

# Row over constructions, destruction of nature at Siolim-Marna panchayat

Villagers corner Sarpanch, Secretary over multi-dwelling units, water shortages; demand civic body to enforce strict measures to prevent tree felling

Team Herald

**ASSAGAO:** The Siolim-Marna gram sabha saw villagers holding the panchayat fully responsible for the environmental degradation of the village, accusing it of failing to exercise its authority effectively.

Gram sabha member and Biodiversity Chairperson Joaquim Barros questioned the panchayat on the actions taken following the July gram sabha resolutions that opposed rampant constructions and the proliferation of swimming pools.

Responding to the concerns, Sarpanch Sandesh Hadfekar and panchayat secretary Mandrekar cited a High Court ruling, stating that the gram sabha had no jurisdiction to oppose or revoke construction licences.

However, Gregory D'Souza challenged this position, asking whether the panchayat had issued construction licences with specific conditions. "If

conditions were stipulated, the panchayat certainly has the authority to revoke licences where these conditions are not met," he argued. D'Souza stressed that even if the gram sabha lacked direct power, the panchayat was empowered to act when legitimate reasons were presented.

Barros expressed concern over the cumulative impact of constructions, bore wells, soak pits, and swimming pools on the village's resources. He lamented the apparent buck-passing among government departments, including the panchayat, warning that neglecting these issues would adversely affect future generations.

"We are witnessing an explosion of multi-dwelling projects with swimming pools. On one hand, Siolim faces water shortages; on the other, water is being wasted in pools. Existing wells are at risk of contamination as constructions proceed

On one hand, Siolim faces water shortages; on the other, water is being wasted in pools. Existing wells are at risk of contamination as constructions proceed without sewage treatment plants (STPs), water harvesting systems, waste management solutions, or biogas plants, placing immense strain on local infrastructure – Joaquim Barros, Biodiversity Chairperson

without sewage treatment plants (STPs), water harvesting systems, waste management solutions, or biogas plants, placing immense strain on local infrastructure," Barros stated. He criticised the panchayat for failing to hold developers accountable.

Barros and D'Souza called for immediate intervention, proposing camps conducted by the Water Resources Department for well registration and similar initiatives by the Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) to

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address the prevalence of unhygienic food in Siolim.

Deforestation was another major concern raised at the meeting. Villagers demanded that the panchayat enforce strict measures to prevent tree felling and ensure replantation. "Trees are vital for oxygen production. With rampant greenery loss, we risk breathing polluted air, increasing the prevalence of illnesses. Yet, there is no substantial action from the panchayat," a villager remarked.

Several residents questioned the purpose of electing panchayat members if essential decisions were controlled by external departments.

The gram sabha also discussed the recent accident involving Judith Fernandes, a prominent Siolim resident. Former panchayat member Victor Fernandes and another local, also named Victor Fernandes, raised concerns over inadequate setbacks in compound wall constructions and the dangers posed by haphazard parking, particularly by app-based taxis, which endanger pedestrians.

Villagers, including Joaquim Barros, Fatima Fernandes, Amrut Agarwadekar, and Gregory D'Souza, strongly asserted that the panchayat is directly accountable to the people. They condemned the Town and Country Planning (TCP) Department, accusing it of pursuing policies detrimental to the State's welfare.

## Neura stands firm against proposed railway station

Vow to protect khazan lands, village biodiversity

Team Herald

**PANJIM:** The Neura Gram Sabha, unanimously opposed the proposed construction of a railway station in the ecologically sensitive Khazan lands.



Villagers expressed deep concerns over the project, citing the potential devastation to local agriculture and the surrounding ecosystem. They voiced their dissent with the slogan, "Amka Naka, Amka Naka, Railway Station Naka" (We do not want the railway station).

Speaking to the press, Neura Sarpanch Manisha Naik stated, "Our position has been consistent from the outset—we do not require another railway station. There are agricultural fields here, and an existing station is located not far from our village. Establishing a new station would endanger local crops and disrupt the environment. The entire panchayat is united in its opposition."

Naik further emphasised, "Accordingly, we have passed a resolution rejecting the proposal. Our stance is unwavering, and we are prepared to escalate the matter to higher authorities in consultation

with our MLA if necessary."

In the wake of the Union Budget, Konkani Railway announced plans to develop three new stations in Goa over the next three years, namely at Sarzora, Neura and Mayem.

The proposed developments sparked debate during the winter session of the State Assembly, with MLAs Cruz Silva, Viresh Borkar and Venzy Viegas expressing apprehensions regarding the potential harm to Goa's fragile ecology.

Responding to these concerns, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant assured the public that no coal would be handled at any of the new stations along the Konkani Railway line. "These fears are unfounded," Sawant remarked, drawing a comparison to similar apprehensions voiced during the establishment of the Konkani Railway in 1993-94.

## Illegal land filling, rising accidents spark concern in Arpora-Nagoa

Team Herald

**CALANGUTE:** The Arpora-Nagoa gram sabha, held with limited attendance from villagers, brought to light pressing issues of illegal land filling in low-lying areas and an alarming increase in accidents involving tourist vehicles.

