

The saga of Goa's land

'The Great Goa Land Grab', a new book by Kenneth Bo Nielsen, Heather P. Bedi, and Solano Da Silva based on 15 years of extensive fieldwork, examines the land politics scene in the state

CHRISTINE MACHADO | NT
NETWORK

In 2006, when the Goa Regional Plan-2011 was notified, Solano Da Silva saw entire swathes of land in his village of Piere-Marra clear-felled. Hills burnt for days, the Savlem lake was designated as a settlement zone, and those asking uncomfortable questions in the village panchayats were threatened. This was mimicked across Goa as zones were surreptitiously changed by the TCP Department," says Da Silva, an assistant professor at BITS Pilani in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Goa campus. Deeply troubled by this, Da Silva got involved in land-related activism.

Kenneth Bo Nielsen's interest in land conflicts in India began in 2006 when he started his Ph.D in social anthropology where he studied land conflicts in West Bengal, particularly those related to land acquisition for industries and special economic zones. "This was the time when the anti-SEZ movement was also very strong in Goa, and I followed quite closely what was going on in Goa at the time. When, many years later, I had the chance to return for more research in India as a postdoc in Bergen, I decided to go to Goa," says Nielsen, who is now an associate professor of social anthropology at the university of Oslo, Norway, and leader of the Norwegian Network for Asian Studies. During his research in Goa, in particular, he studied the Plumbidique Bedi's writings on SEZs in Goa. Bedi is an associate professor of environmental studies at the Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. "We have researched various land-related conflicts in the state individually, but also collaboratively. A few years ago, we passed and took stock of our work and found that we had by then accumulated a considerable amount of knowledge on land-grabbing in Goa that we thought would work well in book form," says Nielsen.

The trio recently came out with 'The Great Goa Land Grab' published by Goa 1556, following it up with book discussions at DogEars, Margao, and Broadway, Panaji.

"Shorter articles can show only one or two pieces of a puzzle. In book form, one can start to paint a wider canvas. And that's what we try to do in this book," says Nielsen.

According to the blurb, the book unpacks how political and economic interests in the state have increasingly aligned to capture land, often with decidedly negative consequences for people and the environment.

Excerpts from an interview with Da Silva and Nielsen:

Da Silva, you have mentioned, is undoubtedly the global epicentre of land grab protests. Why do you feel that the sentiments are so strong here?

Kenneth: India has a long tradition of social movement organisation. Indeed, post-colonial India has to a very large extent been shaped by the work of grassroots social movements, and so it is perhaps unsurprising that land grabbing has also been met with considerable scrutiny and outright resistance, by more or less organised move-



ments. But more than that, I think it has to do with the socially unjust nature of what is often euphemistically called 'development-induced displacement' or dispossession. Much of the land that has been acquired, often with force, in the name of 'development' in India over the past decade or two has been used for real estate, large infrastructure projects, or other rentier projects that facilitate capital accumulation but which do not generate broad-based forms of development. Most people will not benefit much from such projects, and they know it. This can lead to strong and bitter resentment, and to conflict.

You have mentioned that some of the biggest successes of movements against land-grabbing have been in Goa. Why do you feel that there has been more success here in Goa as compared to other parts of India?

Kenneth: This can only be answered through a proper comparative analysis but a few obvious factors come to mind: the small size of the state; the relative closeness between citizens and the people in power; a resourceful and often highly educated civil society; and a history of people's movements over many decades, many of which have shown that movements can make a difference.

Solano: I would like to add: (a) the strategy of using imagery to depict the in-situ implications if a zoning plan or land policy were implemented; and (b) the fact that there seemed to have been successful in translating bland facts to vivid scenarios and this strikes a chord with people, as was done in the agitation against the RP-2011 (b) the collaboration of people and groups bearing different skills but a singular objective has been critical to the success of many movements. Often this has meant cutting across narrow parochial notions of who is a Goan or non-Goan. (c) The painstaking background work of collecting and analysing data has led to building strong legal cases — as done in the anti-SEZ movement, the Goa Foundation-led mining case, agitations against the golf course in Tircad, and cases against the various

ODPs. (d) Last, but not least, has been the conviction among many natives and new settlers in Goa, who firmly believe that another kind of politics and economics is possible.

With the judicial avenue often stretching the financial and emotional limits of activists, what then is the way forward to protect land?

Kenneth: This is indeed a major challenge. The law may offer an important avenue for challenging land-related policies and forms of dispossession but fighting battles in court in India also requires stamina and resources as cases can drag on for many years. In this respect, the playing field is not even, and activist groups are at a distinct disadvantage if and when they confront governments, developers, or other powerful actors with interests in land. We also find that the view of the courts increasingly tends to favour the state. So prospects would seem to be relatively bleak from an activist point of view when it comes to fighting battles over land via law. But we also know that the law can always be read in many different ways and that which reading tends to win out over other possible readings is often determined by the wider balance of class forces in society, to put it in quaint old Marxian language. This may give some cause for optimism. But there is no denying that the judicial avenue may not look too promising at the current conjuncture.

