

## **Insights into Ecological Struggles in Goa: Field Perspectives**

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Were one to spread out the map of Goa one would find that Goa is longitudinally divided in half in terms of fundamental ecological struggles. While along the east are the mining zones, along the west or coastline are the tourist zones. The mining zones are located in lush green forests and hills with innumerable fresh water streams and rivers, with dense mixed vegetation predominated by palms. The tourist spots are dotted all along the shoreline and golden beaches, the waves crashing on the sea shore sometimes bring with them a rich evidence of a variety of life forms flourishing in the sea.

We visited, what was introduced to us as the “two epicenters of people’s resistances in Goa”, *Benaulim*, earlier a small fishing village surviving on the tourism economy and currently agitating against a recent spate of building and construction activity and *Colomb*, struggling against the mining lobby for the last two decades.

### **The agitations against mining at Colomb**

We witnessed in detail, local resistances against mining activities in the area. In the villages impacted by mining, mining is seen as an ‘external activity’ which will benefit people living outside or only a few people within Goa. Mining as a labour activity is not seen as an opportunity either. It is associated with health hazards and exploitative labour conditions. A mine in the vicinity is an extremely disturbing and destabilizing economic activity rather than one bringing a feeling of ‘development’ to the area. Resistances by people at Colomb emerged when the lands they had been tilling for generations were being taken

away<sup>1</sup>. Their agricultural crops got damaged by polluted waste waters released from the mine (in this case Formentos Mine), the vegetation and air in their village got polluted because of careless transportation of raw material, or their local sources of drinking water was affected. Mines were thus seen as permanently devastating, leaving nothing behind after extraction for future generations living in the area.

Resistances in Colomb against the mining authority have been continuing for many years. Here is a forest and agricultural zone which is carelessly being transferred to mining. There are numerous small mining leases given in Goa, in this case it is to Formentos owned by Hiralal Khodidas. The power wielded by these local mining companies is significant. Obviously the mining company has adequate monetary resources and influence, buying off the local police and governance systems and local goons and mafias to ensure that mining is operationalised in the area either through paperwork or by instilling fear through violence.<sup>2</sup>

Our stay in Colomb showed the way these power politics are operating and the sense of fear that could develop in anyone who was opposed to the mines. It is purely on the basis of people's strength and solidarity that each of the activists speaking up against mining are surviving. Sometimes it seemed as if they were walking on a very tight path of life and death given the fragile and extremely volatile situation there.

Incidents at Colomb during our stay gave us some glimpses of how this fear was being generated, different tactics which were being used to

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<sup>1</sup> The land surveys in 1971-72 were not conducted properly by the government. There are numerous mistakes made by the surveyors and for every minor change people need to file affidavits. While the land surveys show different records, people in the area can show records from the Portuguese time where they have been tilling those lands for generations. During this survey period a lot of incorrect appropriation was made, e.g. much land was taken over by the Brahmins, 'commons' were converted to private lands.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to [www.mandgoa.blogspot.com](http://www.mandgoa.blogspot.com) for a detailed idea on what happened in terms of protests and arrests at Maina and Colomb.

show that the weight of power was stronger on the hands of the mining lobby. However, there were also moments of triumph to prove that resistances by people have also been strong.

***Threats, arrests, letters,***

It seemed as if the heartbeats of the struggle pulsate at specific sites. This was most apparent at the local *thana* or police station.

From the first day of the trip, we found that there were repeated visits by the police at the President GAKUVED's house at Rivona Unit where we were staying. These cases were either for unlawful assembly, trespass or where the police was using their preventive powers to arrest the villagers. Whatever the sections and offences, it was clear from the activists that this was the kind of regular harassment they face, calls to the police station and interrogations and past cases used where people had gathered to protest or resist.

Dr. Avadooth Prabhudessai, retired military officer in the Indian Army who also lives in the village, was asked by the villagers to speak to the police. It was the first time in our stay at Colomb that I witnessed a village community gathering, where different members had come to support those arrested. Their demand was that only seven should not be arrested, if the police must, they should arrest all.

