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Controversy

REALTY SHARKS ON THE PROWL

Amendments to a land law in Goa amount to giving a cartel of civil servants, politicians, and real estate agents carte blanche to convert pristine "no development zones" into settlement areas. AMEY TIRODKAR

As you drive along the roads of Goa, you will encounter countless billboards promoting the idea of owning "a second home" in this charming coastal State. The advertisements showcase villas and flats, often surrounded by lush greenery and clear skies. Once upon a time, similar billboards advertised accommodation, food, or casinos for tourists. Now, the focus has shifted to luring investors and realtors to buy land in Goa.

This change in Goa's essential character is thanks to a shift in government policy. It started in 2018 with an amendment that became Regional Plan (RP) 2021, whereby the Town and Country Planning (TCP) department decided that land "zones" (such as eco-sensitive zones) could be changed with a simple application made by the landowner. Development was once completely prohibited in some of these "no development zones" (NDZs): hill slopes, wetlands, forests, or *khazans* (low-lying land near creeks or the sea). The amendment opened

NDZs up to development for the first time.

However, the government, aware of the imminent opposition the amendment would trigger, included a clause: people opposed to any change in zoning could file a petition, and a



TCP authority would hear their grievances.

Between 2018 and 2022, there were nearly 8,000 applications to change land zones, but Goa's progressive civil society rose in strong opposition. Unwilling to wade into a controversy, the government did nothing until the 2022 Assembly election, before which not a single land conversion took place.

WHEN THE BJP government returned to power that year and Vishwajit Rane became the TCP Minister, he came up with another amendment. This time, the government omitted the public objection clause. The new amendment, brought about in February 2023, said there were zoning mistakes in RP 2021 that needed to be rectified. The new amendment allows an applicant to file for a "change of zone" and the TCP authority to act on it without opening it up to public scrutiny.

Organisations such as Goa Foundation, Goa Bachao Andolan, and Khazan Society as well as several individuals, including environmentalists and lawyers, filed petitions against the amendment. The High Court is hearing the case at present. In July 2023, *Frontline* ("Goa for sale", August 11, 2023) highlighted how this amendment would impact the State. By the time the story was published, some 1.8 lakh square metres of land had been converted from NDZ to settlement zones. Now, 18 months later, 30 lakh sq m of NDZ land has been converted.

The High Court is hearing petitions against the amendment, but because it has not stayed it, rapid conversions are taking place. To give you a picture of the scale of the changes, let us talk about Rajesh Naik, a chief town planner in Goa who got a controversial one-year service extension after retirement. There are allegations that Naik is "clearing files" without proper checks and at lightning speed. The veteran environmentalist Claude Alvarez wrote in the Goan newspaper *O Heraldo*: "During the week preceding the extension on retirement, Rajesh Naik approved the conversion of 8,25,648 sq metres of land in Goa for real estate. This was the single biggest week of conversions ever seen in the state. The extension order [of Rajesh Naik] came as a reward." Indeed, some of the conversions point to the possible involvement of government authorities in changing zones arbitrarily.

In January 2024, Delhi newspapers carried advertisements by The House of Abhinandan

Lodha, a real estate giant, that read: "Delhi, Rulers of India, Now Conquer Goa". A huge backlash from Goans made the company withdraw the advertisement. The land the real estate group was talking about is reportedly in Karapur village in Bicholim Taluka of North Goa district.

SWAPNESH SHERLEKAR, an engineer turned activist, dug deep into government documents to establish the exact land area the Lodha group was looking at. The data that Sherlekar shares are disturbing. Two parcels of land in Karapur village, amounting to 5.7 lakh sq m, belong to Karapur Estate Pvt. Ltd and Enricher Infra Pvt. Ltd. Karapur Estate's managing director is Vishwajit Rane, the TCP Minister. He has given the power of attorney to one Satguru R. Dhume to sign on papers relating to government departments such as TCP and forests. Thus, when Karapur Estate applied to change the land zoning and the matter came before the TCP board for hearing, Rane was the Minister concerned (he still is) and Chairman of the board. The board, unsurprisingly, approved the zone change. Later, Rane's Ministry too endorsed the change. All this took place even as Karapur Estate reportedly signed a deal with The House of Abhinandan Lodha group to sell the land. The conversion, as mentioned, was challenged in the High Court. *Frontline* tried to contact Rane for three days when this reporter was in Goa, but to no avail.

