

THE RIVER MHADEI: THE SCIENCE AND POLITICS OF DIVERSION

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EDITORS

PETER RONALD DESOUZA | SOLANO DA SILVA | LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

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The Science and Politics of Diversion

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*To
the people
of the Mhadei*

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4. Saving the Mhadei: The Anatomy of a Movement

Meera Mohanty

***Abstract:** This chapter traces the evolution of Goa's long-standing struggle to protect the Mhadei River from upstream diversion projects initiated by Karnataka. Drawing on interviews with activists, politicians, journalists, lawyers, artists, and conservationists, it reconstructs the legal, political, and cultural contours of the movement. It focuses in particular on the role of the Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan, a citizens' collective that combined legal action with environmental education and advocacy. The chapter examines how the movement gained momentum in the 1990s, the key figures who shaped its direction, and its strategic choices, such as avoiding mass mobilization in favor of legal recourse. It also interrogates why, despite episodic public outcry, the Save the Mhadei campaign has struggled to develop into a broad-based, sustained people's movement. It situates the movement within the broader political context of Goa and Karnataka, highlighting the limitations of environmental activism when decoupled from electoral politics, class coalitions, and economic stakeholderhood.*

Introduction

ON 16 January 2023, more than 5000 people gathered on a private ground near the Amona bridge at Virdi, Sanquelim. The organizers of this event, “Save Goa, Save Mhadei,” had chosen “Opinion Day”¹ and BJP-affiliated Chief Minister Pramod Sawant’s electoral constituency Sanquelim, for greater political impact. Less than 24 hours before the event, however, the Sanquelim Municipal Council revoked the permission it had granted.

Thousands nevertheless turned up, responding to the rallying call of “*Chalo Sankhali*.” Members of opposition parties—the Indian National Congress,

¹ Opinion Day commemorates the referendum conducted on 16 January 1967 where Goa voted against being merged with Maharashtra, thereby asserting its own, unique cultural identity.

AAP and Trinamool Congress—were in attendance, as was Vijay Sardesai, leader of the Goa Forward party, which had provided buses to ferry Goans from the south to this northern constituency. Environmentalist Rajendra Kerkar, Jnanpith awardee Damodar Mauzo (accompanied by the government policemen assigned to him ever since an alleged threat to his life from a right-wing organization) and former Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leader Subhash Velingkar, were present. Poet Siddhanath Buyao who had composed an anthem for the occasion and diocesan priest Father Bolmax Pereira who had encouraged his parish to attend, were also there to lend their support. Members of Comunidade Awareness Fellowship, Goa Coconut Farmers Association, and Goa Heritage Action Group were present as well among the thousands of attendees. Never before had so many people come together in the three decades that Goa has been fighting to save the river Mhadei. Members of the BJP were absent—and so too, conspicuously, were the people of Sattari.

A year later on 18 Jan 2024, in an opinion piece written for the *Gomantak Times*, author and journalist Alexandre Moniz Barbosa (2024) noted the “deafening silence” on Mhadei:

...Have the demands of the people at that meeting been met? Has Goa achieved any victory, however small it may be, in the past 12 months? Pertinently, as that meeting had ended, in this column the questions asked were: what next? How will this people’s movement for the Mhadei river waters be taken forward? There have been no replies, but then, none were expected as they were rhetorical.

To Barbosa, the answers were evident: there was no leadership, no direction—in fact, there was no movement.

The fight to save the Mhadei—or Mandovi—from the specific threat of diversions of its upstream tributaries in Karnataka has been ongoing for a quarter of a century. Goa’s fight has been legal, but it has also taken the form of *morchas*, human chains, speeches, songs, street plays and *nataks*. It has been articulated through thousands of news reports and still left room for the question: was the Mhadei movement ever really a people’s movement?

This chapter seeks to document the efforts to save the Mhadei through extensive interviews of environmentalists, activists, politicians, lawyers, artists, and journalists, and also through an examination of some published material, largely in English. It hopes to analyse the successes and failures of these collective efforts.

The Mhadei dispute

The 111 km long Mhadei—or Mahadayi as it is known in Karnataka—originates at Degaon near Khanapur inside Karnataka’s Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary. Joined by its tributaries, it flows into Goa near Valpoi in the north-eastern taluka of Sattari, before meandering down to the plains and eventually reaching the Arabian Sea in Goa’s capital, Panjim. By then, combined with the runoff of other rivers, it is recognized as the Mandovi (Shetye et al. 2007). The Mhadei or Mandovi river basin sustains Goa’s agriculture, its biodiversity. It provides for its drinking water needs and is critical to its mining and shipping industries. It is, therefore, often referred to as Goa’s “lifeline,” particularly in the context of the five-decade-old inter-state dispute over its waters.

Karnataka had first proposed damming and using the Mahadayi and its rivers back in the 1970s when Goa was still a union territory along with the former Portuguese territories of Daman and Diu. Goa’s objections are believed to have led the Centre to persuade Karnataka to shelve the project (Do Rosario 2023). In the 1980s, when trying to address the water shortage faced by farmers, which the Renuka Sagar reservoir on the Malaprabha was expected to meet, Karnataka looked to link the Mhadei with the Malaprabha. In late 1988, it decided to divert water into the Malaprabha from the Katla and Palna—both tributaries of Mhadei—and from the Khandepar river, which they join. The Khandepar forms the four-tiered Dudhsagar waterfalls in Goa. The ruling Progressive Democratic Front, then in power in Goa with Dr Luis Proto Barbosa as Chief Minister, is said to have used its political clout with V.P. Singh’s National Front Government at the Centre to block the project. In 1989, in the brief eight-month period during which S.R. Bommai of the Janata Party was Chief Minister of Karnataka, he is reported to have reached an understanding with Goa CM, Congressman Pratap Singh Rane over the use of the Mhadei’s waters, offering Goa a share of the electricity its projects would generate. Before work could commence on this multi-dam, hydroelectric project, Bommai’s government was dismissed.

In 1993, with the Congress back in power in Karnataka and at the Centre, the plans for water diversion were revived. The general elections that followed in 1996 produced a hung parliament. The thirteen-day government, led by BJP’s Atal Bihari Vajpayee, was followed by a coalition of non-Congress, non-BJP parties. Deve Gowda resigned as Karnataka CM to lead this so-called United Front coalition as Prime Minister. A renewed effort to provide the promised water, purportedly for drinking purposes, to Dharwad and Belagavi districts began, still tied to the idea of diverting water from rivers

and streams—notably the Kalasa and Bhandura nallas, which flow westward into Goa—out of their natural river basin, the Mahadayi, into another, the Malaprabha's.²

Declining Karnataka's request for permission, the Central Water Commission pointed out that the Mhadei was “an inter-state river,” appending the Central Electricity Authority note that in the 1980s, the agency had rejected applications for approval of Katla and Palna schemes under the 345 MW Mahadayi Hydro Electric Project on the same grounds, namely that it involved inter-state aspects with Goa (Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal 2018, vol. I). Then Goa CM Manohar Parrikar of the Bharatiya Janata Party communicated a position similar to what the CWC had taken to his Karnataka counterpart in March 2000 and then again in December 2000, reiterating Goa's strong objections (MWDT 2018, vol. I, 196, 199). Nonetheless, back in power the following year, the Karnataka Congress under S. M. Krishna, formally applied to the Union Ministry of Water Resources to begin work on the Kalasa-Bhandura projects. On 30 April 2002, the Ministry granted Karnataka an in-principle approval. Parrikar rushed an all-party delegation to meet Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Included in this united front was Congress State President, Nirmala Sawant, who had already assumed leadership of Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan (MBA)—an organization that had taken upon itself to educate Goans on the repercussions of Karnataka's unilateral decisions over the river and its fragile ecosystem. At Goa's request, the approval was kept in abeyance (MWDT 2018, vol. II, 37). Yet, and despite its neighbour's objections, Karnataka proceeded to implement the inter-connecting canal on the ground.

