

## 'Corrupt' projects disturb Goa's peace

**S**immering resentment against major developments in rural Goa — famous for its exotic beaches and idyllic rural countryside — has exploded in protests against allegedly corrupt local administrators.

The former Portuguese enclave, which merged with the Indian Union in 1961, has a rich heritage, and its people have a term *susegaad* (take it easy) that typifies their laid-back culture. Attracted by the ambience, millions of visitors, mainly foreigners, come to Goa each year. That is helping to attract real estate developers seeking huge profits in large projects in the area's villages, permission for which is given by the panchayats, or local administrative offices, each of which encompasses several villages.

Several large projects in South Goa, one of Goa's two districts, are said to be obtaining permission given by the panchayats without adequate attention to garbage management, water or electricity, while the developments destroy coconut and cashew orchards and other resources, leading local communities to fear already tight supplies will be strained further. Many projects also encroach on water bodies, agricultural land or violate construction laws. Villagers say corruption at all levels is responsible for the situation, but blame their panchayats for giving the ultimate sanction for these projects.

At least 28 out of the 30 panchayats in the coastal area of Salcete, a subdivision of South Goa, have seen angry protests by villagers over construction in ecologically sensitive areas in the past year, notably involving large developments in Colva, Raia, Nuvem, Fatrade-Varca, Courtalim, Betaibatim and Orlim. "Goa is turning into an infrastructure hub," said Geraldine Fernandes, chairperson of the Benaulim Villagers Action Committee (BVAC). "Roads and highways are being built through our agriculture fields and rivers, and blasting our mountains and forests apart without forethought."

Fernandes, previously a housewife running home stays for European tourists, is protesting against three housing projects in her fishing village of Comlatolem, in the beach town of Benaulim, South Goa.

**O**ne of the projects has illegally filled up part of the village's ancient pond with a lotus species that is killing the pond, which had served as a source of water for nearby paddy fields. Ironically, the word from which the village derives its name, *comla*, means lotus.

Last March, the BVAC began a series of protests against the local administrative offices, demanding that licenses issued to the three housing projects be revoked. Their action included demonstrations in Goa's capital of Panjim (also known as Panaji), an appeal to the state's Director of Panchayats, a hunger strike and a vigil at the panchayat office to stop further licenses.

But initial success in securing revocation of licenses and the resignation of the village panchayat leader, has floundered, with the real estate companies obtaining legal

stay orders that override the license revocation. In nearby Pateapura village, at Nuvem, a 140-apartment housing complex being built in the absence of proper infrastructure on elevated land threatens to contaminate the village's water. The complex, which is nearing completion, features a club house, massage parlour, spa and swimming pool.

"This is a village," said 25-year-old Anthony Sequeira. "How can they conduct such a lifestyle in this area?" The village, with a population of 500, mostly low-income daily workers, is now frightened by the concrete expansion taking place. "We are poor, we do not have any support from anywhere", said 35-year-old Marian Correa, a small shopkeeper at the village. "The builder has filed seven cases of trespassing against us and we are now running from pillar to post for these false cases." Pateapura villagers say their panchayat members have been in complicity with the builder in the irregularities that have occurred.

Soter D'Souza, Director of the Center for Panchayati Raj, an organisation training villagers about their rights under the panchayat system, blames Goa's Department of Rural Development for the growing unrest and violence against panchayats in the villages. "The government has been denying this decentralised system to function by refusing to give powers to the panchayats, resulting in widespread malpractice, corruption and illegality," said D'Souza.

All over Salcete subdivision, villagers find themselves in direct conflict with panchayat members who have lived their entire life in the same villages. They [panchayat officials] are robbers," say Mario Fernandes, a retired chauffeur. Communities are splitting apart by taking different views on the issue. The BVAC condemns fellow villagers, 'lawyers, doctors and professionals' who have chosen not to join their protest.

Datta Naik, of the Confederation of Real Estate Developers' Association, Goa, says the real estate sector is being made the scapegoat for the government's neglect of infrastructure in the villages. Goa's regional plan covering the

period up to 2021 declares that several fields and people's homes are non-inhabited, causing widespread complaints. Panchayats have now been given time until April 15 to present their grievances.

**T**here is no concurrent population and tourism management along with this development," says Kim Miranda, convener of Gaon Ghor Rakhon Manch (GGRM), another movement to save villagers' houses. "Where on earth are we to live?" she said. Miranda, a tourism official, said an exodus of Goa's landowning elite to foreign countries 30 years ago exacerbated the issue because their lands, though mired in litigation, had attracted the real estate developers.

"Tell Goans abroad to set up trusts for their lands and cultivate them," Miranda told Inter Press Service. "This will give opportunities for livelihoods and adding value for both cultivators and landowners. We will be glad to help."

(Courtesy: Inter Press Service)

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— Soter D'Souza, Director, Centre for Panchayati Raj, Goa