

'They grumbled, struggled, complained and finally succumbed to mining'

Joaquim Fernandes | TNN

Panaji: It is nobody's case that mining is the only reason for the decline of agriculture in Goa. Fields in Goa's coastal belt lie abandoned due to the more lucrative option of tourism. Agriculture is also now seen as financially unviable and youth are shying away from the labour-intensive profession in favour of white-collared jobs.

It is, however, equally clear that mining has hit agriculture where tourism is yet to reach—Goa's hinterland. Anti-mining activist from Bicholim, Ramesh Gawas tells of how north Goa villages of Pale, Velguem, Surla, Kotambi, Dingne, Navelim, Usgao, Pissurlem, Shirgao, Advalpal and Langao have been "ruined by mining". Gawas says that the village of Mulgao, though affected, still has agriculture, but that Shirgao is "lost forever".

Gawas says that with fields getting silted, farmers could not get profitable yields. "They grumbled, struggled, complained to mamlatdars and with no way out, finally succumbed to mining. They adjusted by taking up jobs or owning mining trucks," says Gawas.

"North Goa is gone," he says, adding that the struggle has now shifted to the mining belt of south Goa. Environment is a casualty that has forced priests (Tisk-Usgao and Panchawadi) and politicians (Bicholim) to lead people out on the streets in protest. Even today, Surla in North Goa is witnessing an agitation and public protests are now common in Sanguem-Quepem.

The festering discontent against mining-related ills has often erupted into law-and-order situations. In all this, citizens complain that they are at the receiving end of the law; that they have been wrongly arrested, ill-treated and slapped with criminal and civil cases.

Quepem lawyer John Fernandes says five different cases have been filed by mining companies against farmers and residents of the Sanguem-Quepem area. These are criminal cases



File photo of police action against Quepem villagers protesting mining activity

pending before the judicial magistrate first class in Sanguem. There is also a civil case pending against 80-odd villagers of Collamb village in Quepem. There are other criminal complaints against

There are dozens of complaints filed by villagers for destruction of their fields. But police have not taken cognizance of a single complaint

John Fernandes | LAWYER

villagers that are treated under Section 151 of the criminal procedure code, says the lawyer.

Fernandes also alleges discrimination by police. "What about the complaints filed by people against mining companies? There are dozens of complaints filed by villagers for destroying their fields, water resources,

forests, for polluting nullahs, for causing dust pollution, etc. But police have not taken cognizance of a single complaint," says Fernandes.

One complaint by the miners was filed against Rama Velip, Muneil D'Souza and 85 others. The complaint filed in the Quepem civil court, pertains to a November 12, 2008 incident. It accuses the villagers of "unlawful assembly with intentions of committing serious offences, forcibly entering mines and abusing officials and workers and threatening workers, security personnel", due to which, "plaintiffs suffered huge losses".

Fernandes recalls, "All the villagers were arrested in the evening. By the time the villagers were released on bond it was almost 10pm. The agitators were beaten by the security of the company."

A more brutal incident happened on December 17, 2008. "The villagers of Cope-labhat Ambaulim staged an agitation at Ambaulim for dust pollution caused by the

mining transport operation. The villagers, including aged women, were brutally beaten by the police. A small child was crying when the mother was forcefully taken into custody by the Quepem police. We have got video footage of that," says Fernandes.

Quepem DySP Rohidas Patre and Quepem PI Sudesh Narvekar rejected allegations of discrimination. They



said specific details in the people's complaints are difficult to remember but said they were willing to discuss the merits of all complaints face to face. They indicated that most complaints pointed to problems that were in the domain of either traffic police or the transport department.

Complaints of dust pollution had been forwarded to the Goa state pollution con-

trol board and though the board had tested some sites, they were yet to give their certificate, police officers said. It is easy to make allegations against the police, but the complaints have to be looked at on merit, they said.

A recent example of citizens' complaints being ignored by police is that of Dumena D'Souza of Collamb. In December 2009, she filed a complaint against about 12 mines from Collamb, Curpem, Rivona and nearby areas. D'Souza complained that overloading of trucks continues in violation of a high court order dated January 29, 2002 passed in writ petition 418/89, in violation of the transport department notification of December 15, 2007 and in contravention of the conditions in the mining lease.

She complained that the dust pollution from Collamb to Curcholem is the "main cause for air-related diseases such as asthma to pedestrians travelling on this route and particularly to those re-

siding adjacent to the main road". She also stated that the trucks cause accidents and loss of life.

D'Souza prayed that the mining companies be charged under the IPC, CrPC, the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1981 and under the Goa Public Health Act for "endangering the public health and for jeopardizing the safety of public life". Police have still not registered the complaint.

In North Goa, an incident of police-public clash happened in May 2008. Over 300 villagers from Advalpal (Bicholim) stormed the mines to stop them. Seventy villagers including 76-year old Kashinath Gad were arrested and thrown behind bars.

Says Gad, "Five busloads of policemen came from Panaji to arrest us. But we offered to go on our own. The mine owner is relaxing in his luxurious bungalow while we who suffer, were made to suffer even more," says Gad.

It's a criminal case in which all 70 villagers have to appear before a Bicholim court regularly, says another Advalpal villager Shyamsundar Naik. Along with his two brothers, wife and old mother, Naik is also an accused in this criminal case.

In his budget for 2010-2011, chief minister Digambar Kamat increased the plan allocation for agriculture from 2% of the total plan outlay to 4%. Kamat made a provision of Rs 46.22 crore for agriculture as compared to Rs 18.62 crore in the previous year.

But with an unprecedented mining revenue of Rs 291 crore in 2009-2010, the government is clearly over the moon. "Its a boom! This is the first time in Goa's mining history that the state has earned such high revenues. Next year, it may be Rs 350 crore," mines director Arvind Loliengar told TOI.

It is against this backdrop that mining-affected people are fighting against the government machinery. Some view it as a "hopelessly unequal fight between chappal-wearing farmers and jet setting, billionaire miners with vast monetary might and political clout to match".