Following a Goa cabinet decision in July 2002, Parrikar formally requested the Centre to establish an inter-state water tribunal under Section 3 of the amended Inter-State Water Disputes Act, 1956. Many saw this move as the first big concession on Goa's part. The Goa government, however, continued to maintain that it was inevitable and the only available recourse in disputes involving inter-state rivers. It took another eight years for the Mahadayi Water Dispute Tribunal to be constituted; it was notified on 16 November 2010.

² Under the Mahadayi Multipurpose Irrigation Project, Karnataka planned to divert 7.56 TMC to Malaprabha reservoir in the Krishna river basin. The waters of the Kalasa alone would not suffice and would need to be supplemented by damming the Haltara, with additional water lifted from the Surla catchment and carried into the proposed Kalasa reservoir through a 5.5 km-long interconnecting canal. Parallely, 5.527 TMC would go to the Kali basin to augment the flows of the river being tapped for hydropower (under the Kali Hydroelectric Project) and the remaining would go to the proposed Mahadayi Hydro Electric Project (MHPEP) at Kotni. This would entail construction of 86.5 m high storage dam across the Mahadayi downstream of the confluence with the Kotni *nalla*, a 62 m high dam across Bail Nadi, a 44 m high pickup dam across the Mahadayi downstream of the Irti *nalla* confluence, a 25 m high tailrace dam across the Mahadayi river near the state border, a power house, and other ancillary works.

In these interim years, the Union Minister for Water Resources convened several inter-state meetings at the level of Chief Ministers but failed to find any resolution. Another eight years would pass before the Tribunal delivered its first award. On 14 August 2018, it determined the total yield of the Mahadayi River as 188.06 TMC at 75 percent dependability over the total basin area of 2,032 sq. km. Karnataka was awarded 3.9 TMC (subject to certain conditions) from the Kalasa and Bhandura. Maharashtra was allotted 1.33 TMC for in-basin use. Goa, against its demand of 94.02 TMC of water for consumptive use, was allotted 24 TMC. All three states—Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra—unhappy with the award for their own reasons, filed clarification applications before the Tribunal, (as did the Centre), while all three also moved separate Special Leave Petitions (SLPs) before the Supreme Court.

In 2006, just days before resigning as Chief Minister of Karnataka, H.D. Kumaraswamy, accompanied by BJP's B.S. Yediyurappa, laid a foundation stone for the project works at Khanapur. Goa had already petitioned the Supreme Court seeking the formation of a Tribunal and a stay on construction activities. Simultaneously, Nirmala Sawant as President of the MBA also approached the country's highest court, arguing that the proposed dams and canals were being constructed in forest areas in violation of the Forest Conservation Act and the Wildlife Protection Act (TN Godavarman vs. Union of India, IA No. 1804 of 2007/09 in WP (C) No. 202 of 1995).

Over the next sixteen years, while both the Tribunal and the SC adjudicated the matter, Karnataka repeatedly attempted to push forward its plans, including a formal application to the Tribunal to proceed on the grounds that these were drinking water” projects. And despite its undertakings to the SC (in Sawant's matter) and the injunctions passed by the Tribunal during the course of its hearings, Karnataka resumed work on the Kalasa nalla in 2018, prompting Goa to file a contempt petition with the Supreme Court (State of Goa vs. State of Karnataka, Contempt Petition no. 2113/2018).

On 18 December 2019, Goa awoke to a news report about dwindling Barazan falls on the Surla River. Following field investigations, the Goa government filed an interlocutory application seeking joint inspection of Karnataka's “acts of contempt” at the diversion site (Supreme Court of India, I.A. no. 9810/2020). When the *Times of India* reported that Karnataka had managed to reverse the natural flow of the Kalasa nalla at Kankumbi on 4 September 2020, yet another contempt petition followed, charging willful and deliberate violation and/or disobedience of the MWDT's award dated 14 August 2018 as well as the Supreme Court's order dated 2 March 2020 (Contempt Petition no. 0724/2020). Inspection on 6 September 2020

confirmed that by deepening one of the channels and raising the riverbed at another, Karnataka had altered the gradient of the river, causing it to flow in the direction opposite to its natural course towards the Surla, as evidenced by reduced levels of water in the Surla despite heavy monsoonal rainfall. In early August 2022, news broke of Karnataka initiating construction work on the *bandharasor* dams without securing the necessary Environmental Clearance. Then on 30 December 2022—just six months ahead of the Karnataka Assembly elections—the Central Water Commission (CWC) approved Detailed Project Reports (DPRs) for the Kalasa and Bhandura projects. The resulting public outcry in Goa climaxed in the 16 January 2023 event (Malkarnekar 2023).

The Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan

When news of Karnataka's diversion plans reached Goa in the 1990s, a network of environmentally conscious individuals and organizations had already come together to save the Western Ghats in what is considered a landmark movement in India's environmental history. Playing an active role in this historic campaign spanning the six states through which the Western Ghats run,³ was the Peaceful Society, a Gandhian organization headquartered in Madkai, aiming for "self-rule of grassroot communities and to re-establish their rights and access to natural resources (Peaceful Society 2025)."⁴ Dr. Nandkumar Kamat, a mycologist and prolific writer, and Rajendra Kerkar, a teacher at the higher secondary school in Bicholim were actively involved with the Society's activities. Kerkar, who lived in Keri—a village in the foothills of the ranges—was intimately familiar with the areas under threat from these upstream projects, having hiked, trekked and cycled through these parts in his free time. Documenting and appreciating the ecological and cultural richness of his surroundings became a personal mission, one he would later turn into a movement through the Vivekanand Environment Awareness Brigade.

Kamat had undertaken to implement an Indo-Canadian programme of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), aimed at educating teachers. Assigned coordinator for North Goa, Kerkar had begun organizing awareness workshops and nature trails for teachers. Kerkar says that during one of those meetings in 1996, Dr. Kamat told him, "Karnataka is going ahead with damming the Mhadei, you are from those areas, you should start creating awareness on the issue." Thus began, for Kerkar, a prolific

³ I.e., Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra, and Gujarat

⁴ According to their website, their "principal strategy was to awaken the social spirit by making the people aware of their rights and duties, leading to the removal of 'poverty, inequality, exploitation, injustice, illiteracy, and blind-faith, ecological and economical imbalance.'"

and relentless body of reporting over three decades during which he has become a whistleblower, sentinel, record-keeper, activist and witness to the unfolding of the Mhadei issue. Together, Kerkar and Kamath also formed the Goa River Conservation Network (GORICON) in July 1997 to collect critical data for the WWF on Goa's rivers.

