

# 'Surla not a wasteland': Greens say no to 'eco-tourism' project

Campaign promoted by Goa Foundation and Save Mollem demands scrapping the proposed project inside Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary — home to tigers, other rare flora & fauna

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** A petition promoted by environmental groups including the Goa Foundation and the Save Mollem campaign is gaining traction, calling on the Goa government to revoke permissions for a proposed 'eco-tourism' project on the Surla Plateau. The campaign warns that the plan, which is to be located within the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary, threatens to destroy a highly sensitive laterite ecosystem that supports several endemic species and protected wildlife, including the tiger. Citing scientific research and court directives, the petition accuses authorities of greenwashing and urges that the plateau be conserved instead of developed.

The petition, which has attracted a large number of signatures, stresses that high-altitude laterite plateaus like Surla are wrongly

**ENVIRONMENTALISTS ALLEGE**

- A resort with 'eco-tents' is being built on the Surla plateau by the Goa Forest Development Corporation, and managed by private players
- Resort developers plan to put up an electric fence to keep wildlife at bay
- The proposed eco-tents are in violation of the Wildlife Act, 1972
- Project involves construction cost of Rs 7.16 crore and does not have an NOC from the National Tiger Conservation Authority

labelled as barren 'wastelands', when in fact they are rich ecological zones. Research has documented over 300 plant species on such tablelands, particularly monsoon-dependent herbaceous species. These seasonal blooms play a crucial role in sustaining pollinators like bees and flies, while the grassy terrain serves as vital habitat for open-area bird species such as Malabar larks and quails.

Surla Plateau is also home to rare fauna, with recent studies identifying species like the scorpion

Hottentota vinchu and the frog Fejervarya goemchi, both considered range-restricted and possibly endemic to the area. Wildlife such as sloth bears, leopards, pangolins, and gaur—listed under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Protection Act—have been observed in the area. Of particular concern is the confirmed presence of tigers, with camera traps capturing images of the animal on the plateau and in adjoining zones.

The petition underscores that the Surla Plateau lies within the Mhadei Wildlife

Sanctuary—one of Goa's largest and most biodiverse protected areas—and that the National Tiger Conservation Authority, along with the Bombay High Court at Goa, has already directed the state government to declare the sanctuary a tiger reserve. Despite this, no clearance has been obtained from the NTCA for the proposed tourism development.

Environmentalists are also concerned that the plateau's categorisation under the Wasteland Atlas of India has facilitated its vulnerability to infrastructure projects. Across Goa, similar laterite tablelands have been concretised for industrial estates and townships—such as those at Verna, Kundaim, Colvale, Kadamba, and Mopa—leading to ecological consequences, including reports of wells drying up in nearby villages.

In a joint social media

appeal, Goa Foundation and the Save Mollem campaign described the effort as an "urgent campaign" to prevent irreversible ecological damage. "Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary is one of the most biodiverse forests in India, home to endemic species and the majestic tiger. But the Goa Forest Department, instead of prioritising its protection, is planning to destroy a sensitive laterite plateau to build an 'eco-tourism' resort within the sanctuary," the groups stated.

They warned that the project could interfere with tiger movement and harm the hundreds of unique species found in this ecosystem. "We urge the Goa Government and Forest Department to cancel this proposed project," they said, encouraging citizens to read, sign, and share the petition in support of the campaign.

# Three Colva constables suspended for alleged bribery; PI transferred

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** South Goa Superintendent of Police Tikam Singh has suspended three constables attached to the Colva Police Station following allegations of bribery involving a local scrap dealer.

The suspended personnel have been identified as Constables Amar Gaonkar, Siddesh Shirodkar, and Satyam Desai. The suspension orders were issued after a report was submitted by a senior officer from the sub-division.

According to police sources, the three constables allegedly demanded and accepted a bribe from

The three constables allegedly demanded a bribe from a local scrap dealer; asked to report to the reserve line at Margao police HQ

a scrap dealer, although the nature and amount of the bribe have not yet been disclosed. A departmental inquiry into the matter has been initiated.

Sources further revealed that one of the suspended constables is the husband of a lady PSI, another had previously been transferred to Vasco but returned to Colva Police Station, while the third is a newly recruited constable.

The suspended person-

nel have been directed to report to the reserve line at the Margao Police Headquarters, pending further inquiry. An inquiry officer will be appointed to investigate the case.

