

# Progress or plunder? Goa's hills, forests pay price for 'development'

Even as the Goa government aspires to shape a "developed India by 2047," the ground beneath that vision is rapidly eroding—both literally and figuratively. Illegal hill cutting, landfilling, and unchecked construction are turning once-sacred landscapes into cautionary tales. Development is no longer about people—it's about profit, say grassroots activists, who point out that the race to development is leaving ruin behind. **GAURESH SATTARKAR** brings you the story



**A**t the recently held 10th Governing Council meeting of NITI Aayog, Goa's Chief Minister Pramod Sawant proclaimed that the State would play a significant role in 'realising the vision of a developed India by 2047'. The statement paints a promising future, one of modern infrastructure, progress, and prosperity. But beneath the rhetoric lies a harsh, inconvenient truth: if the present trajectory of unplanned and often illegal development continues, the Goa of 2047 may be unrecognisable, stripped of its ecological essence, its cultural roots, and its native people.

The state's supposed enforcement machinery, such as Flying Squads and revenue officials, operates with an astonishing lack of urgency. Investigations are often delayed, and First Information Reports (FIRs)—if filed at all—come long after the hill has already been levelled. Developers, fully aware of these lags, exploit the window to complete their work and avoid penalties

What does "developed Goa" really look like in this context? Will it be a place where toll booths rise like sentinels every few kilometres, where hilltops once covered with lush greenery are flattened to accommodate sprawling urban townships, six-lane highways, and mega-casinos? If current patterns of land abuse, unauthorised construction, and environmental apathy are any indication, Goa's future is heading not toward sustainable develop-

**“The government has made strict laws and announced flying squads, but the illegal cutting of hills continues. Despite repeated protests, nothing changes. This issue should concern the entire village, not just one organisation or political group — Azim Sheikh, Social Activist**



ment, but toward a man-made ecological collapse.

At the heart of Goa's looming environmental disaster is a glaring pattern of illegal hill cutting, rampant landfilling, and unauthorised real estate development. Despite stringent environmental regulations and vocal activism from NGOs and civil society, implementation remains virtually nonexistent. Laws exist, but they are treated like ceremonial decorations - displayed, admired, and ultimately ignored.

For years, environmental groups have raised alarm bells over hill cutting in both North and South Goa. The damage is no longer theoretical; it is visible and irreversible in areas like Sanguem, Quepem, and Curchorem, where entire green belts have been reduced to barren slopes in the name of development. Hills that have stood for centuries, nurturing flora and fauna and feeding streams and aquifers, are now vanishing under bulldozers.

One particularly revealing case comes from Morpirla Panchayat, where illegal hill cutting continued even after local complaints prompted an inspection by the Flying Squad and the Mamlatdar of Quepem. The panchayat, astonishingly, claimed complete ignorance of the inspection—raising critical questions about the complicity or sheer negligence of local governance bodies. Was it wilful blindness or covert support?

Social activist Azim Sheikh rightly points out that unless each village

treats this as a collective crisis, enforcement will always lag behind destruction. "This issue should concern the entire village," he states. And yet, it remains isolated—fought only by a handful of activists and residents, while local leaders either look the other way or quietly sanction these illegalities.

The state's supposed enforcement machinery, such as Flying Squads and revenue officials, operates with an astonishing lack of urgency. Investigations are often delayed, and First Information Reports (FIRs)—if filed at all—come long after the hill has already been levelled. Developers, fully aware of these lags, exploit the window to complete their work and avoid penalties. This delay not only emboldens violators but signals that enforcement is more theatre than deterrence.

Panch members like Falcer Da Costa lament that the activity stops briefly whenever a complaint is filed, only to resume days later—an endless cat-and-mouse game where the violators almost always win. "The panchayat can act," he says, "but those responsible often have political backing." This unholy nexus between local politicians, developers, and enforcement agencies ensures that the cycle of destruction remains uninterrupted.

