

A Blaze That Burnt More Than a NightClub

When the Fire Exposed the Fault Lines: How The Birch Blaze Laid Bare Goa's Broken System

Suraj Nandrekar

The fire that gutted The Birch at Anjuna was not just an accident. It was an exposure. What burned that night was not merely a tourism property but years of regulatory neglect, political convenience and institutional silence. As flames rose into the night sky, they illuminated a truth Goa has long avoided confronting. Illegalities do not survive in isolation. They thrive only when every authority looks the other way.

From the panchayat to the fire department, from electricity officials to the Goa Coastal Zone Management Authority, from the revenue machinery to the police, the responsibility for what The Birch became cannot be pinned on one office alone. The buck, as many locals now say openly, has to stop somewhere. But at The Birch, it never did. Every-

one, in one way or another, had a piece of the cake.

The rise of a tourism giant

The Birch began like many other beachside ventures in North Goa. What started as a modest hospitality concept soon expanded into a large scale tourism property, hosting events, parties and high footfall throughout the season. Locals watched its footprint grow steadily, often beyond what was visibly permissible. Temporary structures became semi permanent. Power connections multiplied. Crowd density increased. Yet, enforcement remained invisible.

"There were nights when we wondered how this place was even allowed to function," said a resident from the area. "Parking was chaotic, electricity lines hung dangerously low, and fire safety was a joke. Everyone knew, but no one acted."

That silence would prove costly.

The night of the blaze

When the fire broke out, panic spread faster than the flames. Fire tenders struggled to access the site. Narrow approach roads and parked vehicles delayed response time. Electricity supply had to be cut urgently to prevent further escalation. Miraculously, there were no mass casualties, but the destruction was total.

A senior police officer later said, "This could have been much worse. We were lucky it happened when it did. If the place was fully packed, the outcome would have been catastrophic."

Luck, however, is not policy. And it is not governance.

The investigation begins

As public outrage grew, the state government announced a multi agency probe. Files were pulled out. Permissions were re examined. Clearances

were cross checked. What emerged was a maze of inconsistencies.

The Joint Empowerment Committee, tasked with scrutinising the approvals, found discrepancies across multiple departments. Structures that should never have existed had stood for years. Licences appeared to have been renewed without physical inspections. Fire safety norms were either diluted or ignored.

The obvious question followed. Where was the state sleeping all these years?

A local activist put it bluntly. "If today the committee can see the violations, why could the departments not see them earlier? Either they were blind or they chose not to see."

The Luthras and the law

Attention soon turned to the promoters, the Luthras, who allegedly evaded arrest after the incident and were



later detained in Thailand. Their detention has added an international dimension to what was initially seen as a local disaster. Extradition proceedings are now awaited.

A police official involved in the case said, "We have initiated all legal processes. The law will take its course. No one is above it."

But for many Goans, the focus on the promoters alone feels incomplete. "Yes, fix the owners," said another local, "but who enabled them?"

Political reactions and uncomfortable questions

Chief Minister Pramod Sawant acknowledged the systemic failure. "What happened at The Birch is unacceptable. If there are lapses at any level, action will be taken. No department will be spared," he said, adding that the

government would ensure accountability across the board.

Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte admitted the incident had damaged Goa's image. "Tourism cannot grow at the cost of safety and legality. This incident is a wake up call. We need stricter enforcement, not just policies on paper."

Local MLA Michael Lobo was more direct. "Everybody knew what was happening there. From the panchayat upwards. You cannot allow illegalities for years and then act shocked when something goes wrong," he said. Lobo also pointed out that selective action would only deepen public distrust. "If action is taken, it must be taken against all responsible, not just the last man standing."

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"Mhadei Is Alive Only Because We Fought"

■ Nirmala Sawant on Water, Politics and Goa's Long Battle

For more than two decades, the Mhadei river dispute has remained one of Goa's most emotionally charged and politically complex issues. Environmental activist and former Goa minister Nirmala Sawant has been at the centre of this struggle since the 1990s. As a founding force behind the Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan, she has fought successive state and central governments, taken the battle to courts and tribunals, and repeatedly warned that the issue goes far beyond politics. In a candid conversation with Editor Suraj Nandrekar on Just Casual, Sawant speaks about how the movement began, the failures of governments, the Supreme Court orders, the controversial Benni Halla claim, and why she believes Mhadei survives today only because citizens refused to stay silent.

