

FROM REGIONAL PLANS TO REAL ESTATE PROFITS: THE QUIET TAKEOVER OF GOA'S LAND

Goa's battle against mega housing projects has been ongoing for nearly two decades, with citizens repeatedly resisting large-scale developments that threaten the State's identity and environment. Despite past victories, real estate interests continue to find ways to bypass regulations, often with government support. **PRATIK PARAB** examines the ongoing struggle, the loopholes in planning laws, and the growing concerns of local communities fighting to protect their lands and water bodies



Mega housing projects in Goa have been unpopular ever since the first developer set foot on Goan soil. The alert citizens of Goa sensed the danger in 2006 and mobilised a mass movement against the Regional Plan 2011. Goa Bachao Abhiyan demanded the revocation of the Regional Plan 2011, involving people in participatory planning at the village level and notifying a new plan. The movement will complete 20 years in 2026 - but, alas, the demands and the problems faced by the people remain the same.

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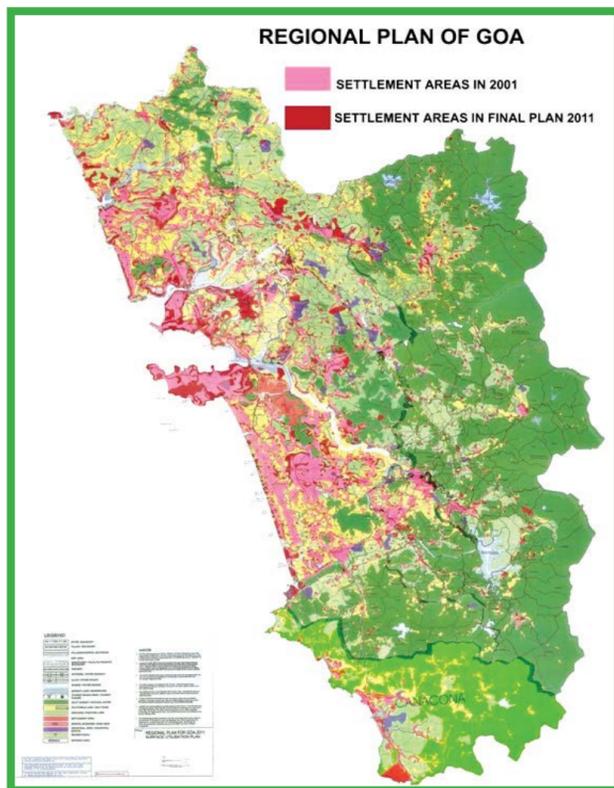
Ever since the Regional Plan (RP) 2011 was formulated, it met with extreme criticism and rejection. However, Planning & Development Authorities (PDAs) proliferated, and Sections 16, 17(B), and 39(A) of the TCP Act, 1974, keep being amended to bring in RP 2011 through the back door. The amendments have helped realtors and speculators bypass all the authorities and local self-governments, leaving Goans at the receiving end.

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One of the biggest movements that started in 2006 against RP 2011 was GBA. The movement managed to achieve what it demanded. However, not many knew that the same problems were going to make a backdoor entry.

Later in 2008, the village of Carmona started a long fight against mega projects, which was one of the first in the State, in a way lighting a fire through protests against a 618-apartment project in their village by Raheja Developers. The villagers managed to oust the project from the village after 15 years of street and court battles.

However, even after 17 years, the fights of the villagers remain similar. But this time, the enemy is much better equipped, as the people have found no support from the government. Similar protests have started in yet another movement recently in Savarfond, Sancoale, after the Village Panchayat granted permission for a 700-villa and 700-swimming pool



mega project. Placed on a visibly steep hillside with a gradient that does not even allow a person to stand properly, the geography and the locality of the project have become a major flashpoint for protests.

The protests that had cooled down for a while are now on the verge of reigniting as the developer has started the exercise of soil testing, which is a primary requirement to obtain Technical Clearance for any project. Locals fear that, with a court order protecting the developer's interest and a government that is not interested in protecting the interests of locals, Bhutani may try to steamroll local concerns and proceed with the project.

Even though a Public Interest Litigation is pending in the High Court against the project, the developers have dared to go ahead. Locals have

long complained that despite knowing that M-Tech, a real estate company attempting to develop this very land, was pushed out of the village through protests, Bhutani has dared to step in—something that cannot happen without the patronage of the government.

The same happened with the Reis Magos hill. Once a lush green hill turned brown due to excavation and has now become a concrete jungle. President of the Goa Panchayati Raj Institutions Union (GoaPRIU), J. Santano Rodrigues, said, "All the development that is being done in the form of roads and other public infrastructure is being built to allow commercial and capitalist interests into the villages." Rodrigues stated that the interests of villagers have now taken a back seat, while planning is being done for the capitalists.