The Urban Planning Department recently proposed increasing fines for illegal hill cutting to Rs 1 crore—a welcome move on paper. But as ev-

**“Whenever we report hill cutting, flying squads are deployed, and the activity stops for a few days. But it starts again. The panchayat can act, but those responsible often have political backing, which allows them to continue — Falcer Da Costa, Panch member from Morpirla**



**“Across the state, hills are being cut to create plots, destroying natural resources. The administration issues notices and conducts inspections, but action stops there. After a short break, the work resumes. What's the point of laws if citizens have to go to court every time? — Prashant Desai, Social Activist**



ery Goan knows, fines and rules are meaningless if enforcement remains toothless and corrupt.

Activist Yeshwanth Naik goes a step further, alleging that illegal hill cutting is often abetted by panch members, MLAs, and even ministers. The local talathis, who are supposed to serve as the eyes and ears of the administration, reportedly visit sites not to inspect but to "collect their share." The system, it seems, is less about protection and more about participation in plunder.

Several incidents from villages like Sirvoi, Rivona, Sulcorna, and Kankanifond in recent months confirm this pattern. Excavators continue to raze land even after receiving stop-work orders. In Sirvoi, a property owner continued illegal activity in defiance of official orders until a fresh notice was issued. In Rivona, the Flying Squad observed unauthorised hill cutting without any permissions—yet enforcement remains reactive, not preventive.

Social activist Prashant Desai from Sanguem voices the community's growing frustration: "The administration issues notices and conducts inspections, but action stops there. After a short break, the work resumes." His question cuts to the bone of the matter: "What's the point of laws if citizens have to go to court every time?"

The ecological impact of this unchecked activity is enormous. Hill cutting destroys aquifers, exacerbates water shortages, and

destabilises soil structures making landslides not just possible but inevitable. The CM had once cited landslides in Wayanad and Sattari as warnings, pledging to empower talathis and revive dormant disaster management bodies. But as of now, those pledges remain exactly that - just pledges.

In August 2024, following severe landslides elsewhere in India and specially in Wayanad, the Goa government vowed to involve the National Disaster Management Authority, identify vulnerable zones, and upgrade the State Disaster Management Committee. A monitoring body was proposed, comprising mamlatdars, agriculture officers, and forest officials. Yet illegal hill cutting continues unabated, making a mockery of these promises. Governance appears stuck in endless meetings, while bulldozers do their work without pause.

What makes this destruction even more tragic is the cultural erosion that accompanies it. For centuries, Goa's 400-odd villages have treated their surrounding hills as sacred guardians of ecology and repositories of spiritual belief. These hills are not just geographical features; they are symbols of heritage and identity. Today, that heritage is under siege from infrastructure projects like railways, highways, and luxury townships, none of which respect the cultural or ecological sensitivities of the land they occupy.

Let's be clear: development in Goa is no longer about improving lives; it's about increasing land value. It's

**“I reported the issue to the panchayat, which ordered the work to stop. But it continued. We even approached the Chief Engineer of the Public Works Department, but our complaint was ignored — Swapnil Bhandari, Complainant**



**“Illegal hill cutting usually happens with the support of local leaders—whether it's a panch member, sarpanch, MLA, or minister. Village Talathis visit the laterite mines just to collect their share, and the Circle Inspector rarely visits such sites. It's all managed — Yeshwanth Naik, Social Activist**



about replacing cashew plantations with concrete resorts, and substituting community forests with casinos. It prioritizes short-term gain over long-term stability, inviting disasters under the illusion of progress.

If this trend continues, Goa in 2047 will indeed be "developed"—but only in the most ironic sense. Its rivers may run dry, its hills may flatten, and its original inhabitants may be pushed to the margins. It will be a place where glossy brochures sell paradise while locals struggle to find drinking water. A place where high-speed cars zip across four-lane highways while the region's biodiversity dies quietly in the background.

Goa's ecosystem is not resilient enough to endure decades of mismanagement. The time to act was yesterday. The second-best time is now. Enforcement mechanisms must be empowered, but also held accountable. Panchayats must stop functioning as silent spectators or worse, as collaborators. Citizens must stop being treated as fringe actors in the fate of their own land.

More importantly, the state must reimagine what "development" means. It must shift away from the mindless replication of urban models and toward a vision rooted in ecological balance, cultural preservation, and community empowerment.

Because if Goa loses its hills, its forests, and its water sources in this blind rush toward 2047, we must ask ourselves . What exactly have we developed?