Q: Nirmala tai, the Mhadei Bachao movement has been going on for years. How did it all begin?

Nirmala Sawant: The movement began around

1996. At that time, there was very little awareness among people about what Mhadei actually meant for Goa. Many thought Mhadei was some distant river in



Maharashtra, not realising that Mhadei and Mandovi are the same river. When plans of diversion first came up, a few of us came together as concerned

citizens. People like Rajendra Kerkar, Nandkumar Kamat, Avinash Bhosale, Sadanand Tendulkar, doctors, environmentalists, church groups, and several

NGOs stood up together. It was not political then. It was a citizens' uprising.

Q: Why did governments fail to act decisively, despite this strong public voice?

Sawant: Because politics always came first. Whether it was the Congress or the BJP, the thinking remained the same. Karnataka has 28 MPs, and Goa has only two. Political priorities were obvious. Nobody wanted to upset Karnataka because national politics mattered more than Goa's water security. Governments closed their eyes and ears deliberately.

Q: What was the situation when the issue first reached the Prime Minister?

Sawant: In 2002, then Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar took an all party delegation to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Vajpayee listened and clearly said that the project should be kept on hold until proper studies were done. Again in 2004, he reiterated that no work should be carried out. That was a big moment. It showed that when leadership listens, action is possible.

Q: But despite that, the dispute dragged on. Why?

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Sunday Thought

The Pranks People Play and the Alliances They Break

By Suraj Nandrekar

Goa's Opposition politics has begun to resemble a badly scripted reality show, where contestants keep entering and exiting the house, alliances are announced with drumrolls, and then collapse before the commercial break. At the centre of the latest episode is Manoj Parab, whose social media post of a Delhi flight became less about air travel and more about political turbulence.

Parab calmly announced that the photograph was merely a prank. The picture, he said, was taken in August and uploaded much later just to "test the political waters". In Goa, however, even a puddle is enough to create waves. WhatsApp groups went into overdrive, speculation flew faster than the aircraft in the photo, and political pundits began reading meanings that Parab himself may not have imagined.

Having successfully stirred the pot, Parab then added seasoning. He declared he did not trust Goa Forward or the Congress. This was less a statement and more a reminder that in Goa's Opposition, trust is a rare commodity, usually discussed in theory but seldom practised.

Goa Forward chief Vijai Sardesai wasted no time in responding. With sharp political sarcasm, he labelled Manoj Parab a prankster, not a politician. It was a neat line, memorable and cutting. In one sentence, Sardesai reduced the entire episode to a joke, though many would argue that Opposition politics itself has been doing a fine job of that without external help.

While Parab and Sardesai traded barbs, the real tragic figure of this story stood quietly in the background. Leader of Opposition Yuri Alemao, who had taken considerable effort to bring seven Opposition MLAs together, now finds himself stranded in political no man's land. He did what leaders are supposed to do. He negotiated, persuaded and tried to project unity. Unfortunately, unity in Goa's Opposition lasts roughly as long as a viral tweet.

The Congress-Goa Forward

alliance, once announced with hope and optimism, now looks like a patchwork arrangement stitched together with weak thread. On paper, it sounds impressive. In reality, it barely registers. With the Aam Aadmi Party deciding to fight the Zilla Panchayat elections alone, the Opposition vote is neatly fragmented, leaving the ruling side comfortably entertained.

What makes this saga particularly satirical is the predictability. Every election cycle, Goa's Opposition promises unity. Every cycle, egos, mistrust and one-upmanship take centre stage. Leaders accuse each other of betrayal, ambition and opportunism, while voters watch the spectacle with a mix of amusement and despair.

Manoj Parab's prank, intentional or otherwise, perfectly captures the mood. Politics has become performance, symbolism has replaced substance, and optics matter more than organisation. A photograph in an aeroplane can cause more discussion than policy, governance or grassroots work.

Yuri Alemao's predicament also says a lot. In a system where leadership is constantly undermined by internal doubt, even genuine attempts at unity are viewed with suspicion. The message seems clear. Come together, but not too closely. Lead, but don't expect followers. Announce alliances, but be prepared for heartbreak.

