

Environmental Protection, Protests and Infrastructural Development: Can Goa Strike a Balance?

Sanam Bhobe

Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Symbiosis International (Deemed University)

How to Cite this Paper

Bhobe, S. (2021).
Environmental protection,
protests, and infrastructural
development: Can Goa
strike a balance?
*Confluence: Journal for
Interdisciplinary Studies,*
Volume V, 220-228.

While the world was fighting the COVID-19 battle, India's favorite tourist attraction, Goa, was struggling with another: the longstanding conflict between environmental conservation and infrastructural development. In November 2020, locals took to the streets to protest against three infrastructural projects which allegedly aim at making Goa a coal-transportation hub. While on the one hand, concerns about the environmental impact of such projects are valid, on the other arguments that without these developments, Goa will not become self-sufficient and remain heavily dependent on tourism are no less compelling. This commentary seeks to ask some important questions: where does one draw the line between development and environmental protection? Is this development even justified? And if so, are the locals justified in raising their voice, or is it a hindrance to progress?

To understand the complexities of this issue, one must first understand the geographical and historical context that has led to the situation today. Goa shares its borders with Maharashtra in the north, and Karnataka in the south, with the Arabian Sea as its coast on the west, and the Western Ghats running along the east.

The geographical features of Goa can be divided into three broad classifications: the low-lying coastal plains in the west, the mountainous terrain of the Western Ghats, and the undulating plateau in the middle (Pascual et al., 2013). The mountainous region in the Northeast part of the state, as a result of lateralisation has turned the area into a mining belt. The coastal strip is dominated by tourist activities and the central plateau region primarily caters to industrial and

transport infrastructure. Mining and extraction activities along with tourism make up the base of Goa's economy. In 2011, iron ore export from Goa was at a record high of 54 million tonnes, making it the premiere iron ore exporter in India ("Panel wants mining capped at 20 million tonnes in Goa", 2016). The contribution of mining to the state's economy was the highest that year, at 16.33%, but dropped down drastically following the Supreme Court ban on mining in the state in 2012 (Goa Mineral Ore Exporters Association, n.d.)

Around the same time, environmentalists started raising concerns about the impact of mining and coal transport on the livelihood and health of the locals. A 2006 report by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) suggested that suspended particulate matter due to mining activities resulted in respiratory illnesses that had long-term impacts on the health of locals living in and around those areas (TERI, 2006). In 2008, a book titled *Rich Lands, Poor People: is 'sustainable' mining possible?* published by the Centre for Science and Environment, analysed the socio-political impacts of mining in the state, and in 2011, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel released a report stating that several mining leases were granted in forested areas and wildlife sanctuaries (Pascual et al., 2013). The future of mining in Goa was decided by one final report, *Illegal Mining in the State of Goa*, submitted by the Justice M. B. Shah Commission in October 2013. This, along with the Goa Foundation writ petition in 2012 (Writ Petition (Civil) No. 435 of 2012) resulted in the Supreme Court banning all mining activities in the state.

The ban was partially lifted in 2014, with the Supreme Court cancelling all existing leases and asking the state government to grant new ones after proper assessment and evaluation. However, instead of granting fresh leases, the government renewed the existing leases. This decision was seen as "undue and hasty" by the apex court which believed that the Goa government had vested interests and displayed "favoritism towards mining companies" and in 2018, the ban was re-imposed for a second and final time (Banerjee, 2018). The ban rendered mining sites unproductive, and as a result, the economy and livelihood of those engaged in mining and extraction activities took a big hit. While the ban was seen as a victory for environmentalists, it directly impacted 60,000 households and 3 lakh livelihoods, disrupting the entire ecosystem of allied industries, suppliers, and truck companies (Ahmad, 2019). Activists, on the other hand, argue that besides the loss of livelihood surrounding the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries located close to mining areas, the locals are experiencing the effects of noise and air pollution (Jorge et al., 2013). It also causes "irreversible damage" to forests, agriculture, fisheries, and water aquifers, according to *Goyencha Xetkarancho Ekvott*, (roughly translated as the 'Unity of Goa's Farmers') an activist group based in Margao (Aghor, 2011). So which damage deserves more attention: the destruction of the environment, or the loss of revenue and livelihood of the people? While the two groups would answer differently, let us further explore the issues.

