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Sweet nothings over Sanjivani

The state's sugarcane farmers are a worried lot, as they very well should be, following an ambiguous government directive that instructs them to harvest and transport their produce directly to the Sanjivani sugar factory for payment. This comes amid a long-standing demand from them that the government clearly outline the future of the Sanjivani sugar factory; particularly whether it will be restarted at all or remain shut for good.

This latest development is a rather bitter twist when one recalls the sweet beginnings of the state's lone sugarcane crushing factory. Set up by the government in 1973 in South Goa's Dharbandora, it was officially known as the Sanjivani Sahakari Sakhar Karkhana, and was run by Sanjivani Sahakari Sakhar Karkhana (SSSK) Ltd, Goa. Soon enough, the factory had a direct impact on sugarcane cultivation, as the area on which the crop was grown increased greatly. The factory received 55,000 tonnes of cane in 1977-78 compared to 13,532 tonnes that was produced in 1973-74, the trial season during the commissioning of plant.

The government ably supported the farmers too by providing loans and other assistance to promote sugarcane cultivation in Goa. Ultimately, various societies of sugarcane farmers were amalgamated and reorganised into a single society.

Sugarcane cultivation in Goa and operations at the factory reached their peak in the early 90's. But in 1996, the government took over the factory in 1996 after it started incurring losses. Despite this intervention, however, the losses continued to pile up.

When the government took over, the factory had incurred Rs 8 crore in losses. More than two decades on, this amount soared to more than Rs. 120 crore, rendering the sugarcane crushing plant redundant and crushing the will of farmers to cultivate the cash crop like before.

According to reports, 2017-18 saw around 789.48 hectares of land under sugarcane cultivation, with the engagement of 955 farmers producing 47,503 tonnes of the crop. In the subsequent year, 798.64 ha of land was under cultivation with the engagement of 865 farmers, who then produced 33,212 tonnes of sugarcane; a substantial drop.

In 2020, the government announced that operations at the sugar factory would be shut, and transferred the management of the plant from the cooperative department to agriculture department. This led to a drop in sugarcane production - 26,282 tonnes - which was cultivated by 784 farmers. In 2020-21, the number of farmers dwindled further to 535.

What has irked the farmers is that the long-awaited ethanol plant, proposed by the government to bail out the struggling community, has not materialised either. Chief minister Pramod Sawant had, last year, announced that the government had initiated the process of restarting the factory and had said that the plant will also produce ethanol and will be operated on public-private partnership basis. He has appealed to farmers to cultivate sugarcane as it would be received at the factory for crushing when operations commenced.

Apart from this, Sawant had also assured that the special assistance as notified by the government earlier, will continue through the financial year ending on March 31, 2025.

However, amid the prevailing uncertainty about the reopening of the factory, it is but natural that the farmers have demanded a revised notification from the government that is chalked out keeping them in mind and after holding consultations with them. They also seek a two-year extension of the compensation scheme until the sugar factory resumes operations.

These demands are only fair considering the limbo the farmers have been in and the losses they have incurred to their respective livelihoods as the government drags its feet over the future of the sugar factory. It is high time the government stop doling out stepmotherly treatment to them, considering that sugarcane cultivation in the state itself may die of the farmers decide to stop growing the crop entirely.

Before the finger-pointing and mud-slinging begin, it would be in the fitness of things for the state to come clean on its intentions for the sugar factory and to ensure that the farmers are protected, whichever way Sanjivani may go.

CUT TREES, GET FLOODED

Goa dodged a bullet when the year's first Meteorological Department red alerts about extreme monsoon weather (and possible cyclone) didn't come true this weekend. The damage from two days previous downpour was bad enough, and if those conditions had continued it would have been outright disaster. After an entire decade of unchecked environmental destruction – and its age-old climate resiliency – the writing is very clearly on the wall for India's smallest state.

Renowned ecologist Madhav Gadgil warned us very directly in 2018, after floods in Kerala killed hundreds of people: "Of course, the Western Ghats are not as high in Goa as they are in Kerala, but I am sure Goa will also experience all sorts of problems. The greed for enormous profits has been allowed to go on unchecked, which has actually worsened economic disparity in the society. So now those who are making money through these means are even more effective in getting the government to allow this kind of rampant illegal behaviour. The central government is actually bending over backwards to make sure the National Green Tribunal does not function properly. On the sadas [plateaus] of Goa there are a lot of streams originating but they don't mention about them in their EIA reports. All kind of false statements are made in these reports."