Addressing concerns, Sarpanch Roshan Redkar urged residents to report such incidents to the panchayat. "We will not permit any illegal land filling in Arpora. Anyone who witnesses such activities should lodge a complaint with us, enabling us to escalate the matter to

the deputy collector," Redkar affirmed.

Villagers also expressed serious apprehension regarding the surge in road accidents, many of which are attributed to speeding tourist vehicles. Notably, in January, a tragic hit-and-run incident occurred near Viegas supermarket. The driver, allegedly under the influence of alcohol, lost control of the vehicle, veered onto the wrong side of the Arpora-Nagoa road, and struck a two-wheeler. Amirul Haque, who was delivering chicken from Saligao to a restaurant, was killed instantly.

## FAITH MATTERS



JOSEPH FERNANDES

Devotees thronged the stalls serving kanji (pez) on the occasion of the feast of Khuris Milagr at The Church of Cruz dos Milagres, located on a hillock, Monte de Boa Vista in Old Goa

## Seraulim approves annual budget

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** The Seraulim gram sabha approved the panchayat's annual budget and discussed various development proposals.

While speaking to the media later, Seraulim Deputy Sarpanch Leslie Dourado categorically denied all the allegations that were made against the panchayat.

He said that trace licenses were approved by the panchayat body as per law and that the gram sabha meeting has also been held as per the law.

He added that those who have complaints should approach the right forum

and not the gram sabha.

Referring to allegations of land filling, he said that the matter is being heard by the concerned courts.

About the gram sabha, he said one proposal was regarding the new panchayat ghar. He added that the government informed that a consultant will be appointed within three months after which the tender will be out but that besides that all other formalities had been completed.

Another issue discussed was regarding the Seraulim underpass plans and their demand for the authorities to remove excess mud at the western bypass junction.

## Highway expansion plans meet with stiff resistance at Cavelossim

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** The Cavelossim village panchayat, during its ordinary gram sabha meeting on Sunday, opposed the Velsao to Cavelossim proposed highway expansion, citing its potential impact on residents, even as gram sabha members raised several other infrastructure and environmental concerns.

Member Natividade Fernandes highlighted the expansion of the road from Velsao to Cavelossim, warning that many houses could be affected. Sarpanch Dixon Vaz informed the gathering that the panchayat had not received any official notification regarding the project but assured that they

would oppose it if it threatened residential areas.

Concerns over environmental degradation were also raised, with member Jose D'Costa pointing to a floating vessel near Betul that was damaging the marine ecosystem. In response, Vaz assured that the panchayat would write to the relevant authorities to seek action.

The growing stray dog population, particularly along the beach, was another issue discussed. With reports of dog bites increasing, Vaz stated that the panchayat had requested animal welfare authorities to conduct a sterilization camp in the village.

The pollution of River Sal was also a concern, with

Vaz noting the rising levels of plastic and other waste in the water, warning that it could affect both tourism and the livelihoods of local fishermen.

The gram sabha also passed resolutions to repair traditional bundhs and address complaints of low water pressure in the village.

Speaking on land sales, Vaz urged Goans to avoid selling their houses and properties to non-Goans, stressing the importance of preserving the local identity and culture.

Earlier on, the gram sabha approved the annual village panchayat's budget for the financial year 2025-26, allocating additional funds for developmental projects and community services.

## Aquem Comunidade scoffs at govt's move to rehabilitate slum dwellers at Moti Dongor

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** The Comunidade of Aquem has expressed strong opposition to the government's renewed initiative to rehabilitate slum dwellers at Moti Dongor, labelling it a "seasonal exercise" ahead of civic elections. They emphasised that the issue remains sub-judice, with legal proceedings ongoing in the High Court.

The government's current plan involves the rehabilitation of approximately 325 structures at Moti Dongor, a proposal that initially received in-principle approval in 2006 but was stalled due to administrative hurdles, including the failure to allocate necessary funds.

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ment has established a six-member committee chaired by the Director of Municipal Administration. This committee comprises officials from various departments, including the Deputy Collector of Salcete, the Inspector of Survey and Land Records (ISLR) of Salcete, the Municipal Engineer of Margao Municipal Council (MMC), and the Senior Project Engineer of the Goa State Urban Development Agency (GSUDA) will serve as the member secretary. The committee's mandate includes determining land

acquisition requirements and exploring rehabilitation options through public-private partnerships or government schemes.

Despite these developments, Aquem Comunidade Attorney Celestino Noronha has voiced strong objections. He stressed that the legality of these structures is still under judicial review in the High Court. He noted that demolition orders obtained by the Comunidade in 2014 were stayed, and the matter has been pending for a decade. Noronha also highlighted a legal flaw in the rehabil-

itation plan, stating that the Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act, 1956, was never extended to Goa, rendering any notifications under this law invalid. He added that the shareholders of the Aquem Comunidade have clearly instructed him to reclaim their land at Moti Dongor.

It may be recalled that a meeting chaired by the Revenue Secretary was held in the past to discuss this issue, during which sources stated that Margao MLA Digambar Kamat had highlighted that the total slum area of 23,800 square meters at Moti Dongor had been notified under the Slum Act and asserted that the entire area should be demarcated, regardless of ownership.

