

## Agroecology as Christian Environmentalism in a Hindu Majoritarian Context

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### Abstract

This chapter analyzes the environmental and agroecological engagements of the Catholic Church and Goan Christians in a context defined by the rise and consolidation of an assertive and aggressive Hindu majoritarian politics in large parts of India. Focusing on the state of Goa, we demonstrate how environmentalist initiatives in the form of agroecology and community farming have emerged as politically acceptable forms of public engagement and activism. These activities, we argue, signal a greening of the Catholic Church that simultaneously enables it to retain an important public voice and a position of social leadership in an otherwise hostile political context.

**Keywords:** Hindu nationalism; Goa; community farming; Catholicism

There is an emergency before humankind: the emergency of preserving this world to subsequent generations. There is a challenge before us which needs to be addressed without wasting time: the challenge of preserving clean air, clean water, hills and forests, fields and rivers. The more we delay to listen to the cry of God's creation, the further we walk the path of self-destruction ... Keeping aside all differences let us all join hands in protecting God's creation. As members of the Church, each one of us has the responsibility and the duty to safeguard creation. Let us fulfil them with diligence (Archdiocese of Goa and Daman 2021, 31–32).

In this chapter, we focus on the environmental engagements of the Catholic Church in the Indian state of Goa. As our opening quotation from the Archbishop of Goa and Daman's pastoral letter from 2021–2022 indicates, concerns with the current environmental crisis figure high on the agenda of the Church in Goa, as indeed it does for the Catholic Church at large, and for most other world religions.

The purpose of focusing on what we in this chapter refer to as Christian environmentalism (see Quinsey 2024) in the specific context of Goa is to analyze how the Catholic Church and Goan Christians have sought to navigate a rapidly changing political context characterized by the rise and consolidation of an assertive Hindu majoritarian politics that defines and targets religious minorities in India

as “anti-national Others.” Indeed, with the rise of Hindu nationalist politics across India, forms of public assertion by religious minority groups that can be construed as “political” increasingly invite reprisals from the Hindu right, leading to a considerable shrinking of the space for social outreach and activism. We argue that Christian environmentalism emerges, in this context, as a politically acceptable form of public outreach that enables the Catholic Church to retain an important public voice and a position of social leadership, despite the narrowing political space.

Environmental questions and the protection of Goa’s ecology have been part of the Church’s agenda for some time, but they have, tellingly, assumed even greater importance in recent years as the Church has actively engaged in issues of environmental sustainability and the protection of Goa’s air, water, hills, forests, fields, and rivers, to paraphrase the archbishop’s pastoral letter. Environmental issues are widely endorsed by the Catholic Church globally, as epitomized in Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato Si’*, as well as by political authorities in India, at least rhetorically, and by most Goans irrespective of creed and confession due to widely shared popular concerns about environmental degradation. This imbues environmentalism with a significant degree of religious, social, and political legitimacy and acceptability. Within the Church’s general reorientation towards environmental issues, however, we find that agroecology and agricultural rejuvenation have received particular attention. We argue that the attractiveness of practicing Christian environmentalism through agroecology is twofold. First, a turn to agroecology and agricultural rejuvenation enables the Church to engage with and address pressing local issues related to the degradation of soil, the overuse of chemicals, and the toxicity of food, as well as the locally unpopular large-scale diversion of Goan lands for non-agricultural purposes. At the same time, the attractiveness of agroecology is also derived from the fact that not all forms of environmentalism are equally legitimate in the eyes of governments and politicians who remain firmly committed to furthering neoliberal restructuring with a strong pro-business orientation—an orientation that is endorsed by Hindu nationalist governments both regionally and nationally. In light of this, localized agroecological initiatives emerge, we suggest, as politically more acceptable forms of Christian environmentalism because they can be more easily framed as “apolitical”; as posing no direct threat to the broader processes of capitalist accumulation; and even as secular.

The chapter is structured as follows. We begin by offering a brief account of the role of the Catholic Church in Goan society, focusing especially on its postcolonial transformation and showing how the championing of new social, political, and environmental issues was part of this transformation. We subsequently discuss the current political conjuncture marked by the rise of Hindu nationalism both nationally and in Goa, documenting how this has worked to severely circumscribe the political space available to actors associated or affiliated with the Church. The final

sections analyze the Church's turn to agroecology and agricultural rejuvenation as a response not only to the global environmental crisis, but also to more localized political and economic developments. While this turn is arguably underpinned by theologically grounded ideas of responsible stewardship and an ethics or "culture" of care for God's creation (see DeWitt 2016), the case study from Goa that we offer highlights not so much the ideational and motivational aspect of Christianity as faith, but rather emphasizes the crucial importance of Church institutions, personnel, and knowledge networks in mobilizing and organizing local communities around community farming.<sup>1</sup>

### The Transformations of the Catholic Church in Goa

While Christianity had a sporadic presence in those parts of India that today constitute Goa prior to the commencement and consolidation of Portuguese colonialism, the Catholic Church as an institution only arrived alongside the Portuguese colonizers in the sixteenth century. The longer history of the consolidation of Catholicism in Goa is not our central concern here, but it is nonetheless important to stress how the Christianization of Goa was intimately intertwined with processes of colonial state formation. As the historian Celsa Pinto (2023, 127) argues with reference to the first centuries of Portuguese colonial rule in Goa, "the Church and State worked hand in hand ... to fulfil the obligations imposed on them by the Pope and their King. Together by coercion and indoctrination they brought about the Christianization of Goa and eventually the consolidation of Portuguese rule." Indeed, such was the consolidation and institutional density of Catholicism in colonial Goa that it became known as the "Rome of the East" and emerged as a globally important center for Christianity.

