

THE DESTRUCTION OF TREES & NATURAL HERITAGE OF GOA

As Goa's trees face the axe for development, *former Chief Minister and Ex MP Rajya Sabha* **LUIZINHO FALEIRO** propounds a simple, yet effective way to save our leafy and friendly giants, as part of a chapter *Destruction Of Trees, Natural Heritage Of Goa*, which is part of his to be published book "For a Better Goa." Trees do not only provide shade or oxygen they are persons and more than that repositories of happiness. He introduces the concept of "forest bathing" which is therapeutic and a wellness therapy and involves nothing more than 'walking slowly through the woods, in no hurry, for a morning, an afternoon or a day.' Using this ancient technique, Finland finds itself as the Happiest Country in the world. Here are some excerpts....

Goa is known for its beauty. Though this statement is oft repeated, and has become a cliché, most people just shut their ears to it. Yet, as I begin this chapter I use that very sentence, fully aware that many may frown and wonder why they need to be reminded of this. There is a reason for this and it revolves around the fact that Goa is butchering, what nature has bestowed upon it. Don't take my word for it, drive around Goa and see for yourself. Trees have been cut, hills have been massacred, paddy fields have been leveled and Goa's very fragile ecology is under threat. The moment you cut a tree, soil erosion occurs. The rocks get exposed and the area from a canopy of trees gets degraded to bushes and from bushes it descends into cacti and from that to a graveyard of rocks. That is what Goa is turning into and this is what hurts me most, that the Goa I love and where I have lived and still do, is not the green, leafy, shady State that my forefathers bequeathed to me. If I inherited a Goa that was green, can I consciously leave for the generations to come a Goa that is not as green as it was? I have to fight this destruction of Goa and I have in whatever little way I have been able to.

A question that has troubled my mind for a long time, and when I mean long, I should say my entire life, from childhood onwards, for trees have always fascinated me, is whether we are doing enough to preserve the tree canopy of the State. I may not have known of the importance of trees as a child other than the fact that they gave fruit, but that fascination for trees developed from my mother, and all my life I have revered trees and till today I can't bear to see a tree being cut. It pains me, as much as it pains the tree and it was this pain that led me to take up the cause of preserving them.

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH TREE FELLING

It was in the early 1980s, at a time when I was a young MLA with a lot of drive and a vision for Goa that I thought I could attain through politics, that I was driving to Canacona. I didn't really have anything specific to do in Canacona, but I used to love to drive through the forest and the road to Canacona which passed through a lush forest. Anyone who has been on this highway stretch will testify that as you drive there are trees in front of you and on either side of you. On that particular day, when I reached Karmal Ghat, I was shocked, disturbed and upset because instead of trees I saw only barren land on either side. The trees had been all felled, the forest, as I remembered it, was just not there. What was once a beautiful forested area, abundant with trees was now completely barren, the land that had



been shaded by the trees for perhaps centuries was brown, scorched by the sun. It was a horrible sight. I didn't go further, I turned around and returned home.

Next morning, I drove to Panjim and met our then Chief Minister, Mr Pratapsingh Rane. I was a first-time MLA and Rane was much senior to me, but we shared a very cordial relationship, so I didn't face any nervousness in meeting him. I came straight to the point and asked him, how had the government allowed such vast tracts of the forest to be cut at Karmal? That day I got one of my first lessons in politics and compromises.

By nature, Mr Rane also loves forests and even today is an agriculturist. He explained to me the political exigencies involved in running a government, where MLAs had to be accommodated. He said to me, "You are young, you don't know, I have to manage the MLAs." Mr Rane explained that a majority of our MLAs at that time were what we call forest contractors or timber merchants. Since the For-



rest Department was cutting the trees, they were buying the timber and earning from it. He told me that the MLAs would come to the Secretariat, walk into his office and ask him to sign on the proposals for clearing forest land. This was a second surprise for me, after the previous day's sight of bald forest land. I saw that the government was unable to act and was also not going to act, but something had to be done. I could not allow forest land to be cleared in such unreasonable manner, I had to fight it.

Much of the damage to our forests, and I would go out on a limb and say that 90 percent of the damage, has been done by the Forest Department itself. At that time, there were forest areas that were being cleared by the Forest Department and were planting trees like eucalyptus and teak. Unknown at that time, these trees were destroying the biodiversity. I recall that when in school, we were taught that eucalyptus trees are very useful, for the oil and could be used for various products, toothpaste, medicines etc. It was only later that we realised

that these trees were actually damaging the environment. Planting an eucalyptus tree is akin to operating a water pump in a pond. Like a pump, the eucalyptus tree takes all the water from the hills and it gets evaporated because its bark is like that. After that nothing grows, the hills become barren. The trees were not ideal for our weather and these destroyed the other flora and fauna.

There is considerable area under private forests which are indiscriminately used, leading to soil erosion and flooding in low-lying areas, thereby posing a threat to ecological balance

According to old records, the total forest area in Goa is about 1,309 sq. km. Of this total area, government forests are estimated to extend over an area of about 1053 sq. km, the remaining area is under the control of Comunidades and private parties.

The Dr. Swaminathan report also referred to the planting of eucalyptus trees stating, 'Since 1963, the Forest Department has raised teak, eucalyptus, cashew and rubber plantation over an area of 9509 ha, 5232 ha, 9510 ha and 580 ha respectively. Since all these species are economically important, they have positively increased productivity. Eucalyptus, however, has not done well in some of the areas, particularly, in the North Division. It is, therefore, necessary that eucalyptus be introduced after carefully considering quality and other factors and after ascertaining the suitability of a site for eucalyptus. Similarly, since eucalyptus does not support bird life, it should not be raised as a pure plantation but mixed with other miscellaneous species.'

I was stunned and saddened at the extent by which the forest coverage had dropped in Goa. That report by Dr. Swaminathan's task force propelled me to take up the issue and I told the Chief Minister that if the government found itself with its hands tied, then I would draft a bill for the preservation of trees and present it in the Assembly. And I did just that.

PILOTING THE PRESERVATION OF TREES BILL

I was caught in a dilemma of what to do. In my readings, I had come across Dr. Swaminathan's Task Force Report on Eco-development Approach and here there were very specific statistics of the forest coverage in Goa, at

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