

## **Anti-golf activism remains on the agenda – the case of India**

Dear friends and colleagues,

In 1993, an alliance of environmental NGOs, consumer groups, tourism critics and concerned citizens formed the Global Anti-Golf Movement (GAG'M) to oppose the rapid proliferation of golf courses and golf tourism in Asia-Pacific and beyond because of the many harmful impacts these activities had on ecosystems and local communities.

The burst of the Japanese bubble economy and the Asian financial crisis that started in Thailand in 1997 however caused serious blows to the East and Southeast Asian golf industry. Many projects in the region went bankrupt or were given up, and subsequently the golf controversy calmed down for some years. Meanwhile, the golf course boom spread to other regions - especially to areas in South Asia and the Caribbean earmarked for tourism development -, resulting in more environmental destruction and social problems for local residents. So people's activism against golf and related extravaganzas is still alive and spreading in many parts of the world.

Today, I'd like to present parts of a research by Mario Rodrigues who writes for the Indian daily The Statesman and is currently conducting a sociological study on golf in India as part of a fellowship programme of Sarai/Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi. Mario first tells the story of the many excesses and irregularities in relation to Asian golf course developments, which boosted the Global Anti-Golf Movement in the 1990s. The second part gives an overview of some golf course projects in India that are currently subjected to public controversy and legal action.

We'd be pleased to share more of Mario's research in the Clearinghouse at a later stage. He can be contacted at [majorod22@yahoo.com](mailto:majorod22@yahoo.com).

Yours truly,  
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**THE POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF GOLF IN SOUTH ASIA**

By Mario Rodrigues

<http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2005-May/005728.html>

### **ASIA'S 'GOLF WAR' REVISITED**

Over the last decade, golf has acquired the status of a four-letter word because of the havoc it has wrought across the globe. These ravages have been most manifest in Asia, and especially in South-East Asia, which has experienced some of the most concentrated golf development as a result of state policy.

The so-called “green game” has made millions of people across the world see red because of the excesses and illegalities associated with golf course development. These include: issues relating to illegal and sometimes forcible acquisition of land required to build deluxe resorts and golf courses, the displacement of traditional and/or marginalized communities from their ancestral land, deforestation, destruction/alteration of environment and ecological life systems, use of (harmful) pesticides to keep courses green and pest-free, contamination of soil and neighbouring water systems due to heavy use of pesticides, and the consumption of large amounts of water at the cost of the public.

These excesses have been mimicked in almost every country across the globe, including India: this will be highlighted in a future posting. Such excesses have provoked strident protests from environmentalists, activists, NGOs and those affected by golf developments, sometimes erupting in violent incidents. The violence has often been perpetrated by golf developers in collusion with the governments/ authorities backing such developments.

To combat the scourge of golf, the Global Anti-Golf Movement was founded in 1993 by Japanese market gardener Gen Morita after he discovered that his crops were contaminated by chemicals from the water draining off a nearby golf course. The GAGM has been observing a “World No Golf Day” since the 1990s and its activists have waged sustained campaigns against controversial golf projects, especially in South-East and East Asia, sometimes successfully. Of late, GAGM has not been as active as before due to the economic recession and the setbacks to the “tiger economies” a few years ago, which badly impacted on the golf business. But it seems that golf is back on the agenda of national governments now and golf courses have become an intrinsic part of the landscape in South-East Asia.

Some of the anti-golf struggles that erupted in the region, especially in the 1990s, and excesses connected with golf, include:

\* **THAILAND:** The Golden Valley Golf & Country Club designed by Jack Nicklaus allegedly encroached on the famous Khao Yai National Park, with developers dynamiting a hill in the park to join two roads. A number of golf courses in the country have allegedly trespassed on protected forest areas and national parks.

\* **MYANMAR [Burma]:** GAGM activists launched a campaign to try and force Nicklaus to de-link himself from designing a golf course for the Andaman Club on Thahtay Kyan island, a \$ 24 million five-star resort and casino project, in view of the economic sanctions that were in force against the Burmese military junta.

In another instance, the army used strong-arm tactics to evict traditional residents so that the land could be freed for the development of the Myanmar Golf Club in Rangoon.

