

The Chief Minister of Goa is suddenly determined to provide affordable housing to Goans, and also, believe it or not, to protect Goan land. From whom, one is tempted to ask – himself? Affordable housing as reality, instead of a bribe. Yes, even as the entire state is being converted into the luxury holiday home of rich Indians under his supervision, CM Pramod Sawant would have us believe that his government is busy creating a scheme of low-cost housing in every taluka for Goans, with about 50-100 flats to be built and offered to native Goans at about 10-15 lakh rupees each. Soon after this announcement came another, that the CM planned to “protect” Goa’s land by approving a 130% hike in land prices in Pernem and Bardez, which, according to him, will ‘curb massive development’ in these areas.

Now the price hike makes total sense for this government – not for curbing development, of course; there are more than enough moneybags drooling over Goan land – but in terms of more profits, white and black, for everyone involved. But affordable housing? This is a CM who has never expressed any interest in Goa’s housing problems, not even when complaints, including the very common denial of permission to expand village houses or build new toilets, etc, have hit the headlines. It is not surprising then, that nobody is taking his promise of affordable housing seriously, seeing it, in fact, as just an attempt at bribery. Even as his builder friends cut the hills, forests, and fields of Goa, and cover it all with concrete, our concerned CM will basically ensure that some crumbs of real estate fall to ordinary Goans, in return for which we would all be expected to forget the reports about Daffodil’s villas, Bhutani’s swimming pools, Lodha’s conquests, the land-grabbing Chief Secretary, the landgrab-facilitating DGP, the embezzling Smart City CEO, etc, etc.

We are, nonetheless, glad that the CM has, for whatever reason, brought up the issue of affordable housing. And we would like to remind him that there is no need to build afresh to solve this issue – because there are already hundreds, if not more, of quality Goan residences without any occupants. Some of them are waiting for buyers, some of them belong to investors, while others are second (or tenth) homes, used for barely one or two weeks in the year, if that. According to Kenneth Bo Nielsen, Heather P. Bedi and Solano Da Silva (*Goa’s Great Land Grab, 2023*), a whopping 22%, i.e. over one-fifth, of Goa’s housing stock stood vacant almost 100% of the time, in 2011. The percentage would be much higher now, given that all residential construction in the state is for second homes and vacations homes. So, all that is required is for the government to take over this vast and empty housing stock, and offer it to Goans for 10-15 lakhs, as promised.

Can you imagine Sawant doing this? These posh apartments and sea-viewing villas, each with individual swimming pool, are surely not what he envisages as cheap housing for Goans; they are reserved for India’s metropolitan elites. Cheap housing for ordinary Goans, in contrast, will probably mean cheap construction along with poor facilities, poor location, poor

everything.



But even if we give him the benefit of doubt, the proposal of affordable housing still rings hollow given the context of today's Goa. It reminds one of the new public buses recently introduced in Panjim. The new buses (and bus-routes) are comfortable, smooth, and more eco-friendly than the earlier buses, definitely a boon for the poorer sections of Panjim's population. But they are running half-empty much of the time, and very slow as well. The reason is again the context, which is completely against any public good.

The context is that the roads are jam-packed with private vehicles, many with just one occupant, and despite the traffic jams, pollution, and accidental deaths caused by the numbers of these vehicles, pot-holed roads, bad driving, alcohol, tourist bravado, etc. etc. If people are free to use their own private vehicles, how many will voluntarily shift to buses? Doesn't the municipal corporation know that one has to reduce the existing traffic while introducing new vehicles - unless one wants to worsen the traffic jams? At the very least, there should have been a ban on 'monster cars' as *The Economist* calls them. In an article titled 'What to do about America's killer cars' (5 September 2024), the journal points out that big cars, which are popular in the US at least partly because they are believed to keep the users safe in any crash, are horribly dangerous for everyone else on the street. This is true for Goa as well. Remember Banastarim? When that huge, super-luxury, and super-speedy Mercedes SUV ploughed into multiple vehicles, its occupants did not even suffer even a scratch, but left 3 persons dead and many more grievously injured.

What we need is a complete ban on such big vehicles, and restrictions on all others (like compulsory car-pooling and dedicated bus lanes). Not just throwing more buses into the dangerous chaos that are Goan roads today.

And when such restrictions come in, we need new buses not just in Panjim, but all over Goa. There are women who travel standing all the way from Pernem to Panjim, every single day, in ancient buses which are not just packed but also leaking in the monsoons, and frequently breaking down along the way. Don't they deserve better transport? Or is it all just about the myth of the Smart City; public transport tick-marked as done, expenditure shown, even if the transport is hardly used?

The point is that offering mass transport, or mass housing, within the same unchanged and very rotten context is guaranteed to fail. You cannot have successful public transport without restricting private transport, just like you cannot have successful mass housing without restricting the opposite kinds of housing. Mass housing has to go hand in hand with a ban on luxurious, wasteful, and hardly-used housing, which destroys the environment, consumes colossal resources, and also keeps house prices sky-high and out of the reach of most Goans.

Just adding cheap mass housing to the tsunami of luxury-apartment, gated-villa, individual-swimming-pool, private-golf-course, artificial-lake already ravaging Goa will not protect our future, nor even our present from Wayanad-like disasters. So, first a ban on all such construction projects, Mr. Sawant, and a take-over of unused or hardly-used residences, to be sold at your rate to Goans.

Affordable mass housing is a great idea, and we congratulate our CM for talking about it. But it has to be implemented genuinely, and in a socially and environmentally conscious manner; not as a mere sop behind which the destructive rampage continues.

(A shorter version of this article was published in *O Herald*, dt: 21 September 2024)



Share this...

