

How the SEZ Battle Was Won

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Recently, Goa became the only state in India to openly declare that no more Special Economic Zones (SEZs) would be set up on its territory. This was a result of relentless pressure from almost the entire state—villagers, educated middle class, professionals, activists, the church and media.

Think of Goa, and beaches, pristine forests, churches and hordes of tourists spring to mind. But in the last few weeks the state has grabbed the headlines for different reasons. Despite 22 industrial estates, Goa has successfully refused to host Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

The struggle against SEZs in Goa has been led primarily by the educated middle class and professionals from all walks of life. Begun in early-December 2007, mid-January 2008 saw the anti-SEZ campaign reach fever pitch. Almost the entire state, including members of the political establishment, villagers, the church and the media stood united in their demand for the scrapping of SEZs.

Finally, the state government was forced to cancel all approved SEZs and recommend denotification of the rest by the central government. Goa had approved seven SEZs, of which three were notified.

Developments like these are unheard of in the rest of the country. Struggles against SEZs have very often been labelled “anti-development”, and the middle class has opted to stay silent on the issue. Yet in Goa it was the middle class that spontaneously came forward to initiate and lead the anti-SEZ drive. “The local people’s resistance, under the SEZ Virodhi Manch (SVM) and support groups in the Goa Bachao Abhiyan (GBA), drew members from educated middle class professionals,” emphasises Pravin Sabnis, a corporate trainer by profession and member of the 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, which would have led to the destruction of forests and the environment, scrapped. Set up in mid-2007, immediately following the success of the GBA, the SVM is a non-partisan umbrella grouping of various village-level people’s resistance movements against SEZs across the state.

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

The key initiators of the movement —Frankie Monteiro, Charles Fernandes from Verna village, Allen Fallerio from Lutolim village—are all professional engineers; Peter Gama, also from Verna, is a contractor. Presently grouped under the SVM banner, they have been waging a year-long battle against SEZs to protect their village and culture from corporate greed and corrupt politicians.

Interestingly, the fight against SEZs started when Monteiro tried to unearth the details of a seemingly fraudulent 20-point programme 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 votebank for him. I filed an RTI application to examine the project details and with those minutes tumbled out details of the SEZ projects as well,” he says. “We didn’t have any inkling then even about the concept of SEZs, but living just 2 km away from the proposed site we had to know anyway,” he adds.

They started by reading the SEZ Act and Rules and simultaneously filed hundreds of RTI applications in early-2007, painstakingly gathering documents on the various SEZ projects.

Monteiro, who has filed the most RTI applications, has spent over Rs 18,000 only on applications and appeals. “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 the documents and familiarise ourselves with the legal text,” says Fallerio. Both he and Monteiro spent nights after office hours, poring over their gathered documents.

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

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

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

As the group expanded its RTI applications from the Verna Industrial Area to cover the rest of the state, they unearthed violations in the other SEZ projects too.

Armed with their knowledge of the dangers of SEZs and the unearthed “frauds”, the four started an awareness-building campaign initially in their villages and subsequently throughout Goa. “We held numerous street-corner gatherings and formal meetings, and conducted powerpoint presentations. We also got in touch with other locals and groups where SEZs were coming up. The response was fantastic,” says Gama.

As more and more people got to know about the SEZ provisions and “frauds”, the number of supporters swelled. “Villagers not affected by SEZs also turned up in large numbers to show their support. The media supported us unstintingly. We only had to call for a press conference and provide our data,” says Monteiro. On a number of occasions, individual press reporters came up to him and said: “Being Goan it’s our duty to protect our land.”

Not content with the awareness campaign, on November 3, 2007 a crowd of 200 local SVM members from around Verna swarmed onto the Raheja SEZ premises to inspect it. They entered with banners and shouting slogans, before the security men could stop them, and stayed 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," say members of the SVM.

Inside they were shocked to see construction in full swing, much before SEZ notification had been given -- a gross violation of the law. Over four months of construction had already occurred and the place was teeming with hundreds of labourers. When confronted, the site engineer said they were working on the basis of "verbal permission" from the GIDC. They also discovered several borewells extracting precious groundwater. This has all been captured on video, as evidence.

The movement started receiving support from every corner of the state. While pressure at the political level was intensified by Mahatany Saldana, ex-MLA and GMAS leader who is opposed to SEZs, members of the GBA and Council for Social Justice and Peace -- the social arm of the church -- also gave their backing. With the strong anti-SEZ mood in the state, Goa's Chief Minister Digamber Kamat was forced to declare a halt to all SEZ activities in the state.

Once his statement was released, local members of the SVM and GBA, totalling over 250 people, once again stormed into the Verna SEZ site. They took away mobiles from the security personnel and engineers, demanded that they stop work immediately, in line with the chief minister's statement, and told workers engaged in the construction to leave the premises. Threatening dire consequences, they also ordered officials to pack up and leave with their machinery. According to the protestors, even the policemen who came to arrest them backed off.

KERIM—WHY INDUSTRIES?

Kerim village in Ponda taluka is known for two strong protests put up against industry, within a span of 10 years. This is the site of Goa's first notified SEZ project—Cipla's Meditab Specialities Pvt Ltd. Here too, stiff opposition from locals halted work on the SEZ, which is located in Bhutkhamb hill on 12.32 lakh sq mt of land. It was slated to become India's largest pharmaceutical formulation plant.

