

## Loksatta

Record rainfall does not liberate Goa from water tankers

Raju Nayak

Barely have the monsoons retreated after dumping record amounts of rain over Goa when the water tankers have begun to make their appearance in the villages of this tourist state.

According to state government officials this year's record deluge of 130 inches have washed hundreds of tonnes of silt from mining sites into Goa's primary water sources like the Selaulim reservoir, the Khandepar and Bicholim rivers and Mayem Lake. Officials say the holding capacity of these water bodies have been considerably reduced following the unprecedented silting this year.

For instance, water supply from the Selaulim project is expected to be far lower than the usual 165 million litres per day in the coming months, sources say. Sources in the state's irrigation department allege that wastes from four mines in the catchment areas of Curpem, Curdi and Chilman around this reservoir have silted the reservoir. Worse still, three old mines near this reservoir were resurrected earlier this year worsening the situation.

According to Brother Philip D'Souza attached to the Don Bosco farm at Sulkornem in Sanguem taluka mining wastes are being discharged right into the Selaulim River. "The silt from the mines is now weakening the structure of the Selaulim dam itself," D'Souza says.

However the mining industry denies the allegation. "For the matter of fact, in Khandepar around 8 years ago the problem of silt existed and off late, the same has been arrested by taking effective measures in the mining dumps. In Selaulim, Khandepar and Mayem, there is no damage of water quality being found." S. Sridhar, Secretary GMOEA said.

Incidentally, the Union Ministry for Environment and Forests had only in June issued a notification extending the leases of nearly 500 mines after several of them were ordered closed by a Supreme Court order.

According to environmentalist Claude Alvares Goa's mine owners flout even the most basic environment-protection norms like constructing bunds to prevent inflow of mining wastes into water bodies. "The state government's mines department which oversees the functioning of mines has just two engineers one of whom is bogged down with court matters," Alvares said.

Even government officials admit that mine owners have a major say in the state's administration. "The Executive has found the ways and means to subvert the orders of the judiciary," says Johnson Fernandes, Mamlatdar of the Salcette taluka, who did a dissertation on the effects of mining in Goa. Government officials are quick to do a white wash job to please inspectors functioning on the orders of the judiciary, says Fernandes.

Admitting that the state's mines department was weak, Minister for Mines Digambar Kamat said a major revamp was on. "We are on the verge of expanding the department," says Kamat.

However villagers from the areas near the mining centres have already begun to sell off their properties. Most of the residents of the Pissurlem village in Bicholim Taluka surrounded by mines have already left after mining wastes destroyed all the 80 wells in the village. "Regardless of who is in power here, all politicians take the side of the mine owners," moans Hanumant Parab, a BJP activist. After Parab raised the problems of the villagers in public fora, local police allegedly acting on the behest of mine owners have slapped several cases against him.

Residents of Bicholim taluka say they have begun to order water tankers even before the end of the rains since the ground water here has been ruined by the mines.

Meanwhile six new mines are to be opened in the area by the end of this year.

*Box item in the story:*

S. Sridhar, Secretary, Goa Mineral ore Exporters Association (GMOEA) responds: Wells in Pissurelm have been ruined because of mining wastes. What is the industry's reaction?

It is not right to conclude that wells in Pissurlem have been ruined because of mining wastes. In fact, over the years desiltation of fields has been carried out by the mining industry and efforts are being made by the industry to remove the silt and help the farmers in cultivation. In fact, the industry is very keen that farmers re-cultivate their land, but there has been resistance from the farmers not to desilt their fields. Their only interest been compensation to be paid by the mining industry.

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