Meanwhile, Goa State Congress President Nirmala Sawant had been stirred into action by a letter from across the border from the legislator of Khanapur, Karnataka, Vasantrao Y. Chavan. Situated in the Western Ghats where Goa, Maharashtra and Karnataka meet, Khanapur is where Mhadei and its tributaries originate. Marathi-speaking Khanapur had demanded to be merged with Maharashtra ever since the States Reorganisation Act of 1956 had placed it in Karnataka. The proposal to divert water out of the Mhadei basin was being made while territorial disputes remained unresolved and with no consideration of Khanapur's in-basin claims. Chavan had reportedly mailed a similar letter to then Congress Chief Minister, Pratap Singh Rane. Unlike Sawant who called a press conference to publicly share her alarm, Rane apparently remained silent.

Sawant joined forces with Dr. Kamat, Kerkar and others to raise awareness on the matter. With the support of volunteers from Swami Vivekananda Smruti Sangh—the education trust founded by Kerkar—they organized village meetings in Sattari taluka where the Mhadei first enters Goa and conducted lectures in schools and colleges. Two decades later Sawant recalled, “Despite our efforts, very few people understood the issue then. People of Sattari realised that this was a drinking water issue and hence they were worried but others were not worried, as they felt that Mhadei was part of Maharashtra and brushed aside the issue” (Herald Team 2019). She also organized a cross-border, educational trip for journalists, inviting Julio D’Silva of the *Herald*, Rajendra Desai, Sandesh Prabhudesai, Ashley Do Rosario and Prakash Kamat amongst others. More than one of the above journalists, remembered the trip for the leeches that had climbed stealthily onto their legs.

In the following month, in October 1997, the campaign was christened as the “Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan” (Kerkar 2019). Sawant was nominated President, with Kerkar taking up the role of General Secretary. In June of 1998, Swami Vivekananda Smruti Sangh, in association with the Peaceful Society organized a workshop in Old Goa. All aspects of the river Mhadei—hydrological, geological, botanical and ecological, cultural and presumably political too—were covered. Among the speakers was author Prakash S. Parienkar, who presented his research on *puran sheti/xeti*, a unique and declining form of silt-based cultivation practiced along the Mhadei's banks. Through a formal

resolution at this meeting, it was decided to consolidate efforts and register the MBA. In Kerkar's words, "After this workshop, the mission to save Mahadayi got the real philosophical base." Earlier that year in March 1998, Kerkar, Parienkar and Gopinath Gawas had participated in a three-day national conference at Tatanagar, Jharkhand (then Bihar) on the subject, "A question on river and water."

In September 1998, through GORICON, a memorandum opposing the diversion plans was submitted to the Goa government's expert panel for a master plan for the Mandovi river basin, chaired by V.R. Deuskar. Resolutions supporting the fight, passed by the village panchayats of Honda, Pissurle, Morle, Gulel, Savorde, Nagargao, Mauxi, Keri, Thane-Dongurli, Khotode, Parye, and Bhironde were submitted to Ministers of Irrigation and Panchyat (sic) Raj, Dayanand Narvekar and Surendra Sirsat respectively. This had been possible only because of the support of then Congress MLA of Valpoi, Venkatesh 'Bandu' Desai. The workshop held on 6 June 1998, marked the culmination of nearly two years of sustained efforts to awaken Goans to the looming threat facing their river. It drew together a diverse group of individuals, all united by a common cause. "The mission is not against any state or person but against the unconstitutional attempts to dam and choke our mother river, Mahadayi. Since 1996, we have launched the mission to save Mahadayi, inspired by Dr. Nandkumar Kamat," stated a special issue dedicated to the river's cultural and ecological heritage, published by the MBA in collaboration with the Vivekananda Environment Awareness Brigade (Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan 2001).

The special issue enumerated the efforts: Sawant raising the issue in the Goa Legislative Assembly after her successful election as Cumbarjua MLA on a Congress ticket in the 1999 elections; the Vivekananda Environment Awareness Brigade's grassroots campaigns, using street plays, and songs; and a series of articles on the Mandovi by the Marathi daily *Tarun Bharat*, whose editor Kiran B. Thakur was also a senior leader of the Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti (MES) in Belgaum.⁵ The support from the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), one of India's oldest and most respected nature conservation organizations (which at the time was campaigning for Bhimgad to be declared a wildlife sanctuary), and solidarity from organizations across state borders, including the Samaj Parivartan Samuday in Dharwad and Pune-based Kalpavriksha (Maharashtra) were also noted.

Particularly active at the time, was the Belgaum-based Paryavarani. Led by

⁵ The MES is a Belgaum based socio-political committee fighting for a merger of Marathi-speaking areas in general, and Belgaum district in particular with Maharashtra.

former Lt. General S.C. Sardeshpande, the organization had taken on the real estate and timber mafia to fight deforestation in the Sahyadri region. The proposed Kalasa-Bhandura dams would require the felling of about 60,000 trees in 700 hectares of forest area. Paryavarani's members, intimately familiar with the terrain, often served as guides for Goans curious to visit ground zero. The name of Srihari Kugaji, now serving in the Indian army, comes up more than once in this regard. Signing off on the special issue inaugurated by then CM Manohar Parrikar, Kerkar wrote "Now, the MBA is making a more focused approach to create systematic awareness among the public and policy makers. This effort, hopefully, would result in involving more and more common people in our goal of saving the lifeline of Goa—Mandovi" (Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan 2001).

Founded as an organization of around ten members, the MBA in its early years would meet once every month or two, usually at the Quarterdeck restaurant across from the Mandovi hotel in Panjim. Over time, however, the group lost some of its members. Former journalist Sadanand Tendulkar, and constitutional expert and Maharashtra Gomantak Party (MGP) ex-MP Amrut Kansar, passed away. Venkatesh "Bandu" Desai, the former Valpoi MLA, says he wasn't invited after the initial few meetings.

Parienkar, currently Associate Professor at Goa University's Shenoji Goemabab School of Languages and Literature and once Joint Secretary of the MBA, has authored a voluminous eco-anthropological book in Konkani on the Mhadei titled *Mhadei Kallzantlyan Kagdar* (Parienkar 2011) and now focuses on his own efforts on annual overnight treks and cleaning drives along the Mhadei and its tributaries. Dr. Nandkumar Kamat, once Vice-President of the MBA, broke ties publicly in 2019. Prajal Sakhardande, Professor of History at Dhempe College of Arts and Science, is one of the three founding members of Save Mhadei, Save Goa. He, along with advocate Avinash Bhonsle, continues to be actively associated with the MBA.

Conversations with current and former members suggest that much of the decision-making has long rested with a very small core team. Sawant and Kerkar have been untiring in their efforts to ensure that the MBA retains the moral high ground in Goa's campaign to save the Mhadei, a fight that has now spanned more than a quarter of a century. To what extent the MBA has managed to involve "more and more common people" into the fold, as Kerkar had once hoped, remains an open question.

