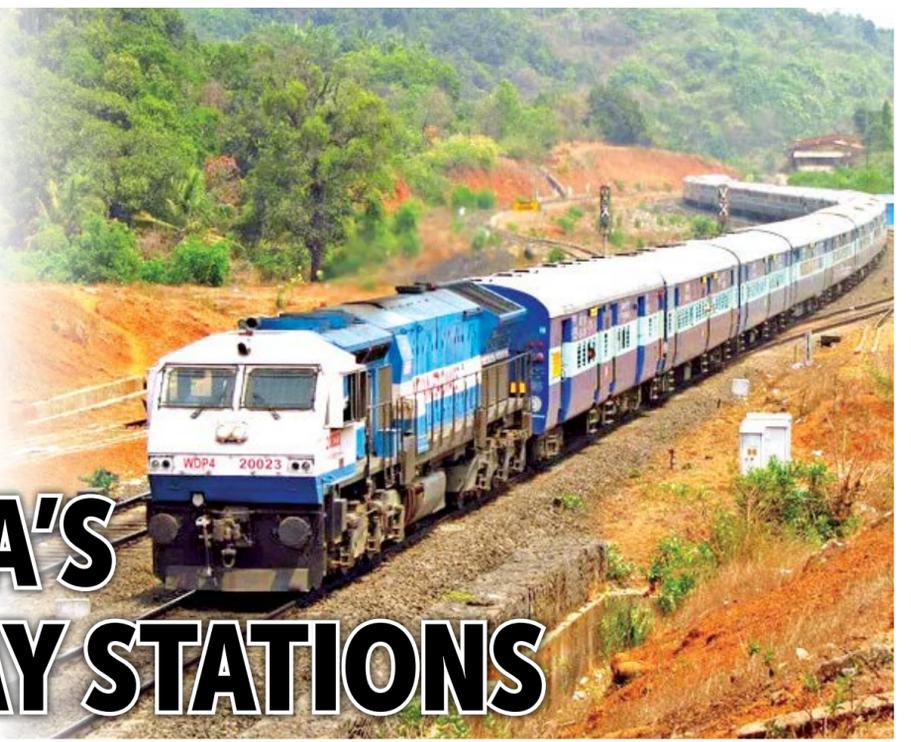


Review

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RAILROADED: THE BATTLE AGAINST GOA'S 'UNWANTED' RAILWAY STATIONS



What began as a triumphant announcement has spiralled into a heated public confrontation, as communities across Goa mobilise against the Union Railway Ministry's plans for three new Konkan Railway stations at Sarzora, Neura, and Mayem. Residents of these villages argue that the projects are unnecessary and threaten their livelihoods – they fear environmental devastation, unchecked migration, and covert plans for coal transportation. As protests mount, the controversy over Konkan railway's expansion plans is turning into a larger fight for local rights and ecological preservation.

ANIL KUMAR MISHRA and **KARSTEN MIRANDA** track the story

Full steam ahead? Not in our khazans, say Neura locals

The Gram Sabha of Neura and Azossim-Mandur Panchayat has opposed the Konkan Railway Corporation's (KRC) proposal to construct a new railway station in the ecologically-sensitive Khazan lands of Neura, located in Tiswadi taluka. Citing potential environmental damage and threats to agriculture, gram sabha members voiced firm resistance to the project.

Speaking to **O Herald**, Sarpanch Manisha Naik warned that if the proposed station is intended for coal transportation, the village will vehemently oppose it.

"We have rejected this proposal before and even passed a resolution in the gram sabha stating that we do not want a railway station here. There is a railway station just five to six kilometres from our village, and we do not see the need for another," Naik said.

She added, "If the station is for coal transportation, we do not need it. It will harm our children and future generations. There are homes and a school nearby. A station would require road widening, which we do not want."

Fears of Goa becoming a 'Coal Hub'

Former Sarpanch and current panch member Honorina Araujo stated that the livelihoods of local farmers would be at risk.

"Our village already has a railway station just six kilometers away. Many farmers depend on agriculture. If this station is built, it will affect them in the long run. People suspect that the true reason behind this project is to facilitate coal transportation, which would be disastrous for the environment and public health," she said.

According to Prasad Sawant, a resident, the proposal for a station in Neura had been scrapped due to public opposition, leading to the station being built at Karmali instead.

"The railway has made provisions for this station. There is a kachha road leading to the proposed site. But the big question is—who is this station for? We are sandwiched between Karmali and Margao railway stations, which are easily accessible," Sawant pointed out.

He alleged that the station could serve as a coal storage and transit hub. "People fear that coal wagons will be parked at the station during the

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day, just like at Karmali. Freight trains operate mostly at night, but during the day, the coal sits there, polluting the environment. The villagers are determined to prevent this station from becoming a reality," he said.

Sawant warned that if the government ignores local opposition, residents may resort to agitation.

"We have already passed a resolution against this project, and our MLA has raised the issue in the Assembly. If the government does not listen, the only option left will be public protests," he asserted.

Villagers allege land grab, environmental destruction

Francis Correa, another resident, questioned the necessity of the project.

"I don't understand why this sta-

tion is being built. The real reason is to drive up land prices and enable coal transportation. The government wants to take control of the land and later sell it. This benefits only the government and Adani. Once the station is built, the area will be ruined with garbage and pollution," Correa said.

Ward member Joel James Gonsalves said that this is not the first time the villagers have fought against such a proposal.

"Years ago, a station was planned here, but public opposition stopped it. We fear this project is being revived for coal transport. If the station is built, our agricultural fields will be destroyed. Our current transport system is sufficient—we don't need another station within six kilometres," he said.