Although the relationship between the colonial state and the Catholic Church in Goa was arguably more complex and contradictory than what Pinto's summary assessment allows for, the Church hierarchy and its institutions did indeed support the colonial government and aligned with Goa's ruling classes right up to the time of the departure of the Portuguese in 1961 (D'Mello 2018, 216). The Church itself was an important locus of economic and political power and an influential social institution in which Catholic Brahmins that constituted the colonial elite played a disproportionately influential role. Today, the Church continues to run a large network of schools, orphanages, and old age homes, and still owns a number of properties and agricultural lands across the state. This makes the Catholic Church in Goa very different from many other Christian churches of various denominations in other parts of India, whose situation is often precarious and whose followers are overwhelmingly drawn from poorer and marginalized segments of Indian society.<sup>2</sup>

When Portuguese colonialism came to an end in 1961, the Church sought to adapt to a radically changed context by gradually embarking on a transformative process that saw it move from “trying to be where the ruler was, to being where the laity was,” as Abreu puts it (2020, 3). As part of its postcolonial transformation, Goa’s Catholic clergy and organizations have, therefore, become increasingly involved “in the struggles of the common man striving for a more equitable society” (D’Mello 2018, 215). The end of Portuguese colonialism in Goa, importantly, coincided with the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), held from 1962 to 1965. These two events, in combination, would propel the Church toward taking up social, political, and environmental causes. According to some respondents interviewed for this chapter, the Church in Goa endorsed the mission of Vatican II with great zeal. More specifically, at a seminar organized by the Church on its evolving role in Goan society in 2003, the Archbishop Felipe Neri Ferrao traced the social “transformation” of the Church to the Second Vatican Council and to a seminar held by the Church in Goa in 1968 to discuss the implications of the Council for the Church’s future. The seminar concluded with a commitment that the church would involve itself more in social issues.

At that time, the Church also came to see politics as an important aspect of its work toward social justice. As one respondent from the Church put it:

After Vatican II, which was the rethinking in the Church, the Church saw it more important to emphasize on social justice issues and get involved. It was this whole thinking of what is the church in the modern world. [And] because politics influences injustices, if those are to be tackled then we also have to look at the political establishment that is there.

Among the concrete initiatives taken toward this end was the Diocesan Service Centre for Social Action, set up in the 1970s and renamed the Centre for Social Justice and Peace in 2005. The social action component in the Church’s activities was further energized by Catholic students. In the 1970s, Goan university campuses were politicized (much like the rest of India). Many of the students were Catholic and trained by the Jesuits in the All-India Catholic Universities Federation (AICUF), formerly named the Catholic Students Union. This training was influenced by liberation theology from Latin America, which drew inspiration from the Second Vatican Council as well as from Marxist and peasant movements. In India, the AICUF took students for “immersion” tours to rural areas, and through this many urban and elite Catholics from Goa were exposed to poverty and social justice issues.

As mentioned, part of the Church’s postcolonial transformation was to become involved in a series of social, economic, and political issues and struggles. Sometimes this has taken the form of individual priests supporting specific political parties in light of concrete issues, either openly by encouraging Catholics to vote in certain ways, or less openly by allowing Church property, including Church

compounds and buildings, to be used for political meetings by some parties and groups, but not by others (D'Mello 2018, 220). Priests have also delivered political speeches from the pulpits or openly marched in the streets with the laity during political rallies (Abreu 2020, 31).

At other times, the Church has been involved in social and popular movements with few explicit party political connections, supporting, for example, traditional (and often Catholic) fishing communities protesting the ravages of mechanized trawling; supporting Konkani as the official state language; backing NGOs protesting the destructive impact of mass tourism on local environments and culture; joining hands with activists opposing railway and airport expansion and the setting up of polluting industries and special economic zones (D'Mello 2018; Nielsen 2017; Nielsen, Da Silva and Bedi 2022; Bedi 2013; Sampat 2015); and agitating against corrupt land use planning practices (Da Silva, Nielsen and Bedi 2020). The list of issues taken up by the Church is long and also includes raising awareness about human rights; environmental protection; the rights of children, women, and the marginalized; the need for a peaceful and just society; corruption; religious freedom; and inter-religious dialogue (Abreu 2020, 35). D'Mello (2018, 225) interprets the many social and political engagements of the postcolonial Church as indicating a "broadening of the vision of the Church," and a shift away from a somewhat narrow focus on supporting largely Catholic interests "to something which is broader and concerns [Goan] society at large." Abreu (2020) arrives at a similar conclusion in his analysis of the metamorphosis of the Catholic church in Goa after 1961, stressing additionally how the Church, through its many activities, has also sought collaboration with Goa's Hindu majority. To Abreu (2020, 35), this has created two new images of the Church in Goa today: a more radical Church that is socially active and ready to tackle the roots rather than the effects of social injustice; but also a church that promotes inter-religious dialogue and seeks to build Hindu-Christian solidarity around the fight against social injustice. Abreu (2020, 36–37) further suggests that these efforts to promote and strengthen Hindu-Christian solidarity can be understood as "at some level a struggle for survival and for remaining relevant" in a context where the Church no longer enjoys colonial state patronage and where the number of Goan Christians has declined to around 25 percent of the Goan population. In this regard, the Church has enjoyed some success insofar as its involvement in social and political issues and its collaboration with different secular NGOs has enabled it to continue to assert sociopolitical influence in the public sphere in the postcolonial context.

