

'Not a single square inch of land has been cultivated here in 4 yrs'



Photos: Joaquim Fernandes

Shirgao, once known for its abundance of water, has a sorry tale to tell. It's difficult to find a potable source today. The Nagpur-based National Environmental Engineering Research Institute has held mining responsible for the depletion of the water sources and the siltation of the fields. It says Rs 6.60 crore would be the cost of remedial measures to address the water scarcity. It also estimated Rs 1.8 lakh per ha as the cost of cleaning up the silted fields

Joaquim Fernandes | TNN

Shirgao: For the abundance of water, Shirgao village in Bicholim taluka was once called Vishnusthal (Vishnu's abode), villagers say. Today, Shirgao is Goa's epitome of how mining can ruin agriculture through a two-pronged attack: by depleting its natural water sources and by silting its fields to render them uncultivable.

"The deepening of the mine pit to the level of -30 m to -40 m has led to reversal of groundwater flow direction from Sirigaon (Shirgao) village to the deep mine. The resultant effect is the depletion of groundwater in the village wells," says a report by the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), Nagpur.

The executive summary of the NEERI report also states, "The soil analysis' results indicate that the silt deposition from the mining overburdens has degraded the soil fertility in the agricultural fields of Sirigaon village." It was in March 2008, that Shirgao villagers petitioned the Goa bench of the Bombay High Court to stop mining as their wells had gone dry and they were unable to cultivate their fields.

Three mining companies — Chowgule and company, Rajaram Bandekar mines and Dempo mining company (now taken over by Sesa



WASTELAND: Those used to be coconut palms once upon a time (top) and the barren fields of Shirgao

Goa) — have been mining in Shirgao for several decades. Around 2005, when mining intensified, there was an alarming drop in levels in the drinking water wells as well as the numerous natural springs that nurtured the rice fields of Shirgao. The slide continued and within three years, the wells and the springs had dried up completely. Shirgao villagers claim that they used to take two crops annually from the 160 ha fertile fields which they proudly claim were part of the "rice bowl area of Goa".

The high court appointed NEERI to ascertain, among other things, whether there was depletion in the water bodies

of Shirgao, whether the depletion was caused by mining and whether mining was responsible for the damage to the agricultural fields of Shirgao. The court also directed NEERI to specify the measures to be taken for the rehabilitation of the water bodies, rehabilitation of the agricultural fields and the costs for the same.

After a nine-month study, NEERI submitted its report around March 2009. Besides holding mining responsible for the depletion of the water sources and the siltation of the fields, NEERI estimated that Rs 6.60 crore would be the cost of remedial measures to address the water scarcity in the village. It also estimated Rs 1.8

lakh per ha as the cost of cleaning up the silted fields.

"In Shirgao, 90% of the families depended on agriculture. Of the 425 families here, 375 depended on farming. But since 2006, not a single family has cultivated even a single square inch of land," says Dinanath Gaonkar of Manoswadda, Shirgao.

He also says that the 72 drinking water wells in the village have gone completely dry. The NEERI report has also recorded that while wells in the neighbouring villages had adequate water even in December, Shirgao wells had dried up completely. The village is also covered in a blanket of dust. Armed with damning evidence in the form of the NEERI report, Shirgao villagers have urged the high court to direct the authorities who have granted permission for mining operations in Shirgao to withdraw the permissions.

The court has asked the ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) to file their say regarding the continuance of mining in Shirgao. The MoEF filed an affidavit saying it will place the NEERI report before its Experts Appraisal Committee (Mining) and report the committee's comments to the court. The matter has



been adjourned to June 2010.

Meanwhile, Gaonkar says the villagers now want to write directly to the union minister of environment and forests, Jairam Ramesh. "NEERI gave its report in March 2009. It confirmed that mining is responsible for our problems. Still the environment clearance of the MoEF stands. We urge Jairam Ramesh to cancel the clearance," says Gaonkar.

Continues Gaonkar, "For sixty long years, they (miners) have been grabbing the wealth from our village. We don't worry about ourselves. But what about the future generations? If rehabilitation does not happen fast, the future is grim. They should rejuvenate our fields and recharge our water table at the cost of the mining companies, not at the cost of the government." Atchut Gaonkar of Dewulwadda, Shirgao, owns 3,000 square metres of rice fields from which he produced 24 'khandi' paddy. With his fields ruined by silt and lack of water, Atchut now buys his rice from the shops like the rest of the villagers.

Atchut laments the drying up of the natural water sources in the village. "For the abundance of water in Shirgao, our village was called Vishnusthal (Vishnu's abode). Atam amchem astitva naxtt zalem (Now our own identity has been destroyed)."

When contacted, Sesa Goa, which has taken over Dempo mining, declined to comment saying the matter is in court. Email and telephonic queries to other mining companies failed to evince any response.

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