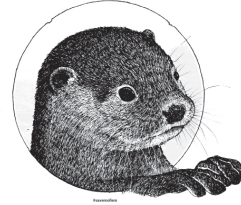


**Building bridges**  
On August 15, citizens created a human bridge over the protected area where the railway line is expected to be built



**Small packages**  
Amche Mollem works in small groups, using a WhatsApp group for day to day communication, which is managed by a group

240  
In total, the parks occupy an area of 240 sq ft



**In the hotspot**  
Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary and Mollem National Park constitute the largest protected area in Goa and is part of the Western Ghats, one of the 8 biodiversity hotspots



# A MIRACLE IN MOLLEM

The concerned citizens of Goa have launched a widespread movement that hopes to save the protected Mollem National Park from 3 major developmental projects. **Azmia Riaz** learns more about it

*From a tiny little scorpion to a flycatcher which is blue  
From a majestic gaur to a keelback or two  
This is all going to die, we'll never get them back  
And all this for what? Some stupid railway track!*

**W**hat 14-year-old Panjim resident Vikram D'Silva wrote in four lines has come to represent a sentiment boiling in the veins of thousands of Goans. In April, many citizens of the coastal state woke up to the news that three proposed developmental plans had been passed: Widening the existing national highway 4A into 4 lanes, double-tracking of a railway line, and the construction of a power transmission line. These would encroach upon over 170 hectares of land within Mollem National Park and Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary. The projects were announced on April 7 during a virtual meeting held by the National Board for Wildlife.

Nandini Velho is a wildlife biologist and conservationist who got tangled up in the movement through a combination of professional and personal interest. "I am Goan by passion!" she laughs. "The park and sanctuary were places that I had visited on camps multiple times. When environment minister Prakash Javadekar tweeted that that they were fast-tracking these projects, I took notice like any other concerned citizen."

Goa's concerned citizenry was not one to sit idle. Perhaps in an effort to remind those in power about who Mollem belonged to, a citizen's movement called Amche Mollem (meaning Our Mollem in Konkani) was born. They began by capturing the nation's attention with a change.org petition that was signed by more than 70,000 people, many of them students and youth who cared deeply for the land around them. This brought together Goans from every walk of life, social circles and industries to demand that the projects be questioned.

The project would encroach upon 377 hectares of land, out of which 187 fall within the park and sanctuary premises. Nandini says, "We needed to be very critical of these proposals because the effects they could have are irreversible. For those who live here, Mollem and the iconic places around it are something we learn about in school. The authorities like to say that we are just scientists or artists coming together in anger. In all honesty, we are just a group of appalled citizens. How can you call an action 'public interest' when half of the public is unaware of it and the other half is up in arms about it?"

Amche Mollem works in small, focused groups, with only 10 members working actively at a given point of time. Most of the members are young students and enraged artists demanding due process. In July, the environmental action group Goa Foundation filed a Public Interest Litigation concerning the three projects to High Court and the Supreme Court's Central Empowered Committee (CEC).

Different interest groups including legal groups, doctors, the tourism industry, political leaders and scientists had come together to affect change from their respective industries. Lorraine D'Silva, a Mollem resident, discovered the movement through art. Artists from around the state had come together to create artwork that would stir up anyone's interest through social media. When



**Saving the species**

All three projects require the diversion of forest land where the forest department has revealed presence of Schedule-I and Schedule-II species such as the tiger, dhole and Indian Pangolin

we spoke, Lorraine was still fatigued from an intense month of work.

She says, "The people of Goa have responded to many things as a collective but this is the first youth-driven movement and that means a lot. These projects were passed under the guise of citizen's interest and the citizens are just not interested! All three of these projects would mostly just benefit the coal industry as would make it easier for companies to transport coal. Any such major project within a protected area needs to go through a robust scientific process. There need to be afforestation plans, the transmission line had no Environment Impact Assessment draft at all and so much more due process that is standard to any such case."

From the very beginning, the movement has been led strongly by a legal team that has come together to protect the areas. By August 2, the state government submitted a response to the CEC who would analyse the responses. Currently, the team is expecting this advisory board of the supreme court to offer their official response to the demands. What will be the future of this movement? "We are prepared for the likelihood that our demands are not met. But whatever happens, this movement will always remind us that the citizens of Goa were not willing to take it lying down."

**THE AMCHE MOLLEM TIMELINE**

**Stage 1**

- 70,000+ signatures on a Change.org petition helped the movement go viral
- 7,000+ emails sent via Let India Breathe
- Webinars to spread awareness
- Formal representations to National Board for Wildlife and Goa Government: 160+ scientists from across India and Goa / 150+ small business owners in Goa / 150+ tourism stakeholders / Travel & Tourism Association of Goa (TTAG)

**Stage 2**

- Goa Foundation petitions the High Court and the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) about the 3 projects in Mollem
- CEC asks Respondents to respond to them by August 2, 2020
- Citizens and expert representations sent to the CEC. Prerna Singh Bindra, former Member of the National Board for Wildlife sent a summary of 18 different representations sent to the CEC
- Extensive press coverage on letters and submissions to the CEC
- Weekly webinars covering legal perspectives, ecology and Insta-hangouts
- Infographics + illustrations of letters and submissions by artists
- Campaign support: 20,000+ signatures on the Jhatkaa petition to the CEC
- Letters to the MLA + other public actions

**Why Mollem needs saving**

The protected area is home to more than 721 plant species, 235 bird species, 219 butterfly species, 80 odonate species, 70 mammal species, 75 ant species, 45 reptile species, 44 fish species, 43 fungi species, 27 amphibian species, 24 orchid species and 18 species of lichens



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