

Scientists push to scrap rail expansion through W Ghats

Want Central Empowered Committee's (CEC) recommendation against double-tracking to be upheld; say project is unnecessary as Mopa airport, expanded highway network already meet Goa's transportation needs



Thousands of Goans had protested against the railway double-tracking at Chandor in November 2020

Team Herald

MARGAO: A collective of esteemed scientists and researchers has written a formal letter to the Regional Empowered Committee (REC), urging it to uphold the Central Empowered Committee's (CEC) strong recommendation to scrap the controversial double-tracking of the railway line from Castlerock (Karnataka) to Kulem (Goa). The experts emphasize that the project poses a severe threat to the fragile ecosystem of the Western Ghats, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and contradicts India's environmental commitments.

The letter, addressed to the REC at the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MoEFCC), highlights the irreversible damage the double-tracking project would cause to the biodiversity-rich forests of the Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary and Mollem National Park. These protected areas serve as critical wildlife corridors, supporting endangered species such as the Bengal tiger, dhole, and Indian pangolin. If approved, the project would lead to large-scale deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and increased train-induced wildlife mortality.

The Western Ghats is one of the world's eight 'hottest biodiversity hotspots,' home to approximately 325 globally threatened species. The CEC report underscores the project's severe ecological implications, including the diversion of 113.857 hectares within the Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary. Experts warn that railway expansion will exacerbate forest fragmentation, disrupt seed dispersal of key forest species, and significantly increase wildlife mortality due to train collisions.

THREAT TO THE WESTERN GHATS

- Double-tracking threatens the UNESCO-listed biodiversity hotspot.
- Risk of large-scale deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and increased wildlife mortality due to train collisions

TIGER CONSERVATION AT RISK

- Railway line cuts through Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary and the Kali Tiger Reserve.
- NTCA has identified the area as crucial for tiger movement between Karnataka & Goa.

FLAWED JUSTIFICATIONS

- The steep 1:37 gradient makes the railway inefficient
- Reports indicate the project is driven by coal transport, not public benefit
- Mopa Airport & expanded highways already meet transport needs

The letter also highlights concerns over habitat destruction for cavity-nesting birds like the Great Hornbill, which play a crucial role in forest regeneration. The loss of tree cover would further impact arboreal species, such as langurs, macaques, and civets, whose movement depends on canopy connectivity. Researchers argue that mitigation measures suggested in Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) remain inadequate and fail to address broader ecological disruptions.

The researchers stress that the EIA overlooked critical considerations regarding tiger presence in the region. The proposed railway line cuts through the Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary, part of the Kali Tiger Reserve, and reserved forests of the Haliyal Division, where tiger activity has been documented. The National Tiger Conservation Au-

IMPACT ON PROTECTED AREAS

- Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary & Mollem National Park are critical wildlife corridors.
- Home to endangered species like Bengal tigers, dholes, and Indian pangolins
- Loss of tree cover impacts Great Hornbills, langurs, macaques, and civets

CALL FOR ACTION FROM SCIENTISTS

- Supreme Court's directive should be upheld to scrap the project
- Scientists urge authorities to prioritise ecological and community well-being

thority (NTCA) has identified this corridor as vital for connecting tiger populations in the Northern Western Ghats with those in Karnataka and Goa. Increased rail traffic would heighten mortality risks for tigers and their prey, as evidenced by rising wildlife fatalities on railway tracks across India.

The letter questions the economic and transportation rationale behind the project. With a steep 1:37 gradient, the railway line is one of the most inefficient in the country, and double-tracking will not significantly improve efficiency. Reports suggest that coal transportation, rather than public transport, is the primary motivation for the project—despite the Indian government's revised policy to phase out coal imports. The CEC report also points out that Goa's new Mopa Airport and expanded highway networks already address regional transport demands, making railway

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— Dr. Sinead D'Silva, researcher, University of Leeds

“This project threatens not only the fragile ecosystems of the Western Ghats but also the livelihoods and well-being of communities that depend on them. Upholding the CEC's recommendation is a vital step toward protecting both the ecological future and societal well-being of the region”

— Dr. Anushka Rege, conservation and sustainability scientist

expansion redundant.

The signatories call upon the REC to uphold the Supreme Court's directive and scrap the double-tracking project entirely. They stress that the project is an inefficient use of resources with devastating socio-ecological consequences, including heightened pollution, health hazards from coal transport, and economic disruptions to communities reliant on eco-tourism.

