

By AMITA KANEKAR



Is One Pandemic not Enough?

What can you expect from a government that responds to a disaster by creating new disasters? Hard on the heels of the news that Covid19 had reached India, came the announcement of an unplanned but instant national lockdown, sending the well-to-do into a panic grabbing of all available provisions, and pushing millions of daily wage earners into horrific misery and desperation which the government, almost unbelievably, has done little to ameliorate even three weeks later. And then – to distract from its own mammoth failing – came the demonisation of the Tablighi programme, resulting in violent harassment, social boycotts and more deaths, this time targetting poor Muslims, on top of the general turmoil.

Such is the Indian government. And if this short-term response to the pandemic has been disastrous, the long-term is looking no better. At a time when we are flooded by information linking the origins of Covid-19 to ecological destruction, we have Prakash Javdekar, Minister for Forests, Environment and Climate Change, announcing – mid-lockdown – that the National Wildlife Board had met via video-conferencing to clear proposals from eleven states for wildlife-destroying developments. Then his cabinet colleague Nitin Gadkari suggested that infrastructure projects should restart despite the lockdown. Finally comes the news that the construction industry will be one of the few enterprises being allowed to re-start from April 20<sup>th</sup>.

The government, in other words, is set to get back to normal with its pet projects – lockdown or no – i.e. precisely the same ‘normal’ that produced the pandemic in the first place. For Covid-19, like many other new diseases – including AIDS, Ebola, West Nile, SARS, Lyme Disease, and our own KFD – has apparently emerged from the destruction of the wilderness, which results in pathogens jumping from other species to humans. And this destruction is the result of activities like logging, mining, expansion of roads, agriculture, settlements, plantations, and grazing lands into forestlands, and intensifying urbanisation – all activities that fall under the term ‘development’. That’s why, despite many warnings in recent years of possible pandemics, governments took no notice, for they are wedded to this highly profitable development model – profitable, that is, for the corporate world along with the hyper-consuming classes. But for indigenous peoples, rural communities, and small folk everywhere, it’s a different story, for this ‘development’ has resulted in the loss of homelands and traditional livelihoods, and the ecological foundations of their existence. The destruction of the wilderness thus goes hand in hand with the destruction of a great many human lives.

The construction and infrastructure industry, a very big player in this development model, constitutes a rather direct attack in itself on the environment, both natural and social. On the




social front, the industry is notorious for exploiting labour; dangerous working conditions on construction sites are common, along with poor living conditions, poor wages, and zero security. When it comes to the natural environment, there is much lip-service to the idea of sustainability, but the word has come to mean little. If construction that is essentially unnecessary, like giant luxury hotels and vacation homes, can get top places in sustainability ratings, this is an unsustainable sustainability. It has actually become just a tag - which can be bought by using specific products listed as sustainable. The basic question, though, of the need for the project - beyond a profit on investment, or private enjoyment - is a question that's rarely asked.

Look at the real estate industry in Goa. Vacant homes as a percentage of total housing stock have been on the rise for several years now, according to social scientists Solano Da Silva and Ananth Chandrashekar ("ODPs: Anarchic Planning", O Heraldo, 7 April 2018). This is because most new housing in Goa is built for speculative investment purposes, even as locals are priced out of the market. And despite the vacancies, the government only wants to intensify building, by increasing permissible built-up areas per plot and also heights, and increasing settlement zones. Now they are trying to classify villages as urban areas, as seen in the notification of February 2020 which declared 56 villages, mostly coastal, as urban areas, thus opening the doors to increased building density along the coast. All for the profits of real estate and tourism corporates, and those interested in second homes or investment purchases.

It is not as if Covid-19 is the first inkling that all this cutting of hills, chopping of forests, destruction of dunes, and dredging for sand would exact a price. The massively-destructive monsoon floods of recent years in Kerala, Goa and coastal Maharashtra are warning enough of the dangers of this development model. Studies of the Western Ghats had actually predicted 'natural disasters' as the direct consequences of the ravaged native environment. But these warnings were also ignored, as indeed were the disasters themselves. Profit is all that matters; all else is collateral damage - to be dumped on to nature, and on impoverished communities who don't count.

But for how long? Even if we survive this pandemic, there are apparently thousands more 'novel' viruses waiting in the wings. And there are thousands of construction workers among the angry Indians stranded on the roads right now, without wages, food or shelter, forget water and soap to keep the virus at bay, and facing not just the lathis of the police, but also the hatred of many locals, as in Goa where poor 'bhaile' are an easy target in any crisis. This is the result not of Covid-19 but of a 'normal' work culture that disrespects and exploits them mercilessly, followed by a national lockdown that didn't even acknowledge their existence.

 'Back to normal' is intolerable, basically. It's pretty obvious that construction, being an inherently destructive activity, has to be drastically reduced, and limited to socially essential needs. Like decent housing for all – never a priority in 'normal' times – and institutions of public utility. There has to be an end to wasteful construction, whether extra highways, second homes, luxury developments, samadhis on Goa's beaches, or megalomaniacal statues and projects to rebuild New Delhi. Construction labour laws have to be updated, and upheld.

But who's going to do this? Not our governments. The announcement of a 12-hour work day (up from 8-hour) by some state governments, to make up for the lockdown losses, means that they actually expect the losses to be recovered through this already-hammered workforce. And let us not forget that the 8 hour law is hardly implemented in the huge unorganised sector, like construction work. What will it mean if a 12-hour becomes the law – 24-hour shifts? We can expect more such 'solutions' – like the restart of mining in Goa, maybe, all in the name of livelihoods. And perhaps they are indeed solutions – not for humanity at large, nor for the earth – but for investors. Back to normal, but a worse one.

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