Solano: The immediate task of exposing and stalling the present spate of problematic land commodification and alienation would be to continue strengthening strong civil society coalitions that tap into the creativity and skills of the many who love Goa. When doing this one has to transcend narrowly conceptualised notions of Goanhood. To paraphrase Dr. Oscar Reboles's statement made in 2006: a better way to conceptualise a Goan is one who loves, cares and nurtures this land



and all that is in it. The longer but the critical task is to imagine and build an alternative foundational economy in Goa. This would be nurturing, caring and regenerative compared to the current economic system which is premised on the myth of endless growth where people and natural resources (like land) are treated like commodities, and where the huge social and ecological problems are externalised. A new kind of politics is needed to harness people in order to both imagine and transition towards this new system.

With renewable energy now coming to the fore, why is it that coal consumption in India is only growing?

Kenneth: It is true that renewables are becoming ever more affordable, and ever better, technically speaking. This is good news, and India's emphasis on 'the green transition' must, of course, be welcomed. At the same time, post-colonial India has always been powered by coal in the sense that most of India's electrical energy has always come from coal. It is a familiar fact, a kind of fuel that politicians, bureaucrats, and power producers know very well. It is also supported by a vast infrastructure geared towards extracting, transporting and burning coal to satisfy consumers and drive the country's development. This infrastructure now also includes a host of private players that have built private ports to import coal, and private power plants to produce coal-based electrical energy, and so on. This infrastructure is vast and robust, and many actors have key stakes in it, so it will not be abandoned easily. In this sense, there may

be an infrastructural lock-in that favours coal. And until we have an equally robust, alternative 'renewables' infrastructure, coal is unlikely to be displaced. Additionally, India's development requires ever more energy, and overall energy consumption will therefore continue to grow. So for the foreseeable future, the development of renewables may serve as a kind of 'energy addition' to coal-based energy — what this means is that while the relative share of coal may decline a little during the years ahead, the total amount of coal used may still continue to grow, simply because overall energy use will continue to grow at a high rate.

Solano: The obsession with coal is first the implication of mainstream global economic models that are premised on the illusionary notion that we can have infinite economic growth and that all will benefit from it within a finite planet. Buying into the model implies an endless scramble for energy. The second is the promotion of a narrowly conceptualised notion of national greatness. When stripped down, many strong nationalist movements across the world mask the propagation of a crony, extractivist and ultimately unequal capitalist system.

The pandemic has brought the emphasis back on growing your own food, and with it stories of people going back to fields. Does this herald hope that agriculture could come back into focus and begin trending?

Kenneth: Yes, and I have had the pleasure of interacting with a few people who have been part of these 'new agricultural initiatives'. This is a welcome development, of course, and extremely interesting to follow. It remains to be seen how this will develop, but it gives cause for optimism. At the same time, what we often refer to as 'post-agrarian aspirations' are

strong in India, in general. I cannot speak for Goa, but across most of India, many people will prefer to look for futures outside of agriculture. This, of course, also has to do with the political economy of agricultural production, the dynamics of contemporary Indian capitalism, and so on, which tend to favour sectors other than agriculture. More people going back to the field is still significant however — not because it will transform Goa into an agrarian society because that will not happen, but because it may give more people a direct relationship with and a stake in the state's land, environment and nature.

Solano: Following COVID and the closure of illegal mining, many turned to agriculture in desperation. While some may be moving towards agriculture, we have empirical reasons to believe that large swathes of land are converted from agriculture to settlements. The state policy in Goa is implicated in the zoning away of agricultural land. This reveals the deep inadequacies of the economic and political system in Goa. Nonetheless, there is hope in the initiatives undertaken by various individuals and communities (like the collectivised experiment in St. Estevan) that we need to recognise and systematically upscale.

The book discussions have no doubt prompted new ideas. How do you plan to continue delving into studying the various aspects of land-grabbing?

Kenneth: At one of our recent book talks in Goa, one of the commentators said that in his view, this book should not be considered an 'end product', rather we should use it as a point of departure for an even more systematic and programmatic inquiry into land-grabbing and commodification in Goa. I think we would like to do precisely this. We don't think of Goa as a statistical outlier or as an 'odd case' in the wider Indian context. What is going on in Goa today (and which has been going on for decades) may be indicative of future, broader Indian trends. There is much yet to learn from Goa's experience with land-grabbing and land-related conflicts, and these lessons will be relevant well beyond the Goan context.

Solano: One of the commentators hypothesised how the emergence of a strong market in land has emerged in Goa and how this is reconfiguring practically all spheres of Goan life — Goan politics to family relations and even personal ethics are being reconfigured to enable resource commodification and to prevent new justifications for the same. Uncovering the emergence of the market in land and its implications for Goan society would be worth researching.

