

Scheduled Tribes ramp up pressure for political reservation

Team Herald

PANJIM: The United Tribal Associations Alliance (UTAA) has urged Parliament to pass the pending Bill that seeks to provide political reservation for the Scheduled Tribe (ST) community in the Goa Legislative Assembly.

The Bill, introduced by Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal in the Lok Sabha on August 5, 2024, aims to reserve seats for the ST community in the State Assembly.

Addressing a press conference, UTAA President Prakash S Velip recalled that when a delegation from Goa had met Union Home Minister Amit Shah, they were assured that a Bill to ensure political reservation would be introduced.

"The Bill was introduced in August and came up for discussion in November but could not be passed. With the ongoing budget session, we demand that the Bill be passed and the process for providing political reservation be expedited," Velip said.

Velip expressed hope that the Bill would reserve at least four seats for the ST community before the 2027 Goa Assembly elections.

The Bill, titled the Readjustment of Representation of Scheduled Tribes in Assembly Constituencies of the State of Goa Bill, 2024, was introduced in the Lok Sabha by Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal on August 5, 2024. It aims to empower the Census Commissioner to "ascertain or estimate" the population of STs in Goa and subsequently notify them. It also enables the Election Commission (EC) to readjust the number of Assembly seats and reserve constituencies for STs accordingly

He acknowledged that while various organisations may have differing views, they share a common goal — securing political reservation for Goa's ST community.

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The Union Cabinet had

approved the proposal to introduce the Bill in March 2024. The Bill, titled the Readjustment of Representation of Scheduled Tribes in Assembly Constituencies of the State of Goa Bill, 2024, was introduced in the Lok Sabha by Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal on August 5, 2024.

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Pass Ordinance to implement Bill before 2027 polls: Activists

Team Herald

MARGAO: With uncertainty surrounding the passage of the Bill in Parliament, the Mission for Political Reservation for the STs (MPRS) has urged the government to issue an Ordinance to fast-track the process of identifying and notifying constituencies reserved for STs in the state assembly.

Further delay could once again deprive ST communities of their right to reserved representation in the 2027 Goa Assembly elections, said Mission president Adv John Fernandes, who, along with Joseph Vaz and other representatives, recently presented South Goa Congress MP Viriato Fernandes with a memorandum urging immediate action.

John noted that Goa's ST communities have been waiting for over two decades, since their official recognition in 2003, to secure their rightful representation. He stressed that intervention by the South Goa MP could play a crucial role in upholding democratic rights and fulfilling constitutional obligations towards the ST communities.

Citing the Statement of Objects and Reasons of the Bill, John pointed out Goa's unique situation, where the Scheduled Tribe population (1,49,275 as per the 2011 Census) far exceeds the Scheduled Caste population (25,449). Despite this, no seats have

been reserved for STs in the Legislative Assembly. The inclusion of the Kunbi, Gawda, and Velip communities in the ST list under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders) Amendment Act, 2003, significantly raised the ST population in Goa, further justifying the need for reserved constituencies.

He argued that the prolonged delay in passing the Bill violates the constitutional rights of ST communities to fair representation in governance, as guaranteed under Article 332 of the Constitution.

The memorandum also highlighted the multi-stage process required for implementation, including approval from both Houses of Parliament, Presidential assent, and subsequent delimitation efforts by the Election Commission. Given these procedural requirements, the Mission stressed the urgency of immediate action.

The delegation urged the South Goa MP to push for the Bill's passage in the upcoming Budget Session commencing on March 10, 2025. "We request you to raise this issue in Parliament to ensure it is given the necessary priority and expedited consideration. Should further delays persist, we call upon you to advocate for an Ordinance to initiate the identification and notification of ST-reserved constituencies in Goa's Assembly," the delegation stated.

Audit exposes Margao Municipality's revenue leaks amid row over service fee hike

Team Herald

MARGAO: With The Margao Municipal Council (MMC) has come under intense scrutiny following its decision to significantly increase taxes and fees. While Chairperson of the BJP-led council Damodar Shirodkar defended the hikes as necessary to strengthen its finances, a recent audit report by the Directorate of Accounts for the 2023-24 financial year has revealed a troubling pattern of revenue leakages and financial mismanagement, raising questions about the council's ability to address its fiscal challenges effectively.

The audit report, submitted to the MMC Chief Officer, paints a grim picture of the council's revenue position, highlighting uncollected taxes, mounting arrears, and systemic failures in revenue collection. Despite previous audit observations, the council has failed to implement corrective measures, leading to losses running into crores of rupees. One of the most significant findings is the neglect of a GIS survey, which has not been used for tax reassessment over the past six years. This oversight has reportedly cost the council an estimated Rs 20 crore in lost revenue.

The audit also revealed that the council's revenue arrears stood at a staggering Rs 36.83 crore by the end of the 2023-24 financial year, accounting for nearly 30.52% of the total outstanding demand. Despite appointing a recovery officer in January 2022, the council failed to set specific targets or demand progress reports. The officer, who earns a monthly remuneration of Rs 30,000, has not been able to curb the growing arrears, which have increased from Rs 1,150.83 lakh in 2022-23.