As the Zilla Panchayat polls approach, the Opposition appears less like an alternative government and more like a collection of solo performers sharing the same stage but singing different songs. The Congress and Goa Forward may technically be allied, but without trust, coordination and clarity, the alliance risks becoming symbolic rather than effective.

In the end, Goa's Opposition politics feels like an endless series of pranks, punchlines and broken promises. The jokes may be entertaining, but the laughter is hollow. For voters looking for a serious challenge to the ruling dispensation, the real prank may be the hope that unity will finally emerge from this political circus.

Open Letter To Tourists

Dear Tourists, Goa Awaits You With Care, Caution and Its Unbroken Spirit

Dear Tourists,

"Love Goa" T-shirts are everywhere. Goa's world-famous beaches. The golden sun. Sand soft as a feather. Warm, hospitable people. Free-flowing urrak. Traditional food. Adrenaline-charged nightlife. Everything you come looking for is still here. The spirit of Goa is very much alive.

Please do not judge Goa only by the widely reported fire accident at Birch by Romeo Lane in Arpora earlier this month. It was a tragic and unfortunate mishap in which 25 people lost their lives. May God rest their souls in peace. May their atmas attain sadgati. Om shanti om.

This tragedy has also served as a long-overdue wake-up call. The authorities have begun setting the house in order. Chief Minister Dr Pramod Sawant has been working relentlessly to fix responsibility and bring the guilty to book. Indoor fireworks, believed to have triggered the deadly fire, have been banned without delay.

The local MLA of the coastal belt, deeply anguished by the incident, has been working closely with the police and panchayats to conduct thorough audits of fire safety norms across tourist hotspots in his constituency. Establishments found flouting safety regulations or lacking basic fire safety measures are being shut down. Accountability is no longer just a word. Goa has realised, perhaps painfully, that safety must come before celebration. Fun without safety can be fatal. A better safe than sorry approach is finally being enforced, and that is a positive outcome.

Life in Goa, meanwhile, continues with its unique rhythm. With the Goa Zilla Panchayat Elections 2025 around the corner, political leaders cutting across party lines are leaving no stone unturned to keep their voters entertained. A quick look at the headlines of Goemkarponn will tell you exactly what that means.

When you are in Goa, smile freely. Celebrate responsibly. Drive with discipline on the roads and not onto beaches where turtles nest quietly. Respect the land that welcomes you.

Come to Goa this holiday season. The days leading up to Christmas and New Year are magical. Christmas carols fill the air. Soft music drifts from art deco houses built during the Portuguese era. Churches glow with lights. Christmas trees line the streets. The resilience of Goa's tourism industry is on full display. It is a sight worth experiencing.

Our Tourism Minister, Shri Bab Rohan Khaunte, has made it clear in the aftermath of this incident that Goa is prepared. This holiday season, Goa is ready to welcome tourists from across the globe. The state regrets the tragic fire mishap and has taken concrete preventive measures to ensure such incidents are not repeated. One incident must not be allowed to define an entire state.

Goa is as safe as ever. Goa's hospitality continues to thrive and inspire. Goa's doors remain open.

Come to Goa. Make memories.

Yours sincerely,

Irfan Iqbal Gheta



Goa's Forgotten Vegetarian Traditions Find a Voice at Sensible Earth

By **Satyavatinandan Satrekar**

The Centre of Sustainability of Sensible Earth at Salvador do Mundo organised a traditional culinary competition that highlighted Goa's rich and often overlooked vegetarian food heritage. The event brought together women from different parts of Goa, from Canacona to Bardez, creating a vibrant platform for sharing traditional recipes that are usually prepared during festivals, fairs and special occasions.

Goa has a long tradition of varied vegetarian cuisine, rooted in local produce, seasonal ingredients and inherited culinary knowledge. However, such recipes are rarely visible in public spaces today. At the Centre of Sustainability in Salvador do Mundo, this special competition invited women from rural, tribal and urban areas to demonstrate their skills and deep knowledge of traditional vegetarian cooking. The participants showcased dishes prepared using locally available ingredients and



traditional flavours, giving visitors an authentic taste of Goa's nutritious and delicious vegetarian food.