When the new Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government came to power in 2014, it envisioned new infrastructure projects in Goa, the primary one being the transformation of Mormugao port

into a coal hub. The Sagar Mala master plan was thus set up in 2016 with the aim to expand the coal-carrying and transporting capacity of the existing berths. Five of the eleven berths are leased out to private companies such as the Jindal Group, the Adani Group, and Vedanta (Nielson et al., 2020). The project aimed at increasing Mormugao Port's coal transporting capacity to 51 million metric tonnes per annum (mtpa) from 12 mtpa (James, 2020), which would require doubling the tracks at the Hospet-Vasco rail line, constructing a flyover and nine jetties along the Zuari and Mandovi rivers, and making the NH-4A highway connecting Belgaum and Goa, a 4-lane road (Varghese, 2020). It was estimated that the construction of the infrastructure would lead to the felling of 59,000 trees and loss of 170 hectares of protected forest land in the Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary and Mollem National Park (ActforGoa, 2020). These fears are not recent. In 2017, an *Indian Express* article titled "Coal on move, 25 tonnes a minute, is choking Goa, more is on the way" stated:

Nearly 25 million tonnes of coal — evenly spread across a standard football field, this toxic black mountain will rise almost 3 km into the sky. That is the amount that will be unloaded each year at the Mormugao Port Trust by 2020, just three years away (Nair, 2017).

And that brings us to the situation today. On November 1, 2020, thousands of Goans assembled at the railway tracks in Chandor to peacefully protest against the three projects. Because of the pandemic, while the locals protested on-site, support and solidarity poured in online. Social media helped mobilize information and content. Planned tweetstorms and viral hashtags such as #SaveMollem, #FutureFullofForests, #AmcheMollem and #SaveGoa, garnered massive support from the citizens of Goa as well as the rest of India who did not want to lose their favourite tourist getaway to the clutches of industrialization. Goa's Energy and Power minister Nileshe Cabral responded by saying that the state was only looking at the development of the nation, and that "if development has to come, there will be sacrifices, there will be changes in the environment" (James, 2020).

The railway projects were two of the thirty projects that were granted permission during the lockdown based on virtual discussions. This was not just owing to the pandemic. Even prior to COVID-19, decisions were taken via video conferencing, taking away the opportunity for proper site-specific scrutiny, assessment, appraisal, or examination of necessary documents, or for registering the voices and opinions of stakeholders in a fully democratic manner (Varghese, 2020; James, 2020). The government cited "public interest" as the intention behind the projects, suggesting that the expansion of capacity was to meet Goa's power requirements. Cabral released a white paper stating that the load for domestic consumption is more than twice the industrial and commercial consumption requirements (Mahuli, 2020). However, the 19th Electric Power Survey shows that while domestic consumption is at 26.91%, commercial and industrial consumption is at 65.63%. The remaining 7% is allotted for public lighting, irrigation, and other requirements

(Mahuli, 2020). Further, at a time when India should be moving towards renewable energy sources, as Chief Minister Pramod Sawant himself pledged (Souza, 2020), the destruction of the environment at such a scale is not justified.

With the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change suggesting that most of the world's electricity can, and should be produced from low-carbon sources by 2050, and that fossil fuel power generation needs to be phased out by 2100 (McGrath, 2014), countries such as those in the G7 are committing to move away from the use of carbon-based fossil fuels (Connolly, 2015). While there are questions over whether countries can ever become 100% renewable or not, there is no doubt that the narrative of most countries, including India, is shifting towards sustainable development and phasing out the use of carbon-based fossil fuels. In 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged at the Climate Action Summit in New York to double India's non-fossil fuel electricity generation target to 450 gigawatts (GW) (Press Trust of India, 2019). The vision to transform the state into a "coal hub" then, does not align with the long-term changes the country seeks to achieve in the energy sector. While we might still depend upon fossil fuel for our energy and therefore, invest in the companies providing it, the dependence will only last a few decades before we need to look for alternative sources.

