

IS INDIA'S SUNSHINE STATE GOUGING ITSELF OUT?

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While Goa's Padma winners signed a petition against excessive mining in the state this week, earlier in March, groups from the mining belt joined hands and forced a cancellation of declared public hearings for mining leases. But the battle has just begun, as illegal mining and devastation grow rampant in the state known for its tourist beaches and pristine forests

Devki Katu Velip's house in Colamb village of south Goa's Sanguem taluka looks like any other tribal house in the area. Walls painted blue and green, ceilings covered with pink and orange paper streamers...

There is, however, one recent addition. In the room inside, a long, deep gash divides a wall into two halves. It has been caused by mining blasts in their area. "Things get bad during the monsoons, when the water comes in. The house can cave in anytime," says 60-year-old Devki, the eldest in the family of 22 who have been living with the ominous divide since the last three years.

The divide between the miners and the villagers, a wound they live with. A gash that hasn't gone deep enough to completely break the wall yet but one that surely threatens to.

Goa, India's smallest state, has the largest area (almost ten per cent) under its colonial legacy — mining. Its iron-ore is largely located in Bicholim, Satari and Sanguem talukas. The demand has been increasing in the last 7-8 years to meet China's — their largest market (86 per cent) — growing demand for iron-ore. In 2008-09, Goa exported over 70 per cent more ore as compared to 2003-04 and produced nearly 40 per cent more for the same years. And as demand soars internationally, Indian mining companies are looking to expand in other countries like Brazil, Latin America and South Africa in the coming time. While the miners are laughing their way to the banks — the total profit of Goa's top five mining companies (that account for over 70 per cent of exports and production) has crossed Rs 8,000 crore — the reality is contrary on the ground. The net profit of its largest mining company (Sesa Goa) alone stands at Rs 2,798 crore, while the net revenue of the state of Goa is Rs 2,700 crore. Despite mining being touted as one of the backbones of Goa's economy, the state revenues from mining are barely 1 per cent.

Besides the industry, the top players have a stronghold on the state. In an interview to HT after a moratorium on new mining leases was imposed by the Centre in February 2010, Goa's chief minister and its mines minister, Digambar Kamat, said that infrastructure to support mining like dedicated roads should be built, though he wasn't sure how the environmental impact would be accounted for. In the assembly session in March this year, his government announced a mineral development fund in the budget after failing to implement a green cess on mining rejects that had been proposed in the last budget — a watered down policy — which sources say is because of mounting pressure from the state's mining industry.

Moreover, just before the central government placed a moratorium and ordered an environment impact assessment on mining activities in February this year, the union environment and forest ministry had cleared nearly 100 fresh mining leases. “If 110 mines are causing the damage they are, imagine the devastation if another 100 are given permission?” asks Manohar Parrikar, current leader of the opposition.

Shivanand Salgaocar, Managing Director, VM Salgaocar (one of the top mining companies) counters, “All 100 leases won’t go into operation so soon. It takes time to get clearances. Euphoria is because of the frantic demand from China, which will taper off by 2012 once all projects in Australia and Brazil go into full-fledged operation. There is a heavy load on infrastructure currently. Steps are being taken by the government to build a mining corridor along a PPP model. Right now there is a bit of congestion on the roads.”

But while the miners are raking it in, widespread devastation on the ground – drying paddy fields, diminishing ground water and forests, displaced wildlife, health problems – continues. (*See box*)

Add to that, the issue of illegal mining, which in recent times even the state government has been forced to admit to. In the Economic Survey of 2005-06, nearly 2,66,000 sq m of government land was said to have been ‘illegally encroached’ by mining companies. The state that contributes about 15 per cent of India’s total iron-ore has about 110 iron and manganese ore mines that export 35 million tons of ore annually. According to Parrikar, Goa’s ore exports exceeded its production by nearly 10 per cent in 2007-08, which rose to 17 per cent in 2008-09. “How can you export more than you produce? There’s obviously massive illegal mining taking place in the state,” he says.

Even the state’s environment minister, Aleixo Sequeira, told the assembly in March that 85 out of 99 mine operators, which included top players like Sesa Goa, Salgaocar, Chowgule and Sociedade Fomento, were continuing mining activities in the state without the mandatory air pollution clearance – in most cases permissions had expired on Feb 28.

While 2009 became the year of ‘a mad mining race’ in Goa, given the growing demand, it was also the year when the state forest department was forced to survey over 40 complaints of illegal mining in forest areas it had received. And it could barely clear any. A highly placed official at one of the top mining companies, who didn’t wish to be named, said that “a lot of illegal mining by companies who don’t have legal leases was rampant,” adding that even legal leaseholders encroach on various conditions.

