

We Dared to Choose Our Development!!

Middle Class In Goa Stood Against Sezs.....

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Think of Goa, and beaches, pristine forests, churches and hordes of tourists come to mind. But in the last few weeks the state has grabbed all the national attention for different reasons.

The state with 22 industrial estates successfully refused to host SEZs. It boasts of a struggle led primarily by the educated middle class and professionals coming from all walks of life. From the early December of 2007 and till mid January 2008, the anti- SEZ campaign in the State attained a feverish pitch. Almost the entire state, including members of the political establishment, the villagers, the church and the media stood united in their demand for scrapping SEZs in the state.

Finally, the State government had to scrap all approved SEZs and recommend the de-notification of the rest to the Central Government. The state had approved seven SEZs, of which three were notified.

These are developments quite unheard in the rest of the country. The struggles against SEZs have very often been labeled as “anti development” and the middle class has opted to remain silent. Yet in Goa, it was the middle class that spontaneously came forward to initiate and lead the anti SEZ resistance. “The local people’s resistance under SEZ Virodhi Manch (SVM) and the support groups under Goa Bachao Abhiyan (GBA) drew members from the strong educated middle class professionals”, underlines Pravin Sabnis, professionally a corporate trainer and member of GBA.

The GBA was formed as a people’s movement in 2003, by middle class intellectuals and professionals against the Goa Regional Plan 2012. It was instrumental in getting the plan scrapped as it would have led to loss of forests and ecology. Formed in mid 2007 right after the GBA’s struggle and success, the SVM is a non partisan umbrella grouping of various village level people’s resistance movements against SEZs across the State.

SEZ Battle Through RTI: Verna Shows the Way

The Verna Industrial Area (VIA) is the site for four SEZs including the notified 105.91 hectares IT/ITES SEZ by K Raheja Corporation Pvt Ltd. All are located in its Phase IV, for which land acquisition had already taken place. The anti SEZ movement has been very intense here, primarily led by villagers from Lutolim, Nagoa and Verna under Verna constituency.

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The key initiators of the movement Frankie Monteiro, Charles Fernandes from village Verna, Allen Fallerio of village Luotolim are all engineers by profession and Peter Gama from Verna is a contractor. Presently grouped under the banner of the SVM, a year old intense battle of theirs is against SEZs to protect their village and culture from corporate greed and corrupt politicians.

Interestingly, the fight against SEZs started as Frankie tried to unearth the details of a seemingly fraudulent 20 point program in his village. “During the elections, the local MLA under the garb of free housing for the poor was inviting an influx of migrants, a secure vote bank for him. I filed an RTI to examine the project details and with those minutes tumbled out details of the SEZ projects as well”, said Frankie. “Then we didn’t have any inkling even about the concept of SEZs but living just two kms away from the proposed site, we had to know anyway!” he added.

They started with reading the SEZ Act and Rules and simultaneously filed hundreds of RTIs from early 2007, painstakingly gathering documents on SEZ projects.

Frankie who has filed the most RTIs has spent over Rs 18,000 only on RTI applications and appeals. “But the biggest challenge was to read and interpret the massive piles of information that we collected. Since the lawyers were asking for too much and we had to bear the expenses, we trained ourselves to read these documents and familiarize ourselves with the legal text” said Allen. Both he and Frankie spent nights after office poring over their gathered documents.

“Reading the SEZ Act we realized SEZs are, fully autonomous foreign territories, like a state within the state and the government and local bodies having no control over them. The concept itself shocked us. We the original inhabitants of the village suddenly become foreigners on our own land! And those exemptions, breaks and special concessions... it was just unacceptable!” fumes Frankie.

Moreover, the RTI documents revealed startling legal violations and irregularities within the SEZ projects. For instance documents of the Raheja SEZ revealed that the company had not even bothered to submit the detailed project plan, its application for the project was incomplete as mandatory formalities like the inward slip and the company seal were absent.

Before allotment within an industrial estate, it is mandatory for the state’s Industrial Development Corporation (GIDC) to conduct a study or assessment of the project. It was not done. Yet the company was allotted land merely on the basis of mere letter from the then chief minister asking the GIDC to “help them” (See Box).

As they expanded their RTI applications from Verna Industrial area to cover the state, they unearthed numerous violations in all other SEZ projects.

Armed with their knowledge of the perils of SEZs and the unearthed “frauds”, the four started an awareness building campaign initially in their own villages and subsequently

spread to the entire state. “We held numerous street corner gatherings, formal meetings and power point presentations. We also got in touch with other locals and groups where SEZs were coming up. The response was fantastic”, informed Peter.