During inspections, the MMC identified 141 illegal establishments in the market area for the year 2023-24. While show-cause notices were issued, questions remain about whether these businesses have been brought into the tax net. The audit has urged the council to take stricter action to ensure compliance with trade

FINANCIAL MISMANAGEMENT
>> Estimated revenue loss: Rs 20 crore due to the neglected GIS survey

>> Identified units for house and sanitation taxes: 5,410
Units actually paying taxes: 4,441

>> Identified businesses for trade taxes: 2,358
Businesses actually paying trade taxes: 1,671

>> Illegal establishments identified in 2023-24: 141

>> Total revenue arrears by 2023-24: Rs 36.83 crore (30.52% of total outstanding demand)

>> PAYMENTS DUE: Amount owed by the SGPDA for garbage fees: Rs 112 lakh

licensing bylaws and the Goa Municipalities Act. The audit has urged the council to take stricter action to ensure compliance with trade licensing bylaws and the Goa Municipalities Act.

The audit found that the South Goa Planning and Development Authority (SGPDA) owes the council Rs 112 lakh for garbage collection services, with no recovery efforts made despite a resolution passed in July 2022. The council had threatened to discontinue services if payments were not made, but no action has been taken so far. The audit has recommended escalating the matter to the government for resolution.

Additionally, the council has faced criticism for its handling of sopo fees, a tax collected from vendors. The audit noted that the council failed to recover instalments from contractors or issue notices for irregular payments.

Locals push for Dandeavaddo bypass, urge CM to nix flyover

Cite example of Verna flyover extension proposal getting green light; say expanding National Highway through Chinchinim would destroy their locality, way of life

Team Herald

MARGAO: With the Central government approving Goa's proposal to extend the Verna flyover up to the western bypass at Nuvem, residents of Chinchinim are renewing their appeal for a bypass at Dandeavaddo instead of a flyover, urging Chief Minister Pramod Sawant to take up their cause.

The demand gained traction after a recent communication from the PWD's NH Executive Engineer to Ameya Pai Angle, a resident of Dandeavaddo, indicated that the Chinchinim panchayat's request for a bypass had been forwarded to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways' (MoRTH) Goa office for reconsideration.

Chinchinim Sarpanch Frank Viegas pointed out that if the Goa government successfully convinced Union Minister Nitin Gadkari to ex-

tend the Verna flyover to reduce congestion at the Pirni road junction, it should also take up the longstanding request of Chinchinim villagers for a bypass.

"The Chief Minister managed to get the Verna flyover extended even though the project had already been tendered by the PWD's NH division. Meanwhile, the highway expansion between Navelim and Cuncolim, which involves four-laning through Dandeavaddo, is yet to be tendered. We hope the Chief Minister considers the plea of Dandeavaddo residents for a bypass rather than a flyover," Viegas stated.

The issue has been under discussion for some time. Last year, the PWD's NH division had sent a communication to the Project Director at MoRTH's Goa office, requesting an assessment of the Chinchinim panchayat's demand for a

bypass instead of a flyover.

Villagers have long expressed concerns that expanding NH 66 through Chinchinim would significantly impact their locality, maintaining that a bypass is the best solution.

A PWD communiqué from last year to the MoRTH Goa office detailed three potential bypass routes at Dandeavaddo before finalising an alignment along the existing road from the Margao Western Bypass to Uskini Band, followed by a bypass from Uskini Band to Balli.

"Originally, Dandeavaddo villagers strongly supported Alternative 1 for a bypass. However, since land measuring 30m to 40m had already been acquired in 1990 along the existing road between Ch. 554.245 and Ch. 561.890, the alignment along the current road was approved, with Alternative 3 selected for the Cuncolim bypass," the PWD document stated.

DIGGING DISASTER



A water pipeline in Paroda was damaged by an excavator during road digging, causing precious potable water to gush out and flow to waste

Fisherfolk, locals oppose floating jetties and cruise circuit planned in Salcete

The panchayats of Cavelossim and Velim claimed they had not been informed about the project; Captain of Ports unaware too, says Velim MLA

Team Herald

MARGAO: The Directorate Fisheries and local representatives are opposing the government's proposed introduction of floating jetties and a cruise circuit along the Salcete coastline, citing environmental and economic concerns.

The project, initiated by the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI), proposes a cruise circuit connecting Cavelossim, Betul Fort, and the Betul Lighthouse via the River Sal. However, the plan has sparked fears among traditional fishermen who rely on the river for their livelihood. They warn that increased vessel movement could damage the river's delicate marine ecosystem, which

supports vital species like clams, mussels, ladyfish, and red snapper.

"A few years ago, we struggled to restore the marine habitat after dredging operations. If large cruise vessels begin operating here, it could destroy these species again," said a fisherman from Betul.

The lack of transparency in the project has further fueled local frustration. Fishermen and panchayats have criticized the absence of communication about the plan, questioning whether an environmental assessment was conducted. The Cavelossim and Velim panchayats have claimed they were not informed about the proposal and have vowed to seek clarification before

any decisions are made.