Stefny Pedrosa, a local pointed to the damage caused by the Karmali Railway Station.

"We have seen the decline of migratory birds in Karmali. They have nearly disappeared. Fish in the nearby lake are dying. This is clear environmental degradation. Neura is home to many species, and they will be wiped out if this project goes ahead," Pedrosa warned.

Sarzora, Areal vow to resist rly's ambiguous station plans

In packed gram sabhas, villagers in South Goa have emphatically rejected the railway projects. At Sarzora, under Sarpanch Leona Fernandes' leadership, residents warned the station would "spell doom for village ecology and biodiversity and open flood gates for migrants." The panchayat's formal resolution opposing the development has already reached government offices. Highlighting the ecological sensitivity of the region, the memorandum described Sarzora as an agricultural hub with vast rice fields, coconut plantations, and a biodiverse habitat that includes leopards and medicinal plants. Villagers fear that the station's construction would not only destroy the area's green cover but also disrupt the delicate ecosystem sustained by the Sarzora Lake, which irrigates a large portion of farmland.

"The people of Sarzora have made it abundantly clear where they stand," declared panchayat member Sabita Mascarenhas after the contentious meeting. Neighbouring Sao Jose de Areal

"If not for coal handling, then the government should tell the public why there is a need for additional railway stations. I have already raised my objections to the three proposed railway stations with the Konkan Railway Users Consultative Committee. Even though Mayem locals did not approach me, I raised objections to setting up of railway station there also"

"When the Railway Ministry made the announcement, they referred to a station at Sarzora, while simultaneously talking about constructing it at Sao Jose De Areal. The stations are being developed primarily "to facilitate coal and other polluting industries, with possible port connectivity that could severely impact local communities and farmers"

has mounted equally fierce opposition, with residents pointing to the redundancy of another station when they already have a South Western Railway station and Margao's rail hub just two km away.

"Government cannot thrust projects upon us without considering our wishes," one vocal gram sabha member asserted, as villagers proposed alternatives like a sports academy or shopping complex they believe would genuinely serve community interests.

The opposition has been particularly pronounced at the grassroots level, with both villages organizing coordinated campaigns. Sarzora villagers launched a signature campaign, submitting a petition directly to the Chief Minister via Velim MLA Cruz Silva. Meanwhile, the panchayat took

the extraordinary step of writing to the Union Railway Minister, bypassing local authorities to express their concerns at the highest level.

Political figures rally behind protesters

The groundswell of Opposition gained political backing. South Goa MP Viriato Fernandes challenged the plans, demanding answers about who proposed the stations and for what purpose. "If not for coal handling, then the government should tell the public why there is a need for additional railway stations," Fernandes stated, while urging protesters to maintain unity in their struggle.

Fernandes didn't limit his opposition to Neura alone. "I have already raised my objections to the three proposed railway stations with the Konkan Railway Users Consultative Committee. Even though Mayem locals did not approach me, I raised objections to setting up of railway station there also," he clarified, demonstrating a broader concern about the entire expansion plan.

Velim MLA Cruz Silva has amplified these concerns in the Legislative Assembly through a formal calling attention motion. Silva exposed glaring contradictions in the railway authorities' communications, revealing, "When the Railway Ministry made the announcement, they referred to a station at Sarzora, while simultaneously talking about constructing it at Sao Jose De Areal."

Silva warned that villagers suspect these stations are being developed primarily "to facilitate coal and other polluting industries, with possible port connectivity that could severely impact local communities and farmers," while pushing for immediate transparency from authorities.

Despite the opposition, construction has reportedly begun at Areal, while residents from affected villages vow continued vigilance. Silva has demanded a complete halt to "licences, permissions, and approvals until all concerns are addressed and stakeholders are taken into confidence."

CHIEF MINISTER ATTEMPTS TO QUELL FEARS, RAILWAY AUTHORITIES DEFEND - BUT VILLAGERS AREN'T CONVINCED

Responding to the uproar, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant offered assurances that "no coal hub would come up at any of the proposed new railway stations" but revealed a dismissive attitude toward the opposition movement.

"If new stations are announced in other States, people welcome them. Here, there are objections," Sawant remarked, suggesting protesters formally submit their concerns while making it clear the government still "welcomes the proposed station at Mayem" because "Bicholim taluka needs a station."

The Chief Minister's comments highlighted the fundamental disconnect between State planning perspectives and local concerns. While acknowledging that railway projects fall under Central government jurisdiction—limiting the state's decision-making power—his selective support for the Mayem station despite opposition there has only fuelled suspicions about the government's true intentions.

Konkan Railway Corporation has also attempted to quell fears, with Deputy General Manager Baban Ghatge insisting the Areal station is "exclusively for passenger traffic" to relieve Margao's "saturation point" operations. According to Ghatge, the new station's primary purpose is "to facilitate train crossings during peak hours," with no plans for coal movement since "handling goods requires a dedicated yard" that space constraints prevent.

Ghatge detailed that Margao station has expanded from a single platform to six over the years but can't grow further due to space limitations. With Indian Railways adding new trains annually, KRC defends the Areal station as a necessary solution to manage increasing passenger traffic. The corporation maintains that the station, featuring a platform and two railway lines, will serve only passenger movement and ensure smoother rail operations in the region.



Neura locals say the Railways have already cleared shrubbery to build a kachha road leading to the tracks, for the proposed railway station



Farmers fear the construction of a station would affect the ecology around Sarzora Lake, which irrigates large swathes of fields

DEVENDRA GAONKAR

ANISHA FRANCIS