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> Will outrage over environmental apathy on CRZ, coal impact voting?

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Report by
TEAM HERALD

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Whether it was the intense protests against coal pollution and the plans to create a coal hub in Goa, or the series of protests across the State against the CRZ notification; there have been a number of important environmental issues that have increasingly become a part of the citizens' priority. But will the outrage by such Goan groups against the government's apathy towards environmental issues, reflect in their votes in India's upcoming Lok Sabha elections and the Assembly bypolls?

MARGAO: With the Lok Sabha elections around the corner and simultaneously the four Goa bypolls, a question has been raised in the public domain if the political parties and candidates will fight for issues of the environment, like those that had been raised recently by anti-CRZ and anti- coal pollution groups.

With the Goan fishing community in particular being affected by CRZ notification and coal being issue affecting Mormugao taluka, the voters wish that environment has to become the main issue for elections.

The Goenchea Ramponnkarancho Ekvott (GRE) is the organisation primarily working for the fisher-folks and the community directly or indirectly connected to the Coastal zones and their demography. The GRE claims that a strong 80,000 small and traditional fishing communities of Goa inhabit the coastal areas and benefit from the sea and coast for their daily bread. In a way this is the community which has help sustain the traditional fishing activities and also keep a balance in the coastal ecosystem and marine ecology.

The National Fish Workers Forum, with Vice Chairperson in Goa Olencio Simoes had earlier met the Congress AICC President Rahul Gandhi and handed him a list of demands, which they had demanded Congress includes in the manifesto for Goa. As the number of people involved is large and that having direct impact with South Goa seat the Congress has gone ahead with the issue.

The Former Union Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh is going to meet the fishermen in Goa on April 9 to discuss the impact of the Centre's 2019 CRZ notification. It may be recalled that the AICC President Rahul Gandhi had assured this meeting during his Goa visit.

Simoes has been on record saying that "the notification has removed earlier provisions of law for demarcating fishing villages, sand dunes, turtle-nesting sites, khazans. It has opened up the coastline for industrial development," Olencio said.

Olencio has informed that they have already formed Goa Against CRZ 2019 group in which all NGOs and political parties like Congress, APP, NCP were members and till date they have conducted more than 10 meetings in different places from North to South Goa which were attended by large number of people and followed by a public meeting at Lohia Maidan. This was attended by NGOs, Congress, NCP, AAP and others.

"We have appealed to all political parties to make this an election issue and whichever party promises us to withdraw the new CRZ notification 2019; we will come openly vote for them and even join the party if required as it is do and die specially for the 80,000 fishing community of Goa," Olencio insisted.

"The new notification will convert the entire 105 km and more 180 km of riverline into concrete jungle as rapid port led expansion and infrastructure development with massive industrialisation is promoted in the new notification. This will displace the traditional communities, tourism stakeholders, farmers and others," added Simoes.

The NFF had earlier said, "We are the original coastal dwellers and have been requesting and demanding that our rights be protected in the interest of our livelihood and the environment, at large. Alas! The interest of affluent stakeholders has always been given priority, thereby trampling over the livelihood of us poor traditional fishing persons and the already depleting marine ecology. Political parties and successive elected governments have been making lofty pre poll promises and turning a blind eye post being elected. The current elected Government of Goa has introduced several anti fishing and anti environmental projects that have been threatening the future of our livelihood and the marine ecology of the State of Goa" NFF opined.

Political commentator and columnist Prabhakar Timble, while commenting on the CRZ 2019 notification issue and coal issue, said, "local issues of Goa have become so strong here that the people of Goa now perceive that the local Goa BJP has become a party of jokers" he criticised. **==**

"As far as political impact of CRZ 2019 notification and coal issue is concerned it will strengthen the non-BJP vote bank and will benefit the non-BJP candidate that is Congress," he said.

When asked whether the issue is going to pass the test of national issues and the Presidential-like election pattern in the Lok Sabha elections, Timble said, "The capacity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the graph of his popularity have declined. And he alone cannot pull votes at national level. In Goa, of course the issue of coal and CRZ will dominate in the Lok Sabha as well as Assembly elections. In addition to that the local issues will dominate. People don't think national way. A general voter looks at collapsed administration, rudderless cabinet, BJP going back on all their promises may it be on casinos, mining, coal, CRZ and others.

Prabhakar Timble explained that for the general voters local issues dominate and only the elite distinguishes between local and National issues.

However, yet another columnist and political analyst, Adv. Cleofato Almeida Coutinho has an opposite opinion. He says, "The local issues like the CRZ 2019 and coal are going to go on the back burner but in better interest of Goa it should be the issue for voting," said Cleofato.

"The CRZ 2019 and coal issue will be pushed to the sideline as they are trying to make this into a Presidential-like election like 2014. This Lok Sabha election will seen on a bigger frame whether PM Narendra Modi continues or not," said Cleofato.

He further opined that the issue should be influencing voters but the circumstances are going to put it on to the back burner.

Savio Correia, a important loop in the Goa Against Coal movement too has an opinion different to expectations. "Coal issue is a localised issue and it may not find attention in the LS elections. Issues of environment have still not become an electoral issue. Though they are electoral issues in the developed nations but whether it will impact or not can't be said," opined Savio.

He further said, "I feel that it is an opportunity for the people to show the authorities through the ballot and elected Government about their fears," said Savio while adding that there is a fear psychosis over being vocal on these major issues.

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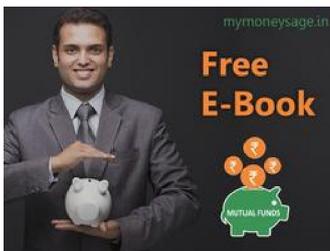
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