The competition was not just about cooking but about recognising and valuing traditional knowledge. Many of the women who participated possess culinary wisdom passed down through generations, yet their skills often remain confined to their homes. Sensible Earth provided them with a platform to bring this knowledge into the public domain.

Speaking on the occasion, Sanjiv Khandelwal of Sensible Earth said the main

objective was to give visitors to Goa a real experience of traditional vegetarian cuisine. He pointed out that there are very few hotels in Goa where authentic Goan vegetarian recipes are available. Through this competition, Sensible Earth aims to identify the potential among Goan women and provide opportunities for them to develop their talents and skills. He added that the centre hopes to empower these women by supporting them not only at Sensible Earth but also by connecting them to other platforms and opportunities.

Several traditional dishes stood out during the competition. Veena Narvekar from St Cruz prepared a special vegetarian Xacuti made from germinated cashew nuts, locally known as Ghodug. Sunita Nilesh Velip from Badde, Cotigao presented Bhikanache Godase, a nutritious sweet dish prepared from dried jackfruit seeds. Praveena Shirgaokar from Mapusa prepared Kharvas, a sweet dish made from the first milk of a cow. These dishes won prizes and drew strong

Culinary Heritage Revived..

- Sensible Earth hosted a traditional vegetarian culinary competition at Salvador do Mundo
- Women from Canacona to Bardez participated, representing rural, tribal and urban areas
- Focus on festival based, traditional Goan vegetarian recipes
- Use of locally available ingredients and traditional cooking methods
- Rare dishes like cashew nut Xacuti, jackfruit seed Godase and Kharvas featured
- Aim to promote Goan vegetarian cuisine and empower women through skill recognition

appreciation for their authenticity and nutritional value.

Apart from the prize winning recipes, a wide variety of traditional vegetarian dishes were served to visitors who attended the competition. These included



Churnachi Bhaji, a vegetable dish made from yam, Nachanyachi Bhakri prepared from finger millet, and Shirvalyo, the Goan version of noodles made from parboiled rice. Traditional preparations such as Khati and Khatkhate were also part of the spread, allowing visitors to experience the diversity of Goan vegetarian cuisine.

By organising this

competition, Sensible Earth successfully created awareness about Goa's traditional vegetarian food culture while also highlighting the role of women as keepers of culinary heritage. The event served as a reminder that these recipes are not only part of Goa's cultural identity but also hold potential for sustainable livelihoods when given the right support and recognition.

Has the time come to replace Vande Mataram as the National Song?

by **Sandeep Heble**

While Parliament debates Vande Mataram, which many see as yet another distraction from real issues, I see it as a rare golden opportunity. An opportunity not just for Parliament, but for every citizen of this country to revisit the song's deeper meaning and begin by asking the tough questions that our political leaders, our bureaucrats, and all those in power must finally answer.

1. If the motherland is sacred, why is her land, water, and forests being sold, mined, polluted, and destroyed with such impunity?

2. If patriotism is the message of Vande Mataram, why is corruption, and not duty or sacrifice, the operating system of governance today?

3. If we claim to honour the motherland, why do we treat political leaders like kings, allowing them to rule rather than serve in a democracy born out of a freedom struggle?

Vande Mataram, penned by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in Anandamath (1882), was born from the author's vision of

the motherland as a living force. Bankim did not see India as a mere stretch of land; he saw her rivers, mountains, fields, and forests as sacred, almost divine. When he invoked Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati, he was trying to show people how sacred India's land was, something to be protected and revered, not exploited and destroyed.

Which reminds me of some old NT Cybervoice discussions from long before Facebook or even Orkut had taken shape. There was a certain user with the pseudonym "Fire," otherwise a fierce critic of the Sangh, who incidentally found nothing objectionable even in reciting the deleted stanzas. He argued that the deities invoked in "Vande Mataram" were never meant as literal goddesses but as metaphors for nature and cosmic forces based on ancient Vedic principles. In his view, singing the song was not an act of worship; it was an act of honouring nature itself.