As the discussion above has shown, environmental struggles, or struggles with environmental components, have been on the Church's agenda in Goa for many years, but so have a whole range of other social and political issues. It is, in fact, only during the last decade or two that environmentalism has risen to particular

prominence within the Church's broader portfolio of social engagement. This has, however, occurred alongside the rise and consolidation of Hindu nationalism—both in Goa and India at large—as a political force that actively seeks to circumscribe and limit the capacity of religious minority institutions to engage in crucial public debates. The next section analyzes the relationship between the consolidation of Hindu nationalism and the Church's increasingly visible engagement in local environmental issues.

### **The Rise of Hindu Nationalism and Its Consequences**

For the past decade, Hindu nationalism has consolidated as the hegemonic political force across much of India (Vanaik 2018; Jaffrelot 2021; Hansen and Roy 2022). The current national government is led by the BJP, supported by the wider Hindu nationalist movement, and led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi who is widely conceived as an authoritarian or national populist (Jakobsen and Nielsen 2024; Sinha 2021; Nielsen and Nilsen 2022; Jaffrelot 2021; 2024).

Hindu nationalism in its contemporary avatar represents a form of conservative politics that works according to a series of antagonistic contradictions. One such contradiction that is integral to populism at large is established between common people and elites, casting the latter as the enemy of the former. Another contradiction is drawn between “true Indians” and their “anti-national” enemies, according to which the latter can be subjected to coercion, ostensibly in order to protect the former. In line with the core tenets of Hindu nationalism as a cultural and political project, the line separating “true Indians” from their enemies is defined in large part by religion, with Hindu nationalist ideology and politics casting Indian Muslims as “the epitome of the other” (Jaffrelot 2021, 194) in order to frame a unitary conception of the Hindu nation. Yet in some contexts, it is Indian Christians who occupy the position as “the antagonistic other.” Indeed, Hindu nationalism has a long history of conceiving of Christians as “cultural invaders” who through proselytization work to undermine the Hindu nation from within; or who work as agents of Western cultural imperialism seeking to lure unsuspecting Indians away from their “natural Hindu way of life.” As summarized by Bauman (2014), Hindu nationalists denounce evangelical proselytization as a socially disruptive endeavor that is driven by deceit and allurements, and which leads to the “denationalization” of Indians who convert to Christianity. In line with such thinking, Indian Christians have currently become “prime targets” (Jaffrelot 2021, 189–93) of the Hindu nationalist regime, making the public display of Christian sentiments or practices a potentially dangerous affair. BJP governments in many Indian states have actively sought to circumscribe and undermine the freedom and operational

capacity of Christian schools and NGOs through a variety of legal means, with for example missionary proselytization (or any other activity that can be construed as such) being increasingly criminalized (Nielsen, Selvaraj and Nilsen 2023). Such laws have, in turn, enabled an increase in physical abuse and extra-legal violence against Christian communities, and the vandalization of Churches or places of worship, perpetrated by vigilante Hindu nationalist groups. Although such groups formally operate independently of government, they can act with considerable impunity and often present themselves as righteous defenders of the law of the land against so-called “anti-national” and subversive Christian communities whose loyalties are believed to lie elsewhere.

While Hindu nationalism made a late entry into Goa, it has consolidated here as well over the past decade and a half, with the BJP having been in power uninterruptedly since 2012. In its early years, the BJP in Goa represented a softer form of Hindu nationalism that stressed development and good governance over religion, downplayed communal polarization, and even succeeded in attracting a considerable number of Christian politicians and voters. While the issue of Hindu supremacy and religious polarization was never entirely absent, analysts of Goan politics could as recently as a decade ago reasonably claim that “the Catholics in Goa do not see the BJP as a threat” and that “even the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh cadres are not seen as being hardliners like their counterparts in other states in India” (D’Mello 2018, 226–27). Yet over the last few years, Hindu nationalist rhetoric in Goa has hardened (Nielsen, Gokhale and Shringare 2025), with a more audible rhetorical targeting of the state’s Christian minority, coupled with demands that the legacies of Portuguese colonialism (which can be said to include Catholicism) should be “wiped away” and that greater efforts need to be made to restore and promote Goa’s “original Hindu culture” (Nielsen, Bhattacharya and Da Silva 2023; Nielsen 2025). This agenda is also pursued by hardline Hindu nationalist groups such as the Sanathan Sanstha whose members engage in self-defense training including the use of firearms, and who have been linked to a series of violent actions in several states (Jaffrelot 2021, 243–47; Jha 2017, 11–32).

While physical assaults on Goan Christians have been few and far between, there is now an increasing policing by Hindu nationalist groups of what representatives of the Church say and do in public. As recent examples show, isolated lines from a sermon in Church can easily be picked up by Hindu nationalist groups, taken out of context and framed as anti-Hindu or anti-national propaganda, and the priest taken to court; civic opposition to the illegal installment of Hindu statues or imagery in public spaces by Hindu nationalist organizations can in a comparable manner be construed as blasphemous or as intentionally provoking the sentiments of Hindus if “a Christian hand” can somehow be identified in such opposition; priests who take a guiding role in explaining the policies and ideologies of political parties before

elections can similarly expect to be roundly condemned by Hindu nationalist organizations for interfering in or communalizing the elections; and so forth (Nielsen 2025). Indeed, most respondents interviewed for this chapter said that it had now become harder for the Church to make public commentary on the pressing social or political issues of the day. Every respondent within and outside the Church that we interviewed agreed that its voice had been missing from important debates on the challenges facing Goa today, including environmental challenges, as we elaborate on below. Respondents pointed out that while individual priests have sometimes been associated with recent popular movements centered on these issues and have attended public meetings, there has been little or no communication from the Church as an institution, neither from the archbishop nor from its organs like the Council for Social Justice and Peace, whose office in Panaji one person described as a “deserted place” in contrast to a “24/7 war room for activists” from a decade ago.