In a related development, Colva Police Inspector Ritesh Tari has also been transferred for dereliction of duty, and asked to report to the reserve line in Margao. The PI of Maina-Curtorim PS has been given additional charge of Colva Police Station.

# After Kharebhand fire, delay in structural report raises concern

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** Concerns are mounting among residents after a major fire recently broke out in a multi-storey residential building at Kharebhand, Margao. While emergency services responded swiftly and no casualties were reported, the authorities' continued delay in releasing a structural stability report has sparked widespread anxiety and allegations of negligence. The fire, which caused significant damage, led to the immediate evacuation of several families. Local authorities were expected to conduct a structural audit to assess the safety of the building before allowing residents to return. However, despite the urgency and visible damage, no official report has been made public to date. This has prompted criticism from displaced residents and civil society groups, who have



accused the authorities of poor communication and lack of transparency. "We were told that an assessment would be carried out immediately, but it's been days and there's no word from the authorities. Are they waiting for something worse to happen?" questioned Savio Coutinho, echoing the frustration of several affected families. Attempts by O Herald to reach Margao Municipal Council (MMC) Chief Officer Melvyn Vas went unanswered. However, MMC Chairperson Damodar Shirodkar confirmed that inspections had been carried out. "We are waiting

for the report, which will be given in a very short period of time," he said. Safety advocates say the delay in issuing the report undermines public confidence and raises questions about accountability, especially in the enforcement of fire and building safety norms. The incident has reignited calls for comprehensive structural and fire safety audits of residential complexes in the city to prevent similar occurrences. Meanwhile, displaced families remain in limbo, left to wonder whether the systems meant to protect them are truly in place—or merely on paper.

# Court to decide on bail plea of suspended Konkan Rly PI today

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** The bail application of suspended Police Inspector (PI) Sunil Gudlar, attached to the Konkan Railway Police Station and recently arrested by the Directorate of Vigilance's Anti-Corruption Branch (ACB), came up for hearing before the Additional District and Sessions Judge in Margao on Monday. The court has reserved its order for Tuesday, April 30.

PI Gudlar was arrested for allegedly demanding and accepting a bribe of Rs 25,000 from a meat trader from Belagavi. During Monday's hearing, the court heard arguments from both sides after having issued notices to the ACB, the public prosecutor, and the defence counsel.

Public Prosecutor V.G. Costa strongly opposed the bail plea, arguing that the investigation is still in its preliminary stage and that custodial interrogation is necessary. He expressed concerns that the accused may tamper with evidence or influence witnesses if released on bail.

Defence advocate Galileo Teles, appearing for PI Gudlar, countered that the

police response submitted in court does not establish that his client demanded or accepted any bribe. He noted that the original FIR was registered against a police constable named Hussain, also attached to the same police station, and not against Gudlar.

Teles argued that Gudlar was not present at the scene during the ACB raid, and according to the police

records, had left the station at 7 pm on

April 21 for patrolling duty. Gudlar, he said, was later brought back from outside the station premises after the trap was already executed.

In his bail application, Gudlar stated that the complaint was originally filed against Constable Hussain and that the complainant had never named him in the case. He further claimed that he had made a diary entry documenting his departure for patrolling duty prior to the raid and has had no interaction with the complainant at any stage.

He also denied interfering in the investigation of the case, maintaining that he has been falsely implicated.

## BEEF EXTORTION CASE

# FDA shuts down three unhygienic food businesses

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** The South Goa team of the Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) recently carried out an inspection drive in Salcete taluka, targeting food manufacturing and service establishments for hygiene and safety compliance. The inspections, which covered two manufacturing units and one restaurant, led to all three being ordered to shut down until corrective measures are implemented.

The first unit, a bakery, was found operating in deplorable sanitary conditions. Officials noted dirty floors, peeling paint, exposed wiring, and unclean storage trays. The facility lacked essential infrastructure, including proper washing areas, pest control certification, and sanitary cards for employees. Authorities ordered the immediate suspension of operations and asked the



bakery to submit a compliance report.

At the second location, a chips manufacturing unit was discovered cooking food in the open, on a public footpath, without basic facilities such as washing stations or an exhaust system. None of the products bore proper labelling, and the unit had no valid operating licence despite previous warnings. Items worth Rs 20,000 were seized and marked for destruction. The operator has been instructed to cease all business activities until necessary licences are obtained.