Nirmala Sawant

Following the tribunal's order, the MBA opened a second front in February 2007 by challenging Karnataka's ongoing construction works in the Supreme

Court, citing the absence of mandatory environment and forest clearances (TN Godavarman vs. Union of India, IA no. 1804 of 2007/2009 in WP 202 of 1995). The move, however, came only after the Goa government itself had approached the court in November 2006. “We wanted to go to court immediately after Karnataka laid the foundation stones for the project, but we held back,” Sawant explains. “Because if something went wrong, people would turn on us—‘Why did these people go there and create problems?’ Politicians are very good at convincing people that we lost everything because of so-and-so.” Sawant’s intervention application in the landmark TN Godavarman case was on grounds that the project, which was in a forested area, did not have its requisite approval.

The matter was admitted in August 2007, which Sawant counts as the first legal victory. (In the meanwhile, with the establishment of the Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal, Goa under Chief Minister Digambar Kamat had withdrawn its petition from the Supreme Court. Sawant has sustained this legal battle through her own personal funds, which is supported by her husband, a dockyard owner, and argued by her friend and SC advocate Bhavani Shankar Gadnis. The initial years from 2007 to 2010 were a hectic search for documentary evidence. And then “nothing.” The matter being *sub judice*, Sawant decided she must not be seen doing anything that could be perceived as politicizing the issue. “Because if I speak something and it’s taken in a different way, then it might go against the case, so there was no press conference,” she says. Professor Sakhardande remembers urging her to hit the streets, rally the masses, to be the “Medha Patkar of Mhadei.” Sawant, however, saw no need for this sort or level of activism. “The case was filed there was no need for an ‘andolan’. if we had not filed the case, the river would have been diverted long back,” she says. It turned into a long wait. “Rajendra told me, ‘Tai, people don’t say anything to you, but they are making fun of me. Where is your case?’” On 17 August 2017 the Supreme Court, assured by the Karnataka’s counsel Fali Nariman that ‘no construction is going on in the area in question,’ i.e., the Kalsa-Banduri project, disposed of the petition along with others.

In the early years of the campaign, Sawant also made personal appeals to senior party colleagues across state lines—R.R. Patil in Maharashtra and S.M. Krishna in Karnataka—even when her own party colleagues in Goa offered only lukewarm support. Her peers commend her for being consistent in her stand. Unlike many Goan politicians, Sawant—often referred to as “Tai” (elder sister)—has never switched parties. In 2002, however, she quit the Congress after being denied a ticket to contest the assembly elections. Since

then, she has continued to hold a mirror to Goa government's inactions through platforms such as Goa Legislators Forum and the media.

Rajendra Kerkar

Rajendra Kerkar has been the repository of all things Mhadei. Articles, Right to Information (RTI) requests, letters to politicians, DPRs, maps, photographs—they cram the shelves of two overflowing cupboards in his house. Much of it he recalls readily from memory for every journalist (national and international), researcher, or politician seeking to educate themselves on the subject. He himself has been prolific, writing by his own estimate, hundreds of articles in English, Konkani, and Marathi, in his own estimate, on the biodiversity, wildlife and culture of the Western Ghats.

Some of these efforts would prove crucial to Goa's fight to save the Mhadei. In 2006 when H.D. Kumarswamy and B.S. Yediyurappa were laying the foundation stone for Karnataka's controversial diversion projects, Kerkar was already there, having ridden pillion with one of his students to document the development for Marathi daily in Goa *Tarun Bharat*. The fact that authorities hurriedly razed a crop ready for harvest merely to clear the ground for the politicians to lay the foundation stones, amuses him to this day.

In 2018, invited to attend a meeting of the Environment Protection Council, Kerkar pointed out to the Goa Governor Bharat Vir Wanchoo and CM Parrikar that the river might as well have been dammed and diverted and that the flow of water was in fact reversed. Parrikar, according to Kerkar, immediately directed the Water Resources Department's Chief Engineer to visit the site with Kerkar and submit a report within a week. This would form the basis of Goa's disobedience petition in the SC dated 14 August 2018. Articles dated 18 December 2019 and 4 September 2020, which prompted the contempt petitions, were also authored by Kerkar. In 2013, when the Tribunal made its visits to the site of the proposed dams and canals and every important point of the Mhadei, from its origins to Mormugao port, Kerkar was often present on site. At Kankumbi in Karnataka, he pointed out that water was already flowing towards the Malaprabha. This, says Kerkar, led to the Tribunal's interim order (17 April 2014) instructing Karnataka to "plug the two vents of the interconnecting canal partially constructed by it with masonry, to fill up the excavations made along the ridge line separating Mahadayi and Malaprabha basins and refrain from diverting or actually utilising the waters of the Mahadayi basin till the Tribunal had not finally adjudicated the dispute." The masonry held for a year or two before water began flowing the other way again, says Kerkar who fears that "they must've done something.... Recently when the PRAWAH Committee visited, they noticed it." (The Maha-

dayi PRAWAH or Progressive River Authority for Welfare and Harmony was constituted by the Central Government to ensure compliance with the implementation of the decision of the Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal.)

Kerkar, who has a calm demeanour, also served as expert witness for the Goa government before the Tribunal. "I am not a pushover, but I am a soft man," he says. "I will not come out and shout slogans and pick a stone and throw it at a passing KSRTC bus." He is likely referring to the 2015 incident when a Goa-owned Kadamba Transport Corporation Ltd. bus was torched in Hubli by protesters agitating against Goa's opposition to the diversion of the Mhadei (Daijiworld Special Correspondent 2015). Since then, every time there are protests in Karnataka, Goa temporarily suspends its bus service to the state (Press Trust of India 2018). Goa's protests have typically taken the form of artistic and intellectual expressions. In contrast, Karnataka erupts more dramatically, burning tyres and effigies (Goa's former Advocate General says not just late Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar's but his own effigy too been burnt); vandalizing government offices and enforcing bandhs that shut down schools and offices in the North Karnataka towns of Hubli-Dharwad and Gadag and even impact day-to-day life as far Bengaluru (Press Trust of India 2017). These demonstrations are led by pro-farmer lobbies and sugar cane unions and even have the active support of the seers of the influential Lingayat community (The Hindu Special Correspondent 2024).

Kerkar's role as teacher and educator must also be acknowledged. His Vivekanand Environment Awareness Brigade has encouraged several young Goans to pursue careers as wildlife researchers. Herpetologist Nirmal Ulhas Kulkarni and ecologist Parag Rangnekar, well respected conservationists today, are two such examples. Keen on being better acquainted with Goa's biodiversity, Rangnekar met 'Bhai' (Kerkar) in 1999, when the Mhadei issue had just begun. He too, as a volunteer of the VEAB, would accompany Kerkar to Sattari's villages. "One of the things he would always speak about is the threat to this region's biodiversity," Rangnekar recalls. "I would ask him when you say 'biodiversity,' what do you mean? How many butterflies? How many birds? And he would respond, 'I don't know. I am a teacher of history; you are the ones who should tell me.'" Thus began a year-long documentation effort. A handful of amateur birders, initially without binoculars, trekked through every nook and corner of the Mhadei, often sleeping in the forests and "doing what young guys do." The outcome was a report, listing 176 birds of the Mhadei basin, sent to the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) at a time when it was compiling India's important bird and biodiversity sites. The BNHS's updated list identifies Karnataka govern-

ment's diversion scheme as "the most important (threat) and conservation issue for the Mhadei wildlife sanctuary" (Rahmani, Islam, and Kasambe 2016). The Mhadei's relevance as an important bird site was included in Goa's arguments before the Tribunal.