When we look back at the song's history, the core purpose of the composition was to awaken patriotism, not the chest-thumping, rabble-rousing

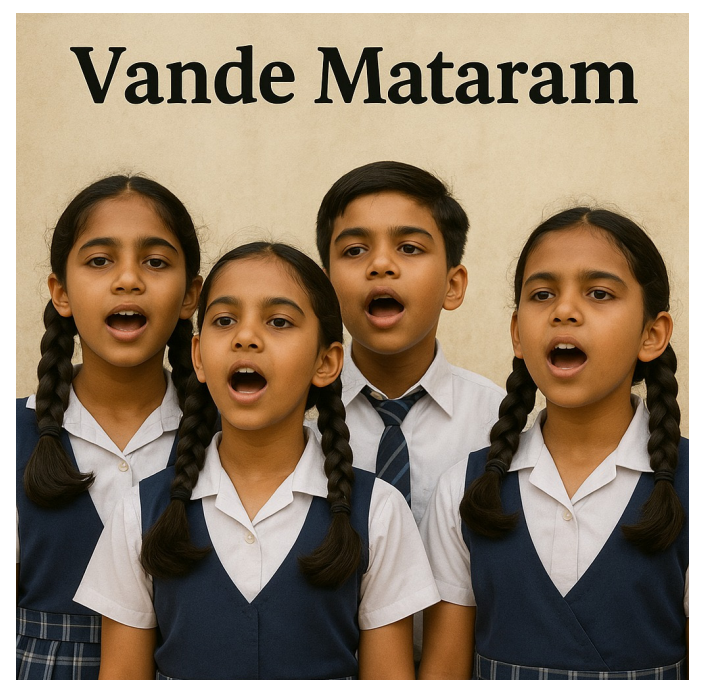
variety we see today. It called upon the people to demonstrate patriotism through responsibility, sacrifice, and duty. It spoke to their conscience, urging them to rise, act, and protect their land, not merely recite words for applause.

Today, as we mark 150 years of this powerful composition, tough questions must be asked. Have any of our political parties truly honoured the spirit of Vande Mataram? As Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amit Shah lead heated discussions on the song in Parliament, is the focus really on its message, or is it yet another attempt to distract, deflect, and revive the routine blame game by invoking Nehru while sweeping everything else under the carpet?

All one has to do is read the beautiful lyrics, understand their true meaning, and ask those who govern the relevant questions. The motherland described in Vande Mataram - with her cool breezes, flowing rivers, green fields, and majestic mountains - have they done justice to it? Or is it slowly being consumed by human greed?

Bankim saw our land as our greatest wealth, our beauty, our identity - Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, to quote his words. Are these resources being protected, or are they being ravaged? Forests are falling to reckless, unsustainable mining; beautiful streams and rivers are choking with sewage; hills are being cut open for rampant construction. Every stanza Bankim wrote celebrating nature is now being rewritten by bulldozers and illegal contracts. Ironically, many who cry the loudest while singing "Vande Mataram" are also the ones presiding over the slow destruction of the very mother they claim to worship.

Why has corruption reached a stage where it has become the ruling culture? Illegal constructions are regularised. Public resources are handed over to corporate giants in deals that would put the old colonial companies to shame. If the motherland is sacred, then this unchecked exploitation is nothing less than sacrilege. The horrifying Arpora nightclub fire, which cost 25 innocent lives, is a direct product of this corruption. An illegal structure, a demoli-



tion order stayed, safety norms ignored, officials looking away - all ingredients of a manufactured tragedy. If we truly honoured the mother as invoked by Vande Mataram, such senseless deaths would never occur.

As we celebrate 150 years of this national treasure, we must ask: Was Bankim's dream simply to replace white sahabs with brown sahabs? Should citizens in a democracy treat political leaders like kings? Was Vande Mataram written to praise political leaders, or was it meant to inspire those who govern us to stand up for our motherland?

I love the composition of Vande Mataram. It is a beautiful, soul-stirring piece, and I have

many different versions of it. But when the very mother it praises continues to bleed in silence, the song begins to lose its true relevance. As Parliament debates Vande Mataram, it must also ask: in over 75 years of Independence, have we truly done justice to what it stands for?

Time to think and reflect: Should we replace the Vande Mataram as our National Song, or rather the political culture that has betrayed every word of it? Until we repair the culture of corruption, greed, and selective patriotism, no national symbol will ever feel truly honoured. The song is not the problem; those who recite it without living by it are.