The gathering at the police station had a mixed group in terms of class structure, but it was clear that almost all of them owned agricultural and residential land in the area and were affected. A couple of youth shared that this has been happening to them for the last three years, regular calls to the police station. Three lists had been handed out, of which three names were repeated in all three lists, these were the more vocal people in the village. The names highlighted were mainly of members in the village who have been active in the struggle. The inspectors shared that they have been ordered to arrest the villagers, who had been called for interrogation to the *thana* and there was little else they could do.

When the villagers approached the SP of the police station, he declared it to be a 'law and order' problem, they were not interested in 'politics'. It is interesting to note here that the local police station is an important negotiation point where the police system is actually dealing with multiple social interests. The complaints had been filed already by the mining authority it was their duty to arrest the villagers. The villagers shared that the mining authorities who had complained should not have targeted just their leaders but the entire village which was resisting the mines and thus if they must they should arrest all the villagers.

Advocate John Fernandes, who had been called by the village, argued at length with police on their inaction on the complaints filed by the village members against the company managers since March 2007. The SP shared that action will be taken if a complaint was filed. There was a lot of confusion on why the police had not taken action against the mining companies when complaints were filed under the environmental law.

However that evening, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2008 with the pressure of the entire village and outside groups, no one was arrested at Quepem Police station. It reinforced a lot of strength in the local resistances by people

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One tried to sift through recent letters on disputes with mining authorities, letters sent to the police station, letters to the CM and other authorities. These were dotted with different stories.

In general, they gave a picture of sudden unprepared changes in the lives of the local residents; who, taken by surprise, immediately resorted to making formal complaints to local and state government institutions. Repeated complaints had been made during the months of January and February 2007 on 'prevention of damage to property and loss of livelihood' under Article 21 of the villagers. These included cases of releasing polluted water from the mine into the agricultural fields, damage to residential houses due to blasting of explosives, loss of

agricultural income due to silting of fields, damage to *nallas* and rivulets used by villagers for irrigation, and loss to agricultural production due to depletion of water. There were other letters where the village organization filed RTIs(Right to Information) demanding to get information on the 'No Objection Certificates/Licenses/Clearances' given to Formento mines in the area. A letter issued almost a year later was a Show Cause Notice by the Goa State Pollution Board dated 14<sup>th</sup> March 2008 addressed to the Deputy Collector, Mamlatadar and Sarpanch of Rivona, on show cause to Hiralal Khodidas and Co., owner of Formento mines on pollution, damage and public nuisance. *Colomb* in fact has many stories of small transformations and triumphs. This last letter is indicative of the most recent one.

The letters dated after the show cause notice reflected internal disputes in the village and calls to the activists and to the police station on complaints filed by the mining company. Complaints had been filed at the police station based on gram sabha disputes, mostly indicative of internal power struggles within the village centered on the mining issue. It was quite clear, that while the surrounding green scenery gave a picture of peace, the current rumblings in the village to preserve it, were reflective of extremely turbulent times. Even though there was a powerful verdict given in March to the mining company, it had been followed by infighting, local disputes, threats and arrests in the village.

### *Life at Colomb*

A sense of solace automatically emerged when one moved out of the cutting edge of negotiations between the village and the outside world and explored the life of the Velips in the household and the lives of the people of Colomb. What was life at Colomb besides the mining agitation?

The fragrance of marigolds filled the air in the Velip household, on the eve of Dussehra, where the Velip women had collected the bright orange and yellow flowers, which they strung together for sale to the

market. Rama shared how cashew was an extremely profitable crop for farmers. Cashew unlike other food crops in India, had a free market. Coconut trees abundantly found and grown in these parts had multiple uses, each part of the tree is useful and the tree bore fruits throughout the year. Other important crops grown were bananas.

It was clear that the generations old lifestyle of farming in the area was now being disturbed for purposes of mining.