This hesitancy on the part of the Church is closely related to the rise of Hindu nationalism. “Anything we say, they give it a communal color,” was a common refrain among priests, “they” referring to the BJP government and allied Hindu nationalist organizations who are quick to construe the Church as being anti-Hindu and fomenting communal hatred. As the political analyst and commentator Cleofato Almeida Coutinho put it, “even if the church may do much good social work, or raise its voice against human rights violations, the moment the clergy’s involvement becomes public, the BJP or RSS will turn it into a religious issue” (Suresh and Saeeduzzaman 2022). Some priests reported receiving threats from unknown callers demanding they cancel protest meetings or public events, while others have received advice from the police or government officials to cancel certain events or face legal action. One priest, who has taken up social issues for over two decades, referred to instances from earlier when Church actors could negotiate and discuss issues with senior government officials and ministers. But this dialogue seems to have ended as the current BJP government appears openly hostile to the Church.

A related explanation for the hesitancy of the Church is of a more material sort as the Church fears losing access to state government grants for its schools, old age homes, orphanages, and the cancellation of its license from the central government to receive funds from abroad. The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act has been actively used by the central government to arm-twist and punish organizations critical of its policies, including NGOs, prominent think tanks and environmentalist organizations, and even some organs of the Church in other states (*The Wire* 2024). In all, more than 20,000 NGOs have lost their license to receive foreign funding since 2015 (Jaffrelot 2021, 183–85), effectively rendering them financially incapable of functioning. The church in Goa, thus, appears to have arrived at the conclusion that taking public positions on controversial issues may well cause greater damage by endangering its charity and educational work, as well as its own parish

activities. Some respondents from the church, however, insisted that the Church in fact remains active, only in a more discreet and non-public manner, informing the laity locally about social and environmental issues and asking them to show up at protests. Individual priests too take up public causes but are careful not to speak on behalf of the Church. As one priest said: “People ask why the archbishop is not saying anything. But if he makes a statement, all our schools, our institutions are getting targeted. So what is better? That we do [our work] through the people, or make statements and then everybody suffers?”

This scenario characterized by increased policing of the activities of the church in both civil and political society evidently limits the capacity of the Church for publicly sustaining its involvement in social and political issues that are of importance to Goans, and, by extension, its capacity for asserting sociopolitical influence. It is in this context that environmentalism and the engagement in environmental issues has emerged as an important field of public intervention by the Church. This is not to say that the Church’s engagement in environmental issues is entirely new. Environmental questions have, as indicated above, long been part of the Church’s agenda, and one of the first initiatives taken up by the Diocesan Service Centre for Social Action was, in fact, an investigation into the possible environmental impact of the construction of a five-star hotel on Goa’s coastline. Similarly, already in 2002, the Diocesan Synod organized by the Church in Goa acknowledged that one of the great crises of the times was the ecological imbalance caused by the exploitation and misuse of natural resources, including “environmental concerns” in its list of six “challenges for the Church in Goa in the exercise of her mission.” However, all respondents interviewed agreed that the emphasis on environmental issues within the Church is arguably more pronounced today than two decades ago. This development has been driven both from above and from below. It has been greatly influenced by the publication of the *Laudato Si’* in 2015, which led to the setting up of the Diocesan Commission on Ecology in Goa in 2022, the first of its kind in India. This commission is expected to perform all environmental activities of the Church and implement the teachings in *Laudato Si’*. This is a significant development insofar as the Church’s environmental work was earlier a part of its broader social outreach under institutions such as the Council for Social Justice and Peace and its affiliate Centre for Responsible Tourism. The new Diocesan Commission on Ecology consists of members from the Church and the laity, including schoolteachers and students. Among its initial activities are planting mangroves, working with youth farmer clubs, and engaging with schoolchildren. Notably, as a respondent put it, the commission’s focus is now “directly” on ecology in its own right, and “not through social justice.”

From below, the protection or restoration of Goa’s environment, its wildlife, water bodies, rivers, air, and soil are issues that, for very good reasons, engage and concern a very large number of Goans not just among the Catholic laity, but

irrespective of creed and confession. To put it bluntly, the situation in Goa is such that the state would, even without climate change, be approaching an environmental disaster with considerable speed. A large and for long mostly unregulated mining industry extracting enormous amounts of minerals in the hinterlands for global exports has caused tremendous damage to forests, land, and waterbodies in Goa's interior, the consequences of which are felt far beyond the so-called "mining affected areas" (de Souza 2015). Elsewhere in the state, the development of industrial parks and infrastructure—airports, roads, and railways—has dramatically transformed the environment through expansive concretization and the destruction of biodiversity hotspots and agricultural land, and polluting and water-guzzling industrial activities. Goa's status as a holiday destination (Routledge 2001) and favored location for a "second home" for well-off Indians (Sampat 2014), combined with the influx of speculative capital, have led to an explosion in the construction of resorts, hotels, and real estate almost across the state, with all the associated problems of waste management, vehicular traffic pollution, sand dune erosion along the coast, the cutting of forests and hills, and considerable strain on local resources. Much of this has happened within the span of only a few decades, and for many Goans it has felt as if their familiar green environment has collapsed in real time in front of their eyes; or at the very least that it has been fundamentally altered for the worse, making Goa much less livable. When he talks about clean air, clean water, and the protection of hills, forests, fields and rivers, the archbishop therefore effectively taps into widely shared environmental concerns and anxieties among many Goans.