Velim MLA Cruz Silva has demanded the project be halted until consultations are held with all stakeholders, particularly the fishing community. Silva revealed that even the Captain of Ports (CoP) was unaware of any formal proposal, raising doubts about the project's legitimacy.

The AVCB Traditional Fishermen warned that fishing communities in Chinchinim, Assolna, Ambelim, Velim, Betul, and Cavelossim could face extinction if the project proceeds. "We suspected the government's de-silting plans had a hidden motive — now it's clear they are preparing a channel for cruise vessels," a representative claimed.

Ousted by vote last month, Aquem Sarpanch re-elected by same panchas

Team Herald

MARGAO: Floriano Danny Fernandes has returned as the sarpanch of Aquem-Baixo, less than a month after being ousted through a no-confidence motion. His re-election, which came unopposed, followed last-minute negotiations among the panchayat members who had earlier voted him out.

The original group of five opposition panch members who had earlier moved the no-confidence motion, struggled thereafter to unanimously agree on a successor after Fernandes was removed in mid-February. Despite multiple discussions, no consensus emerged on who should take charge. Until the day before the election, negotiations continued behind closed doors but remained inconclusive.

With the deadlock persisting, two members from the group that had supported Fernandes' removal reversed their stance and backed him for a return to office. This unexpected shift led to Fernandes' unchallenged rein-

statement as sarpanch.

Observers noted that such a dramatic reversal is rare in the village's local governance as it is not often that sarpanch gets re-elected by the very members who had pushed him out of office.

Fernandes had originally assumed the role of sarpanch in August last year through a draw of lots. However, before completing five months in office, he faced a no-confidence motion from panchayat members Inacio Dias, Pooja Naik, Avinash Sardesai, Deputy Sarpanch Natasha Dias, and Amisha Tilve. They accused him of lacking transparency, failing to ensure fair resource allocation, and struggling with decision-making.

Until the day before the election, efforts were made to reach a consensus on an alternative candidate, but no agreement was found. Eventually, two members shifted their support to Fernandes, clearing the way for his unopposed return. His re-election marks a significant turnaround in the village panchayat's leadership dynamics.

Activist flags nightly nuisance at Benaulim beach parking

Team Herald

MARGAO: Social activists have called for immediate action against anti-social elements frequenting the Benaulim parking lot at night, raising concerns over safety and law enforcement in the area.

Local activist Warren Alemao strongly criticized the inaction of authorities, highlighting the growing menace of miscreants engaging in drinking, drug peddling, and littering at the site. "Every night, the parking lot becomes a den of chaos, with no police presence to keep things in check," he stated.

Expressing frustration over the situation, Alemao took aim at Benaulim MLA Venzy Viegas, questioning the legislator's role in addressing the issue.

Alemao warned that if the authorities fail to act, residents would be compelled to arrange for private security to safeguard the area. "Our safety is non-negotiable. We demand police patrolling, or we, the people of Benaulim, will take matters into our own hands," he asserted.

FDA raids dodgy snack manufacturers, destroys fried goods worth over Rs 1 lakh

Team Herald

MARGAO: The Directorate of Food and Drugs Administration (DFDA) conducted back-to-back inspection drives in Salcete on March 10 and 11, targeting unlicensed food manufacturing units operating under unhygienic conditions, resulting in the detention and destruction of substandard food products worth over Rs 1,12,000.

On 10 March, DFDA officials carried out a routine inspection in Salcete taluka, where five units were found manufacturing and packing fryums



and namkeen without valid food licences. The units were operating in unsanitary conditions, and the final food packets lacked proper label declarations as mandated by the Food Safety and Stand-

ards Authority of India (FSSAI) regulations. Approximately 80 kg of fried snacks valued at around Rs 96,000, were seized and destroyed. The manufacturers were directed to cease their operations

immediately.

Continuing the crackdown, on 11 March, DFDA officials visited the Davorlim Mugali area, where they uncovered two more units operating without valid FSSAI licences. Around 25 kg of food articles, including fryums, fried green peas, and peanuts, were found being packed under unhygienic conditions. The detained products, valued at approximately Rs 16,000, were destroyed. DFDA officials have urged food business operators to comply with FSSAI standards and obtain the necessary licences to avoid legal action.

Ambelim P'yat passes annual budget

Team Herald

MARGAO: The Ambelim village panchayat's gram sabha convened on Sunday to discuss various developmental initiatives and culminated in the approval of the budget estimates for the 2025-26 financial year.

The meeting, presided over by Sarpanch Alexander D'Silva, saw deliberations on several key issues, including the collection and disposal of garbage, as well as plans to construct a futsal ground near the panchayat ghar.

D'Silva pointed out that the panchayat previously received Rs 1.5 lakh in government grants for waste disposal. However, he highlighted that no such financial assistance had been provided in the last four years, straining the panchayat's ability to manage waste effectively. "Being a weaker panchayat financially, we are exploring alternative solutions to handle garbage collection and disposal," he stated.

Additionally, the sarpanch emphasized that Ambelim is home to Goa's largest wetland and urged the Water Resources Department (WRD) to construct a retaining wall and undertake desilting of the lake to facilitate irrigation. He further suggested that, with proper treatment, the water could also be made suitable for drinking.