“This project threatens not only the fragile ecosystems of the Western Ghats but also the livelihoods and well-being of communities that depend on them. Upholding the CEC's recommendation is a vital step toward protecting both the ecological future and societal well-being of the region,” said Dr. Anushka Rege, a scientist who has worked in the landscape and co-drafted the letter.

Dr. Sinead D'Silva, a researcher focusing on youth futures and relationships with place, currently based at the University of Leeds, added, “In addition to the crucial evidence raised in this letter, the people of Goa constantly demonstrate our deep relationship with territory and culture by actively voicing dissent as citizens who care. The people can see this—why is the government unable to do so?”

“The scientific community stands united in this appeal,” the letter concludes. “We urge decision-makers to recognize the long-term environmental costs and act responsibly to protect our nation's ecological heritage.”

Goa govt empowers Comunidade Administrator to reclaim misused land

Team Herald

MARGAO: The State government has formally notified the Goa Legislative Diploma No. 2070 (Amendment) Act, 2025, which introduces new provisions allowing the Administrator of Comunidades to reclaim land that has been used for purposes other than those for which it was originally granted. The reversion of such land to the Comunidade will require the approval of the government.

The amendment, which was passed in the recently concluded winter session of the State Assembly, was officially notified recently. It adds a new provision, Article 31A (2), to the existing legislation. Under this provision, the Administrator of Comunidades is granted the authority to initiate proceedings by issuing a showcase notice to the allottee or the individual holding the land.

ACCORDING TO THE AMENDMENT

■ Administrator of Comunidades can now issue a showcase notice to the individual holding the land, and then pass an order reclaiming the land

■ No authority, including the Town and Country Planning Department (TCP), municipal councils, or village panchayats, can issue No Objection Certificates (NOCs) for construction on a plot, once it is reverted to the Comunidade

■ Administrator is also required to issue an order preventing any change in the land's use for purposes other than those for which it was originally granted

Following this, the Administrator has the power to

pass an order for the land's reversion to the Comunidade.

“The Bill seeks to make provision for empowering the Administrator of Comunidade to revert a land to the Comunidade if it is used for a purpose other than for which it was granted, with the approval of the Government,” states the notification.

Additionally, the amendment specifies that no authority, including the Town and Country Planning Department (TCP), Corporation of Panaji, municipal councils, or village panchayats, can issue No Objection Certificates (NOCs) for construction on a plot once it has been reverted to the Comunidade. During the course of proceedings, the Administrator is also required to issue an order preventing any change in the land's use for purposes other than those for which it was originally granted.

HARVEST OFFERING



The Babreshwar Temple in Calangute is adorned with plump bunches of bananas, known locally as 'keleyache ghod', offered by devotees during the festive Babreshwar Zatra, also affectionately referred to as Kelyachi Zatra

Mangaluru-based cultural Konkani organisation to back GKF's Romi script fight

Team Herald

MARGAO: A Global Konkni Forum delegation visited Mandd Sobhann's Gurkar Eric Ozario at Kalaangann in Mangaluru on Wednesday to update him on the ongoing movement demanding justice for the Konkni language in the Official Language Act (OLA).

Jose Salvador Fernandes, Secretary of the Global

Konkni Forum, shared that Eric Ozario reaffirmed his support for the fight to grant equal status to all Konkni scripts, including Romi Script, at the Sahitya Akademi level.

The meeting was attended by Global Konkni Forum Secretary Jose Salvador Fernandes, Treasurer Aplon Rebello, executive members Xavier Mascarenhas (Xavier de Maina), Nora Antao e Souza, Vivek

Menezes, Mandd Sobhann Gurkar Eric Ozario, convenor of the Konkani Writers' Association Karnataka Richard Moras, and Mandd Sobhann member Elon Rodrigues.

To determine the future course of action and intensify the push for Romi Script's inclusion in the OLA, GKF has scheduled a special executive committee meeting for February 20.

Residents livid as illegal parking chokes roads in Margao, Fatorda

Team Herald

MARGAO: Residents of Margao and Fatorda have urged the authorities to take immediate action against the increasing problem of buses and cars being parked on roads, causing significant inconvenience to commuters.

In several locations along busy roads, including the national highway passing through Fatorda and Margao, vehicles are frequently parked, blocking up to half of the road. This severely disrupts traffic flow and raises safety concerns, particularly during peak hours. In Fatorda, near the Sincro Hotel and several other areas, both sides of the road are often occupied by parked cars throughout the day and night.

