

Goan tribals rediscover agriculture after shut-down of mines

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When the iron ore mines in Netravali and Mhadei areas were ordered to be shut after they were declared as reserve forests in 1999, Rohidas Ram Gaonkar faced the prospect of sudden unemployment.

Gaonkar, 55, with a family of four to support was employed as a truck driver ferrying iron ore from the Netravali mines had to look for alternative means of employment. With no jobs in the mining sector nearby Gaonkar had to fall back on his family's age old occupation of gathering forest produce and agriculture.

After the initial hassles of readjusting to the old life, Gaonkar and 20 of his neighbours who were rendered unemployed are now sure that they do not want the mines back. "We used to suffer from malaria and respiratory diseases. All these are now a thing of the past," says Gaonkar.

His neighbour Ashok Gaonkar insists that agriculture more than makes up for the Rs 1800 or so he earned monthly as a daily wager. "Agriculture is enough to sustain ones family if we manage some surplus to sell...at least one is independent and won't have to answer to some supervisor," says Gaonkar.

Tribals formerly employed with the eleven mines that were shut down in Netravali and Mhadei are now pitted against Goa's politicians and mine owners who are fighting to overturn the Centre's decision to shut the mines. Egged on by environmentalists, the tribals, mainly from the cattle-rearing Dhangars and agriculturist Velips, have now taken to farming cash crops like areca nut, coconut and paddy on the periphery of the reserve forests.

With Netravali and Mhadei designated as part of the Sahyadri hotspot, the tribals living here are keen on benefiting from eco-tourism initiatives promoted by the state government. The Mhadei Sanctuary has now been adopted by an NGO, Eco, which is developing local handicrafts much to the delight of the tribals.

Still Goa's politicians cutting across party affiliations are working towards overturning the decision banning mining in the protected forests. Former BJP Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar continues to rage against former Governor Lt Gen (retd.) JFR Jacob, who agreed to declare the areas as Reserve Forests when President's Rule was enforced in the state in 1999. Parrikar's government has

appealed the decision in the Supreme Court. His successor Pratapsinh Rane who took over earlier this year is pressing ahead with the appeal.

At stake are leases of several top mine owners in the state. The number of leases within a 5 km. radius from Mollem (a conservation unit comprising Bhagwan Mahaveer Wildlife Sanctuary and Mollem National Park), Cotigao Sanctuary and Bondla Sanctuary were approximately 34, 10 and 5 respectively. All of these have been shut and the mine owners are waiting for a reprieve from the Supreme Court.

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