

The many layers of Goa's lifeline

'The River Mhadei: The Science and Politics of Diversion' edited by Peter Ronald deSouza, Solano da Silva, and Lakshmi Subramanian, launched with a companion documentary, 'Maa Dei (Mother Goddess)' reframes the Mhadei not as a mere dispute but as an ecosystem, cultural archive, and intergenerational trust

ADITHI SHARMA | NT BUZZ

Professor Peter Ronald deSouza, Solano da Silva, and Professor Lakshmi Subramanian assert that as trustees of the River Mhadei, it is the duty of each of us "to act with the responsibility that this privilege entails."

Keeping this in mind, the trio recently unveiled the book 'The River Mhadei: The Science and Politics of Diversion,' along with a companion documentary, 'Maa Dei (Mother Goddess).'

The book's journey began, the editors (collectively initialled PSL) recall, with "a limited ambition to look at the water sharing dispute, in terms of its politics, and then look at the working of the adjudicatory institution, the Inter State Water Dispute Tribunal." This initial framing, focused on "seeing the river as a body of moving water," soon felt inadequate. "We realised that we were entering a rich ecosystem that the river nurtures and sustains and that has evolved over millennia," PSL say.

This realisation, and prompted them to assemble an "epistemic community" - academics, activists, journalists, filmmakers, lawyers and writers - to produce not just an edited volume but also a film and a website on the Mhadei, www.mhadeicollective.com

Authors were given "complete freedom" while penning their pieces for the book, and the editors ensured coherence through repeated engagement. With a total of 20 chapters, it is organised around four interconnected time frames - geological, ecological, cultural and political. This approach enabled them to integrate scientific analysis, historical narratives, legal critiques, and cultural perspectives.



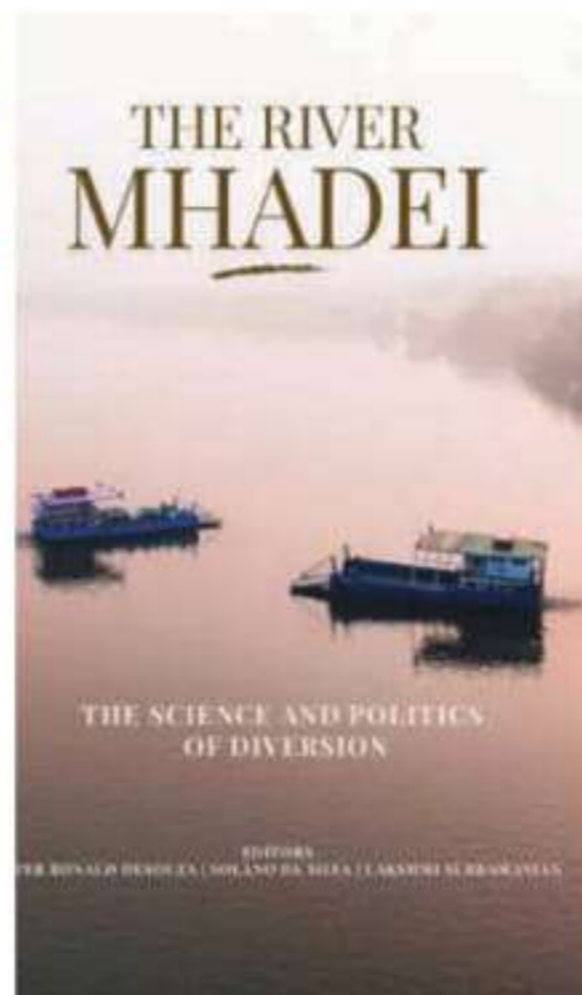
Prof. Peter Ronald deSouza



Solano da Silva



Prof. Lakshmi Subramanian



availability and willingness to engage with critical feedback were the main criteria.

Rather than struggle with conflicting perspectives, the real challenge turned out to be the book's size. "Most publishers do not like fat books. This is in excess of 450 pages," PSL acknowledge. "Few readers read such large tomes. But the controversy of Mhadei's water diversion demanded that all issues, which we thought relevant, were considered."

"Every chapter must be read and inspire further research," PSL say, adding that, "the book is only a baseline for future research."

