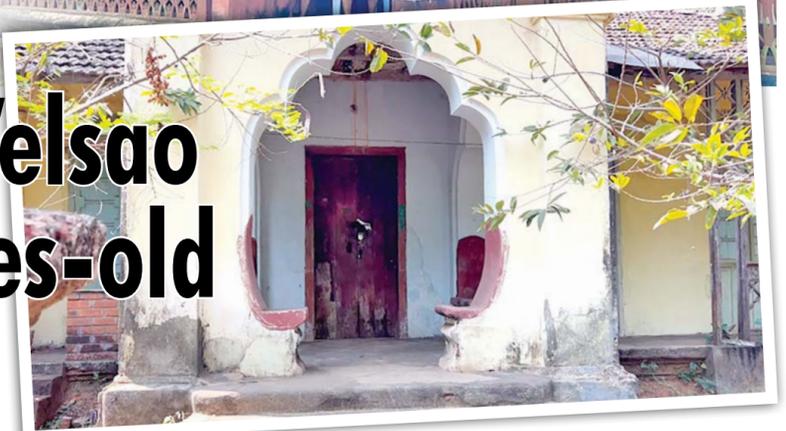


THE HERALDO Review

Panjim, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 23/23,

A VILLAGE CORNERED: Velsao families fight to save centuries-old homes from rail expansion

Generations of families in Primeiro Vaddo, Velsao, have lived in quaint heritage homes, but today, their very existence is under threat. The Railways have dumped truckloads of mud in front of these houses, cracking compound walls and cutting off access, leaving residents landlocked. Senior citizens struggle to step out, and children need help navigating the rubble. Despite protests and legal battles, construction continues, disregarding villagers' ownership documents. As vibrations from trains shake their fragile homes and coal and construction dust pollutes the air, residents fear they are being forced out of their own land. **KARSTEN MIRANDA** and lensman **GAURESH SATTARKAR** report from the village



TRAPPED IN THEIR OWN HOMES

When one meets the families living in 400-500-year-old heritage homes that line the traditional Right of Way opposite the railway tracks in Primeiro Vaddo, Velsao, one encounters faces full of dejection, hearts weary from their ongoing battle with the railways, and minds filled with anxiety about what comes next. These centuries-old structures, which have weathered time and change, now face an unprecedented threat to their existence.

Over the last couple of weeks, railways have dumped truckloads of mud in front of these homes, with rubble piling up against compound walls. Some walls have cracked under the pressure, while other portions were forcibly broken down by railway machinery, forcing owners to rebuild them. The residents are now effectively landlocked—homeowners cannot move their vehicles out of their compounds, and even walking out of their homes has become a precarious task.

Senior citizens must carefully navigate loose rubble that sits at an elevation higher than their compound ground, performing a dangerous balancing act just to enter their homes. Young children need assistance to leave their houses, as the height difference has made it impossible for them to step out independently. The situation has worsened despite numerous complaints to various authorities and the Velsao panchayat's stop-work order demanding the removal of the dumped material.

At the heart of this crisis lies a dispute over land ownership. Villagers possess documents proving their ownership, while the railways have failed to produce title documents. Even with pending cases at both the Inspector of Survey and Land Records (ISLR) court and the District Court in Margao, construction continues unabated.

Orville Dourado Rodrigues, founder of Goencho Ekvott (GE), points to the historical roots of this conflict. "This was a road long before the Western India Portuguese Railway arrived in the 1890s. Our ancestors used it for their horse and bullock carts. Now, the Railways are suddenly claiming it as their land through adverse possession. But the irony is that this dirt road has been used by locals for generations for access to their homes. If anything, it is the villagers who have adverse possession over this strip of land, not the Railways."

The landowners possess Portuguese-era legal documents (Inscription/Description) issued by the Revenue Department of Goa, which clearly describe their parcels of land as having either a road or railway tracks as their eastern boundary. "Back in the 1990s, when the railways shifted from narrow gauge to broad gauge, people did not object—we coexisted peacefully," Orville notes. "It is only with this double-tracking project that there has been so much upheaval. Primeiro Vaddo is the first village, and the monsoon water flows from here to neighbouring villages and out into the sea or River Sal. The

Construction has begun on a traditional Right of Way along the railway tracks in Primeiro Vaddo, Velsao, which residents have long used as an access road to their homes—without it, they would be landlocked



Railways (SWR/RVNL) are proceeding with work under police protection, despite two pending cases: one before the Inspector of Survey and Land Records (ISLR) and another in the District Court, Margao



The ongoing work has caused major disruptions: material dumping has blocked access, compound walls have been damaged, and drainage systems have been destroyed, leading to water-logging concerns

Residents hold historical Matriz records proving that their land extends to the tracks, with their ancestors having ensured a public Right of Way

The Railways claim construction rights but have not provided ownership documents when challenged. Instead, they cite Railway Act powers, which locals dispute

destruction of the natural water bodies here won't just affect us—it will disrupt waterways across the region," Orville added.