The children in the house played freely, some shared their text books containing stories of fish, and poetry on fireflies, the rain beat down heavily on the roof, as the Velip women busied themselves in the kitchen. The kitchen was a combination of the new and the old traditions, the use of firewood and LPG.

There were large coconut groves growing around the village, which the mining company had indiscriminately cut down. The changes in forest cover had brought in serious climate change. Why, in Colamb itself with increased mining activities, forests have been degraded and the rains have become erratic, which has impacted crops in different ways. The cashew crop is fragile and requires specific quantities of water, though a water intensive crop, too much rain in one time or too little can damage it. Coconut trees too have been infested with 'mites' due to excessive rainfall, speaking to some others, one found that this disease has become an epidemic in Goa.

Most of the water sources in the village were natural springs used for irrigation and domestic purposes in these parts. It is a trend in Goa in areas where mining agitations start, that most of the local water sources get completely polluted due to waste water discharges, and depleted because the mining company starts pulling the water for their own use. In this situation, the mining company makes a water work or pipeline available to the village regulating clean water supply there. In a neighbouring village in Rivona, Ulhas Gaonkar, a geographer and a resident there, shared how acute the water crisis had become for them,

specifically in terms of ensuring proper irrigation for their farmlands, in this case for cashew cultivation. The villagers there had managed to initiate a watershed programme in partnership with government, which cost a total of Rs. 35 lakhs. Gaonkar has conducted a detailed study on the benefits from the programme, where the rainwater run off was collected and channelised for agricultural purposes. There is a need for similar such investments by the government on watershed planning, he shared.

It is clear that mining activities are extractive assisting in building extremely oligarchic or monopolistic institutions which are interested in monopolizing resources only within themselves and profits get distributed unevenly, which is very different from the existing farming lifestyles of the people.

The Gawdas of Colomb belong to the tribal community and a common theory is that they are from among the tribes of Chhota Nagpur now in Jharkhand, having migrated here many years ago. The traditional systems had the concept of 'Mand' or community land, which could be cropped by any needy family in the village; they also have a concept of Gaunvkary lands which are community lands used for agriculture, fruit gathering, grazing lands and other community activities. A lot of land around sacred sites was also available for this purpose. These lands are called 'Devarae'. In fact these sacred sites or community owned lands had assigned families who were given the responsibility of taking care of it, performing rituals and also providing shelter and land to those who needed it most in the village. The families assigned as care takers of these sites could use the revenues and rents collected for the social purposes of the village.

Community lands are targeted first, by development projects and mining companies. At Colomb, the mining company has encroached on 'commons', which were rotated for agricultural activities in the village. This is also taking place due to the weakening of traditional systems in

the village. The original customs of the village have rapidly changed in the last two generations.

One finds that as the *adivasi* system is slowly demolished by bringing in other institutions, these weakening of systems gradually work in favour of bringing in non ecological, capital intensive economic activities into the area.

Rama took us to *Vagro*(tiger) temple, which he shared was one of the older temples in the village and later shared an archival document he had managed to retrieve. It was a document dated 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1882, which said “Official Bulletin” of the Government of India. It was a chronicle by the Portuguese of which also had an English translation. The *Vagro* temple which we visited was one of the numerous sacred spots in the village like the *Betal*, *Cullu-purus*, *Docxina Denta*, *Xanta Canvorem*, *Ramanath*, *Santery*, *Bromodeo*. The document spoke of a traditional system whereby the families of the *Gancarar*, *Dessaes*, *Vellipos* are part of the corporation of *Mazanes* which would look after temples of the village. It is interesting to note that the traditional systems having weakened some of the families remained in supremacy and illegally converted these lands to private holdings even selling it off to the mining company.