Their own editorial journey was "one of continuous discovery". Perhaps the most striking surprise was "the realisation of how limited the

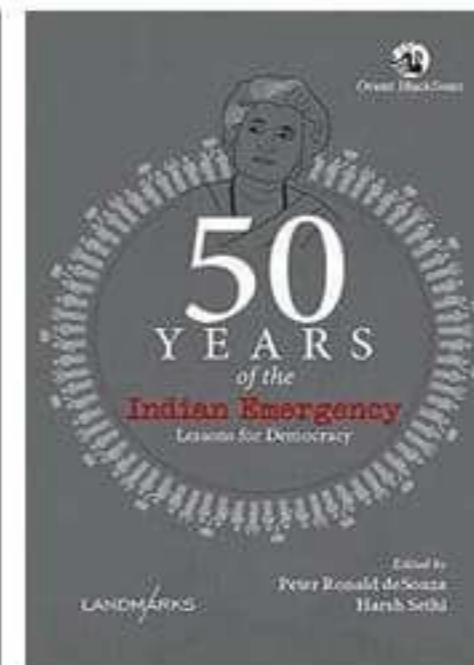
Why the Emergency still matters

The Emergency, declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in June 1975 and lifted in March 1977, remains a defining moment for India's constitutional order. It is remembered for its curtailment of civil liberties, censorship of the press, mass arrests, and coercive state policies. Yet, as Peter Ronald deSouza argues, there is more to this period.

"There were other issues that needed to be researched - of why she imposed it and why she lifted it. We wanted to engage with all the issues now that we have critical distance from the event 50 years later," he says.

With this in mind, as India approaches the fiftieth anniversary of this dark chapter, deSouza and senior scholar Harsh Sethi have edited a new book titled '50 Years of the Indian Emergency: Lessons for Democracy,' which will launch on September 19, 5 p.m. at the International Centre Goa, Dona Paula.

The book features essays on well-known topics - such as the notorious ADM Jabalpur case, censorship of newspapers and the violence inflicted on large



populations alongside more unusual inclusions like chapters on poetry written during the Emergency; letters exchanged between the Dandavates, a couple incarcerated in different jails; and a subaltern perspective. The editors also revisit Vinoba Bhave's elaboration of Anushashan Parva, which at the time was widely read as support for Mrs. Gandhi. Indeed, deSouza believes that Poetry, memoirs and biographies are vital to grasp not only the fac-

tual record but the human experience of authoritarian rule.

Although the Emergency ended almost half a century ago, deSouza is clear that its lessons are far from historical. "The state has become too powerful vis-à-vis the citizen," he notes. "We need to return to making citizen rights inviolable, such as holding persons without bail for years, etc. We have to go back to rule-of-law, not rule-by-law, which is what the Emergency was and which drives governance today."

This theme - the fragility of institutions meant to defend citizens - recurs throughout. "Because it tells us how institutions that are supposed to defend citizens can become enfeebled in the face of authoritarianism. This we must think about," he says.

For younger generations, many of whom have no lived memory of the Emergency, the editors hope the book will act as both history lesson and civic warning. "We hope our book is debated widely in the media and that it ultimately will enter discussions in the public sphere and enter even syllabi in the classroom," says deSouza.

initial framing of the dispute was and how little reliable scientific literature exists despite the many government institutions tasked with protecting the river." PSL highlight the Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal's criticisms of hydrological data, which showed "very large variations even from the same sources". "They should do more research on the ecosystem, on pollution, on biodiversity," PSL say, inviting any such work for uploading to their dedicated website.

The editors hope the book will encourage policy-makers, students and citizens "to move beyond the narrow, presentist view of the river as merely a resource for consump-

tion or a site of political conflict." Their central message is that "the river must be understood in its entirety."

The companion documentary 'Maa Dei (Mother Goddess)' they state, takes the discussion beyond the academic, which books are limited to— to communities, from the closed classroom, to the open classroom. By visually showcasing the river's beauty, biodiversity and vibrant cultural life, the film which is now available on their website, "adds an aesthetic and emotional layer to the book's arguments and helps forge an emotional connection with the river which is crucial for inspiring public concern and action."

They hope the book will "challenge the shackled imaginations and the narrow, state-centric procedures of our institutions who tend to see the river as just a mere commodity" and help incorporate its broader, multi-dimensional understanding into future planning and adjudication.

Looking ahead, the editors view this volume not as an endpoint but as "the beginning of a series" on river governance in Goa. "We hope the discussion on the River Mhadei we have started will be followed up on the other six rivers of Goa," PSL say. This, they suggest, could also lead to the creation of a River Protection Authority.