The Church's turn toward environmentalism arguably constitutes a more readily acceptable form of social outreach and activism than championing human rights, or openly telling people who they should and should not vote for. It can more easily be construed, also among Hindu nationalists, as an apolitical and secular activity, at least insofar as it remains focused on ameliorating localized and concrete environmental problems that adversely affect all Goans. One example of such moderately ameliorative environmental interventions can be found in the circulars of the Council of Social Justice and Peace that encourage Church leaders to work collectively to provide environmental awareness to parishioners and to effect piecemeal changes toward "greener" everyday practices among priests and parishioners alike by, for example, encouraging the use of eco-friendly materials, avoiding single-use plastics at church meetings and seminars, and so on.

But importantly, the scope for Christian environmentalism is certainly not without limits. Of crucial importance in terms of defining these limits is the fact that BJP governments both nationally and in Goa—in addition to being hostile toward Christianity as such—remain firmly committed to a neoliberal restructuring of the economy at the expense of the environment. As Dutta and Nielsen (2022) have argued, this neoliberal restructuring is enabled by, among other things, the dilution

of environmental legislation and safeguards, the speeding up of clearances for environmentally damaging projects in infrastructure and industry, and a narrowing of the space for popular participation and civil society engagement in environmental issues. There has, not least, under BJP rule been a marked increase in the policing of environmental groups and activists across India, many of whom have been branded as “anti-national” and shamed for sabotaging India’s economic growth because of their opposition to environmentally damaging large-scale projects. For example, the Indian chapter of Fridays for Future has had its website blocked by the authorities and was served legal notice from the police under the country’s draconian anti-terror law. Overall, India made the list of “deadliest countries for environmental activists” according to a Global Witness (2017) report that claimed that killing of environmental activists had increased threefold from 2015 to 2016 “against a backdrop of heavy-handed policing and the repression of peaceful protests and civic activism” (Global Witness 2017, 6). In Goa too, strong political and business interests that in practice often overlap are heavily invested in those economic sectors that cause the most damage to Goa’s environment, such as real estate, mining, and land conversions. To the extent that environmental activism runs counter to these interests or threatens to derail capitalist accumulation in key economic sectors, severe repercussions are to be expected, something to which most Goan environmentalists can testify.

The current conjuncture, then, may be conducive to and render some forms of Christian environmentalism legitimate, while repressing and criminalizing other forms as “environmental terrorism” or “anti-national activities.” Among the many possible forms that a contemporary Christian environmentalism could take in Goa, we suggest that these contextual factors play an important role in rendering agroecology and agricultural interventions a socially and politically acceptable and even attractive form of Christian environmentalism. Our aim in the following is to offer illustrations of the forms that these agricultural interventions may take, but also to offer a series of reflections on the significance of Church institutions, networks, and forms of knowledge as they operate within and across these interventions.

### The Church, Agroecology and Community Farming

The involvement of the Church in agriculture in Goa is not entirely new. Fr. Inacio Almeida, for example, who worked with organic farming from the early 1990s is considered an early pioneer in the field, organizing camps for farmers, taking farming-based education to the schools, and working to engage the youth. A state agriculture award is now named after him (Braganza 2022; Navhind Times 2014). Currently, however, priests engaged in agriculture can no longer be considered lone pioneers, but are rather a part of a broader movement within the Church toward

agriculture. In fact, the revival of agriculture has emerged as a major environmental initiative for the Church within the last decade, including on the Church's own lands and in its seminaries. As one priest explained:

In the reflections following *Laudato Si'*, very consciously our church in Goa has moved a lot into getting people into farming and horticulture. Much of our own land was just lying fallow and a lot of new farms have come up. We have also named one of the farms *Laudato Si'*. The reflection is that it is not construction which will remain forever, it is farming. Seminaries are involved in cultivating agriculture and horticulture. So we want to plant that seed in the minds of the ones who are preparing for priesthood also.

At its seminary in Saligao, the Church has established an organic farming and composting initiative called “GOA with EARTH,” an acronym for Guaranteed Organized Action with Efficiently Applying Residue Treating Habits. Under this project, an outlet at the seminary allows visitors to purchase saplings, donate organic waste for composting, learn about composting and hydroponic cultivation methods, and even hang out or work in an airconditioned coworking space and cafe retrofitted inside an out-of-service bus. The project also conducts training for school students. Several Catholic schools practice gardening, involving students in the production of organic fruits and vegetables, and organizing them into “eco clubs” to encourage them to “go green” (Herald 2022).

Elsewhere in Goa, the Salesians, who we shall return to in more detail later, have played a no less important role, running an agricultural college in south Goa from 2015, offering agricultural education and training to the youth and developing new agricultural technologies. Other priests run their own organic farms, experimenting with different plant varieties and techniques such as vermi-compost and natural pesticides (Herald 2022). Yet others have spearheaded small-scale so-called “farmers’ clubs,” organizing rural communities to take up organic farming on long-abandoned patches of erstwhile farmland—a pressing issue in Goa where large areas of arable lands have fallen out of cultivation. One such project has emerged in the village of Chicalim where the charismatic parish priest Fr. Bolmax has been instrumental in mobilizing the local youth to take up farming. Fr. Bolmax holds a master’s degree in ecology and environment and a doctorate in botany, personally embodying a not uncommon fusion of science and faith within Christian environmentalism and agroecology. He has also been involved in a local Biocrusaders Group in his parish and has been selected as an “eco achiever” by the Prithvi Parivar pan-India Ecological Movement, launched recently by the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India Commission for Ecology (*The Goan* 2021). This movement is, in turn, inspired by the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform and Pope Francis’ arguments on integral ecology as the solution to the environmental crisis (*Times of India* 2021).

