

By AMITA KANEKAR



What is responsible for the fires burning all over Goa today? You only have to check the fate of any tree in the state to know that it's not just the weather.

Missing the (burning) forest for the trees

Like the trees outside Kala Academy in Panjim. This area has got to be one of the best stretches of road in Goa, if not India. And the reason is obvious: the trees. Mostly old and huge rain trees, natives of the African savannahs, they form a dense canopy above, ensuring a wonderfully cool and quiet ambience despite the busy traffic. This stretch of road was created at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, and the trees are showing their age, with some even falling in recent years. What's going to happen now? Have new saplings been planted behind the old trees, as gardeners advise, ready to take over when the old fall? Are new ones being planted at least *after* the old fall? Or will there just be less and less trees, as is the case all over Goan towns and villages, and, finally, just a hot and ugly concrete jungle like most Indian cities? No prizes for guessing.

And now this rash of forest fires, in Goa of all places, where the wilderness has always smelt of water. But that's the new Goa for you - 48 fires reported by the Forest Department over less than 10 days, some of them raging for more than a week in the wildlife sanctuaries, while new ones are being reported every day even on the outskirts of Panjim and Margao.

Locals are to blame, says the government, and the weather. Traditional burning of undergrowth; private property disputes resulting in arson; and illegal clearing of forest, for expanding cashew plantation or fields or tourist home stays, are the ways in which things started, they say, after which the hot and dry weather took over. Now they even claim to have caught a man - a local villager in Sattari - actually setting a fire in a forest. What more proof is required of the nefarious doings of locals? And so the solution has been announced: a strict ban on 'unauthorized' entry into the forest.

Now, let's not forget who we are talking about. Can this government, with its record of environmental destruction, really be serious about protecting the forests? Will this ban be enforced on *everyone* interested in exploiting the forests? What about the so-called development projects through the forests, the double-tracking and so on? Will they also be banned? What about all the legal or illegal constructions on forested lands: the resorts, spice farms, and lavish vacation homes, with ministers reportedly among the owners? What about the IITs and other 'prestigious' institutions with their hunger for lavish campuses? So many bigshots with their greedy eyes on the forests - are they really going to be banned? Or are they 'authorised'?

The answer is obvious. The ban is for locals only, for the people, mostly of indigenous



communities, who have been using the forests in a low-key way for generations, and, moreover, only for sustenance. Yes, some of them might be breaking the current laws, but – unlike the mine companies, bungalow-owners, real estate developers, and coal-corporates – not to make obscene profits, nor to build second or tenth homes or lavish campuses for themselves. But it is the corporates and other bigshots who get the permissions to not just enter, but also to cut the forest as and when they want – nay, the government will even do it for them, as at Mopa and now Mollem. That’s called ‘development’.

Let us presume for a second that it really was this arrested villager and others like him who set fires which went out of control, thanks to the unseasonal high temperatures, low humidity, etc. But who is responsible for this situation? Is the unseasonal hot weather really unexpected – given that we are living in the age of global warming and climate change? What is the government doing about climate change et al, except for setting up ministries in their name? Everybody – including kindergarten kids – knows that trees and forests reduce temperatures and generally make a hugely positive contribution to reducing the heat, as well as to everybody’s health and well-being. But trees and forests are uprooted wholesale in Goa in the name of development, and supposedly replaced by afforestation in Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka – by this same government which tells people to be ‘careful’ during the heatwaves of February, the stronger ones of March, and surely worse to come in April and May. Be careful, cover your heads, and drink plenty of water, while we wipe the forests right off the map of Goa. So, what if water sources are running out, along with the trees – the water tanker business is booming, another sign of ‘development’!

As for local people expanding plantations into the forest, isn’t it the responsibility of the government to come up with long-term solutions or alternatives? In the absence of decent jobs – meaning well-paying, safe, and respected jobs – in Goa, people are trying to survive any which way they can. What exactly is supposed to be the job of a government if not solving basic livelihood issues of citizens, while also protecting the environment? Shouldn’t they be trying to provide other sources of income generation for vulnerable communities, instead of leaving them to compete with the forest for survival?

But the government is least bothered about such fundamental issues. Who cares if people have no options, if villages and agriculture push into forests, and displace the wildlife there, resulting in loss of biodiversity, killing of animals, and spread of new diseases? Arrest a few villagers, and get on with profit-making. Shifting local settlements away from the forests is already being proposed, as in the case of the tiger deaths a few years ago. Won’t that be convenient – the forests left without any local oversight, at the tender mercies of the ‘authorised’?

Coming back to Panjim and its declining tree population. Fires have suddenly erupted on the outskirts here as well, but not in any forests. Here it is the fields in the village of Taleigao which are being mysteriously set alight. The idea - so local farmers say - is to discourage cultivation, courtesy the builder lobby.

Such is development, BJP-style, where ordinary livelihoods are a non-issue; long-term vision is unheard-of; and trees, forests, and fields are not just dispensable - they are all a waste of land that could be profitably covered with concrete instead.

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