The impact on these heritage structures has been severe. "Unlike modern buildings made with concrete, these houses were built with lime and mortar. With the use of heavy compactor machinery and the added pressure from the rains, collapse is a real fear," Orville explains. "I saw this firsthand at my own house, which is located some distance away. When the Railways conducted a speed test, the vibrations were so strong that glassware fell off the table, and my niece, who was visiting us, ran in fright. If this is happening at a distance, imagine the impact on homes that are right next to the tracks."

For 94-year-old Melina George, who lives in their ancestral house along with her 90-year-old brother Jose De Souza, each day brings new challenges.

"This village used to be so quiet, with no problems," Melina says. "Then, all of a sudden, the railways want to extend. It's so noisy now. Is this all for coal? Is coal more important than the people?"

The situation is equally dire for nonagenarian Ira Coelho, who questioned what would become of her, given that she already struggles to walk. Her daughters, who are equally distressed by the situation, shared their concerns.

"Our mother is 90 years old—how are we supposed to take her across when they add the second track? It's already difficult to cross one track, and now they want to take even more land without our knowledge or consent. That's just wrong," Debra said.

"We are citizens of this country, and our voices should be heard. But right now, everyone is doing what they want. The villagers aren't consulted, just given ultimatums. It's not fair. This is our village. We've lived here

for centuries—our ancestors built their lives here. And now, someone comes and tells us this is no longer ours? That's completely unfair, especially in a democratic country like India," Debra added further. Ira agreed, asserting that what was happening was unjust. The family also pointed out that the air they were breathing was laden with coal dust, posing a serious threat to her health.

Sandra Rodrigues's story reveals the human cost of this ongoing crisis. Standing before her house, she points to the land filling that has made it nearly impossible for her family to enter or exit their property. "My car is stuck inside, and we can't bring it out. The railways never informed us, never acquired this land, and never gave any notice before starting this work. Our boundary wall, which is nearly 400 years old, has already suffered damage."

The toll extends beyond physical damage. "Just ten days ago, I lost my father," she says, her voice heavy with emotion. "He lived here with us and was deeply disturbed by everything happening. His health deteriorated, and I had to move him to my sister's place, where he passed away a few days ago. Even as we mourn, they continue this work. Despite our protests and letters to all the authorities, including the Collector and police, no one is listening."

The environmental impact adds another layer of concern

The destruction of natural drainage systems is a particularly pressing problem. "There was a natural drainage path here, but they've bulldozed everything over. There's even an electricity line underneath, which they haven't accounted for," Dax Rodrigues notes. His heritage home bears witness to the physical toll: "The compacting machines they brought in yesterday shook the house so badly that part of the wooden roof col-

lapsed. This is an old interlocking wooden structure, built without nails, and it's already developing cracks from the vibrations of the single track. How will it withstand the double track and the even higher speeds of passing trains?"

Standing in the middle of the railway tracks, Geraldina Figueredo made it clear that her village was more than just the homes on one side—it extended beyond the tracks, where daily life takes place. She had lived here for 45 years, and with essential institutions located on the eastern side, crossing the tracks was unavoidable.

"I've fallen on these tracks four times already, and many of our senior residents struggle even more," says Geraldina.

Former Sarpanch Fatima Pereira provides an official perspective on the residents' plight. "They've put up a board warning that trespassers will be prosecuted and told us we can't even walk here. How is this their land? Our survey documents clearly show our ownership, and these houses have stood for centuries. My own house is 550 years old—Goa got Liberation in 1961, so where are the Railways' documents proving their claim? They have none," said Fatima.

"Now they're carrying out surveys without informing us. And how are they even conducting these surveys? They bring a tape, and suddenly it shows the boundary going through someone's balcony, or worse, straight into their hall. Do they plan to demolish our homes too? Where will we stay after that—not on the road? The same road they say we're not even allowed to walk on?" Fatima questioned.

The impact on daily life has been severe. "The vibrations from passing trains have caused cracks everywhere—on the walls, on the floor—some of which are five inches wide. I'm scared to stay here because something might collapse. My cupboard has already fallen apart, and items inside fell down," Fatima added.