Salgaocar, however, refutes this, “What irregularities? These companies have stopped mining, since their renewals are pending before different agencies. Two of my mines have been shut since 2007 – they are waiting for government clearances.”

The case of Khodidas mine in Colamb, named in the list of illegal mining in forest areas, has a private reserved forest site within its lease. But it still doesn’t have forest clearance, while mining activities continue. Residents say the miners have even managed to get permission from the forest department for a 400-metre wide road to transport the ore.

In another instance, Korgao village in Pernem taluka (a first for an area till date known for only its agriculture and horticulture) the government authorities declared gross illegalities in 2008 against ex-MLA and owner of the said property, Jeetendra Deshprabhu, after they found a pit had been enlarged “reportedly for augmentation of water source” without necessary approvals and 5-6 tons of ore kept near the excavated site which had been found having indications of ore deposits. Government authorities in their report said they would consider issuing a show cause notice to the owner. Kishore Naigaonkar, resident of the same taluka, says despite that, “excavations continue at nights. Villagers can’t question him since it’s his property, but the mining is illegal since he doesn’t have a lease or the panchayat’s permission.” Adds Pernem’s MLA Dayanand Sobte, “the government assured us that action would be taken, but nothing has happened till date. Earlier the mining happened in the day, now it’s taking place at night.” Deshprabhu, on the other hand, admits that his mining lease is pending with the government, but maintains he hasn’t been indulging in mining. “I’m an agriculturist, not a miner. I’ve been only been planting coconut trees, barricading land from cattle etc. And anyway, this land doesn’t come under the forest conservation act.”

Roughing it out

There is simmering discontent with unlawful/excessive mining in the state: Even as Goa’s Padma winners – cartoonist Mario Miranda, writer Ravindra Kelkar, musician Remo Fernandes etc – united and signed a petition against excessive mining in the state in April, about 8-10 new groups from across the mining belts have come up in the last three years. Salgaocar is scathing, “Mining is not supported by the Goan population. Tell me which activity is supported by the Goan people? Activism is justified but it differs from case to case. Can those who oppose mining provide employment to those who are working in mining? Unscrupulous operators should be stopped. You can’t paint everyone with the same brush.”

But for these people at the forefront, it has been a rough ride.

- Sebastian Rodrigues: Blogger-activist and coordinator of GAKUVED (Gawada, Kunbi, Velip & Dhangar Federation) was arrested in 2008 for protesting against mining. Allegedly beaten up by local mining mafia. Branded a Naxalite by local political parties.
- Theatre person Hartman D’souza’s wife Cheryl D’Souza, their daughter and her mother were arrested because they refused to be compensated for their farmlands to allow mining in the area. The family chained themselves to the trucks with support from other activists. Protests turned ugly when the local mafia beat them up, destroyed their cameras and the police watched. They were later arrested.
- Rama Velip: In 1993, Rama and his father, whose home and paddy are on a mining lease, fought in the court and got an illegal mine closed, “The miners were selling the fertile soil from our village to another,” he says. Father and son were arrested and put in jail; the case went on for 3 years. They reached a compromise, when his father demanded that the village soil be retained.

Q&A with P.K. Mukherjee, Managing Director, Sesa Goa

In the state assembly in March, Rs 2798 crore was quoted as Sesa Goa's net profit – a figure higher than the entire state revenue.

Well, in 2008-09, we made a profit of over Rs 2000 crore before tax. I don't see how the profit a company makes is relevant in this case. Probably the contention is how much is going back to the people. I don't want to get into controversy, so let the figure and context remain.

If another 100 mining leases (in addition to the 110 already in operation) are given permission, how do you read the effect on Goa's economy and impact on its environment?

It's not a question of number of leases; it's about how many people who have credentials to do this work – then the impact would be different. You have to look at things like production, acreage etc. Mining leases in Goa are fragmented; it depends on the size, volume, pressure on existing infrastructure... the environmental clearance considers aspects like water, which land can be used for dumping rejects etc. The laws are strong, now they should be firmly imposed.

Why has there been a sharp rise in voices against mining in the state in recent years?

Basically the voices are coming for iron-ore, the limelight commodity now. It's an abnormal profit situation, so it becomes tough to control the fall out which are unscrupulous people coming in. India has seen a number of national and international NGOs come in. Without getting into their merits or demerits, their only business is activism.

There have been various instances of illegal mining in Goa, one of the top mining companies has said that even legal lease-holders flout necessary conditions.

Illegalities have to be dealt with an iron hand. Leaseholders are legal; their leases are given environmental approval. There's no point shouting to enforce the law, punishment must be given. Our civil and criminal courts are good.

