

Who can forget that famous statement by Marie Antoinette, Queen of France? When she heard that the poor were complaining that they did not have bread, she is said to have responded: then let them eat cake. What followed was the French Revolution in which Marie Antoinette was guillotined, along with almost the entire noble class of France. But this attitude is alive and kicking Goans even today, as pointed out recently by the people of Codar village in Ponda Taluka.

The people of this village are the latest Goans to be up in arms against the proposed setting up of Goa's Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in their village. And among the many valuable arguments made by the Codarcars is the fact that their village has neither a primary school nor even a *balwadi* (nursery) - which are what their children urgently need. The response of Goa's Education Minister - Pramod Sawant, who is also the Chief Minister - is to ignore these demands, saying that the opposition to the IIT is just 'for the sake of opposition'.

Is it really? The government proposes to take over a whopping 14.63 lakh square metres (320 acres) of land in Codar-Bethora, which it describes as uncultivated, unused, and rocky. The Codar villagers counter this - the land, they say, is actually fertile, some of it under cultivation. Besides, they ask, what about the wildlife? A very critical question which needs to be asked all across Goa, where wildlife is losing habitat on a huge scale and increasingly entering villages, putting both humans and animals in danger. How long will Goa go down this insane road? Can we survive without wildlife and their natural habitat?

The widespread opposition across Goa to giving land to the IIT - this is the fourth village which has refused - and the important issues of threatened livelihoods, environment, and wildlife raised by the villagers, brings up one more question: why do the IITs need so much land in the first place? The Goa IIT has actually been functioning since 2016 inside the premises of the Goa College of Engineering, with both undergraduate and graduate students completing their entire course of studies successfully there. If they can successfully function in modest premises for years now, why can't they do so permanently?

Because that's not the IIT way. The Kanpur IIT sits on 1000 acres, while the Kharagpur one has an almost unbelievable 2100 acres. Even the much-smaller Bombay IIT has a whopping 550 acres of land for around 13,000 students, i.e. about 160 square metres of land per student! Why do these institutions need such gigantic campuses, far more than those ordinary residential academic institutions in India? Do they really need those vast manicured lawns, lush planting, and scenic water bodies that separate beautifully-designed buildings? Do they really need their own shopping centres, movie theatres and other auditoria, medical centres, top-quality schools for the children of the staff, along with expansive playgrounds, multiple sports complexes, gyms, and swimming pools?

Higher education is still a luxury in India, with not even twenty per cent of the population able to access even ordinary colleges with basic facilities. In this world, the extraordinarily lavish NO BALWADI? GO TO IIT! ambience of the government-owned IITs was clearly designed to be special, literally a world apart. One is forced to ask: were the IITs just educational institutions, or were they also a means of land-grab for the elites of the country? It is no secret that the IITs have never implemented caste-based reservations properly, resulting in dominant castes dominating the student body as well as the faculty. What then were these luxurious campuses but a means for these elites to take over and consume vast spaces, even as they enjoyed the best education that India can offer? Now, of course, the land grabbers have multiplied a thousand-fold, all demanding the same massive pound of flesh and getting it too - especially in Goa, with Goa's Education Minister only too eager to hand over hundreds of acres to unheard-of universities.

Where will this take us? One gets an idea from the recent efforts of the Bombay IIT - to evict its tribal neighbours. For decades, ever since the IIT was set up in 1958 in the forested Powai region, the local tribal communities have lived next to the sprawling campus. The communities actually claim to have been there long before the IIT arrived, and well before the British left. They have, however, no proof of this. And, being illiterate and impoverished, they have little chance of finding official records to support their claim: that this is their ancestral home, where they were born, cultivated the land, foraged in the forest, and fished in the streams and lakes. The IIT's arrival took away a lot of this, in return for which they were offered jobs as cleaning staff on the campus.

Today they are struggling to survive. For, not satisfied with its vast campus, Bombay IIT claims to also own the land that the tribals still live on - and has the modern-day papers to prove it. The result is that it has regularly restricted or even prevented their traditional cultivation, use of water and forest, and even the improvement of their fragile houses. And now the institute wants to expand further, by taking over the land where 260 tribal families live. All kinds of pressure is being exerted to get the families to leave, so much so that, in July this year, the National Tribal Commission stepped in, to warn the 'eminent institution' that it could not evict the tribals without due process, and stating that action could be taken against it, under the *SC and ST Prevention of Atrocities Act*, for trying to stop their water supply and use of the only access road.

If this is what life next to an IIT means, it is no surprise at all that Goans want no part of it. As for the modern-day Marie Antoinettes, perhaps they should offer up their own homes first.

Share this...