In what follows, we zoom in on another such farmers' club, namely that in St. Estevam, where a group of villagers have come together to initiate community-based agriculture, relying on organic farming without pesticides and chemicals. There are several similar clubs across Goa, all of which promote forms of organic agriculture that are rooted in local communities to produce food that is not damaging to human health and local environments. Some also work to revive and protect Goa's unique *khazan* ecosystem, comprised by lands reclaimed from the sea over centuries through an intricate system of bunds, sluice gates, and artificial lakes and channels that regulate the flow of water during tides. Traditionally managed by the village community, the *khazans* are primarily used for an ecologically balanced and environmentally sustainable mix of saline-tolerant paddy cultivation combined with small-scale fishing (Rubinoff 2001, 1110). Much of this ecosystem system has, however, crumbled due to a lack of maintenance, and many *khazans* are currently inundated with salt water and unfit for cultivation. Instead, some *khazan* lands have been diverted to unsustainable large-scale commercial fish or shrimp cultivation, while others have become favorite targets for real estate developers. Some farmers' clubs work to rejuvenate this unique ecosystem by reclaiming the *khazans* for agricultural purposes and are joined in this effort by other environmentalist groups seeking UNESCO World Heritage Site status for Goa's *khazans* (Kamat 2021).

In addition to its illustrative value, the case of the St. Estevam farmers' club is of interest for two additional reasons. First because, unlike the many brief examples discussed above in which Church institutions or the clergy played *visible* and *leading* roles, the Church has played more of a *discreet*, *supporting* and *enabling* role in St. Estevam, where the main initiative rather came from and was spearheaded by a local agropreneur. This somewhat discreet involvement of the Church illustrates its potentially productive intertwinement with agroecological initiatives with secular beginnings and origins beyond the Church. Second, it also allows us to move beyond often-discussed theological or ideational aspects of Christian environmentalism to show empirically how the institutional and organizational scaffolding of the Church, the qualities and capabilities of its personnel, and the networks of knowledge, resources, and expertise that Church actors can tap into and mobilize into action, play important roles in the making of agroecological initiatives.

### The St. Estevam Farmers' Club and the Discreet Role of the Church

The St. Estevam farmers' club was launched in 2018 on the islet of St. Estevam, named after the Christian Protomartyr St. Stephen, to whom the local Catholic Church is also dedicated. Indeed, Catholicism has a long presence in St. Estevam going back nearly half a millennium: The Jesuits arrived in the 1550s, the first

conversion to Catholicism happened in 1555, and the first local Church was built in 1575. The more recent history of the islet is also testimony to the increasing intertwinement between Catholicism and environmentalism, embodied in one of Goa's most well-known environmentalists, the late priest-turned-activist Fr. Bismarque Dias who was born in St. Estevam and who was actively engaged in a series of popular movements—some of which even targeted the Church in Goa—until he was found dead under suspicious circumstances in 2015 (Dev 2015).<sup>3</sup>

St. Estevam remains overwhelmingly Catholic today. As the anthropologist Alexander Henn (2014, 83–125) has observed, each Goan village constitutes “a world of its own,” its territory structured in wards, fields, and wilderness, marked by recognized boundaries that are guarded by tutelary beings, and affirmed by rituals and processions. Popular Catholic religiosity, Henn argues, is generally guided by a “localistic principle” that closely associates specific patron saints—in this case St. Stephen—with the territories and localities of the village. These patron saints are, in Catholic villages, considered founders, members and guardians of the village community, protecting its territory and people, in effect embodying rather than merely representing the village. To this day, the saints, symbols, and institutions of Catholicism play significant roles in the social and spatial organization and identity of the village community, and the temporal rhythms of village life.

As indicated, the driving force behind the farmers' club was, however, not of the clergy; nor was the idea of the farmers' club in any way justified through religious doctrine or duty, personal faith, or an ethics of care derived from Christian teachings. The club, rather, appeared secular in all respects. The initiative came from Mr. da Silva, a former engineer turned agropreneur and vermiculturist who, after having been based elsewhere in India for many years, returned to Goa to become a farmer. Mr. da Silva succeeded in mobilizing a number of St. Estevam residents, many of whom had over the past few years become increasingly apprehensive about the fate of the village because of widespread rumors that land sharks and real estate developers were looking to buy up the village agricultural lands, much of which had been fallow for many years. In this respect, the farmers' club's mission of bringing village lands under the plough again rendered it as much a land defense movement as an agroecological initiative.

One of the first things Mr. da Silva and his small core team did was to reach out to the local parish priest to “sell the idea to him” (do Rosario 2018). Having won the support of the priest, the first challenge that confronted the nascent farmers' club was to identify the village's agricultural land and its owners. This would prove to be a laborious undertaking. Agriculture had largely been abandoned in St. Estevam for nearly three decades as people had turned to other professions or worked abroad, leaving the fields fallow, overgrown, and hard to identify. With interest in agriculture having thus dwindled dramatically over many decades, people were

generally unable to recollect the extent, and sometimes even the location of their farmland. While many could still recount childhood memories of their grandparents toiling in their fields many years ago, few remembered the location of these fields, much less where the boundaries between them had run. As one farm club member explained: “Most of the homes didn’t even know their fields. These were the third generation out of agriculture.”

