



Are there enough casinos? Apparently, no. According to *A Study on Human Trafficking in Vulnerable Districts in India*, a nationwide study by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), partly funded by the union ministry of Women and Child Development, and completed in 2019, Goa is a major destination (as well as a source) for sex trafficking; and – surprise, surprise! – the tourism industry of Goa is the main reason for the trafficking of both women and children for the sex trade as well as other illegal activities. Interestingly, the report, though ready three years ago, was published by the union government only now. Not just this, the report was also taken down from the government website just days after being released. What could be the reason for this cover-up? Could it be the focus on the tourism industry?

The report points out that tourism, which plays a ‘major role in shaping Goa’s economy’, also acts as a ‘major influence in pushing human trafficking activity. A large number of women and children fall prey to the hands of traffickers, particularly during the inflow of tourists...” While many women are trafficked into Goa from the poor rural areas of other states, and also from other countries, especially Nepal and Bangladesh, ‘(m)arginalised tribal communities (nomadic tribes or banjaras), unsupervised children at public places, children of migrants, are the most vulnerable groups... A rise in all forms of trafficking is observed during the tourist season from October to March.’

While providing chilling details of the lures, threats, and traps (even within government shelters), followed by violence and exploitation, faced by the victims, the report goes on to speak of the wide variety of spaces and events being used for this criminal activity. They include bars, pubs, nightclubs, spas, massage parlours, beauty parlours, online escort services, hotels, friendship clubs, flats in residential colonies, and public events of all kinds, like dance events and business conferences. The report writers say that they suspect that casinos are also involved in this, but have yet to find proof. It is noteworthy that many of these spaces/events are well-ensconced as part of the tourism infrastructure of Goa.

Over and above these is the appropriation of even public open spaces for this nefarious business. The reports speaks of certain public rendezvous spots, and also how the beaches – full of tourist family crowds in the daytime – become dominated after sunset by single males, either in Indian all-men tourist groups, or as solitary foreign males, all openly looking for sex. The scenario described matches a study of life as a woman in the hyper-touristy village of Calangute, many years ago, as part of the Masters in Sociology course under the late Prof Alito Sequeira – where the student said that it was normal for women of the village, like herself, to be solicited for sex by tourists on the road, or right outside your own door.

Meanwhile, an employee in a hospital in nearby Porvorim described how Indian male tourists openly ask at the counter, even while paying medical bills, about where they could 'get girls' - as though Goa is an open sex shop. Toxic Tourism Goa-Style

And why not? The government's lack of interest in the issue can also be seen in how basic recommendations are yet to be implemented, despite being years old. Like special courts for sex trafficking cases. As Arun Pandey of the Anyay Rahit Zindagi (ARZ) points out, a special court has been set up in South Goa, though 80% of the cases are in North Goa. Since most of the rescued victims are from outside Goa, and return to their home states as soon as they can, they are not available when the usually-long-delayed cases come up before the current courts - with the result that those responsible have a chance to escape scot-free.

This can be seen in the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report for 2021, which was released in September this year. It placed Goa at the top in the rate of human trafficking, with one case per lakh of population as against the national average of 0.2, and also reported an abysmal conviction rate - with charge-sheets being filed in 89 cases by the Goa police last year, but only three cases being tried, and all these three resulting in acquittals. Pandey also points out that rescues by the police have been falling even as trafficking is clearly on the rise.

None of this will come as a surprise for most Goans. Nor even the role of tourism - the sleaziness of this industry is right out there, thanks to the casinos. But the government has only one agenda here - to increase tourist footfall, come what may. Thus the official ignorance about the mayhem of the casino patrons, some of whom use the streets of Panjim to not just park their cars, but also to cook, sleep, and answer calls of nature. Thus the compulsory overlay of a big food and music festival, and other tourist attractions, right on top of the International Film Festival, ensuring that the ensuing chaos blocks life completely for locals, and even prevents festival-goers from reaching their films. Thus the various new tourist infrastructures planned for Panaji, like the colossally expensive ropeway bridge to cross the Mandovi from Campal to Reis Magos, which is likely to be immediately stymied by the high winds at the river mouth, but no worries - proposed along with it is a huge commercial and entertainment complex right on the riverbank, violating Coastal Regulatory Zone norms but keeping the projected three million tourists happy.

So, forget about stronger supervision, control and regulation of the tourism sector, the state government is going gung-ho with just expansion. And if things continue this way, Goa's growing reputation as a sleaze capital is guaranteed - which will attract even more tourists of this particular variety. That old saying will have to be modified: He who has seen Goa need not see - no, not Lisboa - but any other stinking fleshpot in the world.

(First published in *O Herald*, dt: 10 December 2022)



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