Residents, activists claim new Goa airport construction has impacted water availability
SUMMARY

Around 7,000 residents of six North Goa villages now routinely face water shortages due to the construction of the new Mopa airport on the Barazan Plateau.

Earlier, the plateau acted as a vital recharge zone for rainwater, and facilitated the year-round supply of drinking and agricultural water through an intricate web of over 40 perennial springs and rivulets.

Additionally, an increase in diversions of water from local reservoirs to the airport, by the provincial administration, is further threatening water security of citizens in the entire region.

Scientific studies had warned that the construction of the airport was likely to have an adverse impact on water security in the area.

The government’s proposed expansion of the airport, if implemented, is likely to be disastrous for over 75,000 residents of Pernem Taluka in the North Goa district.
Alleged illegalities in land acquisition
The land acquisition process began in 2003, but opposition from locals halted the project. In 2008, a new notification was issued under the “Urgency Clause” of the erstwhile Land Acquisition Act, 1894, granting the government special powers to take possession of the land.

Non-consideration of issues raised in public hearing
Residents raised serious concerns regarding the potential impact of the project, including its effects on the region’s water ecology and concealment of information in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report. But the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC), appointed to deliberate on granting the Environmental Clearance (EC) to the airport, concluded that only issues “related to employment opportunities” had been raised by the public.

Significant omissions in EIA report
The project flouted key requirements of the EIA Notification, 2006, which mandated a detailed study on the impact of projects on forests, water, and biodiversity within a 15 km radius—this was to be included in the EIA report. But the project proponent of Mopa airport concealed key information on the surrounding biodiversity, and incorrectly declared that the project site, located deep within the forests of the Western Ghats, contained “only few trees mainly bushes.” The EC was granted to the airport in 2015, based on this EIA report.
For generations we have lived here and never had any water problems. However, now, we do not get water for several days in a row.

-Uday Mahale, a farmer and taxi driver by profession

Supreme Court suspends EC
On 29 March 2019, the apex court suspended the project’s EC, following an appeal filed against the clearance. The court also acknowledged the various omissions in the EIA on the surrounding ecology, and that the EAC failed to apply its mind to the information provided by the project proponent. The EAC was directed to “revisit” its recommendations.

Supreme Court lifts EC suspension
Following the suspension of the EC, the project proponent furnished supplementary information to the EAC. This revealed significant environmental features within a 15 km radius of the project, including 42 forests, 5 rivers, mangroves and 2 wetlands, thereby indicating a likelihood of significant impact on local water bodies. Accordingly, the following condition, amongst others, was included in the EC:
“Appropriate drainage channels need to be designed to take care of the water flow into the nearest water courses/rivers, etc. It should be ensured that sustainable water flow in the various channels of watershed in the plateau is maintained.”
Subsequently, the EC suspension was lifted by the Supreme Court and the project was granted EC in 2020.
EMERGING ISSUES
THE IMPACT OF POLICIES ON THE GROUND

Failure to properly enforce EIA Notification
The EIA Notification mandates that any EC granted on the basis of concealment of material information must be quashed. But both the EAC and the Supreme Court allowed the project to go ahead after the submission of accurate data. This indicates a certain failure by state authorities and the judiciary when it comes to strict enforcement of the EIA Notification.

Lack of accountability in EC compliance
The water crisis highlights the project’s failure in adhering to mandated measures for protecting natural water channels. Authorities have been unsuccessful in ensuring compliance, leading to the present situation. Additionally, the failure to ensure restorative measures has also impacted local ecology.

Absence of Environmental Justice
Locals are increasingly dissatisfied due to unfulfilled pre-clearance promises, including environmental restoration and employment opportunities, evidenced in periodic protests and outbursts. Persistent degradation of natural resources in the name of development impedes environmental justice, as in this case the airport construction is impacting water security for 75,000 residents, and has led to an increase in flash floods.
RECOMMENDATIONS

- A 2020 paper in the Indian Journal of Environmental Sciences suggests that current rainwater harvesting methods are inadequate compared to the natural groundwater recharge facilitated by Barazan Plateau’s geology. Comprehensive restoration plans, that go beyond basic remedial measures, are needed to address this disparity effectively.

- By 2045, the airport is expected to service 13.1 million passengers annually, up from 4.4 million today. The proposed expansion will also include hotels, casinos, and employee housing, exacerbating existing threats to local water security. The expansion must be prohibited keeping in mind local water requirements.

- Measures such as institutional preparation of the EIA report by neutral third-parties, and prioritising concerns raised during public hearings are crucial for environmental justice.

- The absence of remedial measures for natural water-channels and ecological restoration emphasises the need for stricter enforcement of compliance with the conditions and provisions of the EC.

- Ecological conservation is crucial for long-term economic stability, urging a judicial shift to ensure environmental justice and sustainable development.
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