In light of this, local volunteers took up the task of surveying the *khazan* lands that the farmers’ club hoped to cultivate—an area covering one million square meters. To aid the process, a large and detailed map of the entire village and its surroundings was obtained from the local Church—possibly the only institution possessing such a map—while supplementary land records were downloaded from various online sources. The parish priest of St. Estevam Church actively joined the effort, assisting the process of identifying village agricultural lands and settling issues of land ownership by converting his morning sermons into appeals during which he would ask worshippers to search for documents and land records, and to use their wider family and kinship networks to locate possible heirs who might possess knowledge about land deeds and entitlements. The parish priest also made weekly announcements during mass about the farmers’ club initiative, explaining its rationale, the requirements involved, and encouraging people to unite and practice community farming.

Based on the collected information, booklets were eventually produced for each *khazan* and taken to the local *somudais*—a small ecclesial unit organized at the ward or intra-ward level, akin to a “basic Christian community”—who assisted in identifying and eventually locating most of the landholdings along with their owners, enquired about people’s interest in participating in the project, and conducted a series of village meetings to bring people on board.

The next challenge that confronted the farmers’ club was the issue of economic feasibility. Their estimates showed that farming one acre of land would cost in the region of INR 45,000 toward the required materials and labor time needed for ploughing, harvesting and de-weeding that had to be done manually. This was a relatively high sum, given the uncertainties of the outcome, and the farmers’ club’s plans were initially met with some local skepticism. As one of the early initiative-takers explained: “people didn’t trust us and were worried if this was another attempt to take land.” The issue of labor assumed particular urgency since, as one farm club member put it, “the members of the village couldn’t till the land”—for the simple reason that they had never done it. And the cost of agricultural labor in Goa is prohibitively high when compared to the great risks and slim and highly uncertain profits that define agricultural production in India (Münster 2015; Matthan 2022).

Solutions to the problem of labor were provided by the Catholic Church. Locally, the parish priest appealed to the strong, energetic youth of the village to come out

and participate in the preparation and the planting. The priest also personally went to the paddy fields to participate in the work and, by thus being “the first man in the field,” as one local put it, made it difficult for the younger boys to opt out, lest they disrespect the priest. But more importantly, it was Fr. George Quadros from South Goa who provided a more effective solution to the challenges posed by the question of labor. Fr. Quadros belonged to the Society of Saint Francis de Sales, a congregation more commonly known as the Salesians. The Salesians generally have a strong emphasis on the virtues of education and work, upholding “daily work as prayer” and stressing an educational style that, in their words, is based on “reason, religion, and loving-kindness.”

Fr. Quadros worked with the Salesians’ Agriculture Training and Research Centre, a center that offers a degree in agricultural sciences and runs the Don Bosco Farm High School. Describing himself as an amateur farmer by heart, Fr. Quadros had experimented with various cultivation methods since the mid-1980s and had come to see his attraction to farming as a calling because “wherever I put my hands, there was considerable success” (*Herald* 2022). Fr. Quadros had come to realize that although mechanized farming both reduced costs and boosted yields, the cost of the machinery was too high for smallholders. However, after witnessing an exhibition by a Japanese company called Kubota who had developed innovative technology that would mechanize paddy farming in cost-effective ways, he had persuaded the government of Goa to invest in a pilot project to bring this technology to Goa. A successful trial in 2015 using the Japanese-made technology on 3,000 square meters of Goan paddy fields—followed by in situ demonstrations of his technology in many parts of the state—earned Fr. Quadros a reputation as a local pioneer in the field of mechanized rice farming as well as the moniker “The Paddy Man of Goa” (*Navhind Times* 2023). This meant that prior to the launch of the farmers’ club, his experimental work with mechanized farming for both seed germination, transplantation, and harvesting was already known to some villagers of St. Estevam.

The mechanized rice farming that Fr. Quadros promotes is very different from the traditional methods where plough, rake, and hatchet are used. Ploughing and preparation is carried out by tractor and rotovators, and the planting done using ready-made trays that pass through a machine with a conveyor belt, which fills different layers of mud, seeds, and water. Transplanting is later done mechanically. These technological innovations significantly reduce the time required to plant, as well as the overall demand for agricultural labor.

Through the application of Fr. Quadros’ technologies, the farmer’s club managed to pool and cultivate 450,000 square meters of erstwhile fallow rice fields in its first season in 2018, bringing together several hundred local families in the farm club venture. The first harvest produced a bumper crop of rice, and the large

Church square in front of the St. Estevam Church was enlisted as the designated site for drying the rice. In 2019, the farmers' club planned to scale up production to grow rice on one million square meters of land, only to see severe floods destroy much of the crop. But despite this, the St. Estevam farmers' club has been upheld as a model for emulation elsewhere in the state, and its style of community farming enjoys widespread political support. The BJP's chief minister is a strong proponent of the model, and publicly encourages the youth of the state to return to primary sector occupations, supported by significant state subsidies (D'Mello 2019). These include an "assistance for community farming" scheme—put in place in Goa in 2018—through which the government encourages community farming as a strategy for ensuring a greener Goa and a reduction in the number of fields kept fallow. The scheme offers a long list of subsidies—of up to 90 percent in cases where more than ten farmers pool their land—for infrastructure and input, and guaranteed prices for output. The scheme came into effect in 2020–2021, with the number of groups availing of the scheme increasing rapidly, from just four in the first year, to fifty-seven a few years later (Hegde 2023).

