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Why Goa is staring at a green crisis

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Bit By Bit, Fields And Forests Are Being Gobbled Up By Projects That Are Spilling Into No-Development And Eco-Sensitive Zones While Agricultural Land And Green Cover Are Giving Way To Farmhouses

Bollywood stars, fashion designers, politicians, businessmen – they have all descended on Goa. Not to holiday. But to buy. And on their shopping list is land. The resource-scarce state's most valuable commodity.

In about a month, over 1 lakh sq. m of eco-sensitive land has been freed up for construction. And if the town and country planning (TCP) ministry has its way, an area of 6 crore sq. m – or 60 sq. km – may soon be on the block. In a state with an area of only 3,702 sq.

km bracketed by verdant hills and palmfringed beaches, that's a booster shot for realtors. But for environmentalists and urban planners, this is a certain recipe for disaster.

Orchards to bespoke homes

Since 1981, when Goa's policymakers and urban planners began drafting the Regional Plan 2001, the TCP department has tried to balance the need for housing with protection of the hills, fields, lakes and forests. The subsequent Regional Plan 2011 was a disaster, suggesting that the TCP department was struggling to perform its role as a gatekeeper. But the Regional Plan 2021, guided by architect Charles Correa, was far more balanced. "In 2007, when policymakers and the state-level committee began working on RP2021, they realised that the coastal areas were overpopulated. They decided to pivot to the hinterland and rationalise the settlement zones along the coastal belt," said an urban planner and architect. This rationalisation saw some areas, which were kept

aside for residential purposes, being reverted to fields, orchards and ecosensitive zones. Naturally, there were some errors, says Panajibased architect Arminio Ribeiro.

Now, the TCP department is on mission mode to rectify these errors on a “case-by-case” basis. Assagao, Siolim, Morjim, Ashwem, Mandrem, Anjuna and Vagator have become sought-after destinations, giving the TCP added incentive to drop all pretence and serve up Goa’s green zones to realtors.

Reconverting agricultural land and orchards for “bespoke homes” and “landscaped private estates” is the new mantra.

If you can’t mend, amend

In the guise of reforms and delivering justice, TCP minister Vishwajit Rane amended the Goa Town and Country Planning Act, 1974, and the Goa Land Development and Building Regulations, 2010.

Rane introduced Section 17(2) in the Goa Town and Country Planning Act, 1974, which gives the government unbridled powers to rectify any “inadvertent error that has occurred in the regional plan, and for correction of inconsistent or incoherent zoning proposals”. Within a month, more than 1.16 lakh sq. m of environmentally fragile land was converted and earmarked for construction.

And if one goes by Rane’s claims, 6 crore sq. m of land is still on the drawing board to be reconverted from eco-sensitive land to settlement zone. “You are now allowing farmhouses in orchards and fields. It does bring in opportunities, some gains even, for the locals, but the TCP department needs to have a vision to balance it out,” said Ribeiro.

Justifying his decision to reconvert green zones to allow construction activities, Rane had said: “There are several discrepancies in the RP2021, through which our people have been put through hardships. Large properties and settlement lands, some belonging to poor people, have been converted from settlement to natural cover, orchards, and non-development slopes in the name of rationalisation, depriving them of their right to put their

land to development use. "Contrary to Rane's claims that he is giving relief to poor people, records show that the beneficiaries are private real estate firms, movie stars, fashion designers and politicians.

Take, for example, the speed with which Hyderabad-based firm Gangareddy Infra Pvt Ltd got 37,000 sq. m of orchards "corrected" within 17 days. Similarly, Telugu producer Konidela Ramcharan Tej got 7,000 sq. m of land converted from orchard zone to settlement zone in Morjim. Luxive Estates LLP, Jaglax Realty and Jai Raghuvira Constructions feature on the list of owners whose lands have been corrected.

"A brief study of the 20 cases cleared till June 15 indicates that 52% of all changes were in favour of real estate firms (89,000 sq. m), 42% were in favour of three individuals who are all listed as directors of real estate firms in the ministry of corporate affairs website (72,556 sq. m), and only 4.7% went to other individuals (8,000 sq. m)," said architect Tahir Noronha, who works with the US city of Detroit in Michigan state as a planner.

The pull of Goa

With a cosmopolitan lifestyle, easy connectivity and largely unpolluted landscape, it's easy to understand why Goa is such a draw for high-net-worth individuals (HNIs). A spacious villa is still going for less than what a luxury apartment would cost in Delhi, so it's no surprise that the affluent and city-weary are keen to change their address in favour of the sunshine state.

"In terms of property prices and rental yields, Goa, specifically North Goa, has witnessed appreciation ranging from 50% to 100% over a 30-month cycle in under-construction projects. The extent of appreciation varies, depending on who the developer is. Rental yields in the region typically range from 5% to 10% per annum," said Lindsay Bernard Rodrigues, chief executive officer and co-founder of Bennet and Bernard, a realty firm that focuses on luxury homes.

The annual Luxury Outlook Survey 2023 released by Sotheby's India International Realty suggests that 61% of HNIs are keen to purchase real estate in 2023-24 with 30% of them looking for farmhouses and holiday homes.

'Perverse and suspicious'

The TCP recently tweaked the Goa Land Development and Building Construction Regulations to allow cottages and villas — couched under the farmhouses category — to be built on agricultural land. The same tweaks permit yoga centres and wellness projects to come up on plots that have significant tree cover.

Urban planners and environmentalists view these developments as part of a broad trend to cater to the surge in demand for luxury housing and wellness resorts in Goa, a trend that began decades ago but which boomed after the pandemic.

These “arbitrary zoning changes” in the regional plan, and to the Goa Land Development and Building Regulations are “perverse” and “suspicious”, say urban planners and environmentalists.

“The move by the government to correct ‘errors’ in the regional plan is suspect as most of the zone changes that are being allowed using Section 17(2) cover large areas, which cannot conceivably be errors. Some of the changes allowed violate eco-sensitive zones and some others were in fact rejected earlier when proposed under Section 16B,” said Goa Foundation director Claude Alvares.

Ribeiro said if the development planning process continues to be an “individual-controlled exercise” instead of a state-wide consultative process, Goa is heading for an ecological disaster. Aside from the strain on natural resources, the lack of a larger vision for the state will result in traffic congestion, high-density population in small pockets, a strain on public amenities and a wide chasm between the rich and the poor.

“I am really worried about what is going to happen to Goa, whether it will remain unique,” Ribeiro said.