As more and more people got to know about the SEZ provisions and the frauds, number of supporters swelled. “Villages not affected by SEZs also turned up in large numbers for support. The media wholeheartedly supported us. We only had to call for a press conference and provide our data”, said Frankie. Individual press reporters on numerous occasions came and said to him that "being Goan its 'our' duty to protect our land", such was the overwhelming response from members of the media, he reminisces.

SEZs Stormed in Verna

Not content with only the awareness campaign, on 3rd November 2007, a crowd of 200 local SVM members around Verna went inside the Raheja SEZ premises to inspect. They entered with their banners and shouted slogans before the security could stop them and remained inside for over two hours. “It is our land, and being the original inhabitants we have every right to know what is going on in our own village. So we just walked in to see”, members of the SVM informed.

Inside, they were shocked to see construction going on much before the notification of the SEZ, in gross violation of the law. Over four month’s of construction was already done and the place was teeming with hundreds of labourers. When confronted, the site engineer informed that they were working on the basis of a “verbal permission” from the GIDC. They also found several bore wells extracting their precious ground water. All these details have been captured on video for evidence.

This act widely reported elicited support from every corner of the state. While the pressure at the political level was intensified by Mahatany Saldana Ex MLA and GMAS leader opposing the SEZs, members of the GBA and Council for Social Justice and Peace- the social arm of the Church also pitched in support. With the strong anti SEZ mood in the state, CM Digamber Kamat was forced to declare a halt to SEZ activities in the state.

Once his statement was released, local members of the SVM and GBA totaling more than 250 again stormed into the Verna SEZ site. The protestors took away mobiles from the security and engineers, demanded them to stop work immediately as per the chief minister’s statement and asked the laborers engaged in construction to leave the premises. Threatening with dire consequences, they also ordered the officials to pack off with their machinery on the same day. According to the protestors, even the police which came to arrest them also backed off.

Kerim- Why Industries?

Kerim Village in Ponda Taluka is well known for two strong protests put up against industries within 10 years, is the site for Goa’s first notified SEZ project, CIPLA’s Meditab Specialities Pvt Ltd. Here too the stiff opposition from the locals halted the SEZ.

The SEZ located at the Bhutkhamb hill on over 12.32 lakh sq mt land was expected to become India's largest pharmaceutical formulation plant.

The hill is also home to the Bhutkhamb Dev and Mharu Dev, local deities that attract scores of pilgrims, especially in the month of January which marks the onset of sacred month "Poush". The extensive dense forests around, clear waters of the Arla lake, an unusual calm and the heavy fragrance hanging in the air, from the thick spice plantations lends an ethereal quality to the village that the locals are extremely proud of. Today, tourists from across the world flock there, housing the world famous eco tourism resort, 'Tropical Spice Plantation', even featured in the BBC and NDTV.

Sandip, a civil engineer and a partner in the resort says that the area has no borewells. Water level is at its best within the depth of 12 to 15 feet. The huge Arla freshwater lake is enough for all irrigation needs of the extensive spice plantations in the village. Abundant natural springs and wells feeding the lake and the entire area are enough to meet the entire water requirements of Arla ward as well as villages downstream.

According to Swati Kerkar, yoga teacher and former bank employee of Kerim "people here are ready to sacrifice their lives to protect the sacred groves and nature and have done that before. In 1994 DuPont's Nylon 66 was stopped by the locals, claiming one life from among the protestors. The company operations would have heavily polluted the area and severely drained the water tables, destroying the ecology.

This time too, villagers opposed the SEZ project. It was resident Ramkrishna Jhalmi, a teacher by profession who got to know about the project through a newspaper article in 2006. Grouped together with a few other concerned villagers, he took the help of NGO 'Perna' in Panjim, to understand the SEZ legislation. The internet for background research and film screenings on SEZs were modern tools widely used for conducting a series of awareness meetings to elicit support.

"We also joined with other groups like Goa Bachao Abhiyan (which was opposing the Goa Regional Plan), SEZ Watch and SEZ Virodhi Manch in a roundtable conference on SEZ organized by GBA. After returning from the round table conference we were sure that we are not alone but supported by many," admits Ramkrishna.

"The information collected under RTI application made it very clear to us that the government was in a haste to allot land to Meditab," explains Ramkrishna. The application submitted in March 2006 by the company was not in standard format yet land was allotted by the GIDC (See Box). This land was in process of being transferred to the University of Goa after the Nylon- 66 struggle. Added Swati, "thus our decision to oppose the project became more firm."