Insecurities arising out of COVID-19 proved that Goa is heavily dependent on tourism. The pandemic destabilized Goa's economy, making it one of the worst affected states with losses estimated at around Rs. 2000 – Rs. 7200 crores and a 35-58 % loss in jobs (IANS, 2020). Since Goa relies upon tourism as a major source of revenue, airports have become a necessity. Goa's second international airport requires the construction of a link road for which land was acquired by the government in 2012. Guruprasad Mahapatra, who was the Chairman of the Airport Authority of India in 2016 said that Goa's traffic was increasing at 15% a year, and that there was enough demand to justify two airports, one in the north and one in the south to handle traffic efficiently (Herald, 2018). However, the villagers protested claiming that they were paid lesser compensation than proposed, they were not given the jobs that they were promised at the site of the airport, and that extra land was secured by the government than initially claimed. In 2019, the apex court suspended the environmental clearance for the airport despite there being approvals from the environment assessment committee and National Green Tribunal (NGT).

Considering the importance travel and tourism holds for Goa, National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog Chief Executive Officer, Amitabh Kant wrote in his commentary, "to put a complete stop to a critically important project that will greatly enhance one of India's most popular tourism destination's capacity could be irreparably harmful for investor confidence and foreign investment". He argued that it is a "dangerous precedent to set" (Kant, 2019). From the point of view of private companies seeking to expand their business, the decision of the Supreme Court is unwelcome. The opposition by the villagers might seem unnecessary at a first glance: new airport, more tourists, more jobs – what is the problem? This,

however, is just one side of the story, because it only takes into account the interests of the private companies involved, and the jobs that will be created *once* the airport starts functioning. The concerns of the villagers also include factors such as the loss of current livelihood, water sources, displacement, and the impact on the rivers, forests, wetlands and farmlands that the construction of the airport might have (Dutta, 2019).

It is essential that Goa expands its sources of revenue by strengthening other sectors. One such example is the construction of a permanent IIT campus in Melaulim. Villagers opposed the construction and prevented the workers from demarcating the land, forcing the government to relocate the site. This is the second time the construction has been halted (since the establishment of the institution in 2014, currently functioning as a part of the Goa Engineering College campus) as the government had previously identified sites at Sanguem and Canacona, which also faced protests. Here we ask, are these protests justified? How will the nation develop if locals keep resisting change? Or, as the government and supporters of the project suggest, are these protests politically motivated? When the protests gained momentum, and support from London, Chief Minister Sawant commented that “foreign forces” were trying to destabilise the BJP-led government by opposing its decisions (IANS, 2020). The Adani group also tweeted out “condemning and refuting” the claims that private stakeholders have business interests in the road and railway projects in Goa and claimed that it was propagated by “politically motivated groups” (Mahuli, 2020).

However, dissent by citizens towards a certain project of the government does not necessarily mean that it is baseless political propaganda pushed by opposing political groups. The opposition towards the infrastructural projects, along with genuine environmental concerns, could also come from other underlying issues such as a perceived threat to livelihood, unfair negotiations, misrepresentation of the magnitude of the construction, unfulfilled promises made in return for their land, or wider interests such as cultural, religious, and societal beliefs. If the proposed projects are undertaken for the welfare of the people, then the onus is on the government to explain the same and address any issues that locals might have. Blatantly dismissing these concerns and labelling them as “political propaganda” seems to be a tactic to weaken the opposers and wait the opposition out, leaving the crux of the issue unresolved.