This marked the beginning of an exercise to document the "under-documented" natural history and biodiversity of Goa—a journey that Rangnekar, Kulkarni and others are still on. In 2000, the two also exhibited their photographs of butterflies and reptiles at the Kala Academy. For the inauguration, they requested VEAB members to bring water from different points of the Mhadei, pouring it into a single *kalash* (metal pot), symbolically recreating the river for urban Goa. "We realized that this was one of the disconnects—and in my opinion, it still exists today," says Rangnekar.

Tiger, Tiger Burning Dead!

In 2009, rumours of a tiger being shot in Keri reached Kerkar. Videos and photographs of the dead tiger, which had been burned soon after, were circulating among villagers but evaded Kerkar. With some persistence, he eventually gathered enough evidence and broke the story, first in the *Times of India* and then, the next day, in a local Marathi daily (Kerkar 2009). It was the English article that caught the attention of the Prime Minister's Office, which ordered an investigation. The country had been told that Goa had no tigers and here was proof to the contrary, albeit a dead one. The fallout was immediate. The Forest Department cracked down on Kerkar's fellow villagers, arresting nearly 20 people. As a consequence, Kerkar was summoned to the temple and accosted by villagers and socially boycotted for a long time thereafter. Meanwhile, the editor of the local paper was also under pressure to explain to the former CM Pratap Singh Rane how such an article, substantiating the existence of tigers in Goa, had gone to print. Ironically, the Forest Department would also accuse Kerkar of shielding the guilty. It is a phase Kerkar recalls with some anguish, "Now I can talk about it, but for five years no one would volunteer, and all our work came to a standstill," he says.

The Ranes have exercised feudal-like control over Sattari for generations. Pratap Singh Rane served as Congress MLA for four decades, out of which he was CM for a total of sixteen years, albeit not consecutively. His son followed him into politics in 2007 and has since retained the Valpoi constituency, even after switching from the Congress to the BJP in 2017. Both father and son have been staunchly opposed to the declaration of Mhadei as a wildlife sanctuary though it was declared as such along with Netravali Wildlife Sanctuary on 4 June 1999 when Goa was under President's Rule. While the father has called for a denotification of the sanctuary, the son has moved court against

the notifications of 1999 (TNN 2011). Kerkar has never harboured any political ambitions, but the tiger incident was enough to bring him into direct conflict with Rane and his son. The grassroots support that he and the MBA could once count on—including the backing former Valpoi MLA Venkatesh Desai had helped secure—was no longer available. Vishwajit Rane famously declared Goa's big cats as “nonresident tigers” and has vowed never to allow a tiger reserve (de Souza 2022). Locals in Sattari, who often lose cattle to tigers, fear that acknowledging their presence could lead to Mhadei being declared a tiger reserve and bring in restrictions on construction, forest use, and other activities. This is a very tangible fear, says Pangurang Gaonkar, editor of *Goan Varta*. “Villagers living in the Mhadei area already have all kinds of restriction on horticultural activities they had been carrying out even before the area was declared a sanctuary. If it is declared a tiger reserve, they will be at the mercy of forest officials,” he says. Despite his long association with the Mhadei's activists, Gaonkar whose family comes from the area is of the opinion the diversion allowed by tribunal is unlikely to affect Goa in this way.

In the face of Karnataka's persistent push for the water diversion projects, there has been a renewed demand for the tiger reserve, which environmentalists see as intrinsic to saving the Mhadei as well. The Goa government itself had, during Tribunal proceedings, placed on record the threats of the proposed dam and diversion projects to the tigers, which roam freely between Goa and Karnataka (Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal 2018, vol. II, 244–46, 304–305). And yet, the state is reluctant to declare the Mhadei a tiger reserve.

Language and Art in the Service of the Mhadei

In the year 2000, the Konkani Bhasha Mandal (KBM) adopted Mhadei as the theme for its seventh annual Yuva Mahotsav, a gathering of students and youth from across Goa. The organization had long represented the faction that fought for Konkani, to be recognised as Goa's official language and opposed the proposed merger with Maharashtra—a move rejected by the majority of Goans in the historic Opinion Poll of 16 January 1967.⁶ Prashant

⁶ Konkani had been systematically repressed and delegitimized under Portuguese rule, forcing generations of Goans to either study in Portuguese-medium schools or depend on Marathi books, particular in the border areas. Marathi—also the language of the priestly community of Bhats—became the language through which many of Goa's Hindus accessed religious scriptures and teachings. A Konkani language movement initiated in the 20th century by Vaman Varde Senai Valavalikar, popularly known as Shenoy Goembab, found new meaning in post-colonial Goa. Refusing to recognize Konkani as a legitimate language in its own right, Goa's first elected government under the Maharashtra Gomantak Party (MGP) advocated for Goa's merger with Maharashtra. Strong pushback from the Konkani faction led to the dispute being

Naik, then president of KBS, recalls the Mandal's decision to celebrate the Mhadei—as it does the Konkani language—as an integral part of Goa's cultural heritage and identity or *asmita* (pride associated with cultural identity). In the leadup to the event, held that year in Valpoi, a torch or *asmitae jyot* was carried across the villages of North Goa.

Gopinath Gawas—also a member of the Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan at the time—remembers scripting a street play for the festival. At the festival, Chief Minister Digamber Kamat, rather dramatically, vowed to make the “highest sacrifice” to defend Goa's interests in the inter-state dispute. If the Mhadei was the subject of plays one year, it was the topic for debates the next. Journalist Sandesh Prabhudesai recalls the youth holding a mock press conference, pretending to be both Goa and Karnataka officials, and later creating a newspaper page, complete with articles, photos, captions, and cartoons. As far as he is concerned, KBM had succeeded in taking the Mhadei issue to Goan society more broadly. And in his opinion, there was no more effective way to do it, than through the youth. A KBM special publication “Goan Asmita—Mhadei” explained how the river, a lifeline for Goa, could become, as Konkani had been, a unifying emblem of Goan identity. It also clarified that the Yuva Mahotsav welcomed all Goan youth, irrespective of religion or language, to participate in this festival of art and culture. Not everyone saw it that way. Some people with pro-Marathi sentiments had objected to the torch rally. A newspaper article or two also insinuated that the Mandal was usurping the Mhadei issue, briefly fanning the embers of the Marathi-Konkani divide—a fault line that underlines Goan society.

Human Chain

Artist Miriam Koshy was among those who travelled to Sanquelim for the 16 January 2023 meeting. Koshy, who works at the intersection of ecology, art, spirituality, community engagement, and activism, had through her art successfully persuaded the state to reconsider a reclamation project planned for a stretch of mangrove wetlands. “Effective action on human-caused climate change requires more than scientific facts. We are moved to act by stories, poetry, art, music, and by retelling our personal experiences of a rapidly changing climate,” says Koshy. From this philosophy and her work emerged two initiatives—the Earthivist Collective and the Khazan Society of Goa.

