

# Today's Environmentalism

## Time for Constructive Cooperative Action

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Environmental activism in India comprises two streams. The first focuses on protected areas and relies on the bureaucracy that often misuses its powers against communities that live in close contact with nature. The second focuses on protecting nature to safeguard people's livelihoods and health. The environmental agenda should focus on the reassertion of people's rights over natural resources, and this should be coupled with an action-oriented promotion of nature-friendly cooperative enterprises in sectors like quarrying, and mineral and sand mining.

Indian environmentalism, faced by aggressive developmentalism, is in retreat even as people, baked by the heat wave of the summer of 2016, confronted with serious water scarcities, are becoming ever more acutely aware of the environmental crisis. We still have fresh memories of the Alakananda floods of June 2013, and the Chennai floods of December 2015, both caused by development gone haywire. At the same time, we see growing social violence all around us, violence linked to struggles over natural resources. For instance, a staunch anti-quarry activist, Anoop Velloppil, died in stone pelting by goondas in Kozhikode district of Kerala, while in a peaceful demonstration,<sup>1</sup> and the endemic Naxalism that is fuelled by injustices against tribal peoples in the forests of mineral-rich central India (Saxena et al 2010).

### Pro- and Anti-people

Present-day environmental activism in India comprises two broad and distinct streams. The first approach, exemplified by many activists from the venerable Bombay Natural History Society, focuses on protected areas, and relies on government action favouring the guns and guards approach.<sup>2</sup> In its report, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP 2011) had emphasised that this approach is often perverted into an excuse for harassment and extortion by a corrupt bureaucracy, citing the experience of the Mahabaleshwar-Panchgani Eco-sensitive Zone (WGEEP 2011). The second strand of environmental activism is motivated by the need to protect nature to safeguard people's livelihoods and health. This pro-people, pro-nature school extensively relies on protests and lawsuits, now more and more before the National Green Tribunal (NGT). However, both protests and litigation have serious

limitations. Thus, today the Government of India as well as the Goa government, completely ignoring the many protests and lawsuits, are actively reviving mining in Goa, assigning leases to the same mining concerns that were held guilty of serious irregularities by the Shah Commission, and that too without taking action against any of the politicians and officials who had colluded in the mismanagement.<sup>3</sup>

**People's concerns:** People at the ground level naturally resent the protected-areas focused anti-people strand in the environmental movement that believes that people at the grass roots are enemies of nature, and nature can be protected only through a bureaucratic gun and guards approach. Thus, a disinformation campaign, falsely portraying the WGEEP recommendations as being an instance of such anti-people nature conservation effort has succeeded in good measure in turning people against this report (Gadgil 2014).

To confront this challenge, the advocates of the pro-people, pro-nature approach need to focus on issues that touch people's lives and whose resolution would simultaneously contribute to protection of environment and betterment of the quality of people's lives. Examples of such issues are extractive economic activities such as mining of minerals and sand, and quarrying of stones, today being conducted in an environmentally destructive and socially abusive fashion. Indeed, recent developments all over the country provide abundant evidence that these supposedly economic enterprises have degenerated into criminal enterprises, so much so that newspaper reports and television broadcasts on the excesses committed by the mining mafia, sand mafia, and quarry mafia have become an everyday occurrence.<sup>4</sup> With such degeneration, it is clear that the contention that these activities make a genuine contribution to India's development is a tragic delusion.

As the distinguished economist Joseph Stiglitz (2012) argues, we must aim at a harmonious development of a nation's

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four capital stocks: not just man-made capital that gross domestic product (GDP) emphasises, but natural capital, human capital, and social capital as well. Evidently, the positive gains to the GDP from criminalised extractive economic activities fuelled by massive profits are dwarfed by their negative impacts on the natural, human and social capital (Kuttoo 2013). It is the pro-people, pro-nature environmentalists that are inclined to advocate a development agenda that would lead to a harmonious development of nation's four capital stocks. However, they have not thought through these issues, and all that they are engaged in today is fighting fires lit by the advocates of GDP-oriented development. This negativity must now be changed with a clearer articulation of how we should move forward in the direction of genuine, harmonious development. Perhaps our tiny neighbour, Bhutan with its bold declaration that it aims to maximise gross national happiness and not gross national product has significant lessons for us.<sup>5</sup>

