

'Over-mining will kill water sources, ruin agriculture'

NGOs Start Expeditions Into Hinterland To Create Awareness

Joaquim Fernandes | TNN

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Panaji: Green fields against ravaged, bleeding hills; an aquifer that was ripped into a 'waterfall' only to dry up some days later; and a sight that could well qualify for the largest concentration of mining trucks in the world. On Sunday, a bus-full and two car-loads of citizens were taken across Goa's hinterland in an effort by some NGOs to create awareness about the effects of over-mining. With plans for more such expeditions in the future, Goenchea Xetkareancho Ekvott (GXE), the Goa Federation of Mining Affected People (GOAMAP) and others hope to force the government into taking immediate remedial measures to check over-mining.

So, on Sunday, starting from Quepem taluka, the expedition travelled to the affected areas in the talukas of Sanguem, Ponda, Sattari and Bicholim.

While dust pollution and its related health hazards are well known fallouts of mining in the hinterland, the activists explain that the killing of water aquifers in the hills being mined is threatening agriculture.

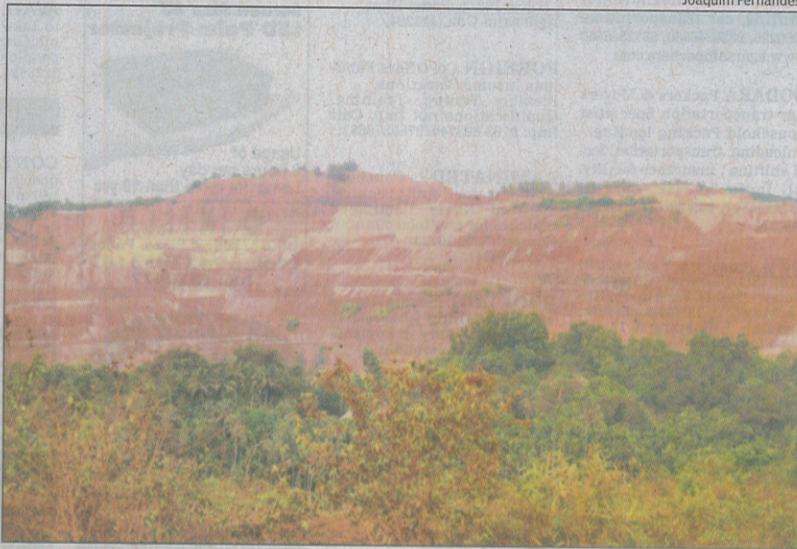
"If the government does not regulate mining now, Goa is a gone-case," says Bicholim-based activist Ramesh Gawas.

Referring to the complete drying up of wells and natural springs and the consequent death of agriculture in Shirgao, Pissurlem and Advalpal, GXE president Deelip Hegde adds, "These places in North Goa are already finished (by mining). But Sanguem and Quepem are in the first stages of destruction."

Entering Cavrem village in Quepem, the group sees a lot of greenery in the fields below. But above the fields are the ravaged, bleeding range of hills starting with Devapan Dongor. Writer and drama personality Hartman de Souza tells the group how the "Paikachi Zhor" and the sacred grove behind Devapan Dongor are now under threat. There are three mines on the hills and the fields below have already been sold, he says.

Just a little ahead in Maina village, De Souza relates a recent incident when the miners allegedly hit a water aquifer while cutting a hill and "there was a waterfall as wide as a car" that gushed for several days before drying up. Still further and a little before the government secondary school in Maina, De Souza shows on the left of the road, a low and long heap of mining dump. "It used to be a hill three years ago. I have climbed it. There were several natural springs in the area that used to flow into the Curca river. Now, all have dried up," he says.

Vending its way through the forested landscape, the group sees the verdant majesty of the Western Ghats punctuated frequently by the red taint of mines. In the Colomb area of Sanguem, the



MINING MALADIES: Mines at Pele

group stops at the huge mining dump of the "Unanantlo Dongor" and Colombarmer Rama Velip steps forward to explain. This mine is illegal," alleges Velip. "There is no environmental clearance for this mine. There was no agreement at the public hearing held in June 2008. This area has been demarcated as forest by the Sawant and Karapurkar committee and marked as no-development zone in the regional plan 2021. It has a slope gradient of 45 degrees. This falls in survey number 72 and permission from forest has been obtained for 12.90 ha. It is within five km of the Netravali wildlife sanctuary and 1.5 km from the Selaulim reservoir." Velip, described by many in the group as a "walking encyclopedia" of mining activity in Sanguem, also states the name of the lease holder, but there is no signboard here and the name cannot be verified.

Further on in Chimmutwadda of Curpem village, the fields are a welcome sight. But beyond the fields and deep within the hills, barely 100 m from the Netravali wildlife sanctuary, mining used to flourish until an NGO went to court and stopped it. Velip says that Curpem village alone has 17 mining leases of which only four now operate.

With the vehicles crawling on a forest dirt track for what seems an eternity, the group has to finally stop. A 10-minute trek in the jungle brings the group to a large mining dump abandoned years ago. The group is told that the slurry and rejects from the nearby beneficiation plant was dumped here to form this hill-ock. One day, the heap collapsed burying a worker and a truck inside. The real shock sinks in when the group is told that this is inside the Netravali wildlife sanctuary. Only after an NGO went to the Supreme Court, the dumping here

was stopped.

All is quiet now at the huge mining-related plant in nearby Tudou village. The security men at the gate are visibly upset at the group's arrival and forbid their entry past the barrier that blocks the road to the mines inside. This is the site that hogged the news three days ago. The SC reportedly sealed this mine some years ago. But the recent surge in demand rekindled interest in the dump of low grade ore inside. Hegde alleges that despite the SC order, 400 truckloads of the ore were illegally taken out of this mine since April 12, 2010. When the GXE and others complained, the administration was reluctant to act, Hegde alleges.

The expedition drives past the towns of Curchorem, Sanvordem and Tisk-Usgao, all awash in red mining dust. One could easily believe that this area has the largest concentration of mining trucks in the world. Mercifully, it being Sunday, the trucks are parked all along the roads and everywhere the eye can see. Past the green-turned-red hills of Pale, Velguem and other villages, the group is finally shown the mining activity on the range of hills from Mulgao to Shirgao.

Asked if these mines are legal, Ramesh Gawas shoots back: "All mines in Goa are illegal. They have all the papers. But do they follow the mandatory requirements in the papers? The environmental clearance states that the mining dump should not be more than 30 metres high. It also specifies the gradient. But not a single regulation is honoured. Also, the impact assessment studies of the mining companies submitted to the ministry of environment and forests state that there are no natural water sources in the area. Actually, there are six natural water sources here," says Gawas.