The Earthivist Collective brought together “citizens, artists, musicians, filmmakers, and journalists collaborating at the intersection of citizen science,

decided by India's first-ever referendum or “Opinion Poll.” Fatorda MLA, Vijay Sardesai who played a significant role in making the January 2023 event —“in Sawant's backyard”—a success has criticized CM Pramod Sawant for discontinuing official celebration of Opinion Day, suggesting the CM's loyalties lie in Sawantwadi in Maharashtra (The Goan Network 2024).

preservation, awareness, and art,” aiming not just to raise awareness but to forge an emotional connection with ecosystems under threat and to inspire positive action. The Khazan Society, led by architect Elsa Fernandes, who has worked extensively on the subject, is committed to preserving Goa’s *khazans*—traditional agricultural lands in coastal wetlands and estuarine regions, intrinsically dependent on the Mhadei’s waters.

For Koshy, it was vital to remind Goans that the river was more than a resource to be fought over; it was an emblem of nature that united them and inspired their art and shaped their stories. With Heta Pandit and other colleagues of the Goa Heritage Action Group (which included Prajal Sakhardande), and Save Mhadei, Save Goa, Koshy designed an event allowing Goans to show solidarity on the issue through various activities. Her own artistic contribution—seven guardian spirits or *Rakhandar* of the river—were supported by “a whole army of [Goan citizens] to honour and protect our *Mai*.” This vision evolved into the *Mhadei Amchi Mai* festival, featuring nature walks along the banks of the Mandovi, poetry readings, painting, jazz, and dance performances. On a sweltering Saturday afternoon on 20 March 2023, thousands gathered to eventually form a human chain at the mouth of the river. The event was widely covered by national media, thanks in part to a conscious outreach strategy—executed by PR professionals—to publicize Goa’s collective stand. For months after the event, the organizers kept up the momentum, sharing artworks and films on the subject on their Instagram handle. Social media, a tool never previously used by the MBA, was adeptly deployed by campaigns such as the *Mhadei Amchi Mai* and the *Amchi Mollem* protests against the three-linear project, a triple project involving the extension of rail, road, and electric connections cutting through the Mollem forest (Bakshi 2020).

The healthy turnout at Miramar for the Human Chain, had benefitted in part from the support of the Catholic Archdiocese of Goa and Daman which shared details of the event and urged people to attend (DCSCM Goa 2023). The event was not, however, as socioeconomically broad-based as the organizers had hoped. They had been counting on Save Mhadei, Save Goa for help with this issue. Calls had been made to specific demographics like farmers and fisherfolk for example and while individuals did attend, it probably was in their capacity as individuals and not reflective of organized representation of those socioeconomic groups.

Save Mhadei, Save Goa

On October 23, 2019, Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change Prakash Javadekar tweeted a letter that in effect granted an

in-principle nod to Karnataka's projects. It was not a coincidence that by-elections in Karnataka crucial to the BJP were scheduled for the first week of December that same year (Shekhar 2019).⁷

That same month Hrudayanath Shirodkar and Mahesh Mhambrey launched the Progressive Front of Goa (PFG)—a “non-political NGO with progressive mindset.” Both had previously been part of Goa Suraksha Manch (GSM) and regarded its founder, former RSS chief Subhash Velingkar, as a mentor. The GSM, however, failed in its intended aim to cut into the BJP's vote share during the 2017 Assembly Elections and had since faded into political irrelevance.⁸ The months following Javadekar's tweet were marked by a burst of activism. Congress youth workers courted arrest while demanding a withdrawal of his letter. The PFG, alongside other opposition parties joined a *rasta roko* (a “block the road” protest) led by Vijai Sardesai at Porvorim, bringing traffic on all three Mandovi bridges to a standstill for two to three hours. Shirodkar claims this was the first time the general public was forced to take notice of the Mhadei issue due to the sheer inconvenience caused. He himself was arrested and briefly jailed in Bicholim during another protest against Javadekar, who in his additional capacity as Minister of Communication and IT was attending the International Film Festival of India (IFFI). Yet, this flurry of protests in late 2019 typifies the sporadic, reactive nature of Goa's Mhadei movement. A cursory look at the media coverage online suggests that public concern and anger in Goa are reactive and sparked by actions from Karnataka or decisions from the Centre. Rarely do these concerns sustain themselves in Goa's public discourse or activism in the periods between these flashpoints.

The Progressive Front had planned a series of talks on all things ailing Goa and started by inviting Kerkar to speak on the Mhadei issue. This birthed “Save Mhadei, Save Goa,” where Mhambrey and Shirodkar joined hands with Professor Sakhardande to form an organization dedicated to the Mhadei. Despite successfully convening the 16 January 2023 Viridi event at Sanquelim, Save Mhadei, Save Goa has not been able to mobilize the public on the issue over the last two years. In private, members say they are split over the question of the proposed tiger reserve. While one faction believes it is crucial to saving the Mhadei, the other fears it will alienate any grudging support they have elicited for the Mhadei from the people of Sattari.

⁷ The by-elections were originally scheduled for 21 October 2019 but were rescheduled on 27 September 2019 by the Election Commission to 5 December 2019, with results announced on 9 December 2019.

⁸ In December of 2021 Mhambrey and Shirodkar would end up joining the Indian National Congress.

Ganv Zala Zantto

In the leadup to the Sanquelim event, actor-director Rajdeep Naik asked his 35,000 followers on Facebook to join the event. Naik runs Kala Chetana, Volvoi—arguably Goa’s most successful *natak* (theatre) company—producing and performing plays often written by his wife and fellow actor, Suchita Narvekar. In January of 2023, Kala Chetana was performing a play on the government’s new education policy, something Narvekar as a young mother had studied. Pleased with the production, the state’s Department of Education agreed to fund a few “promotional” shows. However, Naik’s straightforward appeal to the public advocating for the cause of Mhadei prompted the state government to immediately cancel these shows. “They took this decision on a Saturday, when government officials rarely work,” says Narvekar.

Partly in response and partly inspired by the Viridi event, Narvekar immersed herself in the subject with Rajendra Kerkar’s help and wrote the comedy, “Ganv Zala Zantto.” The title translates to “the village is growing old” or alternatively, “villages are getting educated” and tells the story of a family torn between a deep sentimental attachment to their ancestral village and the lure of urban life, while facing the looming threat of drought. The Konkani play has been a roaring success, even travelling London and being performed to packed venues hosting audiences of the Goan diaspora. It is funny and poignant and has the audience laughing out loud and wiping away tears, but most importantly, it has them engaging with the issue of the Mhadei that the play “brings to their doorstep.” Narvekar, who also plays the protagonist’s wife, says it was a very real challenge to write a comedy on a subject so serious without trivializing the issue. The success of the show—performed more than 200 times including at a school—suggests the script has avoided this pitfall. “Our play says *ab to utho* (‘at least wake up now’). If you see the comments on my Facebook page, people are not just commenting on the play but writing their own reflections on Mhadei.” says Naik. According to Sandesh Prabhudesai, the play’s appeal has crossed traditional cultural lines. “In Goa, Hindus watch *nataks* and Catholic, *tiatrs*. For the first time, Catholics are also turning up to see a *natak*.” This trend began with a priest attending one such show and after Naik called out the government’s retaliation on Facebook.