### Community Control of Resources

I wish to submit that this positive environmental agenda should focus on the reassertion of people's rights over natural resources, agricultural lands, grazing lands, forestlands, rivers, lakes and coastal lands and waters, as also rocks, sand and minerals. For it is the people living close to nature who have a genuine stake in maintaining a healthy environment and in protecting their environmental resources. This long-term policy agenda should be coupled to the more immediate action-oriented agenda of promotion of nature-friendly cooperative economic enterprises in sectors like quarrying, and mineral and sand mining. If properly organised, so as to be accountable to people at the grass roots, such cooperative enterprises could become a significant avenue for creating satisfying livelihoods on the massive scale that is required.

It is the people who are sovereign under our democratic constitution, and assertion of their will through the electoral process has resulted in a number of constitutional amendments and acts that have

progressively empowered the people, at least in theory, through democratic devolution. Our 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution assign an important role to local self-governments—panchayats and nagarpalikas—in taking a variety of decisions, in particular, those relating to management of natural resources. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 takes this further, assigning a vital role to gram sabhas, as does the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006. But our governments have been sabotaging these democratic initiatives, as the Niyamgiri developments have so strikingly demonstrated (Saxena et al 2010). Hence, the foremost priority for the pro-people, pro-nature activists should be to ensure that our existing constitutional provisions empowering people and protecting the environment are actually implemented on the ground, and then further extended to other areas such as rights of fishing communities.

### Community Forest Rights

Fortunately, we do have shining examples of how manifold positive benefits can flow from empowering people. Over 900 villages in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra have won community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act over extensive areas. The struggle for these rights has been pioneered by the citizens of Mendha (Lekha), who have coined the inspiring slogan "*Dilli-Mumbaime hamara sarkar, hamare gavme hamhi sarkar*" (Delhi and Mumbai have our government, and in our village we are the government). Beginning with the debate on the Forest Act in 1980s, they became involved in the Maharashtra-wide movement that had as its motto: "*Jungle Bachav—Manav Bachav*" (save the jungle, save the people). This movement led to their realising that there was substantial space in our democratic system for self-governance. Indeed that was the ideal that we should all work towards. So they injected life into their gram sabha, ensured that women came to participate fully in its deliberations, set up a self-selecting study circle that carefully looked at issues of interest to the community, and gradually implemented a number of decisions aimed at sustainable

use and augmentation of natural resources arrived at through *sarvasahamati* or consensus.

The assignment of community forest rights conferring security of tenure has injected further vigour into these activities that are now beginning to yield handsome economic returns as well. There is meaningful skill development as people, especially the youth are motivated to assess the resource base carefully, plan its sustainable use and conservation, work out the potential of local level industrial processing and appropriate marketing strategies. Notably, they have spontaneously decided to set apart over 10% of the community forest resource areas as strict nature reserves. As early as 20 years ago, Mendha (Lekha) had initiated management of the stone quarry in their community land in a cooperative fashion by the women's self-help group (Das 2011).<sup>6</sup> The manual operation of this quarry with stone mettle as the end-product had generated substantial economic returns and employment till the quarry was closed two years ago as the stone resource was nearing exhaustion. There has, however, been an interesting spin-off. Since the transport by hired tractors ate substantially into the profits, the self-help group purchased a tractor 10 years ago with a bank loan, fully clearing the loan five years ago. Today hiring out this tractor is generating significant income for the self-help group.

### Governing the Commons

There are of course many difficulties in organising cooperative management of community-controlled resources, difficulties summed up in Garrett Hardin's work on what he terms as the "tragedy of the commons." However, as the Nobel Laureate, Elinor Ostrom has shown, through her theoretical as well as fieldwork there are conditions under which such cooperation will flourish (Hardin 1968; Ostrom 1990). Mendha (Lekha) is an apt example of how this can indeed work in practice.