\* **MALAYSIA:** The Berawan, a small indigenous ethnic group, were locked in grim battle with a Japanese hotel chain and the Sarawak provincial government over plans to build a 200-acre course on their ancestral land in the Mulu National Park.

Hundreds of acres of tropical forests were reportedly cleared to pave the way for luxury resorts and golf courses in Langkawi island leading to all-round havoc and deprivation.

\* **INDONESIA:** Farmers, students and religious groups launched a bitter though unsuccessful agitation against the forcible acquisition of land by the government to build the 120-acre Le Meridien Nirwana Golf and Spa Resort (with links to the disgraced former dictator General Suharto) near a Hindu shrine overlooking Tanah Lot in Bali.

In the Gili Trawangan islands off the picturesque Lombok region, government forces used violence to evict inhabitants and visitors; while in West Java, a developer bulldozed crops to force farmers off their land.

\* **VIETNAM:** Security forces cracked down harshly on protestors from the Kim No village outside Hanoi who were protesting the Communist government's decision to confiscate their farmlands and hand it over to foreign developers to build a golf course.

\* **CHINA:** There is a moratorium on golf course development after it was found that almost all courses have been built after illegal acquisition of land. Premier Wen Jiabao warned in Parliament that the government would resolutely put an end to illegal acquisition and use of farmland. According to statistics published in the "People's Daily", golf courses are devouring land illegally; and of the 176 course in 26 provinces, only one has been approved by the central government. The inference is that the rest are all illegally built. According to the law, golf courses can only be built on unused hills, waste land and sloping fields, a rule seemingly observed more in breach by local governments.

\* **THE PHILIPPINES:** Citizens groups have valiantly fought the efforts of the Fil-Estate Realty Corp to build the Harbortown golf course and marina over 8,650 hectares of farmlands in Hacienda Looc, about 80 kms off Manila at the suggestion of USAID. Ironically, ownership of about 5,000 hectares of land was handed over to the locals as part of the government's agrarian reforms programme earlier. But the government then sold all 8,650 hectares on the cheap to Fil-Estate without even bothering to notify the peasants beforehand. To know more, check out the documentary film "The Golf War"; (1999) by Jen Schradie and Matt De Vries, a story of land, golf and revolution in the Philippines.

Also check out the hard-hitting documentary "The Green Menace: The Untold Story of Golf" by Thai independent film maker Ing Kanchanawanit, which highlights the devastating effects of golf course development on the environment. It includes graphic footage of pesticide poisoning, forest encroachment, and water theft associated with golf course construction in Thailand; and features interviews with golfers, caddies, engineers, doctors, developers, and golf superstars (including Jack Nicklaus and Greg Norman).

\* Golf courses are also known to use phenomenal amounts of pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, artificial colouring agents and so on, to keep the "greens" and fairways green and pest-free. A New York Attorney General study of pesticides used on 52

Long Island golf courses found that the average golf course applies about seven times more pesticides per acre per year as compared to that applied in agriculture.

\* Water usage of golf courses is also a very sticky issue. According to a study done in 2000, an average San Antonio golf course in Texas, USA, used 312,000 gallons of water per day. According to other sources, while on an average a golf course anywhere in the world uses about 10,800,000 litres of water per year. According to the Golf Course Superintendents Association, US golf courses use, on an average, 414,500,000 litres a year. In essence this means that each golf course uses enough water to provide at least 1200 people with their basic water needs for a year. Gen Morita of the GAGM says that an 18-hole golf course consumes 5,000 cubic metres of water a day, enough for 2,000 families.

On its part the golf industry has since tried to clean up its act and introduced several environmentally-friendly measures to reduce pesticide consumption and water consumption. The golf industry has also gone on a propaganda offensive to highlight the “green” elements of golf. Whether all this goes far enough to qualify golf as a “green” game or something close to it is the moot point.

<http://www.opensubscriber.com/message/reader-list@sarai.net/1616187.html>

## **CONTROVERSIAL GOLF COURSES IN INDIA**

Last month, I had drawn attention to the excesses and illegalities that had marked golf development in South-East and East Asia, and also the struggles against golf and lifestyle projects in these regions. These have been mimicked almost in toto in India, forcing golf-course opponents to often take the legal route, sometimes successfully.

