



By AMITA KANEKAR

Wanted Urgently: A New Model of Governance

I was astounded to hear, a couple of months ago, of a glass house being built in Goa. Large-scale glass usage in buildings was developed to allow in maximum natural heat in cold climates, which reduced artificial heating and thus saved energy. Glass-fronted commercial buildings then became popular the world over, an aspirational look that became known as the International Style, even where they had to be supported by expensive airconditioning. But a glass house in a hot and humid place like Goa? Described in trade journals as the vision of fashion designer Tarun Tahiliani and architect Sameep Padora, and ‘nestled among the lush green fields and backwaters of Goa’, the villa will apparently sprawl over about 660 sq m., in a huge 1690 sq m. plot. It uses very special kinds of glass, we are told, designed for ‘intrusion-resistance’, privacy, and energy efficiency, besides keeping out dust and noise. No information of its cost, nor its consumption of air-conditioning.

In retrospect, one realizes that there is no reason to be astounded. This latest vulgarity is just one of the many examples of the booming real estate business here, beloved of local landowners as well as the Goa government. For Goa’s development model positions the state as a playground of the Indian rich, a good place to spend excessive incomes on poshed-up ‘Portuguese houses’, or new and ‘green-rated’ vacation homes, or at least apartments in plush gated colonies. But who will pay the environmental price of covering every hill and valley with buildings, many empty through the year? Or that of digging tons and tons of sand, essential for concrete construction, out of Goan rivers? Sand-mining had actually been completely banned across the country some years ago for its disastrous impact on the environment, but it has been re-allowed in Goa, supposedly in a limited way, after much lobbying by the state government. This famous (or infamous) ‘permissible limit’ is as usual an eyewash, for the Goa government has no system in place to supervise how it is done. All that is required, according to insiders, is a hefty bribe to the local police.

If last month’s revelation of deliberately-added poison in our daily fish did not convince us, the monstrous flood in Kerala this month is one more warning of how unsustainable and dangerous this development model is. The Kerala floods are a man-made disaster, say ecologists, which could hit Goa next. The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, in its 2011 report, had predicted severe consequences of the environmental destruction in Kerala,

caused primarily by quarrying, mining, and real estate development; its recommendations, that eco-sensitive zones be demarcated and protected, were rejected by the Kerala government. Similar recommendations were made for Goa, which were rejected by the government here as well.

The Goa governments calls such critiques as not just anti-development, but also anti-people, implying that it is the people of Goa who want such development. Even their lobbying to restart sand-mining, or today to restart iron-ore mining, is always in the name of communities who depend on these for a living. But the fact is that the social cost of this development model is no less than the environmental. Locals may make some living off mining, but it is the corporates who made the killing, while the price of long-term destruction of water, land, public health, etc. will only be paid by the former, as can be seen in Sonshi and other villages across Goa's mining belt. As for Goa's real estate industry, this caters almost exclusively to rich outsiders' need of second or tenth homes, while keeping prices so high that locals cannot afford even first homes. But the government, which goes out of its way to facilitate this industry, with, not just with reckless sand-mining, but also increased buildable areas per plot, increased settlement areas in villages, and now transferable development rights (TDR) as well, has made no effort to develop affordable housing in the state.

Will the Kerala floods make any difference? Not if the example of Bombay is anything to go by. Bombay is a city that always took annual floods for granted, along with the accompanying destruction and loss; as I was growing up, everybody had memories of the city shut down by the rains, of wading all the way home from south Bombay to the suburbs, via flooded roads or railway tracks. But the July 2007 floods were different, the sign of climate change as well as a city choked to death by 'development'. Roads and highways became gushing rivers, with water as much as 10 feet high, and packed BEST buses as well as dead bodies floating on it, flooding even the second floors of buildings, leave aside the low-rise homes of 60% of Bombayites. The many post-mortems that followed the disaster pointed out how wetlands, open spaces, and even the coast-line had disappeared under the onslaught of building, so that the rain water had simply no place to go. So then? A decade on, nothing has changed, except that the authorities close down schools at the very hint of heavy rain. Education can suffer, profits should not.

The fact is that these governments, whether in Bombay, or Kerala, or Goa, are wedded to the corporate-driven development model, whose driving force is greed and nothing else. It's a model that ignores social justice at the best of times – for high-end developments make the biggest profits – and also the worst; thus the media reports of Dalit communities being discriminated against in the relief works in Kerala. An alternative model of development is essential – controlled by, and for the benefit of, local communities, many of whom are already up in arms across Goa against the destructive so-called development that is being forced on them. Village co-operatives, in which only locals would take up all development projects in their own villages, are already being attempted, though hindered by the authorities at every step. Clearly, for these alternatives to succeed, we need a different government.

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