



By DALE LUIS MENEZES

Disastrous Planning: Development and Goa's Future

Goans are constantly bombarded with large-scale infrastructure schemes and this has become routine. If there is a successful protest mounted against the expansion of coal handling in Mormugao/Vasco, then the battle-ground shifts to Mopa, from there it shifts to the mining areas, and currently we are at this juncture where something called “vertical development” is promoted through the controversial Regional Plan 2021 (RP-21). As protests have already begun against the revival of RP-21, it would be useful to check out what exactly the plan seeks to achieve.

One would expect, at the very least, that a master plan that aims to change the face of the Goan landscape would have some basic concepts clear. Since we are talking about the growth of large-scale ‘development’, the draft RP-21 is expected to have a clear idea of what it means by ‘development’. But nowhere in its 270-odd pages is there a clear definition, neither is there any clarity on how this ‘development’ will relate to the existing Goan conditions. This is a serious issue, especially when one thinks about how a loosely-defined idea of ‘development’ is at the heart of the destruction of Goan ecology.

Keeping aside the fact that the RP-21 has been criticized by several activists for procedural lapses that benefit the builder lobby, it appears to be also riddled with contradictions. The future that the draft plan envisions for Goa appears to be divorced from ground realities of what the people of Goa need, in terms of the basic facilities like water, sanitation, and public transportation (to name a few). For instance, the RP-21 envisions a better system of public transport in order to reduce traffic, but at the same time it also envisions new highways so as to handle the projected increase in the movement of goods due to new industries. One could argue that improving public transport and increasing the number of roads are mutually discordant aims. Similarly, one can suggest that the vision of improving agriculture or protecting forests is at odds with that of new highways as it is the fields and forested lands that give way for highways in the Goan context.

The main, and only, real aim of RP-21 is to have rapid economic growth. In this context, RP-21 laments the fact that Goa is experiencing a brain-drain of engineers, and envisions jobs

only for persons who have technological expertise. One could point out that the bulk of Goans migrating out of Goa are not all engineers, but those who work in service industries – or so-called blue-collar jobs – around the world. How would the RP-21 protect such Goans from forced migration due to lack of opportunities? It won't be able to because the type of industries and infrastructure that it hopes to foist onto Goans will be able to only employ a handful of engineers, that too, if they possess the requisite qualifications that the jobs created demand; everyone else still will have to seek greener pastures elsewhere.

Likewise, for the promotion of new information and technology driven industries, the RP-21 talks about the importance of instilling skills in the local people that would make them employable in this sector. However, it also talks about the need for more housing for the in-migrating population that would be employed in these industries. Clearly, these massive industries will require a large workforce from outside, so much so that for every job these industries create for a Goan, the RP-21 envisions that another will be created for a person migrating from outside. Thus, the argument that locals will get jobs if Goa is opened up for the development of large-scale infrastructure and industries is just a red herring. Goa's population would not be able to supply the required workforce for these industries. If the plans go through, there will be a huge influx of people into Goa and no one knows what the consequences of this drastic demographic increase will be.

Similarly, there are many areas, such as the plans for double-tracking of railways and the construction of marinas for boosting tourism, in which one can observe logical and practical deficiencies in the draft RP-21. Its vision for a future Goa, thus, simply does not match the claims that it makes. Like many other master plans that the government has formulated thus far – whether through its own personnel or through private consultants – the RP-21 is also keenly aware of the problems Goa will face should the kind of development that it envisions become a reality. To that end, the plan advises caution, and checks and balances through governmental regulation and legislation. However, we have known time and again that the requisite laws and regulations are either not put in place or are jettisoned the moment private profit or pelf take centre-stage.

There isn't much of an option left, but to force the government to abandon such schemes and visions as contained in the draft RP-21 (or even in legislations like the Investment Promotion Act). As Amita Kanekar recently wrote, what we need instead is to support the common folk,

whose labour develops and sustain the region. Simultaneously, the authorities need to prepare a plan of how they would facilitate the young people in Goa to acquire various kinds of skills (and not necessarily technical), rather than devoting all their energy in 'developing' i.e. profiting from Goa's land – as Marian Pinheiro suggested. For if we don't have such a vision for the future, privileging communities and individuals, backed by iron-clad legislation to check irregularities, Goa will witness even more destruction.

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