

Hindustan Times, cities/others

## **21.29 lakh sq m green zones in Goa converted for construction in 15 month: Data**

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India, July 23 — The Goa government has approved the conversion of 21.29 lakh square metres of green zones into 'settlement' in 15 months since introducing two changes in rules in March 2023, official records show. The conversion is almost 10 times of the land converted between 1986 and 2005.

The green zones converted into 'settlement', which allows for residential and partly residential constructions, include 1.92 lakh square metres of paddy fields, 8.87 lakh square metres orchards and 7.29 lakh square metres of no-development slopes — plots of land that had a gradient of 1:10 (one in ten) or more.

The conversions have been executed under a section — 17(2) — introduced in the Goa Town and Country Planning Act, which came into force on March 2, 2023, that allowed changes to Goa's land use maps justifying them as 'inadvertent errors', which needed alteration or modification.

Through the amendment, the government was empowered "to direct the Chief Town Planner (Planning) to carry out such alteration/ modification to the regional plan" if it is of the opinion that such "alteration/modification is necessary to be carried out to the regional plan for the purpose of rectifying any inadvertent error that has occurred in the regional plan, and for correction of inconsistent/incoherent zoning proposals in the regional plan."

Within a year of its enactment, the state government's Town and Country Planning Department has received 1,074 applications for 'correction', of which so far 260 have been processed, the records show.

In addition to it, 10.92 lakh square metres of land is also sought to be converted into settlement via a separate recently enacted provision of the Goa Town and Country Planning Act - section 39(A) which empowers the government to alter or modify the state's Regional Plan and or the Outline Development Plan for individual towns. The data was tabled before the Goa Legislative Assembly earlier this week in response to a query by Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MLA Cruz Silva.

According to the data, the beneficiaries of the land conversion include Hyderabad based businessman Preetham Reddy Nalla, Telugu actor Konidala Ramcharan Tej, Karapur Estates Pvt Ltd, a company in which Goa's Town and Country Planning minister Vishwajit Rane and his wife Deviya Rane are directors, and controversial organisations like the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti and the Sanatan Sanstha.

While Preetham Reddy Nalla has secured conversions of orchard land to a settlement of 60,000 square metres in Morjim village in north Goa, Ramcharan got orchard land of around 3,500 square metres for the purpose of constructing a farmhouse.

The Hindu Janajagruti Samiti and the Sanathan Sanstha, far-right Hindu groups who own a collective 16,442 square metres of mixed orchard, no-development slope and settlement land, have changed the zoning of their land to 'institutional.'

Among the lands corrected are two plots amounting to cultivable lands (paddy field) 12,000 square metres belonging to Karapur Estates Pvt Ltd. Minister Rane said the lands were not cultivated and the change reflected

the changed nature of the land that happened "a long time ago." "These lands were not cultivated, and the correction has been made to reflect that," he told HT.

HT had sent emails to others who have benefitted from the rule change. But they have not responded.

Land conversion is a contentious issue in Goa, having sparked major protests in the past.

Between 1986 and 2005, the TCP converted 12.19 sq km of land either through planned or piecemeal changes. However, over the last 15 months alone, the state has lost 2,129 sq km of land.

"Construction in orchard zones and on a plateau can have a significant negative impact on the environment. These zones are typically set aside to protect sensitive ecosystems, water resources and used as aquifers systems, catchment areas and grazing lands. The clearing of trees to make way for construction can destroy important habitats," said Mayur Shetgoankar, a resident of Morjim village.

"Many illegal zone changes have been done by the TCP minister Vishwajit Rane for himself, his favoured colleagues and promising businesses. he is trying everything to destroy the current Regional Plan 2021 with its environmental protections, through illegal and anti-people amendments 17(2), 39A, 17D, changing regulations at whim without people's knowledge or participation." Sabina Martins, the convenor of the Goa Bachao Abhiyan (Save Goa Front), a people's movement to protest land use changes in Goa, said.

Town and Country Planning minister Rane replied that his department "has inspected sites for all notified cases for affecting necessary corrections under Section 17(2) of the TCP Act" and that if needed "the Department is empowered to take necessary action against any violations."

"There is a guideline that we follow and there is a committee that decides. It is not that the minister decides. Everyone who falls within the guideline will be entertained. There are certain (kinds of) lands which we will not entertain. Goa is a progressive state, and everyone wants to come here. There are businesses who have invested." Rane said.

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## **MASS ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION OF GOA'S GREEN HEART**

- 21.29 lakh sqm green land converted to settlement zone under section 17(2) and 39(A)
- 10 times more land converted in last 15 months compared to previous 37 years
- Only 2.13 lakh sqm land was converted from 1986-2023

**Land conversion in Goa**

