

# 'Miners are arrogant... we are feeling hopeless'

Mining silt is damaging rice fields, water sources are drying up. Villagers in Sanguem are a worried lot

Joaquim Fernandes | TNN

**Sanguem:** The fertile rice fields spread across 200 hectares in Collme-Xethod in Collamb village of Sanguem taluka have sustained generations of farmers. But now farmers say that silt flowing down from the mines in the hills above are spoiling their fields. Mining is also drying up the natural springs that once nurtured their fields.

"Zaitem xeth paddan assam. Udok nam tor baath kami, poll chod (Much of the paddy has been spoilt. If there is no water, the grain is less, the chaff is more)," says Rama Velip from Collamb-Rivona. Agriculture is the mainstay for this 45-year-old and his four brothers and their family of 17.

The Collme-Xethod stretch of fields is located at the foot of Gulkhond Dongor, where mining is now on. From the base of Gulkhond Dongor, two springs used to nurture the fields. While the one on the eastern side, called Gollimoll, has already dried up, the other one on the west, called Gogro (cascade), is gradually drying up, its torrent now reduced to a trickle.

Rama insists that over 90% of the people in Collamb depend on agriculture. "It is the best profession because all year long you get free food. If not anything, there is at least rice congee to eat. But the main thing is water. Without water, you can't sow. In the last seven-eight years, water is reducing," he says.

A narrow storm water drain separates the house of 60-year-old Pandhari Mahadev Velip and the fields of Collme-Xethod. "Water used to flow

in this drain even in May because of the abundance of the Gogro spring. Now this nullah is already dry in March," says Pandhari.

As if the drying up of the natural springs was not enough, mining silt has washed into the fields, damaging the crops of many farmers. Motesh (Mathew) Antao is one of them.

Motesh's is the first field on the northern side of Collme-Xethod and therefore closest to the mines. A crude wall of boulders now separates his field from the red mining rejects of Gulkhond Dongor. Mo-



tesh's nearly-one-acre field used to yield him 50 sacks of paddy. With a lot of chaff this year, he is not sure of the yield. "Sanguem has the maximum number of springs in Goa. If mining is allowed to destroy those water sources, agriculture will die and will also kill us eventually," says Motesh.

Ironic that although Motesh criticizes mining, he ekes out a living as a driver on a mining truck. "I don't like this job. Someday I hope to buy my own taxi," he says.

Asked why he does not avail of loans that are so easy now, he says banks will not lend him money as there are seven police cases against him. These cases had been foisted on him, Rama Velip and many others by mining companies, he alleges.

Motesh continues, "The police harass us. They arrest us, make us

sign papers and slap cases on us. Then we have to make repeated trips to courts. Their intention is to harass us into silence and eventually into submission."

Milagrina, Motesh's mother says, "The companies create divisions among the villagers. Now there is lot of enmity among people. Earlier, we used to collect firewood from the forest and our cattle used to graze there. Now they don't allow us. We have sold all our cattle, save two."

If there are doubts about farmers' claims regarding the blight of mining in Goa, the state government-appointed monitoring committee's findings should put that to rest. The monitoring committee, headed by the chief conservator of forests, has found violations in 54 of the 110 operational mining leases in Goa. Many of the 54 are in Sanguem.

Goa Foundation has obtained details of the violations in each lease under the Right to Information Act. Said Claude Alvares of Goa Foundation, "These violations were found only in the leases that the committee visited. There are many other leases. We will make a presentation to the ministry of environment and forests. If they don't act within one month, then we will act."

Alvares said most were forest violations. But a look at the monitoring committee's reports showed that each lease had committed on an average about five violations. These included not obtaining consent under water act or air act, leases being adjacent to wildlife sanctuaries, lack of clearances from environment, wildlife or standing commit-



Mining rejects hang like Damocles' sword over the fields of Collamb in Sanguem

tee and, more importantly, "dumping done outside lease area".

It is from these dumps that the silt runs into agricultural fields. Sources in the agriculture department, on condition of anonymity, admitted mining has affected farming in Sanguem. But they also say that Sanguem is just beginning to feel the pinch whereas villages like Cavrem-Pirla in neighbouring Quepem have already been badly hit.

Agriculture department sources said that during the last one year, there have been about seven public hearings in Sanguem for new mines. "About 90% of the people opposed the mines. Earlier, people used to keep quiet for money. Now they want to preserve their land and do agriculture," sources said.

Mining and its accompanying ills dominate the Sanguem landscape. In Shivsorem, 67-year-old Prabhakar Butto Gaonkar grows coconut, cashew, arecanut, sugarcane and rice in his own fields. But a mining lease has been issued for the area and the company is offering Gaonkar Rs 10 lakh for the land. The mine has started but the mining dumps have not reached near Gaonkar's fields yet.

Gaonkar is quoting a steep price for his fields in order to dissuade the company from buying. The mining

company has not agreed yet. Gaonkar's young daughter-in-law gets sentimental about the land: "The field is all we have. If we sell the field, where will we go with our small children?"

The cluster of houses around Gaonkar's house is nestled between two operational mining leases. The water level in the well opposite Gaonkar's house is precariously low. The village women nearby are sure the well will go dry by April.

The women are angry that mining dust has ruined their agriculture. After much fighting by Shivsorem residents, one mining company paid the families Rs 10,000 per year as compensation. Another company paid less.

Says Premavati Gaonkar, "Our sugarcane cultivation suf-

fered because our well dried up. What can we do with the land if there is no water? The miners are arrogant and don't listen to anyone. The village panchayat is not helping us. Last year, we agitated quite a lot. This year, we are feeling hopeless."

## Luxury car dealers zooming into Goa