

Goa destroys green cover to enable infrastructure projects

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In the Cotigao area in South Goa, it is not an uncommon sight to see women of the village lining up in front of the government water tanker. Five villages in the area, mostly inhabited by the Dhanger community, a nomadic herding tribe, have been facing an acute water shortage – so much so that in the first week of July, members and volunteers with a local environment group, Goa Green Brigade, carried 6000 litres of drinking water to the village from Panjim, the city’s capital about 90 kms away.

“We are soon headed for severe water-wars all over Goa,” notes Avertino Miranda, the founder of Goa Green Brigade.

According to Avertino, “development projects have killed the natural springs, around which most villages are based. The illegal destruction of trees and forest ecosystems have severely impacted the water table in most areas.” Coupled with “linear infrastructure projects, expansion of highways, monoculture, overnight destruction of privately owned forested areas”, Goa’s already fragile ecosystem is at a heightened risk.

Last year, Goa saw huge protests as six iconic mango trees, most of which were over 200 years old, were felled overnight for a highway expansion project in Colvale, even after the chief minister and the PWD had assured citizens otherwise. As of July 2020, a notification issued by the State Town and Country Planning (TCP) department includes nearly 400,000 (4 lakh) sq m of orchard land, 49,000 sq m of land classified as natural cover, as well as another 1,07,000 sq m of paddy fields and orchards are reportedly to be diverted for 112 project proposals which recently ended the public consultation period.

Earlier this year the Supreme Court cleared the Mopa airport project which sanctioned the felling of 55,000 trees posing a risk to 42 natural springs in the area, besides two wetlands, mangroves and 10 ecologically sensitive areas notified by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF&CC).

Abhijeet Prabhudesai, co-founder of Rainbow Warriors, an ecological outfit that has been working to protect Goa’s forests, notes that while 55,000 is only the official number, he claims that over 200,000 trees have been axed in the area. Amongst many other peculiarities, he also points to a “shoddy” environment impact assessment (EIA) – given that the EIA consultant for the project was the same independent engineering firm contracted to oversee the construction of the airport.

The case of three major infrastructure projects sanctioned through the Mollem National Park, followed a similar trajectory – the projects which would in effect, divert a total of 250 ha of forest land for commercial purposes, 170 ha of which falls within protected areas – were sanctioned via video conference in April this year. Several members of the Goa State Wildlife Advisory Board later in a letter to the Wildlife Warden noted the “hasty and unstructured nature of the meeting”, and also raised an alarm at the fact that the projects were proposed by the Forest Department, rather than the project proponent themselves.

Anamika Gode, an environmental lawyer, notes that “an area when notified as a protected area, brings with it immense statutory protection. Diversion of such forest land is only allowed if it will benefit the wildlife population or their habitat. While infrastructure projects have historically been allowed, citing MoEFCC guidelines that enable human-centric development in the “most exceptional

of circumstances”, it must be kept in mind that these guidelines cannot, under any circumstances, circumvent the law.”

Bypassing laws

India’s forestry policy, according to the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, is oriented towards “conservation” – the law governs all diversions of forest areas for non-forest purposes – under which permissions for tree felling are to be obtained through a rigorous set of processes – project proposals are to go through six different levels of scrutiny by officials appointed by the state and Central Boards of Forestry, based on which the project is either recommended ahead or rejected. A similar set of processes mandate wildlife clearances. The decisions are based on Environment Impact Assessment reports, which, have come under fire for sidestepping due process.

The initial EIA for the Mopa airport falsely stated that there are no forest, lakes, mountains, ecologically sensitive areas, rivers or wild flora and fauna within a radius of 15 kilometres from the airport site, and later doubled back on the same (noting four rivers, 42 reserve forests, two wetlands, mangroves and 10 ecologically sensitive areas notified by the MoEF&CC). Despite this blatant misrepresentation, the project was cleared by the SC citing “a balance of environment and development” in the Mopa judgement.

In the case of Mollem, despite the fact that the project “bifurcates the entire landscape” of a UNESCO-tagged “global biodiversity hotspot”, for the purpose of clearances, the mega grid has been broken down into “piecemeal, low-impact projects”, instead of assessing the project as a “cumulative” whole. The EIA report is riddled with irregularities – to cite an example, one of the projects – the expansion of the National Highway NH4A from 84 km to 153 km, for which 20,199 trees are scheduled to be felled, was approved despite the fact that of the 33 ha of land inside the Mollem National park that is to be diverted, noted the site report, only 11 ha was inspected by the forest department.