In May of 2015, months before the United National Climate Change Conference in Paris, Pope Francis released *Laudato si’*, a letter emphasizing the unsustainability of current consumerism and mankind’s responsibility to take care of the earth, the common home, which it has been entrusted. As part

of this *Laudato si'* movement, the conference of Catholic Bishops in India formed ecological commissions at its dioceses. In Goa, in its third year now, this commission is chaired by Bolmax Pereira, a Catholic priest and botany professor whose PhD thesis has been on the wetlands of Goa. Goa's peoples' movements have often had the church's overt backing, through the Council for Social Justice and Peace which now focuses more on issues such as human rights and poverty. From 2014 onwards, however, conscious of how its involvement is used to polarize Goa's citizens, the church has chosen to support issues from the background, says Father Pereira. As an influential community leader, activist and scientist, at the helm of a dedicated ecological commission, Father Pereira says he fills the gaps and is able to connect people from different walks of life and religions in movements against the three-linear project or the damming and diversion of the Mhadei.

Conclusion

In its early years, in the late 1990s, the Mhadei movement was nestled in Sattari in North Goa where the river first enters the state from Karnataka. In stark contrast, by 2023, it is people and leaders from South Goa who are voicing their protests and turning up for the cause. Sattari—firmly under the control of Vishwajit Rane—does not speak up, despite potentially having the most to lose.

This geographic shift in the movement reflects a deeper issue: the provincialization of environmental struggles within Goa. Inanpith awardee Damodar Mauzo has participated in nearly every major progressive movement in Goa—the Opinion Poll of 1967, the 1973 environmental movement against Zuari Agro Chemicals, the statehood agitation of the 1980s, the 1986-87 Official Language agitation, the 1991 Konkan Railway realignment protest, and most recently during the pandemic, against the three-linear project through Mollem National Park and Bhagwan Mahavir Sanctuary. “As an activist, I find that people do not come out to support popular movements. It is not that people are not concerned, but sometimes we are just provincial-minded. We think this is an issue of the people of Sattari, why should I be bothered? Or if something occurs in Sanguem or Canacona, people from the northeast will say, it is their problem, not ours.”

Most of Goa's socio-political movements have been driven from Salcete but the Mhadei might be one of the few exceptions, says Father Bolmax Pereira. “Not taking away anything from the great work that MBA has carried out, the connect between the movement and the influencers of society was missing. One of the influencers was the church.” Father Pereira acknowledges the Commission's role in making recent events more participatory. The com-

ing together of such varied interests, from former RSS leader Velingkar to the church, on a common platform at Viridi, happened by making the Mhadei the sole agenda and setting aside ideological differences. Father Pereira claims that the Catholic Church in Goa has not supported political parties above an issue, “Even today people say the fall of the Congress in 2012 was because the Church took a stand against the controversial regional plan.” Under the Ecological Commission a movement drawing youth back to farming through farmers club begun in Chicalim is spreading through the state (Herald Team 2024). It has received great response in the North Goa talukas of Aldona, Mapusa, and Siolim, says Pereira. “Right now, Chicalim Youth Farmers Club is harvesting watermelon. Instead of going on street and making noise, the ecology commission would also like to contribute with something positive like drawing youth back to farming, and movements such as fighting for Mhadei.”

When it began at the turn of the century, the Mhadei movement found natural allies in organizations across the border in Karnataka. Lt. Col. (Retd) Ravender Kumar Saini, who has been steering the NGO Pariyavarani in Belgaum after late General Sardeshpande, is also the petitioner in a matter heard by the Karnataka High Court. Responding to his plea, the court has barred the state from working on the Kalasa-Banduri project in forest areas without prior environmental clearance. Saini recalls the early years of the movement in Goa being more discourse-driven/ intellectualized, failing to create a *mahol*—a Hindi word used for socio-political commentary for an emotionally heightened or mobilizing environment. “People in Goa were more of academics, conducting seminars, giving lectures, and writing articles. They could have benefitted from having more foot soldiers who could go to the forests (like Kugaji), or sit and engage extensively with panchayat after panchayat.” Saini who will turn 70 next month, says that Pariyavarani, instrumental in getting the Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary notified, may have lost some of its vigour too. “We made a big mistake, and we are trying to rectify it now. We did not train a second generation.” Saini’s lament for Pariyavarani, may hold true for the MBA too. On 9 April 2025, as this article gets written, Khanapur’s citizens met to object to states’ moves to lay pipelines to the proposed Bhandura project. The lone attendees from Goa were Kerkar and wildlifer Ramesh Dharmekar.

Back in the late nineties, journalist Rupesh Sawant sent an email to “the upper layer of society” and “non-resident Goans in touch with the mother land through the internet,” encouraging them to turn it into a chain mail and spread the word. From Sawant’s essay it seems they even considered set-

ting up an independent website although this idea was shelved for being too costly and impossible to update every week. 25 years since, the MBA has no social media strategy. This shortcoming is all the more evident given how effectively other recent campaigns in Goa have used social media. It would be reasonable to ask today, If a tree fall in a forest and no one posts about it on Facebook or Twitter, does it make a sound?

The structural weakness of the movement also lies in its framing. In Karnataka the water scarcity of Hubli-Dharwad is a lived reality that translates into a more immediate water crisis, which inhabitants of the region have been told can only be addressed by diverting water from the Mhadei. On the other hand, Goans are being urged to imagine a future scenario of water scarcity that given the heavy monsoon rains does not feel like an immediate threat to the average Goan.

Compounding this is the fact that the Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan (MBA) itself, which came to be the face of the campaign, consciously steered away from the path of public mobilization. Sawant says public demonstration was not necessary once the matter was in court. And in any case, much of the MBA's energy was spent in explaining the situation to people, many of whom believed the Mhadei to be distinct from Mandovi. However, more than one official engaged in Goa's fight laments the state's lack of demonstrative passion. A government official who spoke on condition of anonymity recalls being surprised at the number of people Karnataka could bring to stand in front of the Tribunal with placards in hand. When the Tribunal visited the project sites, authorities were hoping Kerkar could gather a small crowd, but barely anyone turned up. It is telling that government officials banked on an individual activist, rather than local politicians or parties for this show of support.

The campaign in Goa—whether in Kerkar's writings, Koshy's human chain, or KBM's Yuva Mahotsav—has predominantly been framed in ecological and cultural terms. It draws on symbolism that portrays the river as *Amchi Mai* ("our mother") and as a lifeline but fails to engage with the material realities of contemporary Goans. The economic implications of the diversion—its impact on agriculture, river transport, fisheries, and tourism—have rarely been foregrounded. Key stakeholders like farmers, fishermen, or Dudhsagar tour operators are conspicuous by their absence in the movement, despite being obvious stakeholders. Once a formidable force in Goan politics, Goa's miners, whose entire logistical advantage comes from plying iron ore barges on the Mandovi, have also been silent.⁹

⁹ Many of them have business interests in Karnataka

An exception to this rule has been Prakash Parienkar's work *on puran sheti (xeti)*. A 2002 edition of Goa Foundation's *Fish Curry and Rice*, a source book of Goan ecology and lifestyle, dedicated two pages to this ancient silt-based agricultural practised by 500 individuals in 27 Goan villages, producing 3,64,200 kg of paddy. By 2024 however, Parienkar found himself trying to "revive" this practice (Business Goa 2024). Ironically what brought this practice to the verge of extinction is a "successful" Goa Water Resources Department (WRD) water conservation and irrigation scheme launched in 2016 under which the state constructed check dams and *bandharas* that ended up flooding these areas (Navhind Times 2014). There have been several articles lamenting the decline of Goa's agriculture. The same edition of *Fish Curry and Rice* devotes three pages to the subject, highlighting conversion of agricultural land for real estate use. (The upstream projects covered separately find no mention here). Seven pages are dedicated to Goa's *khazans*, saline flood plains of Goa's tidal estuaries on which paddy used to be cultivated through an intricate system of bunds and sluice gates. *Khazans*, which total some 18,000 hectares, and according to some experts have been ruined by farmers themselves, prioritized fishing over farming. "Even those opposing the Borim bridge are doing more fishing than agriculture on their *khazan* land. Goa built three dams, Tillari, Anjune and Salaulim, how many farmers are using their waters," quips one of them who asked to remain anonymous.