When Farming Became a Career Choice, Not a Compromise

By Kajal S

When most young Goans were lining up for government jobs or white collar careers, Varad Samant chose to walk into his fields. Today, that decision has made him one of the most recognisable faces of modern agriculture in the state. Recently appointed as Goa's Agricultural Ambassador, Samant is also credited as the first farmer to successfully introduce carrot cultivation in Goa using new techniques. On nearly 40,000 square metres of land, he grows carrots along with watermelon, ladyfinger, cauliflower and cabbage, quietly rewriting what farming can mean for Goa's youth.

Samant's journey began after he completed his BCom in 2012. Mining was booming then, and opportunities in transport and allied businesses were everywhere. "People told me, why farming? Get into mining trucks, that's where the money is," he recalls. But he was unconvinced. "Agriculture was always at the back of my mind. I felt this land had more to give if we worked with it properly."

Traditional crops like sugarcane did not appeal to him. "Sugarcane takes 15 to 16 months to give returns. For a young person, waiting that long is difficult," he says. His thinking shifted when he learnt about the Goa government's Horticulture Corporation and its assured buyback scheme. "When I saw that the government was ready to buy vegetables at a fixed price, I felt this field had potential."

With little formal training, Samant began experimenting on a small patch of about 2,000 square metres. "At first, I didn't even know how to prepare beds properly," he admits. "I learnt by doing, by failing, and by watching other farmers." He travelled to Maharashtra and Karnataka, visiting farms and asking questions. "Farmers never hide knowledge. If you are willing to learn, they teach you."

The real breakthrough came in 2015, when Samant decided to grow carrots, a crop almost unheard of in Goa's fields. "People laughed. Even I was not sure whether the roots would form properly," he says. When he pulled out the first successful

harvest, the response surprised him. "Suddenly, everyone wanted to know how it worked."

Since then, carrot cultivation has become a regular winter crop on his farm. "Carrot is a three-month crop. You sow once and harvest in stages," he explains. "It looks easy, but it needs discipline. Drip irrigation is a must, watering has to be controlled, and timing is everything." Labour shortages remain a challenge, but he says carrots still work because they require less continuous labour compared to other vegetables.

By 2019, his farming had scaled up dramatically. "That year my turnover crossed Rs 60 lakh," Samant says. "After expenses, the net profit was close to Rs 30 lakh." But farming, he adds, is never a straight line. Heavy rains once submerged his fields, wiping out crops, equipment and infrastructure overnight. "I thought of quitting. I told myself, maybe agriculture is not for me."

What kept him going were calls from fellow farmers outside Goa. "Farmers from Maharashtra and Karnataka told me, losses happen, don't stop,"

he says. He replanted within weeks. "After 50 days, production started again. I understood one thing clearly. In farming, nature tests you, but it also gives you chances."

Today, Samant insists that even small landholdings can be viable. "If you have 4,000 to 5,000 square metres, one family can live comfortably," he says. "You can earn five to seven lakh rupees a year if you plan well." His advice to youth is direct. "If you have land, don't leave it idle. Dedication matters more than degrees here."

Modern techniques are central to his success. Drip irrigation, mulching sheets, fertigation, organic inputs like diluted cow urine, and planting marigolds to control pests are standard practices on his farm. "Water is becoming scarce. Drip saves water and gives better results," he says. "Technology is not the enemy of farming. It is the future."

As Agricultural Ambassador, Samant now works closely with the horticulture department, visiting villages and motivating farmers. "The buyback scheme is a big confidence booster," he says. "Whether the mar-



ket goes up or down, the farmer knows his price." He points out that several young farmers have already crossed annual turnovers of Rs 10 lakh through vegetable farming.

Looking ahead, Samant is optimistic about agriculture's future. "Everything can be downloaded today, except food," he says. "Jobs may reduce, but people will always need

to eat." For him, farming is not just about income. "This land was protected by our elders. My duty is to protect it for the next generation."

In a state where farming often struggles for respect, Varad Samant's fields stand as proof that agriculture, when done with knowledge and conviction, can still offer dignity, stability and hope.

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A Blaze That Burnt More Than a NightClub

A chain of collective failure

The Birch case highlights how illegal tourism structures are rarely the result of one rogue player. Panchayats issue trade licences. Electricity departments provide connections. Fire departments certify safety. Coastal authorities regulate construction. Police ensure law and order. Revenue officials verify land use.

