

'Springs, fields will die if Chiunim Dongor is mined'

Sanguem Farmers Say EIA Report Of Mining Co Is Misleading

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Panaji: The famous Taka-zhor spring and numerous other perennial water sources of Chiunim Dongor in Rivona, Sanguem, will dry up, destroying the orchards, agricultural fields and livelihoods of farmers if mining is allowed on Chiunim Dongor.

This worry haunts the farming families living in and around Chiunim Dongor. A mining company has sought to renew mining for iron and manganese ore on the hill where mining has been dormant for the last 35 years. The company has also prepared a "rapid environment impact assessment (EIA) and environmental management plan" for TC number 35 of 1951, an area totalling 79.9350 ha.

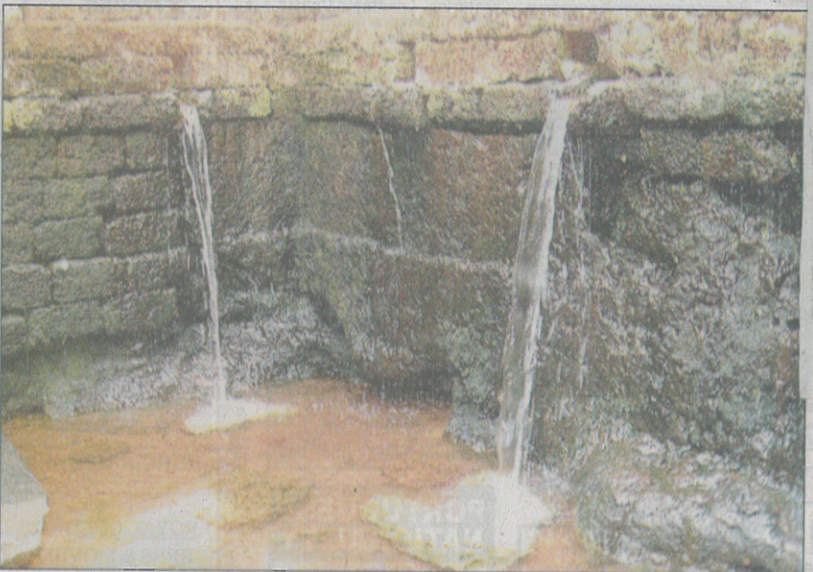
The farming community of Rivona and even the village panchayat are strongly opposed to mining on Chiunim Dongor. In November 2009, the Rivona village panchayat unanimously resolved that permission for renewal of lease and environmental clearance should not be given to the proposed mining project on Chiunim Dongor.

In its letter dated November 2, 2009 to the Goa State Pollution Control Board (GSPCB), Rivona panchayat countered the EIA for Chiunim Dongor stating that the claim made by the project report about "non-existence of perennial water sources in or adjacent to mine area is baseless". Insisting that there are "more than 20 rich perennial water bodies" and springs, the panchayat stated "the main paddy fields of village Rivona, namely Gaiginim, Beleshet and Deo Shetod, plus several arecanut and coconut orchards are fed by these water sources. These water bodies and the connected ecosystems and agriculture will get (sic) irreversible damage and will become extinct if the mine becomes operational".

The Rivona-based Rushivan Shetkari Sanghatana has also slammed the EIA study as "full of blatant lies and is totally fabricated to project our village as a backward area". The organisation claims "Rivona VP is one of the most progressive panchayats with 800 landline connections, 15 broadband connections, 3,000 satellite TV connections, 5 banks, 5 cooperative societies, over 100 self-help groups, a farmers' club, 20 educational institutions, 3,000 pucca houses and (is) a pride of Goa due to its agricultural richness, pristine and natural beauty."

It further states that the project site is at the topmost point of the village and the hill is the source of six big and totally 18-20 springs including Taka-zhor.

"These springs are the only source of potable water for the entire population in the mining lease area and adjoining areas and also irrigate a vast span of paddy fields, orchards, plantations spread on all the four sides of this hill encompassing an area of hundreds of acres of the main wards of Rivona village and on the other side of the major portion of Molcornem village," the farmer's collective states.



UNDER THREAT: Rivona's lush orchards are fed by the springs that flow from Chiunim Dongor. (Below) Taka-zhor in full flow in the middle of summer

The sanghatana fears that if the mines become operational, all the streams originating from the hills will become extinct within a year or two, "thus destroying hundreds of acres of paddy fields and orchards and the people entirely dependent on these fields for their livelihood will be made to starve".