“Especially at night, it becomes increasingly difficult for drivers to navigate, and the situation worsens when street lighting is inadequate,” said Franky Fernandes, a resident of Fatorda. “On several occasions, we've seen motorists crash into parked cars, leading to injuries.” Fernandes also pointed out that while many roads in Fatorda are well-maintained and wide enough, illegal parking has become a major issue.

Shivnand Naik, a Margao resident, echoed similar concerns



and called for action against car owners who leave their vehicles parked on the roadside for prolonged periods.

“Roads are not meant to serve as parking lots,” Naik said. “It's shocking to see traffic police impose fines on vehicles stopping briefly while ignoring cars that remain parked for hours, obstructing traffic flow.”

Concerned citizens have urged the District Collector to intervene and take swift action.

Residents have also called on the Traffic Police to crack down on roadside parking violations. Sapre, another local resident, expressed frustration over the apparent lack of action against vehicles with tinted windows, which are often parked along the roadside. “While traffic police are busy issuing challans to bikers without helmets, they are turning a blind eye to ongoing parking violations,” Sapre said.

Women's rights NGO lauds Bhagat's life sentence

Team Herald

MARGAO: Bailancho Ekvott (BE) welcomed the conviction and sentencing in the Danielle McLaughlin case. “The ends of justice have been met with Vikat Bhagat being convicted for the brutal rape, murder, and destruction of evidence, and sentenced to rigorous punishment and a fine,” said BE President Auda Viegas on Wednesday.

“Although it took eight traumatic years for relief, Danielle McLaughlin's mother and sister, who fought for justice, can now grieve for her. The pain of losing a loved one—especially to a cruel killer—can never go away, but the sentence will pave the way for healing.”

The women's rights organization particularly praised District Judge Kshama Joshi's “leading observations” about consent. “Intoxication is no excuse to rape a woman. If intoxicated, she is not fit to give consent,” BE highlighted from the judgement. The organisation lauded the thorough investigation by the Goa police, the prosecution's efforts and Adv Vikram Varma, the McLaughlin family lawyer.



Despite public frustration with the unending and haphazard Smart City work, and a pending Public Interest Litigation in the courts, the Smart City authorities continue to delay completion of the infra project. In a recent court submission, Smart City pushed back its deadline for completing road works from February 23, 2025, to March 31, 2025

TARIKH PE TARIKH: SMART CITY PUSHES COMPLETION DEADLINE TO MARCH 31, 2025

“The political party ruling Goa is extremely powerful, making it challenging for genuine activists to fight against the government. Unless a large-scale revolution takes place, demanding proper services rather than a change in power, the situation is unlikely to improve. The roads remain unfinished, and Panjim city resembles a war zone. It's unclear how this will end, as deadlines are being consistently ignored. Despite promises made to High Court judges last year, there has been no progress, with another one and a half months passing. The issue isn't whether the projects will be completed eventually, but why the government is delaying. They should be held accountable, and the High Court should take suo moto cognisance and take action against the government”

— Armando Gonsalves, Panjim resident



“These deadlines are no different from the earlier ones. They are all fake and false deadlines. What difference does it make to the CEO of Imagine Panjim Smart City Ltd and the judiciary? They don't feel the pain that the citizens of Panjim endure. So, Smart City makes a submission, and the judiciary accepts it because they undertake the work, not execute it - that's the responsibility of the executive. As a government-owned company and special purpose vehicle for Panjim, only we, the people of Panjim, understand the pain and suffering we've undergone for years. They travel comfortably by car and don't feel our pain. As senior citizens, we know our struggles. The roads dug earlier have also missed their deadlines, with subpar work quality”

— Adv Rui Ferreira, Panjim resident

“The Smart City Mission has brought misery to Panjim's residents and visitors alike for years. The relentless construction has forced people to endure dust and pollution, resulting in devastating consequences. Two lives have been lost, numerous bones have been broken, and pregnant women have suffered miscarriages. The chaos is overwhelming, and the situation is heartbreaking. Ironically, despite the lack of parking spaces due to the digging, two-wheeler owners are being fined for wrongful parking. Meanwhile, four-wheelers are overlooked. Until the Smart City project is completed, it's unreasonable to fine people for parking violations. The incessant digging has left residents fed up”

— Tara Kerkar, social activist

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