According to Sreeja Chakraborty, environmental lawyer, “The forest department claims that the rest of the area will be used for peripheral activities like building approach roads, and that they will retreat from the area once the project is completed. It’s a rubbish excuse, because in the 4-5 years that it will take them to complete the project the ecology of the area will be completely destroyed.” After multiple red flags raised by several individual and environmental outfits, the MoEF&CC has only now sought “additional details” pointing out that GTTPL, an SPV allotted to Sterlite Power has

“not sufficiently explained” this in the company’s application, which says [“35% of trees only are required to be actually felled out of enumerated trees”](#).

Chakraborty points to several other irregularities, including the bypass of the compensatory afforestation (CA) laws – one of the most important prerequisites for approvals from the Centre which assures “compensating the loss of ‘trees by trees’”. The provisions further specifically state that CA shall be raised and maintained at the cost of the user agency twice in the extent of the forest area diverted, in case of transmission lines or road expansion. Despite this, Section 13 of the project proposal through Mollem, lists “Not applicable” against the requirement – “Copy of CA scheme details”. “Each of these processes have a lot of significance but they have reduced it to nothing but a rubber stamp formality”, notes Chakraborty.

According to environmentalist Abhijeet Prabhudesai, CA in the state has been problematic to begin with. In the past 10 years, since Goa failed to meet any of the targets for compensatory afforestation the [MoEF&CC has stopped allocating funds to Goa](#) under the Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority. Prabhudesai further notes that in several instances areas deigned by the state for CA purposes, when inspected by his team revealed to be “already heavily forested – including areas in Chorao island and Sanguem taluka, some with almost a 100% foliage”. In yet another instance, he notes, “The government gave out seeds during the *Van Mahotsav* (a national tree plantation drive) and called that compensatory afforestation.”

Taking a cue from these gross infractions inside protected areas, privately owned lands have also seen a major illegal destruction of trees. Under the [Goa, Daman and Diu Tree Protection Act 1984](#) no person can fell, or remove a tree whether in his occupancy or ownership or otherwise, except with previous permission from a designated tree officer. Despite this the tree cover (which refers to small patches of less than 1 ha, including scattered trees) has seen severe destruction over the last couple years.

In October, 2019, in Assagao, a village in North Goa, 47 mature trees were felled illegally overnight. Several such incidents have been reported in Merces, Siolim and several other areas across North and [South Goa](#). This poses a significantly major threat, particularly because Goa is in a unique position where private forest ownership contributes to the green cover, [though a large part of it is not yet notified](#).

Altering the definition of a tree

According to a case filed by Goa Foundation in 2013, the Goa State government refused to recognise about 1000 sq kms of land as forest land – a discrepancy due to the different criteria adopted by the Forest Department of Goa and the Forest Survey of India. While the case is still pending with the National Green Tribunal, in 2016, the state made yet another amendment to the Goa, Daman & Diu Tree Protection Act, that has further enabled tree felling – the definition of a tree was altered to mean “a woody plant whose trunk is not less than 10 cm in diameter at a height of 1 m from the ground”, as opposed to its earlier definition “a woody plant whose trunk was not less than 5 cm in diameter at a height of 30 cm from the ground.

Thus, it is no surprise that the Indian Forest Survey’s state of forest report of 2019, already noted a loss of 51 sq kms of tree cover as compared to the 2017 report, a situation which has only worsened since, citing the necessity to “balance development with environment.”

According to Prabhudesai, “Most of the projects sanctioned through the last few years, are infrastructure projects mandated by either the state or centre, without any benefits to the people.” Avertino Miranda notes that “these big projects have caused severe negative impact on the trees and Goa’s rich biodiversity only to facilitate the cause of big corporations – the road expansion, transmission lines being built through Mollem are mainly to facilitate movement of coal by the Adani group.” Both particularly point to the counter-productive nature of such decisions, given the rise of zoonotic diseases.



Environment policy and zoonotic diseases

[According to a study](#) of the Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD), also commonly known as monkey fever – zoonotic diseases disproportionately affect poor tropical communities, accounting for around 26% of Disability-adjusted Life Years (DALY) lost to infectious diseases in lower middle income countries. The study further notes that “recognising the interconnectedness of human health, wildlife and domestic animal health and the environment” can help facilitate the prediction and prevention of such diseases, and help shape environment and development policymaking.

Nandini Velho, an independent researcher who has also worked in environmental policy, notes that given we are living through a pandemic, this is a time when environment policy making needs to be further strengthened. “An ear-to-the-ground approach is the need of the hour. Before we can indulge in the debate of ‘environment versus development’ at least due process needs to be followed.”

In Goa, as “development” and “lifestyle” repeatedly triumphs the cause of the environment, civil society at large has taken on the responsibility to keep the statutory bodies accountable. But with major infractions happening time and again, environmentalists fear that Goa’s crisis is only beginning.

Source: <https://india.mongabay.com/2020/08/goa-destroys-green-cover-to-enable-infrastructure-projects/>