



What Destroys Goan Agriculture? Some Thoughts

There is much that one comes across about the schemes available for agriculture. But even before one can begin availing of those schemes, there are strong disablers for agriculture in the manner of planning and governance.

Recently, the Goa Human Rights Commission passed an order in a proceeding that it initiated suo motu, following a news item quoting farmers and concerned citizens of Taleigao stating that the pollution of the command areas of the St. Inez creek was destroying their livelihood. The order directed the Village Panchayat of Taleigao to take necessary steps to stop the raw sewage discharge by housing complexes on the slopes of Nagali hills and areas surrounding the fields in Taleigao.

The local self Government Bodies, that is, the Village Panchayats and the Municipalities, and City Corporation of Panaji are required to maintain the drainage and sewage systems. They fail to do so, because in many cases they are hand in glove with the builders in how to maximise profits, even if it means that the construction blocks the age old drainage system or does not have adequate or any measures for the sewage discharge of its many residents and merrily discharges the sewage into the fields.

In the said case, the Village Panchayat of Taleigao, the Corporation of the City of Panaji, the Department of Agriculture, the Goa State Sewerage Development Corporation, the Captain of Ports, the Imagine Panaji Smart City Development Limited, the Goa State Pollution Control Board, were all arrayed as parties, because the initial parties that were arrayed, namely Corporation of the City of Panaji and the Department of Agriculture washed their hands of the problem. To be fair, the Department of Agriculture did conduct a survey guided by farmers and villagers, who indicated some of the areas where the sewage was being discharged. But after preparing a report of the same, that is where it stopped. The other Departments/bodies each almost passed the buck or sought to say that they are in no ways connected with the maintenance of the creek or have delegated it to other bodies. Here is where the lack of understanding of responsibilities and the accountability of the respective Government Departments and regulatory bodies comes into play. There is therefore a need for convergence, and goes without saying, also the political will.

In yet another case, the Goa Human Rights Commission, noted, through deputing its investigative agency, the impact of the pollution of the industrial unit Goa Carbon Ltd. on the soil, where fields within 100 metres of the factory unit remained unploughed. This tells us that even if the farmers there were to choose to put all the generally advised inputs into the soil, and avail the schemes that are meant to support or subsidise the expenses on inputs, they just would have to keep the inputs fallow for the counter currents that the pollution by

such industrially polluting units generates. This therefore brings into play the spatial planning and zoning as well as the governance in terms of preventing pollution of the fields.



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Should not the Department of Agriculture be empowered to be the nodal Department that would network with relevant Departments to ensure that agriculture is not suppressed or destroyed by the so called economic or building activities, that these Departments or bodies preside over or are supposed to regulate? How can there be structural reorganisation of governance to ensure that the Department of Agriculture can mobilise the various concerned Departments authoritatively to ensure that they factor in the implications for agriculture. Perhaps like environment impact assessment, it is now time for an Agriculture Impact Assessment to be done to define how many more buildings and complexes can be accommodated in a particular area?

Further, a huge challenge awaits the farmers in so far as water is concerned specially in the summer months. With the onddes (ponds) running dry, there are poor chances of the effort that has gone into whatever has been cultivated in the second crop (*vaingon*) coming to proper fruition. It is not simply that the ponds run dry. Many waterlords pump and sell water indiscriminately, with no cap or control of how much water they can pump and sell, resulting in the extreme lowering of the groundwater table. It should be possible to regulate how many waterlords there can be in a physical location, and to have action taken against them when they pump beyond a defined cap.

While on the one hand, fields face drought like situations, on the other hand, flooding of the fields due to blockage of drainage results in water accumulating in low lying fields to the point where the farmers struggle to cultivate the second crop. Therefore this means that the farmers cannot cultivate paddy due to overflowing, and they can only start vegetable cultivation at a very late point.

As if all this is not bad enough, the Government decides that roads are the essence of progress. Yes roads are required for fields too, but where? The roads have to be available to access fields which tractors and harvesters cannot access. Certainly not roads to provide access to upper echelons of society through any and every direction. In Taleigao, already wide roads have been built and still more ten-metre-wide roads are visualised through fields. This is unconscionable. And not even in the interests of equity and climate justice.

All of the above only speaks of different priorities of governance. It is assumed that Goa can always continue to depend on Belgaum for the vegetables. But the COVID 19 lockdown has taught us that this kind of dependency is dangerous, and the rising cancer cases have taught us that there is nothing like fresh vegetable (and ideally organically produced) on the plate for good health of the State's population. Apart from this, whatever happened to self

sufficiency of villages and model villages and smart cities which the Government is touting? Perhaps this self sufficiency was visualised uninclusively, to make local landless agricultural workers and migrant workers toil whilst the upper echelons of society get the vegetables at half the price of what it costs to produce them?

As a matter of fact, it is time the State rehaul its thinking to understand what to value, what to support, what to prioritise. So that the indicators of progress are not measured by the so called Gross Domestic Product, which hides all these aspects apart from hiding the inequalities inherent in such governance processes, and embedded in society.

Not only this, there should be an agriculture cess, not on daily consumption products as is happening with GST, but on high end products, so that agriculture can be subsidised specially for the farmer who is growing for not just her consumption but for her sale.

The pronoun 'her' has been deliberately used because the woman farmer like the actually tilling farmer appears to be invisibilised.

Finally, it has to be said that the social, cultural, and political determinants of agriculture cannot be overlooked in planning and governance, not just related to agriculture, but the overall planning and governance as well.

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