Goa has seen numerous other protests against development, ranging from the #SaveMollem protest that garnered nationwide support, to smaller localized protests which the media does not cover. All of them ultimately boil down to one point: protection of the environment. However, development does not always have to mean the destruction of the environment. Is there no room for both to exist? The general public indicates a tendency to prioritize economic growth even if it is at the expense of the environment because the former promises short-term results like material wealth and prosperity (Turaga, 2016). Environmental activists do not seek to completely halt

development, instead, they seek to ensure that it is done in accordance with existing laws so that the rhetoric of sustainable development can be applied in reality.

With reference to the Mopa airport protest, the narrative created was – locals were opposing a project citing environmental concerns despite its clearance from the authorities, thus questioning the intent behind the opposition. What was ignored is that the approval granted was illegal in the first place. Under the Environment Impact Assessment Notification, 2006, a project such as the airport would require the preparation of an environment impact assessment (EIA) report, a public hearing, and an appraisal by the expert appraisal committee (EAC) of the environment ministry. Environmental lawyer Ritwick Dutta (2019) explains that the civil aviation department of the Goa government submitted an undertaking stating that all information concerning the environmental parameters is true. Despite this, it failed to disclose the wetlands, water bodies, biospheres, and forest region in and around the proposed site. There was no assessment done with respect to the birds in the area, and on the ecological impact of the deforestation caused by the construction of the airport. Further, the EAC is required to undertake a ‘detailed scrutiny’ of the project but the approval was granted without any such scrutiny (Dutta, 2019).

If development is being done for the welfare of the Goans, why then, are they protesting? Goans are not protesting because they do not wish to see development, but because the environment versus development trade-off is not justified. Development must happen, but only when due process is followed, and arrangements are made to ensure natural resources last in the long-run. With approvals backed by proper environmental assessments, clear and specific details about the projects and what they entail, and space for dialogue and dissent, the trust deficit can be eliminated, making the process smoother for all stakeholders involved.

References

ActforGoa. (2020). *Citizen's toolkit for Mollem*. <https://actforgoa.org/my-mollem/>.

Aghor, A. (2011, September 30). *Mining in Goa: Damage to the environment greater than loss of revenue*. Down To Earth. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/mining-in-go-a-damage-to-the-environment-greater-than-loss-of-revenue-34142>

Ahmad, S. (2019, July 30). *The Goa mining debate: How and why mining has come to a standstill in Goa*. India Today. <https://www.indiatoday.in/impact-feature/story/the-go-a-mining-debate-how-and-why-mining-has-come-to-a-standstill-in-go-a-1575216-2019-07-30>

Banerjee, S. (2018, February 07). *SC cancels mining leases in Goa, slams state government, environment ministry for favouring miners*. Down To Earth.
<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/mining/sc-cancels-mining-in-iron-ore-leases-in-go-a-sets-aside-hc-order-which-allowed-renewal-of-mining-licenses-59648>

Bhushan, C., Hazra, M. Z., & Banerjee, S. (2008). *Rich lands, poor people: is 'sustainable' mining possible?* Centre for Science and Environment.

Connolly, K. (2015, June 8). *G7 leaders agree to phase out fossil fuel use by end of century*. The Guardian.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/08/g7-leaders-agree-phase-out-fossil-fuel-use-end-of-century>

Dutta, R. (2019, April 26). *When wings were rightly clipped*. Economic Times Blog.
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/when-wings-were-rightly-clipped/>.

Goa Foundation vs Union Of India & Ors (Writ Petition (Civil) No. 435 of 2012 November 11, 2013).

Goa Mineral Ore Exporters Association (GMOEA). (n.d.). *Economic impact*.
https://goamining.org/mining_in_goa/economic-impact.php

IANS. (2020, October 30). Foreign forces fuelling protests against Goa govt: Pramod Sawant. Business Standard.
https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/foreign-forces-fuelling-protests-against-go-a-govt-pramod-sawant-120103000847_1.html

IANS. (2020, December 19). Goa tourism suffered loss of Rs. 2,000-7,200 cr due to coronavirus. Business Standard.
https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/goa-tourism-suffered-loss-of-rs-2-000-7-200-cr-due-to-coronavirus-report-120121900260_1.html.

