

In the middle of surely one of the hottest March months in Goa's living memory, we hear from the Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte, that Panjim is going to get – what? More shade? Voddakode lost, aarti-ghat gained... so enjoy the heat! Drinking water fountains? Tree plantation? New gardens? Some control over activities like construction and road-digging which are adding to the heat? No. Panjim is going to get the construction of an '*aarti ghat*' on the banks of the Mandovi.

This doesn't surprise us. Perhaps one of the best cities in the whole of India till about 30 years ago – small, clean, green, pedestrian-friendly, quiet, and built at a human scale – Panjim is now an unrecognizable mess, that too after a reported expenditure of over Rs 1000 crore of public money. Construction or re-construction everywhere you look, including the beach. Age-old trees felled by the score. Shady public spaces turned into sunstroke zones. Existing public infrastructure hammered. Old low-rise buildings surrounded by vegetation replaced by glass towers belching out hot air from air-conditioning vents, and surrounded by car parks and more car parks. And the less said about the roads – actual death-traps for more than a few users – the better.

So, what is the government's solution to the ongoing heat wave? Drink water and stay at home between 11 am and 3 pm. That's the official advisory. How are regular jobs to be held with this schedule? And what about all the students, essential service workers, construction workers, domestic workers, delivery persons, etc. etc. who have to be out at all hours? The government doesn't care. The onus is on you. Stay at home. Or face the heat, literally.

The government's job, meanwhile, seems to be to increase the heat, given that whatever is happening in Panjim can be found, with small variations, all over Goa. Like Porvorim and the entire Bardez-Pernem highway zone. Among the many homes and other buildings earlier demolished or sliced through at the altar of roadworks there was one of the earliest Catholic shrines of Goa, more than four centuries old, which just disappeared overnight. The latest casualty was the beloved Khapreshwar temple at Porvorim's Voddakode, along with the old *vodd* (banyan tree) for which the site is named – uprooted despite mass protests. Is this how a democratic government is supposed to respond to legitimate and nonviolent citizens' protests: with police deployment and threats of lathi charges and arrests? Sawant likes to talk about liberation from colonial rule, but what kind of liberation is this, where a gathering of citizens for a peaceful cause is treated like criminals?

Practically every village in Goa is up in arms against land conversions, or some project, or other so-called 'development'. And facing them, in shameless opposition to the peoples' will, is the government. The recent announcement that the high court has struck down the rules enabling the notorious Section 17(2) of the Town and Country Planning (TCP) Act (introduced 2 years ago to allow spot conversion of land into buildable settlement zone), saw TCP Minister

Viswajit Rane immediately declaring that the government would appeal against the ruling to the Supreme Court, and also that investors in Goa should not worry!



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Yes, investors need not worry, because this government will pour in all the public money it can, to ensure a ruling against public interests. As for the latter, the government imagines that their divide-and-rule policy, of putting up statues of Hindu icons everywhere, along with new Hindu temples and now *aarti-ghats*, and continuously misrepresenting Goa's colonial history, will distract Goans from current realities. But are we really so foolish? Is it so difficult to understand, especially in this sweltering weather, the environmental madness that has been unleashed on us; and how all this wholesale destruction of fields, forests, hills, orchards, rivers, and wetlands, this actual wiping out of Goa at breakneck speed, is going to affect us in the future?

And not the distant future, but the immediate future. Goan hospitals are reportedly already thronged by patients with heat-related illnesses. If you catch a viral flu via the dust today, or sunstroke on a hot shadeless road tomorrow, or find no water in your taps the day after, you know who to thank – the ones who are speeding by (or overhead) in their air-conditioned SUVs, the ones who don't ever walk on foot, don't have their houses sliced through by roads, nor their lands taken for unending projects. Those who have never planted a banyan in their whole life, who don't even understand a fraction of its value, whose expertise lies in 'disappearing' trees overnight. Like Nero fiddling while Rome burnt, these rulers will holiday in Switzerland while Goa burns up.

The conviction that they can get away with anything and everything is in our face. Thus you have Chief Minister Pramod Sawant's astounding response – that he himself was not accused – when questioned about the accusation of corruption against his government by a former minister of his own party, who claimed to have recently paid 15-20 lakh rupees to get some work done.

This answer reflects not just a confirmation of the accusations but also the brazen confidence that they don't matter, that creating divisions and distractions, especially in the garb of religion, is all that is needed to stay in power in Goa. That's why ordinary locals and their concerns don't matter. Thus, all government's infrastructure projects – coal corridors, port development, massive road expansion – are all at the cost of ordinary Goans, and for the benefit of outside corporates and a few Goan ones too; while their land conversions and construction frenzy are again for the benefit of Indian settlers and tourists. And after converting Goan tourism into another word for sleaze unlimited – casinos, drugs, trafficking, and every other kind of perverse thrill – they now hope to sell 'spiritual tourism'. Perhaps they will find takers for this too. Even if they don't, the huge monies to be made in the

construction projects for it is all that really matters.



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