Farmers also fear that mining will affect several ancient monuments of archaeological importance in and around the mining lease area, especially the "Vishnudevali" dating back to the 12th century which is in the centre of the lease. Mining will also destroy all the houses lying in the core area rendering the poor scheduled tribe people homeless, the sanghatana states.

The farmers are strongly supported by the Goa state agricultural marketing board, which has urged the GSPCB not to grant any environmental clearance to mining on Chiunim Dongor.

In a November 2009 letter to the GSPCB, the agriculture marketing board wrote, "Mining activity in Goa has brought down the production of horticulture and agriculture commodities. Employment generation due to mining is of temporary nature and destroys infrastructure of agri-horticulture industry. Natural resources are destroyed in due course of time. Mining activity leav-

es behind huge quantities of rejection, spreading debris in forest areas, pasture lands and nullahs. Talukas of Bicholim, Sanguem and a part of Quepem are live examples of this pollution. Besides people are affected on health grounds."

On April 24, this year, in the middle of Goa's scorching summer when water shortage across the state is severe, Taka-zhor flowed vigorously as picnickers frolicked under its refreshing waters. The spring gushed down the valley, home to lush green plantations of coconut, areca nut, pepper and a sprinkling of banana and jackfruit. On the other side of the ridge of the hill, other plantations flourish, nourished by more natural water springs there. All springs run down to nurture the paddy fields below in Rivona village.

Nature's bounty of Chiunim Dongor



is now under threat, local farmers fear. If mining is allowed there, based on "false claims" in the EIA report, then not only their livelihoods will be at risk, the ancient, natural glory of Chiunim Dongor that has long drawn tourists to its spring will be destroyed, they say. The EIA report was done by a consultant appointed by the company interested in the mining lease. Pandurang Patil, Rivona agriculturist and member of the sanghatana, lives on the slope of Chiunim Dongor. He points to other "blunders" in the EIA study prepared "by somebody sitting in Hyderabad without checking facts in Goa". "They want to project this as a very backward and poverty-ridden area which their mining will uplift. The EIA study is done by the project proponent, naturally he does it as per his convenience. Sadly, the government does not verify the claims made in the study, leaving us to fend for ourselves," Patil says.

GSPCB chairperson Simon de Souza confirmed that the EIA studies submitted by mining companies are not verified by the board. "EIA reports are not for our comment. We simply forward the report to the MoEF in New Delhi after the public hearings. MoEF is supposed to check

whether claims made in the report are correct or not," De Souza said. He added that the chief minister had recently made a representation to the MoEF demanding that the GSPCB be given the right to give its say on the EIA studies of the mining companies.

Meanwhile, Patil cites the forms I and XIV of the survey numbers on Chiunim Dongor, states that of the 17.25 lakh square metres area of the hill, 16.98 lakh square metres is cultivated. "This is 98.45% of the total area. Why do you want to finish all this agricultural area?" asks Patil. He says public hearings are a farce. Mining companies do not allow citizens to get their arguments recorded by getting paid goons who create chaos during the hearings. Patil recalls an incident when the South Goa deputy collector Navin Acharya had to adjourn a hearing citing "threat to limb and life".

Ashish Prabhudessai, Patil's neighbour and another prominent agriculturist in Rivona agrees. "Public hearings are very disorganized, farcical and intimidating to many of our farmers, who are mostly illiterate," he says.

High up on Chiunim Dongor, Patil points to its steep slopes. Citing the EIA study figures, he says 52,000 truckloads of rejects will be dumped on the hill slope in the first year. "This will run down the steep slope and silt our water bodies, our paddy fields and make our fields uncultivable," says Patil.

This has already happened in other areas of Rivona. Ashish's family owns plantations of coconut, areca nut, cashew, jackfruit, mango and pepper in Rivona. His 80-acre farm near Pandav Soddo, on the banks of the river Khushawati is suffering. Says Ashish, "The river has silted in the last few years due to mining and the water level has dropped by 50%. The quality and quantity of our coconuts has fallen. Also, monkeys and wild boar displaced by mining in the forests are invading our farms."

He cites the agricultural woes of Shivsorem, another Rivona hamlet, which according to him was a "vegetable haven". Says Ashish, "About five mines have started there now. The yield of the coconut trees has fallen despite being well fertilized as the trees are "scared" of the mines. It is just like feeding a goat well but tying her next to the lion."

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