

'Mining first gave us TB, and then alcoholism and young widows'

The impact of mining on social health has been disastrous, says the only doctor practising in Rivona-Neturlim

Joaquim Fernandes | TNN

Dr Awdhut Prabhudesai of Rivona laments the rampant mining in Sanguem taluka.

"There is dust on our roads, dust in our houses, dust on plants and dust can also settle in the lungs. Tuberculosis is on the rise. So are lung diseases, allergies and disorders of various types. This is not normal dust. It is ferrous, manganese dust and may even contain arsenic as an impurity," Prabhudesai said.

The 62-year-old claims to be the only qualified doctor in the 28-km stretch from Rivona to Neturlim.

He spent five years in the army on short service commission then worked for 28 years at Zuari Agro Chemicals, Zuarinagar, and also did a stint with the state directorate of health services. He also has a post graduate diploma in occupational health.

The younger brother of Ranu Prabhudesai, the first MGP MLA of Sanguem constituency, Prabhudesai says chikungunya was rampant in Collamb village last year and this was because it came from the migrant labourers brought in by mining companies.

"Even I got chikungunya. All the evils of shanty towns have come here due to mining. Alcoholism is rampant. When illiterate people get more money with less work, they don't know how to spend the money. But their aches and pains disappear with alcohol," says Prabhudesai.

Having worked with the state directorate of health services (DHS) for about three years, he knows its functioning quite well.

"DHS is not bad, but it is in the hands of politicians, just like our police force. When I diagnosed the sickness last year as chikungunya, DHS doctors recorded it as "fever with bodyache" in order to keep the record of chikungunya low," alleges Prabhudesai.

Neither the DHS nor Prabhudesai have done any survey of the diseases in the mining belt. But speaking from expe-



'No one bothers about poor farmers like us'

Saptu Ghurko Fatarpekar, 49, lives with his family of six in a farmhouse on his 10-acre orchard in Mushcavrem, in Sanguem taluka. Says Saptu, "I used to get 40 sacks of 'vaigann' paddy from my fields at Dhanollem. Now I don't even get eight sacks proper."

Saptu blames the sharp decline in his paddy yield to the mining ore that has entered his field. He says overloaded mining trucks spill ore on the edge of the road. The ore eventually washes into his and other fields damaging the crop badly. Saptu's field is not the only casualty of mining ore. Since a mine began barely 100m from his orchard, he claims the mining dust and silt has ruined his

orchard as well.

Saptu is a one-man army, often marching to the mines alone and fighting with anyone present including the truckers not to overload their trucks. He recalls one incident when the mines manager accosted him near his roadside field. After a heated argument, the manager pushed Saptu into the muck. "But I pummeled him into the muck too. He called the police who took me and beat me. I told them, you can beat me some more. What would you do if you were a farmer whose crops are being ruined?" asks Saptu.

He alleges that the mine owners' two sons offered him Rs 80 lakh and two trucks which he could operate in their

mines. They told Saptu that every month he would get Rs 14,000 sitting at home. Saptu refused. Another time, one son offered him another deal but



when he refused to commit to it in writing, an enraged Saptu slapped him, Saptu claims.

So what does Saptu do besides single-handedly taking on the might of the miner? He implores the government. He shows you what he calls "forms" that he has addressed to various government agencies. These "forms" are copies

of his letters written to the village panchayat of Rivona, the agriculture department and the health department offices in Sanguem, Quepem and even Curchorem.

In essence, Saptu's cry is that he is a cultivator of cashew, coconut, areca nut, banana, rice, nachni, chillies and sugarcane. He says water running off from the mines is ruining his well, that mining ore is ruining his paddy and that dust from the mines is hurting his orchard. He also writes to say that he and his family are having several health-related complaints due to the mining activity. "No one bothers about poor farmers like us. I ask what you would do if you were farmers?" asks Saptu.

ON A MISSION



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Awdhut Prabhudesai
DOCTOR

Prabhudesai.

Traditionally, he comes from an agricultural family and even today Prabhudesai grows coconut, areca nut, bananas, mango, cashew, papaya, pineapple and paddy.

"We got sizeable ancestral land that sustained us for generations. I am the first in the family to go to work," says Prabhudesai. Alarmed at the danger posed by mining to agriculture and to public health, Prabhudesai advocates moderation in mining.

"I told a mine owner once that mining is going to be here for long. It will not perish like coconuts or bananas. So operate one mine at a time, do it on a sustainable basis. Even we will cooperate with you," says Prabhudesai. He laments the state government's insensitivity to the problems posed by mining. He is now worried

that the government is also considering mining leases close to the Selaulim dam.

Also, he says, there is no consideration for heritage sites in the state mining policy. The rock carvings at Ponsallimoll, a protected site of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), are within a mining lease. He regrets the government's lack of control on mining. "If Zuari can be closed for one year for effluents going in the river, why can't mining be closed for noise and dust pollution?" he asks.

Prabhudesai recalls how in his younger days, he accompanied his elder brother Ranu Prabhudesai on hunting trips in the forests of Sanguem. "Those days we went on shikaar; to hunt for rabbit, jungle fowl and other game. Tigers roamed the land here. Now mining has displaced the animals," he says.

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