Bhutkhamb hill is also home to Bhutkhamb Dev and Mharu Dev, local deities that attract scores of pilgrims especially in the month of January, marking the onset of the sacred month of 'Poush'. The dense forests, clear waters of the Arla lake, an unusual calm, and heady fragrance from the surrounding spice plantations give the area a unique beauty of which the locals are extremely proud. Today, tourists from around the world flock here; the world famous eco-tourism resort Tropical Spice Plantation is located here.

Sandip, a civil engineer and partner in the resort, says the area has no borewells. Water levels are within a depth of 12-15 feet and the huge Arla freshwater lake adequately meets the irrigation needs of the extensive spice plantations in the area. Abundant natural springs and wells feed the lake and its surroundings, meeting the water needs of the people of Arla ward and villagers downstream.

According to Swati Kerkar, yoga teacher and former bank employee who lives in Kerim, people here are ready to sacrifice their lives in order to protect the sacred groves and the environment. And they have done it before. In 1994, locals stopped DuPont's Nylon 66 project in an agitation that claimed the life of one protestor. The project would have polluted the area and severely drained the watertable, destroying the rich ecology of the region.

This time too, villagers fiercely opposed the SEZ project. Resident Ramkrishna Jhalmi, a teacher by profession, got to know of the project through a newspaper article in 2006. With a few other concerned villagers, he approached the NGO Prerna, in Panjim, for a better understanding of SEZ legislation. The Internet for background research, and film screenings on SEZs were modern tools widely used to conduct a series of awareness drives to elicit support.

"We joined with other groups like the Goa Bachao Abhiyan (which opposes the Goa Regional Plan), SEZ Watch, and SEZ Virodhi Manch in a roundtable conference on SEZs organised by the GBA. After returning from the conference we knew that we were not alone," Jhalmi says.

"The information collected under the RTI made it very clear to us that the government was in a hurry to allot land to Meditab," Jhalmi adds. The application submitted in March 2006 by the company was not in the standard format, yet the GIDC allotted the land. This land was in the process of being transferred to the University of Goa after the Nylon 66 struggle. Kerkar says: "Thus, our decision to oppose the project became more firm."

The protest against the Meditab SEZ reached its peak on the night of December 7, 2007, during a jatra (religious procession) in Kerim. A trolley carrying heavy construction machinery to the SEZ site accidentally hit a tree and also caused the electricity to trip. It was then that the residents realised that construction work had already begun at the site. They immediately contacted activists from the GBA and SVM. Furious, the procession changed course and proceeded towards the Meditab site to check the area. Workers were told to stop work and move out. The villagers decided to stay there until the next morning, when mediapersons and activists from Verna and Panjim joined in the protest. By morning the villagers had decided they would not vacate the site until every bit of machinery was removed. The presence of almost 600 people at the gates of the Meditab SEZ site, on the morning of the 8th, forced the state government to remove all policemen from the site.

Don't the middle class care about industry and jobs?

People living around the Verna Industrial Area say: "We are not averse to industry. But we have experienced haphazard industrialisation at the cost of our local ecology and culture. Jobs have gone to migrants who have strained the local resources," says Orwell D'Silva, a tribal rights activist and social work graduate from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS).

The Verna Industrial Area was built in 1989 with promises of area development and jobs to locals. Instead, people lost their forests, pasturelands and the majestic hills that were blasted to accommodate factories. A large perennial stream, the source of drinking water and irrigation, is almost dry thanks to numerous borewells and the extraction of groundwater related to activities inside the SEZ. Locals fear that with further industrialisation 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 fallout of migration, the average Goan is unable to visualise development in isolation of the surrounding natural beauty. They deeply value the thick forests, gushing springs, large freshwater lakes and majestic hills dotting the landscape.

Swati Kerkar says: “It is the current development pattern that is influencing youngsters. They have been taught to neglect their traditional occupations and live and work in urban cities.”

“But we are lucky,” she adds, in that, except for very few people, everyone in Kerim is connected to the village and happy with their self-sufficiency. “We want to save our lands for generations to come. We are not so poor that we would throw away our beautiful land for unmindful industrialisation.”

“We are often called lazy and unambitious. 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 surrounding nature. Why should we look towards industry,” Kerkar asks.

Anna, owner of the Tropical Spice Plantation Resort says: “We felt that in one year such massive industrial projects in the hills would take away most of the water and would not only result in the drying up of natural springs and lakes but would also prove disastrous for the spice and fruit plantations. There would be an irreparable impact on the ecology of the area, and we will not let anybody do that to our land.”

Albertina Almeida, lawyer and GBA activist, says: “Even middle class youth are okay with (the idea of) migrating abroad or to other parts of the country for work. But they will not tolerate the destruction of their rich lands in favour of industry. Expatriate professionals and 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.”

Sabnis and Almeida, also members of a group working on communal harmony, readily agree that the regional plan has helped unite middle class Goa, and that the present SEZ struggle is testimony of the average Goan’s ability to rise above religious differences to save the land. Catholics and Hindus together form 80% of the state’s population. “No government dares go against our interests,” says Sabnis, adding, “after all it’s a question of votebanks too!”

Anna concludes: “The current model of development means more destruction. If we start looking at everything from a commercial point of view we will ruin our life and nature. If we desire to turn everything into gold like the proverbial Midas, what will we leave behind for the next generation? Ultimately, humans cannot survive without food and nature.” □□□