Gadchiroli district is a Schedule v area, where tribal land cannot be transferred to non-tribals, whether individuals or corporate entities. Around the same

time that the self-help group in Mendha (Lekha) initiated their cooperative stone quarry operations, the Government of Andhra Pradesh proposed to assign a mining lease in such a Schedule v area to Hyderabad Abrasives and Minerals, a private company. This was contested by Samata, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) dedicated to safeguarding tribal interests. The Supreme Court finally ruled in this case in favour of Samata in 1997, observing that

The further contention that the rich mineral wealth being a national asset cannot be kept unexploited which is detrimental to the national development, is devoid of force. Instead of getting the minerals exploited through non-tribals, by exploitation of tribals, the minerals could be exploited through an appropriate scheme, without disturbing ecology and forest, by the tribals themselves, either individually or through Cooperative Societies composed solely of the tribals with the financial assistance of the State or its instrumentalities. It would itself be an opportunity to the tribals to improve their social and economic status and a source of their economic endowment and empowerment and would give them dignity of person, social and economic status and an opportunity to improve their excellence.

It also noted:

It is an established rule of interpretation that to establish Socialist Secular Democratic Republic, the basic structure under the rule of law, pragmatic broad and wide interpretation of the Constitution makes social and economic democracy with liberty, equality of opportunity, equality of status and fraternity a reality to 'we, the people of India,' who would include the Scheduled Tribes. All State actions should be to reach the above goal with this march under rule of law.

The clear extrapolation of this judgment is that to further the aims of our Constitution, it is advisable to assign mining leases to cooperatives formed by members of the local communities, regardless of whether these are inside or outside Schedule v areas.<sup>7</sup>

## Cooperatives

**Amul success story:** Community-based cooperative management of natural resources in India has a venerable history. For instance, all along the west coast, particular bays have been reserved through tradition for particular fishing

communities. Hundreds of members of such fishing communities have been working in a cooperative fashion to operate several kilometres long "rampan" or beach seine nets. In independent India, there have been several successful cooperative ventures including the Kaira District Co-operative Milk Producers' Union from Gujarat that led to the establishment of Amul (Anand Milk Union Limited) in 1946. Amul, an apex union of thousands of farmers, mostly with smallholdings is today a thriving and extremely efficient, very modern, commercial operation.

**Lessons from sugar cooperatives:** Another notable success story has been that of sugar cooperatives in Maharashtra, established in the early 1950s under the leadership of Vithalrao Vikhe Patil, a farmer from Ahmednagar district. There was tremendous scepticism in the initial years about the viability of such a complex operation as a sugar factory by the largely uneducated, smallholders of these dry tracts of Maharashtra. However, with grit the farmers succeeded, a story superbly narrated in the biography of Vikhe Patil, appropriately titled "The Fight." However, the sugar cooperatives of Maharashtra hold an important lesson. The acts governing cooperative enterprises, and the pertinent rules and by-laws have not been framed carefully enough to ensure full accountability of the elected management to the sugar cane producers, sugar cane harvest or factory labour. As a result, these supposedly cooperative operations are now in the grip of a small coterie of crafty political operators, forcing the sugar cane producers who are not being paid adequately or in time to launch major agitations against the management (Parasnath 2016).

**Women's collective farming:** More than 94% of the female labour force in India is in the unorganised sector. Their work is not counted, remains invisible and they do not enjoy benefits of any welfare measures. A Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has been attempting to organise them since 1972. Today SEWA has more than a million members and their activities range over cooperative enterprises in agriculture, dairy, labour

like construction work, and services like banking, health, insurance, domestic workers and cleaners, among others. Another recent notable success story of cooperative enterprises of women from weaker sections of the society is that of collective farming by neighbourhood groups of the Kudumbashree programme in Kerala, an experiment initiated in 2004. This has not only enhanced earnings by these poor women, but also contributed to the food security of their families. It has successfully brought substantial tracts of fallow and cultivable wasteland into agricultural use. Above all it has aroused in these women a sense of self-respect (Hindu 2011).

**Nurturing mutual relationships:** While India must, of course, continue to develop modern technology-based industries and services, it is clear that these cannot generate employment on the massive scale required (Bhaduri 2005). It is therefore imperative that this modern sector must rein in its adverse impacts on the labour-intensive, natural resource-based occupations and livelihoods and nurture a symbiotic relationship with this largely unorganised sector. This would be best accomplished through organising the unorganised in cooperative enterprises accountable to their communities. After all, the history of human evolution tells us that we humans are special in being "supercooperators" (Nowak and Highfield 2012). India should aim at replacing today's free-for-all society that has bred a "jungle raj" over large parts of the country by a cooperative commonwealth (Rath 2002).