There is almost a romanticization of Goa's traditional livelihoods but in reality Goans have steadily moved away from such livelihoods and agriculture at large (Narayan 2021; Herald Team 2021). In Rane's constituency, almost every household today has at least one or two members employed in a government job, widely believed to be facilitated by the Ranes. The *kulagars* or areca nut plantations in the upper regions of Goa are not the sole source of subsistence for their owners. In neighbouring areas, large sections of the population depend on mining. Farmlands affected by mining rejects have long ago been surrendered to ancillary activities, as has the river itself—an issue that Ramesh Gawas has been trying to highlight since decades. Gawas, a part of the MBA in its initial years and a prominent environmentalist from Goa's mining belt, no longer associates himself with the organization, faulting them for sharing a platform with very same political forces that should be held accountable for the problem.¹⁰

Goa Forward (GF)'s Vijai Sardesai disagrees, claiming no movement in Goa has succeeded without politicians. And he holds that against the Mhadei

¹⁰ Bicholim-based Gawas prefers being described as responsible citizen, and not as environmentalist or activist

movement. “One prominent agitation, which I failed because politicians were asked to stay out was the MOPA (airport) agitation. You have to get elected representative of the people to stand up for these issues. Many environmental activists spoke very strongly about the Mhadei issue on one hand, but also collaborated with the government saying, that at this stage the government is acting.” Sardesai who was an ally of the BJP, and whose GF colleague was Parrikar’s WRD Minister insists he and his party have taken a consistent stand. “When the BJP is in opposition, they protest the Mhadei constructions, when they are in power and, in power in Karnataka they remain mum. I have no bosses.”

Unfortunately, the Mhadei, unlike the Opinion Poll or statehood, has never been a political movement, says Ramakant Khalap. The former Union Law Minister has been advocating for reforms to Goa’s tenancy act and revenue codes, to be able implement in letter and spirit what these meant to do—retain, preserve and conserve and use agriculture land for cultivation. Khalap who has even drafted a proposed bill, says he never got a response from any of the political parties, neither in the government nor opposition parties, who are relegated to a minority anyway. “If you are not interested in your own agricultural land, why would you be interested in the fresh water that nourishes these lands?” (In 2003, the government introduced the Goa Restriction on Transfer of Agricultural Land Bill 2003, but Khalap says it leaves out agricultural land under horticulture, irrigation and paddy cultivation and is of limited consequence.)

The Mhadei invariably makes headlines around elections—but only those in Karnataka, even if they are only by-elections. It is not really an electoral issue in Goa and politicians in power can thus afford to display a cavalier attitude on the issue. Parrikar famously assured the BJP ahead of one such by-election that Goa would not object to Karnataka’s so-called “drinking water” projects even as Goa’s entire contention in court has been that this diversion is not for drinking water purposes. More recently, under Sawant, the state government told the Supreme Court it has no objection to the notification of the Tribunal’s award—a decision that, after provoking outrage in Goa, it tried to blame on its Advocate-on-Record (Shetye 2021).

Goan politics is today dominated by the two national parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian National Congress. The BJP’s priorities can be gauged from the fact that politicians from Karnataka, such as BJP’s B.L. Santosh, are put in charge of party matters in the state of Goa. During the election campaign, when Home Minister Amit Shah told voters in Belgaum, the “BJP government had managed to find a solution to the long-pending dis-

pute between Goa and Karnataka” Goa’s BJP CM Sawant was by his side according to his critics. Back home, the CM maintained “a guarded silence on the issue—treading a fine line between defending Goa’s cause and stopping short of condemning the union home minister Amit Shah’s claim” (de Souza 2023).

At a constituency level, the Mhadei seems to matter not to the Ranés of Sattari. The Mhadei does not reach South Goa, where the Congress still retains a vote share. It is not an electoral issue for Sardesai in his own seat in Fatorda, nor in the other two South Goa seats his party contested in the last elections. Goan politicians’ propensity to switch parties, and shift loyalties also makes it difficult for them to sustain a position. With the exception of Nirmala Sawant, there are no committed political champions of the Mhadei in Goa. The Mhadei is used more often to embarrass the government in power. (Sardesai for example has used the services of former state AGs Atmaran Nadkarni and Dattaprasad Lawande who fought for Goa in the Tribunal to argue his petition in the Mhadei matter in court.) On the backfoot, after the Virdi event, Sawant announced a House Committee to look at the Mhadei issue. This committee had met only once the month after and never sat again.

The Mhadei “movement” is characterized by reactive, event-driven protests interspersed with periods of inaction. The RSS had carried out a village-to-village march, with floats depicting the river as a goddess, but this campaign is nearly lost to public memory. A participant requesting anonymity explained, “When the BJP came to power, and the stand changed, we had to toe the government line. Political parties are more influential than social organizations, they can influence any outcome, including, if they want, the courts.”

Goans are slow to agitate, says Mauzo, and he has a theory he likes to entertain privately as to why this may be so. “We lived under the Portuguese for 450 years, and endured so many bans and censorships, on our use of our own language, even wedding cards were censored during one period. I think five percent of this is in our blood, which is why Liberation was delayed, our statehood was delayed, and that is why any movement takes a long time.”

A sustained, organized movement needs continuous community engagement—such as the Earthivist’s Human Chain or Naik’s blockbuster play—proactive advocacy, dedicated grassroots organizations and political and even economic champions, which the Opinion Poll had. Several journalists, who have covered the movement say the Mhadei may have been an emotive subject once but it has never been a people’s movement.

Kumar Kalanand Mani, one of the founders of Peaceful Society, says Goans have forgotten they are not just consumers, but also conservators of water as natural resource:

Goa used to be a state of surplus water, with a controlled consumption pattern. Over the last 30 years we have on the one hand lost our traditional ways of managing water, ceded to the government what used to be the responsibility of the state—wells tanks, springs, ponds, even rivers were largely managed by the *comunidades*—and our consumption of water is unchecked. The citizen has traditionally been both consumer and conservator. Its entitlement over water should also be equitable and not compromised by the needs of dominant sectors like mining or tourism. Unless this equity is addressed property, they may not be aware that they are also stakeholders.

Koshy counters any cynicism of Goa's stewardship of its rivers, including this author's, drawing a parallel to the Mhadei. "The river has its own momentum, growing and swelling in relation to the landscape it traverses." The movements with their own legacy have impacted and molded the movement, like tributaries big and small, adding to the flow, and shaping the formidable course of the river.'

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