

Goa should become the maritime hub of the country, feels Chief Minister Pramod Sawant.

What exactly does that mean? At first hearing, it sounds like a lot of hot air. Speaking at the Global Maritime Summit 2023, the Chief Minister claimed that Goa's maritime sector is no less than a "multi-faceted powerhouse" driving economic growth, innovation, and connectivity, "from ship-building and repair, to cruise tourism, from maritime education to port-led industrialisation...". He further urged the Union Government to develop Goa's coastline as a "major multi-modal maritime logistics hub".

Do these fancy words and long-winded titles bode well for the average Goan? Where do Goa's traditional fishing communities, who have long lived their lives and occupations on the coastline, fit into this powerhouse vision? They weren't even mentioned by the CM. Is the multi-modal logistics hub going to require them to disappear?

We don't really need to ask the question. Land grab is a phenomenon across Goa, but the coast has always been special. As it is, a good chunk has already disappeared - thanks to the brilliant 'development' of the past few decades. The biggest robbery of Goan land is probably that done for the noble purpose of 'leisure'. Such is the tourism development model we follow in Goa: the livelihoods of some - usually the most vulnerable communities - are destroyed in order to provide lavish leisure to those who already have enough. How can this be justified? But it is - the justification is simply that money is being made in the process, and the making of money is what is known as development.

Many Goans may not be even aware of the fact that Goa not only has the 3rd highest number of five-star hotels among all Indian states, but, even worse, has the highest number of five-star hotels per square kilometre. Yes, this tiny state, which is usually is not even included in comparisons of states in India, is the topper in this area, and by a huge margin. Goa has 32 five-star hotels over its 3704 sq. km, which means one per just 98 sq. km. Kerala, the state with the highest number of five-star hotels, has one per only 925 sq km, i.e. one-tenth of Goa. And Maharashtra, with the 2nd highest number of five-star hotels, has one per a whopping 8800 sq. km, so about one-hundredth of Goa!

Goa stands tall as the number one leisure destination of India, was the conclusion of the Goan newspaper reporting these figures. Such is the state of the media, wanting us to stand tall as the place with the biggest, absolutely obscene, level of land grab in the country.

And this is not all. Goa can also boast of some of the most sprawling leisure spaces in the country. Just take a few examples: The Lalit at Canacona occupies 85 acres; the Taj Fort Aguada Resort occupies 73 acres, the Leela at Cavellosim 75 acres, the Taj Exotica at Benaulim 65 acres, the St Regis at Mobor 49 acres, the ITC Grand at Cansaulim 45 acres, the Grand Hyatt at Bambolim, 28 acres, the Taj Holiday Village Candolim 28 acres , and the W | 1

Goa at Vagator a mere 25 acres. Now, isn't this an unbelievably grand display of leisure



No Coast for Fisherfolk

And all of this along the coast. And this are just the huge resorts – there are also the luxury villas, the smaller resorts, the cruises and casinos, and other leisure and vacation spaces. All of it at the cost of the fishing and farming communities who traditionally worked on these lands, with them having to fight and approach the courts even for a measly access to the beach in order to pursue their traditional occupations.

And then fight again and again, as can be seen this year with the demolition by the Tourism Department of a fishing hut at Morjim beach, used by the local traditional fishers to store their boats, nets, and other material; the latter say that illegal buildings belonging to the rich on the waterfront, including high-rises, have not been touched. A threat of similar demolition at Colva, where the Tourism Department claimed that fishing huts had been built on their land, was challenged by the local fishers who declared that they would fight any attempt to dislodge them from the beach since they had been fishing there for generations, long before the Department acquired the land, in fact much before tourism even started in Goa.

Sawant's power house vision is really about extracting the maximum from whatever little remains of the coast. Whatever the fancy title, Goa's coast is to be opened for even more lavish leisure, besides coal transport and sand-dredging, marinas and lighthouse tourism, and whatever else big money can dredge up. Which means driving out whatever is left of the coastal fishing and farming communities in the process. And offering badly-paid contract jobs in return, mostly for non-Goans.

The government's anti-people greed for land stares us in the face wherever you turn. Look at the great pride in hosting the National Games, and not a shred of hesitation before declaring that local fishing would be banned in many parts of Goa during the period of these games. Fishing was banned for twenty days, during which the beaches also had to free of all fishing material – the fishing communities were ordered to take their canoes away from the concerned locations much before the Games were to begin. At their cost. Without any compensation whatsoever. How were they supposed to feed their families during the twenty days, people asked. Would the ministers be willing to give up their own incomes for the twenty days of the Games? Or even one day?

No answer. Because there is no need to give an answer in our political system. During the G-20 summit too, fishing was banned for three days, again without warning or compensation. And now, with the Games finally over, instead of listening to the grievances of the fisherfolk at least now, you have the government declaring that it would try to make Goa the permanent venue of this event.

What is the way ahead? This increasing use of Goa for national and international events – another method of land grab – is, as scholar and activist Sebastian Rodrigues argues, “exerting enormous pressure on the local communities. Moneyed interests from across the world have staked claim on Goa’s land, pushing the communities here into a constant resistance mode”.

This resistance is the only hope. As P Sivakami, former IAS officer and current Tamil Nadu politician, put it, land is too important to be treated as ancestral property to be held on to for sentimental reasons, or as a route for profiteering, or as a luxury to be enjoyed by very rich individuals in sprawling resorts – it has to be seen as a means to make a livelihood for ordinary people. The issue of livelihood – a decent livelihood – is the one that matters the most.

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