Some tribal activists say that the Portuguese chronicling too is incorrect. It lists the tribal communities of Goa as Hindu, and the main Goddess as *Xanta Durga*, when *Santeri* was worshipped, which literally meant 'anthill'. 'Durga' is an added name to the original tribal deities of anthill called 'Santeri' in order to insert Brahminical controls over tribal temples and the large community lands that they occupied. *Vagro* temple now has a modern structure built around it, but it was clear that there is no idol worship and till date the *Gawdas* continue stone worship.

There are remnants of the *adivasi* or tribal way of life which continue to exist within the system. These have remained in spite of many new changes in the community. These belief systems have been

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differently documented in formal documents of the rulers, whether Portuguese or the government of India after Independence. However there are local evidences, intergenerational memories and stories of the tribals clarifying that tribal lifestyles and histories exist.

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### *Visits around Colomb*



***On the way to a declared archaeological site Ponsalimol near Colomb***



***A rock carving on the banks of the Kushawat river shown on the left. Before this was declared an archaeological site local women would gather by the side of the river for washing clothes, area is rumoured to be under mining threat in future***



***The colour of the water deceives you, polluted by the iron ore mines***      *Remnants of a manganese pit at Rivona*

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Leafing through “Rich Lands, Poor People: Is Sustainable Mining Possible” prepared by Centre for Science and Environment around 2005-06, which was at the Mand Adivasi Resource Centre office and in conversation with Rama Velip, showed that there have been rapid changes with respect to mining in Goa since then.

The CSE report shared that the price of iron ore then was 17 US dollars per tonne in 2000-01 which increased to 55 US dollars in 2005-06 , it is approximately 130 US dollars per tonne now (2008).

The report states that Sesa Goa, Dempo, Chowgules and Salgaocars were important mining companies, the numbers have expanded rapidly, it includes Formentos and Timlo mines which are becoming popular and powerful now.

There were 70 mining leases, for which applications have been given for renewal; most of them continue to run without any renewal sanctions given by the government.

There were earlier struggles mentioned in the report around issues of water to save the *Kushawati River*, many of these struggles which found mention in the report are not there today, though mining continues. There are many reasons for this; sometimes the demands are

restricted to a specific demand alone and in some cases monetary incentives given explicitly or implicitly either suppress or change the nature of the people engaged in these movements itself.

A conclusion after comparing the situation currently and the report, threw up the non availability of data on the amount of agricultural and forest land that has been diverted for mining, and the need for a mapping of illegal encroachment by mines which exists in large proportions. Village level up to date scientific data is also needed on the kind of pollution taking place due to the mine and the hazards. These regular audits at the village level can be collated.

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*At Benaulim: Life and times*

The agitation at Benaulim started very recently and yet is symbolic of the most recent dissent movements by citizens across Goa, on Goa's urbanisation plans, governance issues and selling off of land for mega projects/SEZs. A small tourist place with a beautiful coastline, and essentially earlier a fishing village, Geraldine, Convenor of Benaulim Village Action Committee (BVAC) and now Ghor Gaon Rakhand Manch, shared in detail the recent problems related to urbanisation in the area and the problems of life in a tourist zone.

The BVAC was formed from an initial agitation when malaria had spread as an epidemic in the village. The taxi driver's union in Benaulim which was already very strong in terms of regulating transport for tourists and also maintaining their livelihood interests in the village realized that they would need a wider number of people to address the epidemic. Thus a village action committee, the Benaulim Village Action committee was formed. The BVAC realized while intervening on malaria issues that not only were the local government institutions completely inactive, but also that the public health of the entire place was getting impacted by poor planning in terms of sewerage systems and water works. It is interesting that during this period, the residents found out

that a lot of illegal construction was taking place in Benaulim. Most of the sewer and garbage disposal was in the local natural ponds of Benaulim. This was completely ruining the ponds and contaminating ground water as well. When raising these with the municipal corporations and Sarpanch they found that they were completely apathetic. Little did they know that they had innocently exposed an entire system of corruption, politicking and the nexus between planners, bureaucrats and builders?

