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ENVIRONMENT-INDIA: Goa Agitated by Shady Real Estate Deals

By Keya Acharya

GOA, Feb 24 (IPS) - Simmering resentment against major, concrete development in rural Goa - famous for its exotic beaches and idyllic rural countryside - has now exploded in violent agitations against corrupt local administrations.

This former Portuguese enclave, which merged with the Indian Union in 1961, is rich in flora and fauna, heritage and history. Its peoples are friendly and warm, and have a term called 'susegaad' ('take it easy') that typifies their laidback culture.

Attracted by its ambience, hundreds of thousands of visitors, mainly foreigners, come to Goa each year. As an indirect result of Goa's tourism, real-estate developers now see huge profits in mega projects in the villages, permission for which are given by the 'village panchayats', or local administrative offices encompassing several villages under one panchayat.

Several large-scale projects in South Goa, one of Goa's two districts, are coming up with permission given by the 'panchayats', without adequate attention to garbage management, water, electricity, destroying coconut and cashew orchards and other resources that local communities fear will strain their already tight supplies.

Many are also encroaching on water bodies, agricultural fields or are violating the village's existing construction laws. Villagers say corruption at all levels is responsible for the situation, but blame their panchayats for giving the ultimate sanction for these projects.

At least 28 out of the 30 village panchayats in the coastal area of Salcete, a subdivision of South Goa, have seen angry protests by villagers over construction in ecologically sensitive areas in the last year.

There are, for instance, protests and discord between villagers and their panchayats over mega projects in Colva, Raia, Nuvem, Fatrade-Varca, Courtalim, Betalbatim, Orlim and several other village panchayats in the entire southern belt of Goa.

"Goa is turning into an 'infrastructure hub', roads and highways are being built through our agriculture fields and river bodies, and blasting our mountains and forests apart without forethought", says Geraldine Fernandes, chairperson of the Benaulim Villagers Action Committee (BVAC).

Geraldine, previously a housewife running home stays for European tourists, is now the spitfire leader of the BVAC, protesting passionately against three mega projects in her little fishing village of Comlatolem in the beach town of Benaulim, South Goa.

One of the projects has illegally filled up part of the village's ancient pond with its lotus species from which the village derives its name comla means lotus).

The pond had, a source of water for paddy fields nearby, had a spring that renewed the system, but is now dying out along with the lotus blooms. In March 2008 the BVAC began a series of agitations against their panchayat, demanding that licenses issued to the three mega housing projects be revoked.

The agitation by BVAC, whose membership has been steadily growing, has staged demonstrations in Goa's capital city of Panjim, appealed to the state's Director of Panchayats, gone on a token hunger strike, kept vigil at the panchayat office to stop further licenses and clashed with police.

But initial successes of revocation of licenses and the resignation of the village 'sarpanch', or panchayat leader, have now floundered with the real estate companies obtaining legal 'stay orders' that override the panchayat's revocation.

Geraldine says they will continue to fight.

Nearby, in Pateapura village, at Nuvem, a 140-apartment housing complex has come up on elevated lands that overlook Pateapura, threatening to contaminate, in the absence of proper infrastructure, the little village's water wells.

The complex, nearing completion, features a club house, massage parlour, spa and swimming pool.

"This is a village", says 25-year-old Anthony Sequeira. "How can they conduct such a lifestyle in this area," he asks in frustration.

The village, with a population of 500, mostly low-income daily workers, is now frightened by the concrete expansions taking place.

"We are poor, we do have any support from anywhere", says 35-year-old Marian Correa, a small shopkeeper at the village. "The builder has filed seven cases of trespassing against us and we are now running from pillar to post for these false cases."

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Pateapura villagers say their panchayat members have been complicit with the builder, Antony Correa from Margao, in the irregularities that have occurred.

Soter D'Souza, director of the Centre for Panchayati Raj (or local administration process), an organisation training villagers about their rights under the panchayat system blames Goa's department of rural development for the growing unrest and violence against panchayats in the villages.

"The government has been denying this decentralised system to function by refusing to give powers to the panchayats, resulting in widespread malpractice, corruption and illegality", says D'Souza.

All over Salcete subdivision, villagers now find themselves in direct conflict with panchayat members who they have lived with for generations in their villages.

"They [panchayat officials] are robbers," say Mario Fernandes, a retired chauffeur. Menino Rodrigues, another Goan 'old-timer' at Maxillvaddo village in Benaulim, nods in agreement.

Communities are splitting apart by taking different views on the issue. The BVAC condemns fellow villagers, 'lawyers, doctors and professionals' who have chose not to join their agitation.

The nexus between the builders' lobby and Goa's politicians - who villagers charge as the origin of the corruption in rural development deals - denies any responsibility.

Datta Naik, of the confederation of real estate developers' association, Goa, says the real estate sector is being made the 'scapegoat' for the government's neglect of infrastructure in the villages. But Goa's regional plan till 2021 has declared several fields and people's homes as non-inhabited, causing widespread complaints.

Village panchayats have now been given until Apr. 15 to produce their grievances, but the general resentment against the ruling Congress party's development policies continues.

"There is no concurrent population and tourism management along with this development", says Kim Miranda, convenor of another movement to save villagers' houses called Gaon Ghor Rakhon Manch (GGRM). "Where on earth are we to live?" she asks.

Miranda, a tourism official, says the exodus of Goa's landowning elite at independence thirty years ago to foreign countries has exacerbated the issue because their lands, though mired in litigation, has attracted the real estate frenzy in Goa.

"Tell Goans abroad to set up trusts for their lands and cultivate them. This will give opportunities for livelihoods and many value-additions to both cultivator and landowner. We will be glad to help", Miranda told IPS.

(END/2009)

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