## Conclusion

We began this chapter by making a twofold assertion, namely that (1) the Church in Goa has made environmentalism an increasingly important part of its social outreach and engagement over the past decade or two; and that (2) this development needs to be situated and understood within a wider political context marked by the rise and consolidation of Hindu nationalism as a hegemonic force. In this regard, the St. Estevam farmers' club is illustrative of one modality of Church engagement in a specific form of environmentalism whose historical emergence we have traced in this chapter, namely that associated with agroecology and agricultural rejuvenation. The overall shift toward environmental questions and agriculture on the part of the Church has of course, as we have sought to show, been the outcome of longer and complex historical processes, propelled by a combination of factors pertaining to overall reorientations and transformations within the Catholic Church post-Vatican II, to the changes to its social and political role in Goa after 1961, and to the locally unfolding environmental disaster in Goa that has accelerated in sync with a rising global awareness about environmentalism and climate change. But we have emphasized that in the specific Goan context, the current articulation of Christian environmentalism through agroecology has been profoundly shaped by the wider Hindu majoritarian political context that has, on the one hand, shrunk the space available for public outreach and social engagement on the part of the Church, while simultaneously rendering legitimate *some* forms of organizing

around ostensibly “apolitical” and local environmental issues such as community agriculture.

It is in this context that the farmers’ club’s illumination of a specific and more discreet manifestation of Christian environmentalism—in which the Church does not lead, but rather takes up a supporting and enabling role by making available its institutions, personnel, and extensive networks to initiatives originating elsewhere—merits further attention. Indeed, the institutional role of the Church shines through in several ways: at the level of the village, for example, the local Church functions as an institutional archive of historical knowledge on local land use and relations; as an organizational network linking St. Estevam to wider, more dispersed locations of agricultural and technological expertise; as a crucial node in the flow of communication about the activities of the farmers’ club involving sermons, masses and *somudais*; as a locus of legitimate authority enabling the clergy—by example as much as by virtue of office—to mobilize a community, its resources, and labor; and as a physical space where the harvest could be stored and dried. These institutional and organizational factors were arguably important to the making of successful community collaboration around agroecology and agricultural rejuvenation—even if the driving force was not from among the clergy. Yet at the same time, the farmers’ club was decidedly secular in most respects. For Mr. da Silva, the driving force in the initiative, the key motivation was to use the rejuvenation of local agriculture as a strategy for stopping the unregulated land grabbing that was destroying the village and the region of Goa that he held dear. Moreover, his approach to agriculture was firmly rooted in science, and he was dismissive of more “spiritual” or new age agricultural initiatives that also flourish in India—such as yogic ecology and zero budget natural farming that Münster analyses elsewhere in this volume—which he saw as nativist, unscientific, and unfeasible humbuggery. The innovative champion of mechanized farming, Fr. Quadros, did recognize his agricultural work as a calling and as the equivalent to daily prayer; but he too chose to stress the mutuality of science and religion (integral to Catholic teaching) by emphasizing hard work, commitment, technology, and the minimum natural requirements as the key to agricultural success—supplemented by prayer, but not vice versa. Such discreet and institutionally anchored Church support for forms of local agroecology that enjoy widespread state support also from Hindu nationalist governments arguably serve to legitimize the active and socially engaged role of the Church in Goan society, despite the largely hostile political context.

In other words, by openly spearheading and institutionalizing some agroecological initiatives, and by more discreetly extending its organizational and institutional support to others, the Church in Goa is treading a fine balance as it demonstrates its commitment to a specific part of the green agenda, namely localized agroecology, that enjoys widespread social and even political legitimacy. In

doing so, it simultaneously fortifies its role in the life of village communities and its standing as an influential social institution in the wider Goan society, reaffirming—in a discreet, secular, and politically acceptable way—that the Church can and should have a public voice and play a leading role in debating and addressing issues of concern to Goans. However, its ability to do so in ways that can avoid attacks from the Hindu right that the Church's public outreach is a mere mask for fraudulently undermining the Hindu nation will for the foreseeable future hinge on the discreetness of its approach, and on the continued existence of more widespread sentiments that community agriculture is “apolitical.”

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The chapter is based on a series of interviews with environmentalists in Goa both inside and outside the Church, conducted by Gokhale in early 2024. The narrative case study of the St. Estevam farmers' club is based on a visit to the village by Nielsen in 2020; on conversations with people involved in the initiative; and on a synthesis of information and descriptions from a number of written sources in the public domain, including D'Mello 2019; Silveira n.d. and George 2019. Gokhale lived and worked as a journalist in Goa for some years prior to COVID-19, while Nielsen has carried out research on the politics of land use and dispossession in Goa for around a decade. These experiences have informed our contextualization of the present study.
- <sup>2</sup> It also tends to make the Catholic Church's environmental engagements in Goa somewhat contradictory insofar as the Church can be said to have been involved in creating some of the problems it now claims to be solving. It has, for example, sold coastal agricultural land in its possession to resort companies and chemical industries; at other times it has sought to have Church lands converted or “re-zoned” from “natural cover” to “settlement” in order to develop it for housing or residential purposes for a profit. While these contradictions merit further exploration, our focus in this chapter remains on the issue of environmentalism and agroecology.
- <sup>3</sup> Fr. Bismarque was defrocked in 2011 for his criticism of the Church's own land dealings with resort developers.

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