When all these systems fail simultaneously, illegality becomes normalised.

"The tragedy is not the fire," said a retired bureaucrat. "The tragedy is that we allowed it to come to this."

Beyond scapegoats

The Joint Empowerment Committee's findings have reopened old wounds. Files that gathered dust are now being cited as evidence. But critics argue that post-disaster scrutiny is not reform. It is damage control.

Goa has seen this pattern before. Acrisis erupts. Committees are formed. Statements are issued. A few heads roll.

And then silence returns.

This time, public anger appears different. Louder. More sustained.

"If this ends with just one arrest or one suspension, then nothing has changed," said a local hotelier. "Tomorrow there will be another Birch."

The road ahead

As extradition proceedings inch forward and investigations continue, the Birch fire stands as a symbol of governance failure. It raises uncomfortable but necessary questions. Can Goa protect its tourism economy without compromising safety? Can regulators act before tragedy strikes? And most importantly, will accountability finally be collective and not convenient?

The fire may have been extinguished, but the heat is far from over. For a state built on its natural beauty and hospitality, the real test lies not in rebuilding structures, but in rebuilding trust.

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"Mhadei Is Alive Only Because We Fought"

Sawant: Because after that, governments diluted their own stand. In 2000, Goa had already gone to the Supreme Court, but in 2010, the Goa government withdrew the case and shifted it to the tribunal. That was a serious mistake. The tribunal sat from 2010 to 2012 and finally gave its verdict in 2018. This long delay weakened Goa's position.

Q: What was the 2018 tribunal verdict, in simple terms?

Sawant: The tribunal allowed Karnataka to divert a limited quantity of water and said the rest should flow naturally. It also said the flow must be monitored. But monitoring exists only on paper. In reality, no effective monitoring has happened. Water is being taken, forests are being destroyed, and Goa is already feeling the impact.

Q: You have often said Mhadei is alive only because of legal pressure. Can you explain?

Sawant: Yes. After 2018, if we had not filed contempt petitions, Mhadei would have been completely diverted by now. The project did not stop because governments acted responsibly. It stopped because the matter is still before the Supreme Court. That is the truth.

Q: There is a lot of confusion around Benni Halla. What exactly is your stand?

Sawant: Let me be very clear. I do not believe there is a legitimate Benni Halla project as it is being projected today. What I have consistently said is this: if Karnataka genuinely needs water, why not plan a project entirely on the Benni Halla river itself, instead of diverting Mhadei's waters? Benni Halla is much wider and longer in parts of Karnataka. My point was never to support the diversion of Mhadei. It was to question why Mhadei is being targeted when alternatives exist.

Q: So you are saying Mhadei water is being diverted in the name of Benni Halla?

Sawant: Exactly. That is our concern. The narrative is misleading. The water that eventually affects Goa is Mhadei's water. Whether you call it Benni Halla or something else, the impact is on Mhadei, Mandovi, and Goa's ecology.

Q: How is this diversion affecting Goa already?

Sawant: I have personally seen water flow reduce near Kankumbi. In 2019, I visited the area and observed changes. The Western Ghats are being damaged. If forests lose their water retention capacity, South West monsoon patterns will change. Less rain will fall in Goa. Salinity intrusion will increase in the Mandovi. Places like Tiswadi

and Bardez depend on low-salinity water for agriculture. This is not a theory. This is already happening.

Q: Do you feel the Goa government has fought strongly enough?

Sawant: No. The Goa government talks, but it does not act with urgency. Crores are spent on lawyers, five star hotels, and meetings, but hearings get postponed. We have repeatedly asked for a dedicated hearing, for an aerial survey, and for police protection to inspect sites. Nothing moves unless citizens push.

Q: What specific demands have you made recently?

Sawant: First, conduct an aerial survey to understand the actual damage. Second, allow independent inspections with police protection. Third, present factual data to the Supreme Court instead of vague assurances. And finally, stop pretending everything is under control. It is not.

Q: Many say this has become a political battle rather than an environmental one. Do you agree?

Sawant: Absolutely. Mhadei is being used by all parties for political benefit. Nobody is treating it as a serious ecological issue. Congress, BJP, opposition, ruling side, everyone is guilty. If Mhadei was truly a priority, Goa's stand would have been consistent for 25 years. It has not been.