

By DALE LUIS MENEZES



On Those Who Do(n't) Depend on Mining

Irrespective of whether one does or does not depend on mining, one will suffer from the ill-effects. If one isn't involved in the sector, the dust, pollution, and the destruction of the ecology will nonetheless affect one's daily life. If one is a service-provider – such as a truck owner/driver, machine operator, and barge owner/worker – in the mining industry, the rampant illegalities (and even legalities that keep changing) in the sector bring in a lot of uncertainties. Thus, whether one depends for sustenance on mining or not, in Goa *all* are 'mining-affected'.

It is not as if those who are service-providers are not threatened by the ill-effects of mining. However, it seems that the only position they have in sorting out the mess is their livelihood issue and the outstanding debts that they need to repay. Even if the mining dependents recognize that the misguided move of hastily renewing mining leases after the 2012 ban is what has caused this fresh problem, they still entreat the same government, politicians, and bureaucrats – who have caused this mess – for relief. The recovery of the loot was, in fact, what the mining dependents should have demanded in their protest, as many on social media have pointed out. For what use will money in banks be when there won't be clean air to breathe and water to drink?

All in all, it looks like the mining dependents have lost their way. At the same protest, it was reported that an effigy of Claude Alvares, the director of Goa Foundation, who led the fight against the illegalities, was burnt. This is rather bizarre because it is through the efforts of Goa Foundation that the Goan public became aware of the massive loot taking place of resources belonging to the people of Goa. In fact, Alvares and his Goa Foundation are acting like a watchdog upholding public interest – indeed even those of the mining dependents – against the illegalities. Rather than viewing organizations like Goa Foundation as the problem, it needs to be understood that their efforts have demonstrated – and the fact that their claims having been repeatedly proven without a shadow of doubt in a court of law – that Goa is currently reeling under a broken system. That is to say that the governance and regulation of various activities in the state have spiraled out of the control of its own people, and the political class entrusted with legislation and policy-decisions have run out of ideas; in fact, they are contributing to the problem with their ineptitude, in-fighting, and self-interest.



If massive fraud and theft in the absence of a just and able regulating authority is what has resulted in a broken system in Goa, it then follows, logically, that we first demand the entire system be overhauled, the loot recovered and the loans written off (as has happened with many defaulters who are big industrialists). If the state authorities are able to prosecute and thereby recover the losses to the exchequer, it would be a good start to clear the sordid mining mess. However, this might not be as easy as it seems, as many politicians - effectively part of the executive machinery of the state that needs to work on prosecuting these illegalities - have invested heavily in mining, as some locals in Usgao have recently claimed. But recovering the loot is crucial if relief is to be given to all Goans and if the Goan ecology is to be healed.

And while demanding the recovery of the loot, the mining dependents along with other mining-affected peoples should also be facilitated to enrich the debate by searching for and articulating possible sustainable futures. This is crucial because the solution in the form of auctioning the leases - and thereby opening the market to national and global players - will again result in the same catastrophic destruction of the Goan ecology that the current leaseholders have unleashed. Private lease-holders, like corporations, are driven by profit and this does not augur well for the Goan public. The first-hand experience of how the government/policy-makers and the mining lobby have misled thousands of service-providers is exactly what is required to chart a new sustainable future. In other words, the same mining dependents need to admit their errors of judgment and lead the way to a different future, without outsourcing it to the ruling class. For thinking differently through one's first-hand experience of living and suffering in the mining areas can be done, as Ravindra Velip and the villagers of Caurem have demonstrated.

The villagers of Caurem with Velip's leadership started the Sadhana Co-Operative Society that aimed to carry out mining on a sustainable basis. These people suggested that mining could alternate with farming, thus not completely rupturing the economic life of the villagers that has been followed for many years. The idea is to take back from the profit-making/corporate player the control of public resources by making the people of villages central to the decision-making process as well as production. This would effectively put an end to all the high-level back-door dealings that Goa has been subjected to all this while.

At the end of the day, we all need to recognize that the mining dependents do have a real grievance, suffering from governmental ineptitude and apathy, the destructive profit-making mindset of national and multi-national corporations as well as a lack of livelihood options. But their condition is quite similar to many other service-providers in the major extractive industries in Goa; which is why Goans need to demand much more than merely livelihood.

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