



The Chief Minister's response to the almost-daily reports of rampant illegal sand mining across Goa needs to be framed and put up on the walls of government offices, because it could be the motto of his government. So, an environmentally ruinous practice, increasingly violent and criminalised, as well as socially destructive, is flourishing under his watch, despite the repeated complaints of local communities, and revealing the complete failure of law enforcement agencies? The CM's solution: legalise it. 'With sand and laterite in shortage for construction activities,' this is, apparently, the urgent need of the hour. Legal sand mining is already happening in the state, but the government has urged the Union Ministry of Environment to amend the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) notification to increase the permitted limit. This, they claim, will 'protect the livelihood of sand extractors' and meet the 'developmental needs' of the state. In the meantime - no doubt because no time should be lost when it comes to 'developmental needs' - they are considering giving provisional permission for new sand extraction in blocks of less than five hectares. In case you imagine that the size is a random choice, no - it's to avoid the mandatory public hearings for anything bigger than five.

No surprises, of course. This government is committed to anything that makes big money quick, with the construction industry - the biggest user of sand -surely ranking at the top of the grimy list. And the last thing they want to hear is public opinion since they already know what it will be. The fact that river banks in Goan villages, along with the houses standing on them, have started collapsing into the rivers is not a concern for them, so they are hardly going to lose sleep over the less dramatic losses to fishing, farming, beaches, wildlife, mangroves, coastal sustainability, underground water tables, natural defences against storms and floods, public health, or any other of the long-term and well-documented effects of unrestrained sand extraction.

Considering all the scams and disasters that Goa faces today, from the latest nail in the coffin of parliamentary politics, to the feverish land-grab across the state, the overflowing sleaze of the drug and casino businesses, as well as the all-round assault on the environment, this robbery of sand seems a minor issue. And maybe it is - for now. The world is actually facing a global sand disaster, even 'sand wars', as the mismatch between the demand and supply of this precious commodity worsens. But it is still an invisibilised crisis, for the most part. When you look at it from the demand side, sand appears to be a completely innocuous commodity - commonly found and very cheap; almost like water or even air, to be consumed almost without knowing, certainly without thinking. So much so that most of us don't even know how vital it is - essential for the production of much of the modern world, from processed foods and cleaning products, to electronics, credit cards, and

microchips. And, of course, for the construction industry. It is the last, the gigantic construction industry so critical to the current development model, and beloved of the Goa government too, that is driving today's huge hunger for sand. Building on sand, literally and otherwise

That disaster – for now – is being felt at the supply end, and the efforts to address it are hence also being directed there. Thanks to Goa's environmentalists, pressure is being brought on the Goa government to clamp down on illegal extraction. Increased police patrolling and the installation of CCTV cameras at sand extraction sites to stop illegal and excessive extraction are two of the measures being considered. But, going by the criminal sand mafias operating blithely in other states, and the abysmal record of the Goan authorities so far, these steps – even if implemented, which is a big IF – are not likely to be enough.

The real problem, though, is the elephant in the room, viz. the demand end of the problem. As scholars have pointed out, the sand crisis cannot be addressed without looking at consumption, especially the sky-rocketing demand from the construction industry, which is only expected to intensify. Isn't it high time to question the validity of this so-called 'development need'?

Is there a real – i.e. social or functional – need for so much building? Or is it just economic, i.e. for profits? And, if it is mainly for profit, doesn't this industry need a serious rethink? The answers have been pretty obvious in Goa for a long time. Goan real estate development is a sea of luxury second homes or tenth homes. As a study by scholars at BITS-Pilani Goa pointed out some years ago (Da Silva and Chandrashekhar, *ODPs: Anarchic Planning*, O Heraldo 17/4/19), over 22% of all residences in Goa are empty. And yet more residences are being built every day, with apartment towers and lavish designer homes (some with 'green' ratings) taking over former fields and plateaux like a rash, and proving that the driving force is not necessity, but profit. As long as there are buyers for this real estate, it will be produced, even if it is hardly occupied, and even it means killing the rivers and a host of other natural resources on which our own lives depend.

And, as if these barely-used residences were not enough, we have a multitude of overbuilt tourism constructions, where scale and luxury rakes in the moolah. What is the need for so much space and grandeur? But tourism infrastructure is another area which the government wants to boost even further.

On the eve of World Architecture Day, this is surely something to think about. How can we even talk about sustainability and green ratings when the profession of architecture in Goa mainly caters to this hugely wasteful, and environmentally disastrous, second home and luxury culture?

So let's join the sand wars. Right now all the efforts are being directed at the supply side. It's high time the focus turned the other way.

Building on sand, literally and otherwise

(A shorter version of this article was published in *O Herald*, dt: 17 September, 2022)



Share this...

