



Goa's ecological balance needs community-based governance

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Wild pigs and monkeys are the talk of the day. Goa's CM is pondering on declaring wild pigs as vermin, while orchard owners are asserting that monkeys too are a pest. These are two of the many animals involved in the humongous human-wildlife conflict haunting the Indian countryside, a conflict in which thousands of people are killed each year and losses of property run to tens of thousands of crores.

The roots of this problem go back more than a thousand years with the conquest of Britain by William the Conqueror in 1066. He parcelled England's land among a handful of feudal Lords. These Lords enclosed the village commons, impoverishing the peasantry. All humans, barring rare exceptions, have indulged in hunting since our species originated as group hunters three lakh years ago. Nonetheless, the domineering British Lords reserved hunting for themselves branding peasants hunting to fill their bellies as poachers and summarily hanging them. The fallout of these authoritarian measures was that Britain's forests and wildlife were wiped out by the 14th century. When the British became Lords of India they were intent on looting its resources. Their tool in this plunder was the forest department, an agency created to confiscate the tree wealth nurtured by our farmers and forest-dwellers by taking over community lands.

The result mirrored what had happened in Britain and India's forest wealth was rapidly depleted by the end of 19th century. Goa was spared this fate under the Portuguese rule. The Portuguese also tried to dismantle community control, but since this led to serious loss of agricultural production and revenue, they permitted its continuance. So, Goa retained its green mantle till the end of Portuguese rule in 1961. On being integrated into the Indian Union the new regime has consistently attempted to take power away from people and dismantle comunidades triggering an erosion of Goa's natural heritage.

The foresters with their colonial legacy stepped into Goa clear cutting natural forests to raise exotic tree plantations. With the promulgation of Wildlife Protection Act in 1972 the entire countryside came in the foresters' grip with farmers and forest-dwellers becoming victims of conflict with wildlife. Goans too are suffering with wild pigs, monkeys and gaur the major problem species inflicting huge losses of crops and livestock.

India's Wildlife Protection Act is unique in the world; no other country bans hunting outside national parks and game reserves. Sweden abounds in wildlife, it treats it as a renewable resource utilising it through properly regulated hunting. As our bizarre law stands people are not free to defend themselves against marauding animals as even driving them out of their homes and crop fields needs official permission and if they so much as injure a wild pig while defending their crops they are liable to be prosecuted as criminals.

Yet the Indian Penal Code, sections 100 and 103 sanction voluntarily causing of death or other harm to the wrong-doer if an assault by the wrong-doer may reasonably cause the apprehension that it will lead to death or grievous hurt or if the wrong-doer is committing house or property trespass or robbery. Wild pigs and gaur have on occasion killed people, wild pigs, gaur and monkeys regularly trespass on farmers' properties and rob him of his produce. Evidently an Act rigidly protecting the wild animals is constitutionally invalid. Goans should surely raise this issue through a PIL.

Foresters, intent on harassing farmers using the weapon of wildlife protection are sorely neglecting their own far more important function of safeguarding national parks. Mollem National Park is threatened by a railway line cutting a swathe through it. It is the people who are protesting and going to court to save Mollem while the foresters are standing by mutely. We must therefore hand back the charge of safeguarding nature to the people of Goa, a responsibility they had discharged so

well till 1961. However while reviving community governance, we must reform the institutions to rid them of the inequities of India's caste society.

That brings to my mind memories of my good friend Fr Bismarck Dias. He was the president of his comunidade and many believe that he lost his life attempting to defend its property from encroachment by real estate sharks. He often talked to me of the need to democratise the institution and create a model for the revival of community-based governance throughout the country. I hope that Goa will lead the way with such a progressive move.

The author is an eminent ecologist and headed the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel of 2010.