MAJOR MOVEMENTS AGAINST FORCED REAL ESTATE PROJECTS

The Goa Bachao Abhiyan (GBA) was formed on 3 December 2006 after the Government of Goa attempted to push the Regional Plan 2011 onto the people without public participation. The GBA succeeded in pushing back RP 2011.

Rodrigues, while expressing the need for a proper Regional Plan, said that the piecemeal approach of the government in planning is proving to be the main culprit behind the state slowly losing its identity. "The government is planning the State as if it were a city. Goa is not a city. The majority of Goans live in villages. The protection of villages needs to be considered in the planning," he added.

Convenor of Goyche Fudle Pilge Khatir, Jack Mascarenhas, said, "The rampant conversion of land for mega-housing projects in Goa, without meaningful local involvement, highlights a critical failure in our planning process, particularly regarding the Regional Plan. It is deeply concerning."

REGIONAL PLANNING: WHY IS IT BEING BYPASSED?

According to expert planners, Regional Planning has been tried and tested in Goa, while other States are just beginning to implement it. Goa

is actually the most unique state in India, as it was the first to have a land use policy and land use plan, which was prepared in 1986. Goa was the only independent state after Delhi to have prepared the Regional Plan 2001 in 1986.

To this day, the State boasts of being one of only three in the country to be completely covered by planning. Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu have tried to extend land use policies to rural areas but have faced significant hurdles. However, Goa has a land use planning system on paper that extends not just to towns but also to village levels.

Tahir Noronha, an urban planner who is currently helping the city of Detroit in Michigan, USA, with planning, formulating regulations, and permits, is also the convenor of the Charles Correa Foundation. He said, "From 1991 to 2024, the government has been extending and revising the ODP of Panjim, and in no city or town of Goa has a CDP been formulated. This is the scenario in Goa, where there is no study, no estimation, and no justification—everything is being done based on a need for faster growth. There is a suspicious and malafide intent to exploit the ODP provisions that lack the requirement of study, allowing for rapid development," he explained.

Activist Swapnesh Sherlekar, a strong voice against the conversion of land in Goa, said, "By granting changes of zone to large amounts of ecologically sensitive areas, particularly paddy fields, natural cover, and no-development slopes, the message appears to be very clear: this govern-

CARMONA'S MOVEMENT AGAINST A MEGA PROJECT TOOK 15 YEARS TO TRIUMPH

In 2008, the quiet village of Carmona was alarmed by a real estate project threatening its cultural, religious, and environmental ethos. A Mumbai-based real estate developer, Raheja, proposed a mega-project of 618 apartments on the banks of the Sal River. After 15 years of relentless fighting, Raheja withdrew, and the village won its battle.

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NO CONSIDERATION FOR LOCAL NEEDS

The Bhutani project is a classic example of how real estate lobbies have been planning a backdoor entry by ignoring the wants of villages. ODPs have to be centric and synonymous to the needs of the local population. Converting land zones was envisaged for the original dwellers of the State and the plans were prepared with the projection of what they would require in the next decade or two. However, Goa is seeing a riot of conversions that are happening for real estate and second home constructions. Permissions and clearances are being given without any consideration to locals or local self-governments like Panchayats and Municipalities. Proposals of conversion and land use changes that must be done with the consultation of local public, gram sabhas, Village Development Committees (VDC) are being done at the top level and are being forced on to the villagers and village panchayats.

An activist from Sancoale Narayan Naik said, "Be it the land conversion done for Abhinandan Lodha or Bhutani, this was never asked by the locals or the villagers. Hill slopes that are construction regulation zones are today being converted to settlement zones. These were earlier eco-sensitive lands and a medium of making a living for the locals," he reminded.

Sources have informed that a large 2,500-apartment project in Mormugao has not obtained occupancy or been able to sell its flats, as the project has insufficient water supply. "Under the garb of providing water to locals, the government is laying big pipelines in Mormugao to supply water to these projects," alleged Narayan Naik.

J. Santano Rodrigues highlighted that capitalist interests have crept into local self-governments. "Locals have now been turned against the interests of the village, labelling them as anti-development. People need to identify and oppose such individuals to save their villages for posterity," he added.

QUOTEROOM

“All the development that is being done in the form of roads and other public infrastructure is being built to allow commercial and capitalist interests into the villages. The government is planning the State as if it were a city. Goa is not a city. The majority of Goans live in villages. The protection of villages needs to be considered in the planning”
—J. Santano Rodrigues, President, Goa Panchayati Raj Institutions Union (GoaPRIU)

“This isn't just about today; it's about the future of Goa. We're sacrificing the very resources and spaces that future generations will depend on. We need a Regional Plan that truly serves the people of Goa, not just a select few. We need a planning process that prioritises conservation, community involvement, and sustainable development, not short-term gains and unchecked land conversion”
—Jack Mascarenhas, Convenor, Goyche Fudle Pilge Khatir

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