## SACRED OBLIGATION

JOSEPH FERNANDES



Devotees bring offerings of firewood for Goddess Lairai at the Shirgao Devasthan in Bicholim, to prepare the *homkhund*, a large pyre. They then circumambulate the sacred site, carrying bundles of firewood on their heads as a fulfillment of their vows. The pyre will later be set alight and once burnt down, devotees walk on the hot coals and embers

## GKF to host 'Chauddi' today

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** The Global Konkani Forum (GKF), which advocates for the development of Konkani in the Roman script has announced a special half-day programme titled 'Chauddi'.

Scheduled for May 1, the programme will be held at the Pai Tiatrist Joao Agostinho Fernandes Hall in Ravindra Bhavan, Margao, from 9 am to 12:30 pm.

# Outrage in Loutolim after villagers catch caterer dumping garbage on plateau

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** A Loutolim-based caterer was caught red-handed on Monday illegally dumping wet waste on the village plateau, sparking outrage among residents and prompting official action.

The waste was dumped on land belonging to the Comunidade of Loutolim. Alert villagers, acting on suspicion, confronted the individual as he offloaded a large quantity of food waste.

The accused, reportedly linked to a local catering business, allegedly claimed he had received verbal permission from the panchayat secretary to dispose of waste at the site.

However, this claim was



swiftly and firmly denied by the Loutolim Village Panchayat. Sarpanch Joana Fernandes clarified that while the catering unit had been issued a No Objection Certificate (NOC) to operate, no permission had ever been given for dumping waste on comunidade land.

"Neither the panchayat nor the secretary has granted any kind of permission for dumping waste on comunidade land. It was clearly communicated to the business owner that managing their waste would be their own responsibility," Fernandes said.

The panchayat has since

"We caught the accused red-handed while disposing off wet waste. His claim that the panchayat gave him permission is both false and deeply troubling" — Blaise Brito, Comunidade president

lodged a police complaint against the caterer for unauthorised dumping and creating a public nuisance.

Blaise Brito, President of the Comunidade of Loutolim, who visited the site after the incident, said, "We caught the accused red-handed while disposing of wet waste. His claim that the panchayat gave him permission is both false and deeply troubling. Such environmental neg-

ligence will not be tolerated. We are committed to protecting comunidade land," Brito said. The incident has intensified long-standing concerns among villagers over the lack of oversight on waste disposal by businesses operating in the area. Residents are now calling for the panchayat to impose stricter conditions on enterprises like caterers, hotels, and event venues, which tend to generate substantial amounts of waste.

"This is not an isolated incident. We've been dealing with similar problems for a while now. If strong action isn't taken, we risk long-term environmental degradation," said one concerned resident.



Residents of Old Goa are protesting the government's decision to relocate the Old Goa Police Station to the Exposition Secretariat site, in front of the iconic Basilica. Activists have long demanded a Master Plan to curb illegal constructions in the heritage area

## NO OLD GOA MASTER PLAN YET: IS THE GOVT SERIOUS ABOUT THE HERITAGE SITE?

"The temporary structure was erected for a particular purpose - for the Exposition. As per the permission of the Archeological Survey of India, it was only for 45 days and it would be demolished thereafter within 10 days. Four months later, it has still not been demolished. Now they have given it as a temporary structure for the Old Goa police station. It is necessary that the ASI answer for this because it is within the 200 metre zone of the UNESCO World Heritage site" — Mariano Ferrao, social activist

"I don't think the government has understood the value of the Old Goa UNESCO Heritage site. Otherwise what is the explanation for all the illegalities that are going on? Is this happening without the connivance of the government? It is not possible. Bringing the police station to the Exposition secretariat site, when it was assured that the office would be demolished. Now they are saying it is temporary, only till the police station building is built. The building will not come up for another two-and-a-half years. The sensitivity of the Old Goa heritage site seems to be lost on this government" — Trajano D'Mello, political commentator

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"If it's temporary, it's good - as long as the new police station is coming up. When such a big issue of the Master Plan is hanging over your head, why is Vishwajit Rane not formulating the Master Plan. If a poor man builds a house without a plan, you call it illegal. (But without a Master Plan) it is easy to do illegalities. Once the Master Plan is made it won't be possible to do illegalities. At least the law will follow them." — Anthony D'Silva, social activist