Now, for a just few examples nationwide:

\* Last October, a two-judge bench of the Punjab and Haryana High Court comprising Chief Justice B K Roy and Justice Surya Kant acted in response to a PIL, and ordered the demolition of the Forest Hill Golf and Country Club [FHGCC] at Karoran village off Chandigarh. They directed the CBI to probe its construction and the nexus between its promoters and top public servants, because the project had come up in blatant violation of the Forest Act and other land laws.

The club had shot into the news when 25 judges of the high court went on a strike a few months earlier, after Roy had pulled up two of them for accepting free membership of the FHGCC. It further emerged that Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh and other ministers, top bureaucrats, police officials and other individuals in positions of power and influence had likewise accepted honorary membership of the 380-acre club floated by NRI Colonel B S Sandhu, who ran an immigration consultancy to Canada. In an ironic development, Roy was subsequently transferred out of the state.

\* In January 2004, a division bench of the Supreme Court stayed the further development of an 18-hole golf course in the Goregaon West suburb of Mumbai,

when environmental activists alleged that hundreds of acres of eco-sensitive mangrove protected by Coastal Regulation Zone regulations had been destroyed for the purpose.

The stay was granted on a special leave petition filed by the Bombay Environmental Action Group. The Rs 200 crore-plus project being developed by the Usha Madhu Development Cooperative Housing Society would have covered from 170-550 acres of land owned by the Behramji Jejeebhoy group.

\* Last July, the Bombay High Court stayed the development of a 9-hole golf course plus seven-star hotel, convention centre and service apartments on a portion of the Royal Western India Turf Club [RWITC] -administered 226-acre Mahalaxmi Race Course, acting on a PIL filed by the Public Concern for Governance Trust.

The petitioners claimed that the project was a blatant attempt to commercially exploit public land by the RWITC and the developer, Pegasus Clubs and Resorts. RWITC allegedly entered into a deal with Pegasus for a minimum of 30 years, the PIL claimed, although its lease on the land was valid only till 2013. It also signed the deal with Pegasus without any consent from the Bombay Municipal Corporation or the state government from whom the land was leased – for racing only. Pegasus had paid RWITC an advance of Rs 10 crore and took all responsibility to secure all permissions for the project.

\* Sahara India Parivar's plans to build a casino, golf course and five-star hotels on four islands on the Sunderbans, the world's biggest mangrove swamp, has drawn protests from opponents who claim it would result in the "total destruction" of the pristine delta system. Sahara has already acquired 2250 hectares of land for this purpose. UNESCO designated the Sundarbans a World Heritage site in 1987. The project has been opposed by many including environmentalist Bittu Sahgal, editor of the green magazine, Sanctuary, and writer Amitav Ghosh.

Sahara India's Amby Valley lifestyle project near Lonavla, a hill station in Maharashtra, is another controversial project which had to wade through legal challenges, but has now forged ahead. A Professional Golf Association of India-sanctioned tournament was even staged on its golf course recently. Incidentally, Amby Valley were the title sponsors of the just concluded PGAI Tour for 2004-05.

\* Over 4,000 trees were allegedly cut down in the old forest area to pave the way for Royal Springs Golf Course in Srinagar, a project for which the then Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister Dr Farooq Abdullah, leader of the National Conference (NC), drew a lot of flak in the media. The course, designed by Robert Trent Jones at a cost of Rs 25-32 crore, has been rated as the best and the most beautiful in India, but has been flayed as "nothing but a symbol of obscenely warped priorities in public spending, and a monument to mal-governance..." by critics.

Ironically, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) opposed the development when it was in the opposition as a folly imposed on the state by the NC; but once in power, the PDP Chief Minister, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, has become an enthusiastic promoter of golf to lure tourists to the embattled state.

\* A couple of years ago, activists scuttled a move to build golf courses in each drought-affected district of Rajasthan as part of the 'food-for-work' programme envisaged by the previous Congress regime. This decision, taken by the then state government, to build golf courses as part of drought relief works was indeed strange – considering that golf courses themselves consume a lot of water and Rajasthan is a chronically drought-affected state.

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NOTE: The articles introduced in this Clearinghouse do not necessarily represent the views of the Tourism Investigation & Monitoring Team (tim-team).