## Oppn in Benaulim to highway expansion, jetties in River Sal

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** Residents of various villages across Benaulim constituency have voiced strong opposition to the government's proposal to upgrade the major district road (MDR) from Velsao to Mobor in Cavelossim into a highway. Their concerns were raised during the recent public meeting organized by the Benaulim Congress Block, where they interacted with South Goa MP Captain Viriato Fernandes.

The resistance to the project has been intensifying, with the Carmo-na gram sabha recently adopting a resolution against the highway's construction along the coastal belt. The proposed highway would cut through multiple villages, including Velsao, Cansaulim, Utorda, and Majorda in Mormugao taluka, as well as Batalbatim, Colva, Benaulim, Varca, Orlim, Carmo-na, and Cavelossim in Salcete taluka.

In addition to the highway issue, residents also expressed firm opposition to the Union government's plan to build three jetties along the Sal river as part of the waterways project. They argued that such large-scale infrastructure development would pose a significant threat to their traditional means of livelihood.

MP Viriato Fernandes attentively listened to the residents' objections and assured them that he would conduct a detailed review of the situation before taking it up in Parliament.

## Unchecked development causing irreversible damage to Goa's ecology, warns activist

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** The Federation of Rainbow Warriors (FRW) has sounded the alarm over unchecked real estate development threatening Goa's environment and traditional livelihoods. FRW founder and environmentalist Abhijit Prabhudessai warned that rapid urbanization, deforestation, and water depletion are pushing the state toward collapse.

"What we are witnessing is the systematic destruction of Goa's natural heritage," Prabhudessai said. "Large-scale real estate projects are being approved without regard for the environment or local communities."

Goa's hills, coastal areas, and farmland are being

The judiciary has often sided with real estate developers, dismissing environmental and social concerns. The government is using every possible loophole to push through these projects, even as people protest on the ground – Abhijit Prabhudessai, environmentalist

converted into luxury apartments, gated communities, and resorts. "Regional plans meant to regulate land use are being manipulated to show settlement zones in ecologically sensitive areas," Prabhudessai said.

A key concern is the absence of scientific studies to assess environmental damage. "We have no comprehensive data on forest

loss, water depletion, or displacement. The scientific community remains silent, and the government is uninterested," he stated.

Environmentalists also warn of biodiversity loss. "Goa's unique species are disappearing as forests and water recharge areas are destroyed," said one activist. "Ecosystems are collapsing, and the effects will be felt for generations."

FRW has been at the forefront of protests against large-scale projects in Kadamba Plateau, Bardez, and Salcete, areas now being transformed into concrete jungles. "Local communities are fighting to protect their land, but their voices are ignored," Prabhudessai said. "The govt prioritizes real estate developers over its own people."

The depletion of water

resources is among the most pressing issues. "Goa was once self-sufficient in water, but reckless destruction of hills and recharge zones has disrupted natural water flow. Springs are drying up, and rivers are polluted. If this continues, a severe water crisis is inevitable," he warned.

Prabhudessai also criticized the govt's climate policies. "The State Action Plan for Climate Change states that 50% of Goa is at risk from floods and rising sea levels, yet construction continues in flood-prone areas. This is a disaster in the making."

Traditional livelihoods are also at risk. "Sustainable khazan farming is being replaced by real estate projects, and fishermen are losing access to their traditional grounds," he said.

## GRLA to Sahitya Akademi: Scrap 'one language, one script' policy, or face boycott

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** The Global Romi Lipi Abhiyan (GRLA) has called on the Sahitya Akademi to abolish its "one language, one script" policy, which the group claims has devastated the Konkani language, particularly by sidelining its non-Devanagiri scripts. In an open letter addressed to Purnananda Chari, General Council member, and other members of the Sahitya Akademi, GRLA President Kennedy Afonso emphasized the policy's harmful impact on Konkani's linguistic diversity.

According to GRLA, the Sahitya Akademi's promotion of only Devanagiri literature has marginalized

The group argues that the Sahitya Akademi's stance goes against key constitutional provisions. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law, while Article 29(1) protects the linguistic, cultural, and script rights of minorities

four other Konkani scripts, including Roman, Kannada, Malayalam, and Perso-Arabic. "By promoting only Devanagiri, the Sahitya Akademi has created a hierarchy of scripts, where other scripts are relegated to secondary status," Afonso said in the letter.

The group argues that the Sahitya Akademi's stance goes against key constitutional provisions. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law, while Article 29(1)

protects the linguistic, cultural, and script rights of minorities. Afonso called the current policy a violation of these fundamental rights, stating that it fosters linguistic inequality and ignores the diverse cultural heritage linked to each Konkani script.

GRLA also accused the Sahitya Akademi of abandoning its core responsibility to support all forms of literature, regardless of script. "The Sahitya Akademi's primary function is to promote the literature of all scripts of any language, especially one like Konkani that has multiple scripts. Instead, the Akademi has become a 'courtier' that only supports Devanagiri, manipulated by the Devanagiri lobby," Afonso said.