## Jungle Raj

There are endless television debates today on the "jungle raj" with claims and counterclaims of which states are under jungle raj. A good definition offered in these debates is that jungle raj prevails where the state victimises its citizens instead of protecting them. There are many accusations and counter-accusations, for instance, labelling Bihar (PTI 2016a), Punjab (PTI 2016b) and Gujarat (TNN 2016b) as harbouring jungle raj. Notably enough, there is little mention of the jungle raj obviously

raging in the mineral-rich states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and Goa. I have been personally working in the field in Goa for many years and have vivid experiences of the jungle raj that prevails there today and of how an utterly false picture of what goes on is being very effectively projected. In 2010, the Goa government constituted the Goa Golden Jubilee Development Council (GGJDC) and I happened to be one of its members (GGJDC 2012). At its first working meeting government officials made a presentation about Goa's economy, stating that agriculture was declining with nobody wanting to continue in the occupation if they could help it. As a corollary, the possible damage by mining was a matter of little concern. Indeed, the farmers were happy to sit at home enjoying the compensation paid by the miners. Everybody but I concurred. The other distinguished members of GGJDC were scientific or technical experts, administrators, and entrepreneurs, completely detached from the life of the people at the grass roots.

As a professional field ecologist I demurred and said that I would like to verify the facts on the ground. So I got in touch with residents of several mining villages and arranged to visit six such villages, spending the night in the houses of the farmers to try to understand ground realities. It was clear that while a fair amount of agricultural land in Goa is not being cultivated, there are large numbers still wishing to continue in agriculture, partly because of lack of alternative employment, but also because for many of them farming is a satisfying choice. Their agriculture and community life is very adversely affected by mining. They are not being paid any reasonable compensation by the miners, and, certainly do not wish to remain idle. In fact, the Shah Commission on illegal mining that was subsequently appointed has observed that "But no inspection has been carried out (of the mines over decades in accordance with Part IV, Section 24 of the MM(DR) Act, 1957) resulting into *fear-free* environment which has caused loss to the ecology, environment, agriculture, groundwater, natural streams, ponds, rivers, biodiversity, etc." As a

result of the Shah Commission report, mining was suspended for several months. The Goa government then claimed that some 1,25,000 people had thereby been rendered jobless, and floated a scheme for their relief. Obviously, this is either a deliberate exaggeration, or crass ignorance, for a far smaller number actually applied to claim relief.

Three of the friends I made in this process included Bismark Dias, Hanumant Parab, Ravindra Velip, all of them highly respected and socially conscious members of their communities. I have been deeply disturbed that of these three, Das died recently in mysterious circumstances and both Parab and Velip have barely survived brutal attacks (Guha 2016).

### Merit of Mining Cooperatives

Velip comes from Cauvrem village, whose gram sabha has unanimously resolved to establish a multipurpose cooperative society, whose manifold objectives include mining. The villagers demand that if the mining suspended because of serious irregularities is to be resumed, it should be handed over to their cooperative which will ensure that mining is conducted prudently, without damaging the environment while ensuring that the benefits actually reach the weaker sections of the society. This is evidently a most desirable alternative, one that is very much in conformity with our prime minister's slogan: "विकासको जन आंदोलन बनायेंगे! *We will make development a people's movement.*" Yet the Government of Goa is refusing to register the Cauvrem village cooperative society without citing any valid reasons. So I went along with Velip and two other activists of Cauvrem village to Vaikunth Mehta National Institute of Cooperative Management in Pune. The experts at this institution all agreed that the Cauvrem proposal was sound and that there was no hurdles in the acts relating to cooperative societies in going ahead with their proposal. Indeed as mentioned, the Supreme Court has positively recommended such a measure in its 1997 judgment in the Samata case (see endnote 7).