As we all know, and have been painfully forced to endure, the holocaust of trees in Goa only multiplied after 2018, and accelerated even further after Covid: fields filled, orchards levelled, entire hillsides turned to mud. The results have been devastating on multiple fronts – air quality remains poor all year round, village communities are swamped far past any carrying capacity, and Goans are almost completely priced out of their own ancestral turf. Now, after the monsoon decided to arrive early, we are seeing another huge problem caused by all this unholy greed – and the fake Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reports - that Gadgil mentions.

Much of the new real estate and "infrastructure" development is vulnerable to landslides and flooding, which is going to cause much suffering but should surprise precisely no one. Gadgil predicted it. Goa Foundation predicted it. Everything that is happening now – and will continue to happen – was predicted in full before, during and after the incredibly irresponsible orgy of illegalities that now characterises the state's reputation.

"Siltation of rivers due to surface soil erosion and mudslides is common in high rainfall areas with lateritic soils," says Miguel Braganza, the esteemed horticulturalist and mentor to two generations of agriculturalists, who has served as Secretary of the excellent Botanical Society of Goa for 15 of its 35 years in existence: "I have seen it recently during a holiday in Madeira, an island off the mainland Portugal, where hillsides are being terraced to extend the vineyards. Ironically, it was the Portuguese who brought the cashew - anacardium occidentale - seeds from Brazil to Goa, germinated them and raised the trees purely for control of soil erosion. These cashew trees have a unique root system that binds the soil together, and, actually, cutting them down, or creating "accidental" fires to burn them down for "development" is not exactly new.

The people in Sattari, Sanguem and Canacona did it earlier for 'Kumeri' - slash and burn cultivation - but the practice became prohibited in Goa during colonial rule, which is why we have good tree cover in the foothills of the Western Ghats."

Braganza told me "last year, we have experienced the effect of cutting of cashew trees and paving of the plateau for the Mopa Airport. All the water that would have normally seeped into the ground simply flowed into the villages below, and flooded the roads, including the NH-66. It was expected, because even the open-cast iron ore mines need to have 'tailing ponds' for run-off of monsoon rains, but no such regulation was applied in Goa for the airport, or all the industrial estates, and other developments on the plateaus. Also, the cutting of mangroves – or sometimes slow death by reducing water flows as in Merces – is another major cause for concern. As it is, many bunds (or dykes) of the khazan networks have been breached or washed away because the traditional system was replaced by a legal framework that just does not work. The issue is urgent but Newton's Law of Motion applies to an average Goan [and only] a people's movement can change things for the better."

World Wide Fund for Nature – India's state coordinator Aditya Kakodkar told me that "climate-driven calamities such as unseasonal rain and the resulting flooding and landslides will get more frequent. The problem will get worse as time passes, and if no action is taken to address it. That is why citizens should stay vigilant about issues such as encroachment of natural drainage, of landfilling in low-lying areas as well as hill-cutting in their villages, and make sure that such instances are reported to relevant authorities. In most flooding or landslide situations, citizens are often the first responders. Hence, each village could have a designated group of individuals who would be trained in first aid and rescue swimming etc. to save lives."

Kakodkar says "the recent flooding and mudslides are mainly due to removing of tree cover and hill-cutting, which has caused large amount of topsoil to wash off into the water channels, thereby reducing their capacity to carry water, which eventually caused flooding of low-lying areas. Knowing this, designated water drainages should be monitored throughout the year for siltation and encroachment, and storm water channels should be maintained on a priority basis before monsoon, while construction in low lying flood plains should be entirely prohibited. Goa can learn a lot from Malaysia which has a similar tropical climate as well as similar flooding risks. Community based flood mitigation strategies have worked wonders there, where community members are involved in designing flood management plans and traditional knowledge about disaster management is given utmost importance."

(Vivek Menezes is a writer and co-founder of the Goa Arts and Literature Festival)

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BY INVITATION

Vivek Menezes

Digital equity: Who gains more— school students or college goers?

VASANT PEDNEKAR

UPFRONT

While the laptop scheme stands to benefit both school and college students in Goa, its impact will depend on how effectively it is implemented and the specific needs of the students

In today's world, where digital literacy and online learning are integral to a student's educational journey, the Goa government's initiative to distribute laptops has stirred a significant conversation. The central question is whether this scheme will benefit school students more than college students. While the initiative is undeniably designed to bridge the digital divide, its impact varies considerably between the two groups. As Goa aligns itself with the National Education Policy 2020 and continues its educational reforms, the laptop scheme (Cyberage Scheme) has reached a critical point in shaping the future of education in the state.

