

Sunday Spotlight

Skewed media coverage of a few crimes involving foreigners has sullied Goa's image

GOA Not a sin city

"Of all the places I have worked, lived and travelled in India, none is safer for women than Goa, despite the recent ugly convulsions in crime, the laid-back and inefficient police and the corrupt politicians."

Devika Sequeira

Some warped media coverage has dogged Goa after a few highly publicised cases of rape and deaths involving foreigners. After the February 2008 death of British teen Scarlett Keeling, Goa has been in the media glare for all the wrong reasons. Keeling, just 15, was found dead on the beach in Anjuna. Circumstantial evidence pointed to rape, and forensics confirmed she had been fed a cocktail of alcohol and drugs. The questionable process of investigations and her mother Fiona MacKeown's fight to expose the Goa police are now clearly etched in public memory, thanks to the persistent overlay of the case by the media.

Just a few months after the Scarlett case, a German woman living in Goa approached the police with a shocking complaint. Her daughter, barely 14 and in school, had been sexually used by Education Minister Babush Monserrate's son. The minister's son was eventually arrested after the intervention of the High Court. Last month a Russian tour representative went to the police after she was allegedly raped by a Goa businessman. After a month on the run, John Fernandes, a man with political connections, turned himself in. The case reverberated in Parliament after Goa MP Shantaram Naik made matters worse by suggesting that women who socialised till the late hours with strangers were putting themselves at risk.

There were three other suspicious deaths involving young Russian tourists that have not been sufficiently and profes-



sionally investigated by the police. But they were completely ignored by an otherwise hawkish English media. The parents of two of the victims had no funds even to travel to Goa from Russia to pursue the cases.

In a bid to airbrush Goa's sullied image and attract better tourists, Goa Tourism Minister Micky Pacheco said recently he was banning advertisements with bikini clad women from tourism promotional material. The announcement has provoked caustic comment from across the world. Here's one reaction: "Goa's image problem has nothing to do with 'bad tourists' vs 'good tourists,' whatever that means. It comes from the wave of rapes and molestations, committed mostly by

residents that local officials have been unable to stop."

How true is this? Are we really the sin city of India? And are those of us who live here, have teenaged daughters who go to the beach and party at night spots in danger of being senselessly attacked, molested, raped and dumped by the local police? I think not. Of all the places I have worked, lived and travelled in India, none is safer for women than Goa, despite the recent ugly convulsions in crime, the laid-back and inefficient police and the corrupt politicians.

A report earlier this month in the mainstream UK paper The Telegraph spoke of Goa's decline from a "hippie haven to a gangster's paradise". Conveniently ignoring the recession, it said the number of Britons to Goa had slumped by a third after a series of murders and rapes of foreign tourists. The rape and murder of Scarlett Keeling and the murder of another Briton Stephen Bennett had "damaged the state's reputation", it said. Bennett was, however, found strung to a mango tree 300 km from Goa in Malasai village in the Raigad district of Maharashtra. Four villagers were booked for clubbing the drug-habituated Briton to death on December 11, 2006. Some news reports said Stephen Bennett's mother Maureen, who visited Malasai was so struck by the poverty that she left a note of Rs 500 in one of the huts.

Hard truths

Media distortions cannot, however, disguise some hard facts. The 2009 annual British Behaviour Abroad report released by the UK Foreign Office said "Britons are continuing to get into trouble abroad, with key concerns including drink and drug related cases". The report said 2,290 Britons were arrested in Spain, 1,534 in the USA, 294 in the United Arab Emirates, 202 in Thailand and 40 in India. "Arrests for drugs offences formed a significant percentage of these arrests, contributing to a quarter of the total arrests in

Thailand," the report said. It also lists 22 cases of Britons raped in Spain, 28 in Greece, one in Italy, 3 in Portugal, 8 in Turkey, 10 in Cyprus, 6 in Egypt and 1 in India, among others.

These statistics are not an argument to absolve Goa of its abysmal level of policing, crime detection and corruption, but it helps put things in the perspective of global tourism. One of Goa's biggest problems is not the police, but the pathetic level of its politicians. An assurance from Pacheco to ban ads with bikinis is meaningless and hypocritical. Restaurants, department stores, streets, flea markets on the tourist coast are clogged with skimpily dressed foreigners and shirtless men, and very little is done to discourage topless sunbathing. The Church complained sometime ago that foreign tourists rarely abide by a dress code when they visit churches in Old Goa. When the first lot of hippies began to straggle into Anjuna and Arambol in the early sixties, they attracted only a cursory look from fishermen and toddy tappers. What were a few Whites zonked out on hallucinogens compared to the authoritarian Portuguese that ruled for 451 years? Goa's excessive tolerance and laissez faire manner has to some extent been its undoing. It has allowed drug dealers to proliferate and corrupt politicians to survive and profit. But far from the excess and tackiness of the tourist coast it is home to a million Goans with traditions as conservative as they come, and who are now caught in the escalating displacement of locals by the real estate frenzy.

More recently Goa is also second home to Sachin Tendulkar, Shah Rukh Khan and thousands of other moneyed Indians and foreigners. It is the one place in India, says Akshay Kumar, who also has a house here, where he can let his hair down and ride a bike without being mobbed in the streets. Things could be much better, no doubt, but they could also be worse.

The Scarlett case



Scarlett Keeling

The Central Bureau of Investigation, which took over the Scarlett Keeling case after a prolonged delay, found the evidence on hand did not support the murder charge made by her mother, CBI lawyers told this newspaper.

Two men, Samson D'Souza, 31 and Placido Carvalho, 42 are standing trial in the case. D'Souza worked as a barman in the Anjuna beach shack where the British teen was last seen alive, and Carvalho according to the CBI, operates in the matka business. The CBI took over the case in June 2008 and filed a supplementary charge-sheet against the two men before the Goa Children's Court two months ago, reducing the charges of murder to culpable homicide not amounting to murder. This upset Keeling's mother Fiona MacKeown.

Carvalho was named abettor in the case for allegedly providing the 15-year-old with cocaine which she sniffed in the bar after already being on a high of alcohol and ecstasy. Fiona, a mother of nine with five different partners had her share of negative press too. In a tell-all, Fiona's former partner Rob Clarke unraveled some not-so-flattering details of her dysfunctional family life to the British tabloids.

More recently, Fiona was hauled up by her government for falsely claiming over 50,000 pounds in benefits.

DS