Mopa Airport Woes

Debating the Proposed Airport in North Goa
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A proposed new airport in North Goa has brought to the fore the old North Goa–South Goa feud. With the current Bharatiya Janata Party government determined to make the project a success, they could ride roughshod over concerns, environmental as well as political.

If the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led state government has its way, Goa will have a new operational international airport in five years from now. The proposed airport will be located on the Mopa plateau in Pernem taluka in North Goa, near the Maharashtra border. But although the project is backed by strong political and commercial interests, it has encountered stiff opposition from other quarters. This commentary examines how the proposed Mopa airport has polarised public opinion in India’s smallest state.

From Dabolim to Mopa

The only airport in Goa today is the centrally-located Dabolim international airport. Dabolim was built by the Portuguese as a civilian airport in 1955—the Portuguese military air force never had a presence in Goa—but only months after the Indian Army had liberated Goa in December 1961, the airport was taken over by the Indian Navy’s air wing (Pais 2014: 217). Dabolim airport today is thus in effect a civilian enclave within a military airbase.

The Indian Navy has shown no interest in relocating its base in Dabolim elsewhere, and has generally proven reluctant to relinquish more land for the expansion of civilian operations, even when a new, integrated terminal building was inaugurated in 2013. Moreover, civilian flights are not allowed to operate from Dabolim between 8.30 am and 1.00 pm on weekdays, a period reserved for military flight training. The limits that the Navy’s control thus imposes on civilian operations is often cited as the main reason for why there is an urgent need for setting up a new international airport elsewhere in the state.

Plans for establishing a new international airport at Mopa have been around for about 15 years. In 1999, a Congress-led state government approved the project, and land acquisition proceedings for a whopping 80 lakh square metres of land in Mopa were initiated in 2003. The land acquisition was never completed, mostly because the proposed airport
encountered stiff resistance from South Goa, spearheaded by the influential Congress politician Churchill Alemao.

The resistance gained strength when it was revealed, in 2004, that Dabolim would be closed for civilian operations once Mopa airport was operational. Reeling under pressure from within and from without, the Congress state government suspended the land acquisition and constituted, in 2006, a committee to take a fresh look at all aspects relating to the construction of the Mopa airport. The committee conveniently found that both Dabolim and Mopa would be viable if traffic was distributed equitably, thus partially allaying fears that Dabolim would be shut down.

This early controversy over Mopa airport coincided with a phase of intense popular mobilisation against Goa’s Regional Plan 2011 (a draft of which was circulated in 2006) and the implementation of the highly unpopular special economic zone (SEZ) policy the same year (Abreu 2014; Bedi 2013; Da Silva 2014; Sampat 2013). These campaigns brought popular concerns over environmental destruction, water depletion, land scams and pollution to the top of the political agenda, forcing the incumbent government to scrap the SEZ policy, withdraw the regional plan, and put Mopa on the backburner. It was not until mid-2008, when things had calmed down, that fresh land acquisition notifications were issued for Mopa. But the actual acquisition progressed slowly and was not declared to be complete until late 2013.

By then, the state had a new government, led by the BJP and the current Union Minister of Defence, Manohar Parrikar, who had risen to become Chief Minister in 2012. Parrikar hails from North Goa (Bardez). So does his party compatriot and current Chief Minister Laxmikant Parsekar, who succeeded Parrikar in late 2014 and who hails from Pernem itself.

Both chief ministers have been strong votaries of Mopa airport, and it is under their dispensations that the project has been carried forward at full speed, with a “Request for Qualification” (to allow prospective bidders to document their qualifications) issued in October 2014; five companies shortlisted as qualified to operate the airport on a public-private partnership (PPP) basis by March 2015; and drafting of the formal “Request for Proposal” now under way. The aim is ostensibly to identify the successful bidder by July and to commence preparatory site work by December (Herald 2015a).

The Case for Mopa

The airport at Mopa is promoted as both a dire necessity and an economic boon for the state, with aviation identified as a “thrust area” for greenfield investment in Goa’s most recent investment policy (Government of Goa 2014: 15–16). In 2014, Dabolim handled 4.5 million passengers, and with an estimated saturation level of somewhere between 6 and 9 million yearly passengers, Mopa airport is projected as the need of the hour to sustain growth in the tourism industry that is vital to the state’s economy. Indeed, the government expects Mopa airport alone to handle 13.1 million passengers by 2036 (Directorate of Civil
Aviation, Government of Goa 2014: 9), thus underscoring its crucial role in expanding tourism.

In addition the airport is also—like all major infrastructure development projects—promoted as a driver of employment generation and economic growth in Pernem taluka, one of Goa’s “backward” areas. This claimed link between the civil aviation sector and economic activity, and its catalytic impact on general development, is recognised by the Union Ministry of Civil Aviation (2010). The ministry claims that $100 spent on air transport will produce benefits worth $325 for the economy, and 100 additional jobs in air transport will result in 610 new economy-wide jobs. By extension, these benefits are expected to trickle down to benefit the Mopa locals, hundreds of whom stand to be dispossessed of their land.

At a broader level, the promotion of a greenfield airport at Mopa resonates with the national policy thrust towards airport development. The guiding idea behind the current policy is to use the construction of new airports as drivers of regional economic growth by developing a region’s hinterland economy, rather than waiting for the regional economy to grow on its own to the level where the construction of a new airport would immediately be economically sound.

The stated aim is to develop a whopping 250 new Indian airports by 2020, including an estimated 20 to 30 new greenfield airports like Mopa by 2025. The development of greenfield airports is possible with 100% foreign direct investment under a PPP set-up, thus making greenfield airport development—including “non-aeronautical revenue,” for example, retail, advertising, vehicle parking and hospitality—a lucrative sector for private investors (Ernst & Young 2014: 26-27).