The initiative aims to provide students with essential digital tools, enabling them to participate in online classes, complete assignments, conduct research, and familiarise themselves with various technologies. While the move is commendable, the effectiveness and utility of these laptops differ significantly for school students versus college students. To understand the full potential and the challenges posed by the scheme, it is essential to delve deeper into how technology can aid these students.

For many school students, especially those in rural or economically disadvantaged areas, access to personal technology is a luxury. Often, students must rely on shared devices or smartphones, which are far less effective for learning, especially for subjects that require sustained concentration or multitasking. By providing laptops, the government can bridge this gap and ensure that students are better equipped for modern learning.

One significant benefit of the laptop scheme for school students is the ability to access educational resources and learning platforms. The use of laptops opens up a world of possibilities for learning that goes beyond the textbook, offering access to global educational content. School students can access free coding tutorials, educational videos, digital libraries, and e-books that foster creativity and independent learning.

An example of this is a rural school student who, without a personal laptop, might never have been able to access online resources or explore digital subjects like coding. With the introduction of laptops, students can now access coding programs, learn programming languages, and even engage in activities like designing their mobile applications. This opens new career paths, even at the school level.

Moreover, the use of technology can help improve student engagement.

However, not all school students will have the same level of access to the internet, and this is where a major drawback of the scheme lies. Access to Wi-Fi or high-speed internet is not uniform across all areas of Goa, especially in rural regions. Even if students receive a laptop, without a reliable internet connection, the device becomes significantly less useful. A student in a village with limited internet connectivity may only be able to use their laptop for offline activities, such as word processing or simple educational games, limiting the potential of the device.

In addition, many students from lower-income backgrounds may not have the parental guidance necessary to make full use of the device. While a laptop can provide access to endless learning materials, without proper supervision, it could lead to misuse. For instance, school students may be more inclined to use the device for non-educational purposes, such as gaming or social media, without understanding its educational value. This misuse could further contribute to distractions, leading to the failure of the scheme to achieve its intended results.

College students, on the other hand, have different needs and challenges that laptops can address. Many students in higher education require laptops for more complex academic work. Whether it is preparing PowerPoint presentations, accessing online libraries, participating in webinars, or submitting assignments through Learning Management Systems (LMS), laptops have become an essential tool for the modern college student.

Moreover, in an era of digital marketing, entrepreneurship, and online internships, having a laptop is a must for career preparedness. Many college students use their laptops not only for academic purposes but also for exploring part-time job opportunities, building professional networks, or working on freelance projects. Websites like LinkedIn, Fiverr, and Upwork have become key platforms for college students to launch their careers, and a laptop is essential for connecting with these opportunities.

However, one downside of the scheme for college students is that many already have access to personal laptops or computers. Surveys in Goa suggest that most urban college students either own a laptop or tablet, often provided by their families or funded through part-time jobs.

While the free laptop scheme holds promise, several drawbacks must be addressed. The first is the lack of adequate digital literacy. For students who have never used a computer before, a laptop can be overwhelming. Without proper orientation and training, students may struggle to even turn on the device or navigate its basic functions. This lack of digital fluency could lead to frustration, especially in school students who are not familiar with how to use technology for educational purposes.

Another concern is the risk of screen addiction. Parents and educators must work together to ensure that the devices are used responsibly, but this requires continuous monitoring and a strong support system, which is often lacking in many households.

Moreover, the free laptop scheme does not address the issue of digital inequality in terms of internet connectivity. Many students, particularly in rural areas, may not have access to fast and reliable internet, making it difficult to fully take advantage of the educational resources available online.

While the laptop scheme stands to benefit both school and college students in Goa, its impact will depend on how effectively it is implemented and the specific needs of the students. School students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, will benefit greatly from the introduction of laptops, as they open new opportunities for learning and skill development.

For college students, laptops are already indispensable to both their academic pursuits and emerging professional responsibilities. Revamping the Cyberage Scheme could significantly enrich their learning experience, especially in specialised disciplines such as engineering, design, and media. Unlike school students, who may not yet fully utilise such technology, college students view laptops as essential tools for research, projects, and dissertations.

Ultimately, the government must ensure that the scheme is implemented equitably, targeting those who need it the most. By focusing on rural and underprivileged students, irrespective of whether they are in school or college, the scheme could bridge the digital divide and help transform Goa's education system into one that is inclusive, accessible, and future-ready.

With the digital age upon us, laptops are not just tools, they are gateways to knowledge, skill development, and future opportunities.