



Development for whom? This is a question being asked by many in Goa today as the Government's ambitious projects—whether of real estate or tourism or infrastructure – are increasingly revealed as destructive of both the natural environment as well as the lives of Goans. But this development has a third victim as well, one that is rarely focused on in Goa thanks to our bias against the poorest of Goa's 'bhaile'. This is those who actually do the real physical work of development, viz. the construction labourers. Within the exploitative and profiteering model of development that is followed in Goa, as in the rest of India, which is oriented towards the benefit of only land-owners, investors, and corporates, these workers are simply cannon fodder.

The poster case for this rotten state of affairs in Goa's building practices is that of the Ruby Residency building collapse of Canacona, on which judgement was recently pronounced last month. This case, Goa's worst building disaster ever, saw the same luxury apartment building collapse twice during construction, something perhaps unheard-of in the history of building disasters anywhere. The first collapse took place in 2012, luckily causing no fatalities. One would have expected this disaster to result in extra care and precautions being taken by the owners of this project, as well as the authorities supervising it. But no. The construction was still on when the building collapsed a second time, in January 2014, this time burying more than 50 construction workers, of whom 31 died. As usually the case in India, the relief work turned out to be another disaster, with the National Disaster Task Force reaching the site twenty-four hours after the collapse.

Faced with public outrage at the heavy death toll, the state government immediately announced an enquiry commission to investigate the causes for the disaster. The report of this V K Jha Commission, submitted to the government in July 2014, was made public in 2015 but is yet to be acted upon. This may be because it laid the lion's share of the blame at the door of the project-developers, Bharat Developers and Realtors Pvt. Ltd., and also on government employees of Goa's Town and Country Planning department, the Canacona Municipal Council, and the local Police Department. The reasons for the collapse, it reportedly said, were poor conceptual designs, inherently faulty structural designs, and defective execution of work on site.



Eleven of those mentioned in the V K Jha Commission's report were chargesheeted by the court, but only one, a private contractor, was convicted. But, according to the South Goa District and Sessions Court, leave aside culpable homicide, cheating, criminal conspiracy and other serious charges made against them, there was no evidence provided by the government lawyers to prove even negligence on the part of the builders and the officials. The latter, who had been suspended following the disaster, have all been re-instated.

It is clear then that such enquiry commissions are not meant to be taken seriously. They seem intended just to take the pressure off, to make the public believe that what has happened is an aberration, that there is a system in place which will not allow it to happen again. But, as Ruby itself proved with its two collapses, what happened is the rule, and it will continue.

Because such is the society we live in. The combination of caste and class provides an unlimited supply of impoverished and uneducated labourers desperate for unskilled work in the agricultural off-season; it also provides an attitude of complete callousness to those deemed low and unimportant. Add to this the contractual, sub-contractual, and sub-sub-contractual methods of employment of contemporary capitalism—superbly designed to invisibilise workers, whether in small projects or on giant construction sites—and you have a guaranteed recipe for murderous disasters, always termed as 'accidents'. The many rules and regulations governing construction work, including provisions on labour safety and well-being, are almost all unimplemented. Safety gear has to be worn, working hours are to be limited, and overtime paid for, all on paper. There is even a Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board in many states, including Goa, but no welfare to be seen.

Workers are commonly paid below the legal wage, never provided decent housing, sanitation, or healthcare, nor even basic safety for their children - at least two children of construction workers are reported to have died on construction sites in Goa in the last 2 years. The families of the 31 victims in Canacona were reportedly offered just Rs 3 to 5 lakhs by the builders after the disaster, which they refused, saying they wanted justice instead.

Far from justice, though, what workers more commonly get is blame, even for their own deaths, as in the case of the welder Sharula Shaikh, who was burnt to death almost exactly a year ago while working on the grandiose third Mandovi Bridge. Following his death, while other workers pointed to a shortage of safety equipment on site, the construction company Larsen and Toubro, a prestigious name in the business, blamed Shaikh himself for negligence. His death was followed by the collapse of a massive crane on the site early this year, supposedly without killing anyone. The project however goes on, unaffected. 31 deaths was an embarrassment, but single deaths here and there are fine, indeed the norm.

Five hundred years ago, soon after Albuquerque conquered the City of Goa, more than 60 persons were sacrificed not far away, in the building of a huge reservoir, the still-existing Kamalapuram tank outside Hampi, the capital of the Vijayanagara Empire. Such sacrifice was believed to bring benefits of various kinds. The patron of the sacrifice was the Emperor Krishnadevaraya, and it is proudly recorded in an inscription on the tank.

Barbaric? Yes, but the days of barbarism are hardly past. Vijayanagara may have disappeared, but open and deliberate blood sacrifice on construction sites continues unabated.



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