

Loksatta

Temples and trucks to the rescue of Goa's mine owners

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With iron ore exports to China soaring, mining wastes are accumulating on the once-verdant villages of Goa. And the state's mine owners are coming up with ingenious ways to stifle opposition from villagers.

Temples have begun to sprout up across the Goa's mining belt and mining companies here throwing in sops like free water tankers, complimentary school buses for local kids, sponsored treatment at local clinics, etc to stifle opposition from the state's vocal environmentalist lobby.

When a mine was supposed to be opened at Gavane village in Sattari taluka last year, the local villagers hit the streets in protest and stage rasta rokos. The protests quickly died down when the mine owners promised to build a temple in the village and organized finance for prominent citizens to purchase trucks to transport ore to the jetty. "Mine owners have gone on a temple building spree to silence opposition," says Rajendra Kerkar, a local environmentalist.

As a result, public hearings organized by the Goa State Pollution Control Board have been reduced to a farce with local truckers, doctors heading clinics sponsored by mine owners and others living off the mine owners. "People are now even coming out in support of open iron ore dumps in towns like Curchorem despite the health hazards," says Dr L U Joshi, Chairman, Goa Pollution Control Board.

Dr L U Joshi of the Goa Pollution Control Board says that people hired by the mines directly support the activity. "When I visited the affected areas of Curchorem the truck owners openly came out in support of the activity and opposed the shifting of down loading at Curchorem station," informed Joshi. People are happy if they are provided with handsome compensation and concessions, he informed.

At a meeting organized by the Board, prominent mine owner Avdhoot Timblo openly said there is demand by people for pollution caused by mines. "How will people be able to get freebies from the mine owners if there is no pollution," Timblo told the audience.

In the town of Amona, opponents of a pig iron plant quietly told the GSPCB officials that they were simply interested in jobs for locals and sponsored buses for the villagers.

Local politicians in Goa have now got into the act and have begun to orchestrate protests against mine owners who do not succumb to demands of extortion, allege mine owners. The smarter ones including the MLAs in the present assembly have already set up companies to lease machinery to the state's mine owners.

“With the kind of money coming in, villagers are losing their moral values,” laments Brother Philip D’Souza of the Don Bosco Farm in Sanguem. The priest’s continued opposition to the mines resulted in two attempts on his life in the past.

The mining industry insists that it does not support religious activities. “It is not true that religious activities are carried out by the mining companies, but we do heed to the requests of the villagers living in that area,” says S Sridhar, Secretary, Goa Mine Owners and Exporters Association.

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