the villagers measured), and to destroy the evidence of large scale over-extraction. They have also sent innumerable letters, petitions, and RTI applications to the authorities demanding the monitoring and supervision of mining activities, and challenging the secrecy in which these are conducted; most of these have been ignored.

The villagers accuse the government of brazenly ignoring all the promises made to the Supreme Court regarding mining operations. According to their letter to the police, chief minister, and other authorities, of 21 March 2016, 'There are no personnel of the Director of Mines at the site, in spite of clear orders requiring the presence of such an official during all transportation operations. The Supreme Court-appointed Monitoring Committee is also never at (the) site and has also totally ignored our letters.'

The situation is again ironical, because the Supreme Court allowed the mining to resume only after the state government's plea that local communities depend on mining for sustenance. The reality, according to the villagers, is that even the information about the ore auctions and transport operations have been kept secret from the locals, ensuring that all contracts, employment, and profits from the auctioned ore remains in the hands of the same mining companies, government officials, and local MLAs, who were responsible for the mess in the first place.

But the biggest irony is that it is the villagers who are monitoring the mining operations and pointing out the flaws and illegalities. This is actually the job of the state. Law and due process are critical to the functioning of democracy; it is the state's job to ensure due process. Instead we have a situation where it is the people who are checking procedural lapses and demanding the implementation of law, while the Goa government is undermining due process and thus the law as well. What is this if not a rogue state?

The solution: a Bahujan take-over of mining

The Caurem villagers are however not just opposing the illegalities; they also have a solution - and it is probably this that scares the powers-that-be the most. After years of struggle, and

 much thinking about the problems of their village and their own future, the villagers concluded that sustainable, just, and equitable mining can only be done through a co-operative of the local population. A Bahujan Challenge to the Mining Mafia

Accordingly, they formed the Sadhna Multipurpose Co-operative Society, under the leadership of Ravindra Velip, and with the intention of developing a co-operative approach to agriculture and other economic activities in Caurem-Maina, including mining. However, although they have been trying to get their co-operative registered with the government from as far back as mid-2014, they have so far only met with refusal. Which is not really surprising, since this venture has the potential to transform the way mining is done in the locality and beyond.

But the fight is on. This murderous assault on Ravindra Velip, though clearly intended to terrorise the villagers into submission, seems doomed to fail. Velip's complaint pins the blame for the assault squarely on not just the jail authorities, but also the mine-owners and the local MLA. The Caurem villagers have meanwhile demanded the withdrawal of all charges against the arrested five and an immediate investigation into the illegal mining. They have also filed a petition in the High Court, against the refusal of the authorities to register their Co-operative. Ravindra Velip is the promoter of the venture, which is probably also why he was targeted.

Finally, this is a moment also to remember Mangesh Gaonkar and Dilip Velip, murdered in 2011 in Balli, south Goa. Young and brilliant leaders of the Velip tribal community, they were fighting for the implementation of the law regarding government jobs and political reservations for their people, when they were brutally cut down in their prime. The grim resonance of the assault of today with this past is not a coincidence. There is no doubt that the ruling elites of Goa are seriously threatened by the rise of independent thinkers, activists, and leaders from the Bahujan communities. Because they know that if the Bahujans are allowed to develop their own visions for their villages and communities, the economics and politics of Goa will not be the same.

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