

The slogan *Bomkarank zai bypass* can be seen as soon as you enter this village on the Panjim-Ponda highway. The people here are up in arms against the widening of the highway, as planned by the government, from two lanes to four; and demand a bypass instead. Highways to Heaven, or Hell?

Widening will mean the destruction of many houses, they say, besides dividing the village even more than today, and affecting the village temples, situated right next to the existing highway. They ask how come this government which keeps talking about ancient temples supposedly destroyed by the Portuguese, and has even set aside crores for rebuilding those non-existent temples, has no concern for the temples of today.

Boma is not alone. Highway-widening is being opposed by local communities in Borim, Navelim, Cuncolim, Balli, Mashem and elsewhere in South Goa. Their determination to not lose their homes or properties, even partially, has resulted, says the government, in disastrous delays and cost-increases of hundreds of crores in this 'nation-building' project.

The question, though, is: why do these projects always need the land of the common people? Our ministers are all big land-owners, but their nation-building activities never seem to affect even one of their properties. No, the cost is always dumped on the poorest and most vulnerable of Goans instead. As in Taleigao, where public infrastructure like the new sewage treatment plant and the panchayat ghar comes up on agricultural land being grabbed from struggling farmers at the dirt-cheap rates of official compensation, instead of acquiring some of the sprawling property nearby owned by Goa's Minister of Revenue.

That's the norm with all projects. All over Goa, and indeed over India and the entire developing world, vulnerable peoples are struggling against government determination to grab their land. Thousands of ordinary Goan villagers and small property-owners have already seen their houses, lands or occupations wiped out in the name of 'development'. The argument is that someone has to suffer for the sake of nation-building and public good, but why is that someone always the poor, while nation-building and public good is all for the elites?

For, who else is going to benefit from highway-widening? These projects are just going to use the locals, and Goa too for that matter, to get a fast conduit between other states, the Mormugao port, and the airports. These highways will primarily benefit transporters of coal and other such, and secondly Indian tourists, who want to have their Goa fun as quickly and conveniently as possible. Who wants to drive slowly and carefully through villages? Who wants to drive slow at all? The whole fun of cars is supposed to be speed. That's why highways, and the wider the better.

It's different for the locals. They have absolutely nothing to gain from a great highway on their doorstep, leave aside through their very houses. Their villages get split; their



environment becomes a high-risk one; trees and other vegetation disappear; pollution of all kinds – noise, dust, heat, carbon monoxide – spirals upwards; ugliness prevails. Highways to Heaven, or Hell?

That the government is unconcerned is numbingly obvious. The only people who concern them are tourists. Union Road and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari has, in fact, declared that Goa should think of tourism hotspots, like hotels and restaurants, to be developed along the highways, to up the tourist traffic and the income of the state. All of which will require even more land, which is going to come from where?

Even the fact that Goa has hit obscene levels of road accidents in recent times does not bother the authorities. Yes, they claim to be concerned, with Gadkari announcing a fund of 100 crore rupees for Goa in December, to 'clear black spots and end road fatalities'. But is it a shortage of money that is the problem? Goa has probably the most expensive roads on the planet – as pointed out by social media jokes which compared the 600-odd crores spent on the recent moon mission to the thousands of crores for the Atal Setu bridge and the Khandepar-Old Goa road. Crores are nothing on Goan roads, but they don't ensure quality or safety. On the same day as Gadkari's announcement, a brand-new Panjim road, built out of the Smart City crores, caved in, the latest of many. And the same month saw news that the new Miramar beach boardwalks installed by the same Smart City project, for 12.9 crores, were already broken and the repairs would cost (surprise, surprise) 'crores'.

More money is not going to help. Nor the same old crackdowns on speeding, drunk-driving, and helmetless two-wheeler driving. Because the real problems are elsewhere. They include, of course, corruption – in the creation of infrastructure, law enforcement, and the punishment of lawbreakers – with the Sawant government named by its own former Governor as one of the most corrupt in India; and also the related issue of abysmal quality of work.

But a third problem is, in fact, wide roads. Wide and straight roads are known to increase accidents the world over, and also to cause more fatal accidents, given the higher speeds. The traditional narrow and curved village roads were much safer than the multi-laned highways replacing them today. Add to that the poor driving knowledge and discipline of people in this country, and what you get is what we have: mayhem.

But not for everyone. Accidents on Goan roads rarely hurt those in big vehicles. Remember the infamous Banastarim crash when, after smashing multiple scooters and sending their riders flying through the air, one of the culprits got out of their plush Mercedes SUV, without apparently even a scratch, to coolly begin arguing about how accidents are just accidents? Yes, it is the pedestrian and the two-wheeler-rider who dominates the death roll... and who will these be, but locals?

So yes, local communities are more than justified in their opposition to road-widening. But bypasses are not the answer – for bypasses will again need land, which as usual will be sought from another poor community. Just no more highways, period.

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