The protest against the Meditab SEZ reached its peak in the night of 7th December 2007, during a *jatra* (religious procession) at Kerim. A trolley carrying heavy construction machinery to the SEZ site accidentally hit a tree and also causing electricity to trip. Realization dawned that unknown to them; construction work had already started at the

site. They immediately contacted activists of GBA and SVM for support. Furious, the entire procession turned towards the Meditab site to check the area and asked workers at the site to drop work and move out of the site. The villagers decided to stay back till next morning when media and activists from Verna and Panjim joined in protest. By morning villagers were sure that they would not move out of site until every machinery at the site was removed. Almost 600 people waiting at the gate of the Meditab SEZ site on the 8th morning made the state government to remove police force from the site.

Don't the Middle Class Care About Industry and Jobs?

Living next to the oldest industrial estate in Goa, residents around the Verna Industrial Area know it better. "We are not averse to industry. But we have experienced haphazard industrialization and at the cost of local ecology and culture. Jobs have gone to the migrants who have strained the local resources", informs Orwell D'Silva, a tribal rights activist and social work graduate from TISS.

The Verna industrial area was built in 1989 with the promises of area development and jobs to the locals. Instead people have lost local forests, pasture lands and the majestic hills that were blasted off. A large perennial stream, source drinking water and irrigation, has almost dried up due to bore wells and ground water extraction especially with activities in the SEZ. Locals fear that with further industrialization and migration, the large Verna freshwater lake will become a sewage dump. "Then we will lose our heritage", says a worried Peter Gama.

Perhaps more than the fallouts of migration, the average Goan is unable to visualize development in isolation of the natural beauty around. The thick forests, the gushing springs, the large freshwater lakes and majestic hills dotting the landscape are of high value to the people.

Elaborates Swati, "It is the current development pattern which is influencing youngsters. They have been taught to neglect their traditional occupations and live and work in urban cities." "But we are lucky," she states adding that in Kerim except for a very few, everyone is connected to the village and happy with their self-sufficiency. "We want to save our lands for generations to come. We are not poor to this extent that we would like to throw away our beautiful land for unmindful industrialization," she admits. This perhaps explains the reason for the fight against DuPont- Nylon 66 project almost 10 years before.

"We are often called lazy and un-ambitious. But rather we are "*Susegad*" meaning contented in Konkani. We have what makes life beautiful. We don't need huge salaries and high profile jobs. What we earn is enough for us. We cannot imagine our life without the nature around. For what else should we look towards industries?" informs Swati

Anna, the owner of the resort says, "we felt that in a years time, such massive industrial project at the hilltop will take most of the water and will not only result in the drying of natural springs and lakes, but will also prove disastrous for spice and other fruit

plantations.” “There would be irreparable impact on the ecology of the area and we will not let anybody do that to our land,” he adds.

According to Albertina Almeida, lawyer and GBA activist, "even middle class youth are fine with migrating abroad or to other parts of the country for work but will not tolerate the destruction of their rich land in favour of industry. Expatriate professionals and even NRIs are anxious to preserve their state and its culture so that they can come back home, often tired of the stressful, cluttered city life.

Prabin Sabnis and Albertina Almieda, also members of a group working on communal harmony readily share that the Regional plan helped in uniting middle class of Goa and the present SEZ struggle is a testimony of an average Goan’s ability to rise above religious differences to save the land. Catholics and Hindus together form 80% of the states population. “No government dare go against our interests,” says Prabin adding “after all it’s a question of vote banks too!”

Definitely, Anna, proprietor of 'Tropical Spice Plantation' puts it best "the current model of development means more destruction. If we start looking at everything from the perspective of commercial value we will misplace our life and nature. If we desire to turn everything into gold like the proverbial Midas, what we will leave behind for our next generation to survive? Ultimately humans cannot survive without food and nature."

Sequence Of Events In Two Notified SEZ Projects	
<p>K Raheja Corporation Pvt Ltd at Verna</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11th April 2006- Company wrote to the Chief Minster • 12th April 2006- GIDC admitted the application from the company • 14th April 2006- The Chief Minster through his letter to the GIDC directed it “to help” the company • 19th April 2006-A board meeting was held for land allotment • 20th April 2006- The Company was allotted land and subsequently started with the construction work. • 6th Nov 2007- Notification of the SEZ. • 8th December 2007- SEZ site stormed. 	<p>Meditab Specialities Pvt Ltd(Cipla) Kerim</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 23, 2005- MoU between the Goa State and Meditab Specialities Pvt Ltd (Cipla) • 27th March, 2006- Single page application to GIDC for land allotment • 28th March, 2006- land allotted by GIDC in its 286th Board meeting • 3rd April, 2006- an executive summery and application without an inward stamp of company was submitted to GIDC • 7th December 2007- SEZ site stormed