Interestingly, both Rane and Abhinandan Lodha's father, Mangal Prabhat Lodha, are from the BJP. Lodha Sr is a six-term MLA from Mumbai's Malabar Hill constituency and now a Cabinet Minister for skill development in Maharashtra's Mahayuti (BJP, Shiv Sena, and Nationalist Congress Party) government. A Congress leader from Goa, Girish Chodankar, alleged that the BJP was selling Goa to outsiders. He said: "All the cases of land conversion directly involve BJP leaders from the State as well as from outside it. This looting of Goa must be stopped."

The activist Sherlekar describes it as a gross misuse of power. "There should be a criminal investigation into the case. Rane should be sacked immediately from the Cabinet. All cases of land conversion under Rane must be investigated," he said.

Another similar case that rocked Goa involves Puneet Kumar Goyal, who was the State's Chief Secretary from February 2022 to October 2024.

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Girish Chodankar
Congress leader



In August 2024, it came to light that Goyal had bought land that was “converted” just a few weeks earlier. Cyril Philip Mendoza of Aldona village in Bardez taluka of North Goa district applied to convert his 1,875 sq m plot on January 23, 2024. While applying for conversion, Mendoza did not mention any house built on the land. When the scrutiny committee of the TCP authority found out about the house, it suggested the appointment of a private surveyor for the land before clearing the proposal. Enter K.H. Kamalini, a private surveyor, who did not mention the house in his report and paved the way for conversion.

While the sale deed was registered on July 5, 2024, the franking fee of Rs.13 lakh was paid on May 18, 2024, two months before the registration of the sale deed and just two months after the land conversion. Goyal had given his son Shubham Goyal a power of attorney for all transactions. A total payment of Rs.2.6 crore was made for the land. The transaction violates the All India Services (Conduct) Rules, 1968, according to which an officer must get prior permission for such transactions if he is involved as an authority. Moreover, Mendoza, who applied for the zone change, is married to Marcelena Monteena Mendoza, a Canadian citizen. Government officers also need permission before getting into any transaction with the family member of a foreign national, which was not done.

In light of these documents, citizens, including Sherlekar, Dhirendra Phadte, Jose Maria Miranda, and others filed a petition in the High Court on October 15, 2024. Within a week, Goyal

▼ **BJP leader Vishwajit Rane**

being greeted by supporters on counting day of the 2022 Goa Assembly election, in North Goa district on March 10, 2022. The BJP returned to power that year, and Rane became the Town and Country Planning Minister. ■

was transferred out of Goa. Chief Minister Pramod Sawant, meanwhile, distanced himself from the issue. “The matter is under investigation. If Dr Goyal is found guilty, action as per law will be taken against him,” he said. Activists have demanded the suspension of Goyal from the civil service and asked that he be barred from leaving Goa until the investigation is complete.

GOA, INDIA'S SMALLEST State, with a land area of 3,702 sq km, is 58 per cent forest and 7 per cent agricultural land. It cannot afford to lose 30 lakh sq m of land to development. There is fear that no forest nor wetland will remain in the State, leading to an ecological disaster. Alvarez said: “If it is not challenged now, the cartel of civil servants, politicians, and real estate agents will threaten the very existence of Goa.”

The conversion of land zones is also threatening the heritage sites in Old Goa. Peter Vegas, a co-ordinator of the Save Old Goa Action Committee, is leading a signature campaign to stop development around these sites. In Se Old Goa revenue village, for instance, there is a proposal to change the zoning of 1.60 lakh sq m of NDZ land, part of which falls within 100 m of the protected Our Lady of Mount Chapel monument. The government has given permission for the building of four farmhouses on that land. The Save Old Goa committee is putting pressure on the government to withdraw its permission. As of now, 35,000 Goans have signed the campaign. It looks as if it is again going to fall upon ordinary Goans to save their State. ■