James, N. (2020, December 17). Hot coals, red eyes. *Business Line*.
<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/cover/anti-coal-handling-protests-in-go-a-gain-momentum/article33356217.ece>.

Jorge, T., Sa, H. D., & Jain, P. (2013). (rep.). *Survey of Environmental & Socio-Economic Impacts of Interim Ban on Mining in Goa* (pp. 1–44). Delhi: Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE) .

- Kant, A. (2019, April 15). *The need to mope about Mopa*. Economic Times Blog. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/the-need-to-mope-about-mopa/>.
- Mahuli, V. (2020, November 6). *India needs to notice how 3 development projects could alter Goa's forests forever*. The Wire. <https://thewire.in/environment/india-needs-to-notice-how-3-development-projects-could-alter-go-as-forests>.
- Mascarenhas, A., & Kalavampara, G. (2009). *Natural resources of Goa: A geological perspective*. Geological Society of Goa.
- McGrath, M. (2014, November 2). *Fossil fuels should be phased out by 2100 says IPCC*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-29855884#:~:text=The%20unrestricted%20use%20of%20fossil,low%2Dcarbon%20sources%20by%202050>
- Nair, S. (2017, October 26). *Coal on move, 25 tonnes a minute, is choking Goa, more is on the way*. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/coal-on-move-25-tonnes-a-minute-is-choking-go-a-more-is-on-the-way-4904963/>
- Nielson, K. B., Roy, B., Oskarsson, P., & Lahiri-Dutt, K. (2020, February 14). *India's new coal geography: Reassembling infrastructure in Goa to move coal*. Senter for utvikling og miljø. <https://www.sum.uio.no/forskning/blogg/terra-nullius/kenneth-bo-nielsen/india-s-new-coal-geography-reassembling-infrastructure-in-go-a-to-move-coal.html>
- Pascual, X. L., Cascallar, M. P., Calle, M., Rodés, E. P., & Casau, C. (2013). *Iron Mining in Goa (India): An interdisciplinary study*. (dissertation). *Recercat*. https://www.recercat.cat/bitstream/handle/2072/223218/PFC_IronMiningGoa.pdf?sequence=1
- Press Trust of India (PTI). (2019, September 24). *PM Modi vows to more than double India's non-fossil fuel target to 450 GW*. India Today. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-modi-vows-more-double-india-non-fossil-fuel-target-450-gw-1602422-2019-09-24>
- Souza, G. de. (2020, November 15). *Goa CM Pramod Sawant pledges to cut coal handling at Mormugao port by 50%*. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/goa-cm-pramod-sawant-pledges-to-cut-coal-handling-at-mormugao-port-by-50/story-Qu4NhcF8oZQBuzTJclfaHI.html>

The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI). (2006). (rep.). *environmental & social performance indicators and sustainability markers in minerals development: reporting progress towards improved ecosystem health & human well-being, phase iii*. Panaji, Goa.

The Herald. (2018, February 17). Demand enough for two airports in Goa: AAI. *O Herald*.
<https://www.heraldgoa.in/Goa/Demand-enough-for-two-airports-in-Goa-AAI/127011>.

Panel wants mining capped at 20 million tonnes in Goa (2016, May 19). *The Hindu*.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/panel-wants-mining-capped-at-20-million-tonnes-in-goa/article5839438.ece?homepage=true>

Turaga, R. M. R. (2016, April 15). *Economic growth vs environmental sustainability*. LiveMint.
<https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/BPOKLclleRJvSdml46LraI/Economic-growth-vs-environmental-sustainability.html>

Varghese, C. (2020, November 26). *Why is Goa protesting against Adani Ports?* Marketfeed.
<https://marketfeed.news/why-did-goans-protest-against-adani-ports/>