There were experiences where authorities had given clearances but had not even cross checked with the plan documents on whether the constructions were legal or not. The BVAC found that it was not just in their village that they were facing such problems there were other villages in Goa which had the same issues. It seemed as if the micro symptom of the politics of land grab is by big corporates for SEZs. An interaction with neighbouring villages helped to link BVAC's struggle with similar incidents in other places in Goa under the larger people's platform of Gaon Ghor Raakhand Manch (GGRM).

Why would citizens in Benaulim be so concerned about their environment? Benaulim is an old tourist town, and find its name in the *Lonely Planet*. Most of the citizens depend on the tourist economy, though the older livelihoods in the area were fishing and agriculture. Geraldine, who also runs a small guest house, shared the unsustainable character of tourism economy. Ever since tourism started flourishing in the area, one found that the people were shifting from their traditional occupations into the tourism economy. Today in Benaulim, the landscape is changing very quickly with a change in real estate market forces entering the area. Most of the constructions promoted are illegal and unplanned. In fact, with increasing prices in Benaulim, most tourists from abroad are choosing other cheaper sea side destinations in Malaysia and Indonesia. Goa has become an expensive tourist destination. Now with the quietness of the beaches changing and the

sudden urbanization processes, tourism will be impacted even more. 'There are very few other jobs available' shares Geraldine, whose husband is a carpenter but has been finding it difficult and expensive to sustain himself because of competing markets for wooden furniture and the increasing cost of wood. Labour too has become extremely expensive. She also shared how during off season, most of the people running businesses dependent on the in flow of tourists are finding it extremely difficult to sustain through the year. The maintenance costs however are annual, not seasonal though tourist in flow is seasonal. While there is a vertical layering of stakeholders within the tourism economy, where it is the five star hotels and big resorts (the owners are mostly from outside the area) who make most of the profits, investing the profits outside the area. The mushroom of restaurants and hotels around these, initiated by local people, never get a fair share but only a trickle of the profits from tourism.

The government does nothing to support this, or help people engage in the business of tourism. However those outside the tourism economy living in the locality suffer even more, as their land and resources keep getting appropriated by private hotels and resorts. Tourism like the mining industry has played an extractive role in Goa. While those within it are beginning to realize the complete dependency they have on an outside world and the moods of the travelers, those outside of it are impacted too.

Tourism has created a highly contentious negotiation of cultures or a site of cultural crossroads which bring with it a multitude of problems and benefits. On the one hand it creates a space to understand differences, plurality but on the other it creates a terrible sense of confusion and duality. Speaking to local people one realizes the struggle that coastline communities in Goa have in terms of cultural

contestations. A place for 'holidaying' have residents in the area for whom it is a regular life, where children go to school, grow up, where mothers rear their children according to their own culture, and men go to work, the struggle is to fiercely bring in this feeling of rooted ness challenged by an increasing and yet have to deal with hospitality issues.

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*At Nuem Khola and Panjim : Ideas on PEZ*

On the 5th of October 2008 at about 5 pm there was a meeting at Nuem, Khola in Canacona Taluka in South Goa. The meeting brought together representatives from different groups in Goa and ideas of forming an alliance of these groups, PEZ (which refers to the traditional staple diet of the people of Goa as well).

There were four to five different groups that had come together for the meeting, the Village Action Committee at Nuem, Gaon Ghor Rakhand Manch(GGRM), Gawda, Kunbi, Velip Dhangar Federation (GAKUVED), SEZ Watch, Goa Federation of Mines Affected People (GOAMAP)

There were four main themes discussed, around which protests are happening in Goa currently, indiscriminate mining in the forested and hilly tracts, privatization of lands by real estate and builder lobbies and for SEZs, displacements or de-notification of old settlements on the beach through the CRZ(coastal regulation zone), CMZ (coastal management zones) regulations and acquisition of 'commons' by large hotels for the purpose of tourism. It would be interesting to note that GAKUVED also has a historic role in Goa of fighting for reservation for tribals in Goa.

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