**Mining engineer's perspective:** Notably, D N Bhargava, one of the country's most respected mining engineers and former director general of the Indian Bureau of Mines has strongly supported such an idea in a letter written to *Indian Mining and Engineering Journal* on 19 April 2016.<sup>8</sup>

It is unfortunate that the Adivasis have experienced environmental degradation due to mining, particularly the decrease in availability of water. Naturally therefore they have stood up against mining. This should not however cause any concern as the mineral resource would remain in the ground for mining in future as and when the local community finds in it the potential of transforming their quality of life. In my opinion, this could be possible if concerned authorities consider a people-centric approach, give up the idea of granting mining rights for major mining projects and instead promote the idea of granting mining rights to the local community. The Government as a facilitator may provide them expert technical and managerial support and enable the community to get engaged in labour-intensive mining. Such a project would not require much capital investment. There is no need for investing on drilling and blasting; it could be outsourced to contractors. Also transport could be arranged on contract by owner-driven trucks. The community will only spend on the purchase of crow-bars, pick-axes, and hammers and tagaries. Marketing would also not be any problem as demand for iron-ore will only grow further. I am suggesting (that) this approach could be adopted in respect of sand mining, and mining of lime-stone and bauxite. A beginning could be made from the areas where the local communities come forward to accept it as an opportunity of improving their economic condition and the quality of their lives. I consider that it is much easier to control environmental degradation in case of labour-intensive small-scale mining.

### Economy of Non-violence

Quite clearly, from all perspectives reserving mineral, stone and sand mining exclusively for the cooperative sector, ensuring that the cooperatives are made fully accountable to local communities is a most desirable alternative. It is not only compatible with our avowed aim of establishing a socialist secular democratic republic, but with the philosophy of the M K Gandhi as so well-articulated by his economist disciple, J C Kumarappa (1957: 10) in his landmark work, *Economy of Permanence*: "Therefore,

self-interest and self-preservation demand complete non-violence, cooperation and submission to the ways of nature if we are to maintain permanency by non-interference with and by not short-circuiting the cycle of life.”

Cooperative mining is an alternative that is likely to attract widespread support at the grass-roots level. It is this fear of an upsurge in popular demand that would come in the way of prevailing economy of violence that seems to have driven the Goa government to arrest Velip on flimsy grounds with the authorities obviously conniving in an attack on him at night while he was in police lock-up. Fortunately, Velip has survived and the Cauvrem village community is steadfast in its resolve to march on its nature-friendly, non-violent, cooperative path (Guha 2016). Gandhi and Kumarappa insist on revival of rural industries, mainly dependent on agricultural produce. It is time now to promote other newly emerging village industries based on mineral resources like iron, manganese and bauxite ores, sand and stone, and revive village industries based on forest resources that had been destroyed by taking away resources like bamboo and handing them over to paper mills at throwaway prices. I believe that Indian environmentalists would be well advised to embrace such a constructive cooperative action programme as a key component of their agenda in the coming years.

## NOTES

- 1 Twenty-year-old Anoop Velloppil, a staunch activist of anti-quarry movement, was killed by stone pelting at a peaceful demonstration by Hindu Aikya Vedi in favour of Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel report and against illegal stone quarries at Kaiveli in Vadakara Taluk of Kozhikode district on 16 December 2014.
- 2 Keeping people out of protected areas has become an article of faith for the advocates of the gun and guard approach, regardless of whether it serves the cause of wildlife or not (see Vijayan 1987; Gadgil 2013).
- 3 Justice Shah Commission's report on Illegal Mining in the State of Goa, <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/content/362839/report-of-justice-mb-shah-commission-of-inquiry-for-illegal-mining-of-iron-ore-and-manganese/>.
- 4 See Krishnachand (2016); Saini (2016); TNN (2016a); Express News Service (2016); Sequeira (2016); and others.
- 5 Bhutan has identified the four pillars of its pursuit of Gross National Happiness as: Sustainable development, conservation of the natural

environment, preservation and promotion of cultural values, and establishment of good governance.

- 6 Milind Bokil's *Gosht Mendha Gavachi* (2012) (in Marathi).
- 7 *Samatha v State of Andhra Pradesh*, 11 July 1997, AIR 1997 SC 3297.
- 8 D N Bhargava: Letter dated 19 April 2016 to *Indian Mining and Engineering Journal*.

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## Sameeksha Trust Books

## Social Policy

Edited by JEAN DRÈZE

The reach of social policy in India has expanded significantly in recent years. Reaching larger numbers of people than before, some benefits now take the form of enforceable legal entitlements. Yet the performance of social programmes is far from ideal, with still a long way to go in directly addressing the interests, demands and rights of the unprivileged.

This collection of essays is clustered around six major themes: health, education, food security, employment guarantee, pensions and cash transfers, and inequality and social exclusion.

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