The potential for large profits is bolstered by the fact that India has very low aircraft penetration compared to, for example, the other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries. Sustained growth in the aviation sector is therefore expected. With overlapping policy agendas at the national and state levels, both spearheaded by BJP governments, the Mopa project has strong political backing. It has also received the enthusiastic blessing of the Goa Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

**Opposing Mopa**

Resistance to Mopa has come from other quarters, but within and beyond the party political sphere. True to tradition, the Congress in the state has remained a divided house. The Mopa project was first introduced by a Congress-led state government, and North Goa Congress strongman (and leader of the opposition) Pratapsingh Rane has called Mopa his “baby.” Meanwhile, Congress politicians in South Goa are strongly opposed to Mopa. This includes the ever-controversial Churchill Alemao, but also Luizinho Faleiro, the Goa Pradesh Congress Committee President.

Another important voice from South Goa has been that of the independent member of
legislative assembly Vijay Sardesai, who sees Mopa airport as an attempt at relocating Goa’s centre of economic gravity closer to Maharashtra, fearing a backdoor merger into Maharashtra. Sardesai’s view finds credence in the fact that the catchment area for Mopa is projected to include four districts in Maharashtra and three in Karnataka with a population of more than 15 million (Oneindia 2006)—10 times that of Goa—fuelling fears that Mopa airport will not benefit Goa and Goans.

In civil society, it is the Goans for Dabolim Only (GFDO) that has spearheaded the movement against Mopa airport. Led by a catholic priest, Father Rebello, and a group of activists from different parts of South Goa, the GFDO projects Mopa as a massive land scam not unlike that stealthily carried out via SEZ development eight years ago. Land surrounding the proposed airport has long since been bought at a cheap rate by political and business interests from Goa and beyond, who look set to make a killing once the airport is up and running, thus depriving locals of any benefits.

Another key concern for the GFDO is that if the projected Mopa-generated growth in tourism actually materialises, it will lead to social and environmental havoc as Goa is incapable of hosting more than 15 million tourists yearly. Environmental activists within the GFDO see the destruction of the Mopa plateau as yet another assault on Goa’s sensitive ecology, an assault spearheaded by the combined forces of unsustainable tourism and rampant, often illegal open-cast iron ore mining (Alvares 2002: 224–47).

Located close to the Western Ghats, the Mopa plateau is projected by the GFDO as an ecologically-sensitive area with more than 40 perennial springs that sustain farming and agriculture in the area, including extensive cashew plantations on the slopes which ostensibly generate an annual income of over Rs 50 crore. Where the project proponents thus see a barren plateau eminently suited for an airport, the opponents see in the plateau a unique hydrological system that sustains local livelihoods and agriculture, and keeps Goa green.

The GFDO has campaigned across large parts of South Goa to mobilise public opinion; and much of South Goa appears to be opposed to the plans for Mopa, because they believe it will eventually lead to the closure of nearby Dabolim. The opposition also includes the tourist industry in the South who fear that if Dabolim—“the lifeline of tourism in south Goa” (Rodrigues 2009: 132)—is shut down, the tourists who arrive in Mopa in North Goa will stay there (or head off to the virgin beaches of southern coastal Maharashtra), thus killing off tourism in the South.

In contrast, the GFDO have found it more difficult to win over the North, where public opinion has largely been swayed by the political promise that the airport will generate development for all. But in and around Mopa itself, local opinion is divided. The majority appear to be supportive of the project, provided that adequate compensation and the promised benefits actually materialise. But a significant minority among the dispossessed
has rallied behind the Mopa Vimantall Piditt Xetkari Samiti (association of farmers aggrieved by the Mopa airport) to outright oppose the project.

**Multiple Polarisations**

The Mopa airport controversy clearly has the potential to polarise the state along multiple axes. It has already divided the Congress; but more importantly it also looks set to revive “the traditional north-south divide” ([Rodrigues 2009: 131](#)) in the state, which partly follows religious lines: The majority Hindu community has a major presence in the North, while the minority Christian community has a sizeable presence in the South, especially in Salcete District, the epicentre of GFDO which, it will be recalled, is led by a priest and backed by the Church.

The North–South divide had become blurred following the 2012 state assembly elections and the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, when the Hindu nationalist BJP performed exceedingly well in both parts of Goa; now it threatens to resurface. Perhaps unsurprisingly, BJP politicians appear to be doing their best to widen the divide. North Goa’s Parrikar has emphasised that “Goa doesn’t mean only south Goa,” adding that the people of North Goa have as much right as [those of South Goa to demand an airport](#) ([Herald 2014](#)). South Goans have seen this as an affront to their concerns about the broader impact of Mopa.

Even the anti-Mopa movement itself may become prone to polarisation. GFDO’s Father Rebello maintains a staunchly anti-party political approach and suspects that politicians like Churchill Alemao only oppose Mopa to garner votes. Alemao, in turn, has faulted Father Rebello for being “just any other activist slinging mud” ([Herald 2015b](#)) and has vowed that he will carry forward the Mopa opposition. Just as the anti-SEZ movement in 2006–07 split into two distinct camps, one apolitical, the other BJP-linked ([Da Silva 2014](#)), the anti-Mopa movement too may become divided into “apolitical” and “party political” factions. This need not be a drawback; but it certainly could drive a wedge between civil and political society.

For now, the BJP-led state government is likely to continue with the Mopa airport at full speed. But if the opposition succeeds in keeping the controversy alive until the assembly elections in 2017, the lurking polarisations identified above may emerge with force to define the immediate political future of the state.

**References**