"Earlier, we could bring a rickshaw, an ambulance, even a gas delivery van. Now, they want to barricade this road so that not even a two-wheeler can pass. How are we supposed to live? We're landlocked—this was our only access. I can't repair my house; I can't even call a doctor. Stand near the tracks, and you'll feel coal dust falling on you. Is this the quality of life we deserve? The government must step in and speak to the Railways about our plight," Fatima added.

She also pointed to an old house belonging to Olympia Rodrigues, whose son, Air Force pilot Ashley Rodrigues, she added, had passed away.

"His wife and children are too afraid to stay here—they visit for a short time and leave. They spent lakhs repairing their house, but the vibrations have damaged it again, and now they can't fix it. Even their gate is blocked—how are they supposed to enter?" Fatima questioned.

Celestina Fernandes, who has been married into the village for over 50 years, re-

flects on their uncertain future as she goes about her daily routine. "I don't know what will happen to us. My husband, Damiao Rodrigues, has a bad leg injury, and now, with these restrictions, even his movement is a challenge. My five-year-old granddaughter, Freya, is terrified every time a train passes."

"We don't want double tracking—we are opposing it, yet the government is only listening to the Railways and ignoring us completely. They should have answered us first—where is the road? Where is the waterway? They should have planned this before starting the work, not after leaving us landlocked. On top of all this, I am worried about the safety of my family at night," Celestina added.

Her daughter-in-law, Jennifer, echoed her concerns, saying that they are struggling to go about their daily lives amidst these hardships.

Olenico Simoes, the general secretary of Goencho Ekvott, sees deeper implications in this struggle. "What's happening here is nothing short of landowners being turned into tenants on their own land. This is no different from what the Mughal rulers did—coming in, seizing land, destroying homes, and then leaving. That's exactly what the Railways are doing—grabbing land, forcing themselves inside people's homes, causing damage, and then walking away."

"They are now trying to claim adverse possession through Form 1 and 14, but if that's the case, what about the many Goan tenants fighting for their rights? The Mayem evacuees, the Kharewado fisherfolk, and others—shouldn't they be given adverse possession too? Why is the government favouring only one lobby—the Railways—while ignoring the concerns of Goans?" Simoes questioned.

He points to broader concerns about Goa's future: "This won't end with double tracking. The Mormugao Port Authority, which has recently been privatized, used to say coal expansion was necessary for the economy. Now they claim double tracking is essential for MPA's future. Tomorrow, they'll justify building even more ports for MPA. If this continues, it won't just harm Goa's environment—the very people whose livelihoods depend on traditional occupations and tourism will suffer as Goa turns into a coal hub."

The Velsao-Pale-Issorcim panchayat continues its fight against railway construction, maintaining their stop-work order's validity despite RVNL's challenges. After work resumed in February, the panchayat demanded immediate removal of dumped materials and alerted district authorities. This conflict, part of a five-year struggle against double-tracking that began during the pandemic, has become emblematic of a larger battle by Velsao residents to protect their ancestral lands. As construction continues and the legal battles drag on, these heritage homes stand as silent witnesses to a community's fight for survival.

QUOTEROOM
The vibrations from passing trains are so strong now that it's difficult to concentrate on anything. At night, when they blow the horn, you just can't sleep. Everybody is getting old, and we can't cope with this situation
— Melina George

We are going to be locked in our own house. We already struggle with access from our gate due to the existing track, and now they want to add another. Our house is rattling, things are breaking—can you imagine our plight when the second track comes?
— Debra Coelho

My car is stuck inside, and we can't bring it out. The railways never informed us, never acquired this land, and never gave any notice before starting this work. Our boundary wall, which is nearly 400 years old, has already suffered damage
— Sandra Rodrigues

The compacting machines they brought in yesterday shook the house so badly that part of the wooden roof collapsed. This is an old interlocking wooden structure, built without nails, and it's already developing cracks from the vibrations of the single track
— Dax Rodrigues

They've put up a board warning that trespassers will be prosecuted and told us we can't even walk here. How is this their land? Our survey documents clearly show our ownership, and these houses have stood for centuries. My own house is 550 years old—Goa got Liberation in 1961, so where are the Railways' documents proving their claim? They have none
— Fatima Pereira

My family depends on crossing to the other side of the tracks to reach the market and for my granddaughter to go to school. The biggest worry for me, is the water flow. There was a water body nearby thankfully, hasn't been destroyed yet, but given where our house is, if anything happens to it, our home will be flooded immediately
— Celestina Fernandes

To get anywhere, we have to cross the railway tracks, but with them being raised and all these illegalities, it's becoming impossible. I've fallen on these tracks four times already, and many of our senior residents struggle even more. If double-tracking happens, it will completely disrupt our daily lives—we simply won't be able to cross
— Geraldina Figueredo