Sesa Goa was named by the state's environment minister in the assembly last week as one of the 85 out of 99 companies that are operating without air pollution clearance.

Every lease has a pollution clearance given by the state pollution board under the air and water act every 2-3 years. We've applied for our renewal but it hasn't yet come officially. If it's not rejected or given a show cause notice, it's deemed as renewal. If we don't have clearance yet, we don't have rejection either.

Devastation caused by mining – illegal or otherwise – in the state

Down south

Domain d'souza, 38, who lives with her family of eight (including four children) in Bandhara, Colamb, says the dust pollution has led to the kids developing asthma, sore throats and frequent colds in the last 4-5 years. Dr A. Prabhudesai, a resident doctor of the village, says he sees an average of 2-4 children a day with respiratory complaints. "There's a condition called pneumoconiosis in which insoluble dust settles in the lungs.

These problems would be common even in a place like Mumbai but here the additional factor is mining dust. Children in the village are particularly susceptible to it.”

Then there are other issues. “Mining has cut the inside forests, getting firewood is a problem. There’s no grass left for cows to graze. Mining agents fight and threaten, give alcohol to villagers... Hardly 6-8 people from the village work in the mines, the rest 30 odd who work in security and operations are from outside,” says D’souza.

Milagrin Antaio, 45, worked in a manganese mine for ten years, earning Rs 10-15/day. He quit six years back when the mine was taken over by one of the biggies and “machines and cheaper labour from Karnataka” were brought in. “Now even workers from Jharkhand have come here after everything of theirs has been destroyed,” he says. Forty something Rama Velip, who has been on the forefront of opposing illegal mining in that area, says 1510 is a figure he’ll not forget – out of Colamb’s total area of 1929 hectares, 1510 hectares is under mining. It’s also the year that the Portuguese came to India. He says that mining has led to widespread deforestation, “hence rainwater can’t be held. From 350-inches of rainfall a decade back, we get barely 100 inches now. Last June there was no water. If there are no trees, where will we go for cover? Around 30 ha of forest have been cut between 2006-2010. Tigers have disappeared. The mines have gone in too deep, we don’t get drinking water. If there’s no water, there’s nothing.”

Nearly 80 families live around these mines, the closest ones are the worst affected. Four families were shifted last year wherein compensation between Rs 2 and 7 lakh was given. “Now to take the people into confidence, miners have spent a crore on concretising the laterite Shantadurga temple of the village,” says Velip. “Besides that, they have been giving free umbrellas, bags, books etc to children, while people are eating mining dust, drinking polluted water.”

UK-based Goan and anti-mining activist Carmen Miranda says Colamb is an area where there seems to be manipulations to usurp land from local farmers and government forests for mining. “But because it is far out, the locals feel they are fighting a losing battle against advancing mining projects.”

Up north

For about 37-odd families in Bandwada, Pissurlem of north Goa’s Satari taluka this is the last season of their ancestral address. Come May 2010, and they will move to Shantinagar. Their old homes stand on the land that needs to be mined for more ore. This village, where 4000 people are dependent on 80 acres of land for their livelihood, is surrounded by a mining belt where mining has been going on for many years.

Erstwhile farmer Gurudas Lakshman Gawde, 45, who has been operating a seasonal tea stall (November – May) since the last 3 years near one of the mines, is one of the future residents. He has been given Rs 6 lakh. “I was born and brought up in this area but will have to move since everyone else is going too. Here, my paddy work stopped almost ten years back when the springs started drying up. It’s not the same with a tea-stall,” he says. Moving homes is not new to this village. Sitarama Savaikar, 60, is also moving with her family this May. Her son, a subcontractor in one of the mines, says cracks have developed in the ground where they lived earlier. “Land slide can happen anytime plus mining is expanding in this area since there’s ore beneath this village.”

Harish D. Rajani, spokesperson for Damodar Mangalji, the mine company that’s shifting the families, was first reluctant to speak on the issue since they didn’t want “publicity”

for their “effort”. Later he said it was their “duty” to do this, and on the issue of people losing their traditional occupation – agriculture – he claimed that every villager there had a job in the mining companies. “We have the required clearances and have spent many crore rupees on building parapet walls and other things.”

Besides agriculture, dairy farming here has taken a hit too. The Jogeshwari Doodhutpadak Sanstha shut down eight years ago. Tarabai Abasaheb Desai, 55, has 10 cows today from 40 ten years back. “The yield has gone from 25 litres to 2 litres. Grass, fodder and water for the cattle have lessened. We had a spring near our house, which has dried up. Now we get a tanker to supply water,” she says.

Hanumant Parab, a long-standing activist, reminisces about the dried up Pandikatchi talli, a water body in the area that used to irrigate 80 acres of land till a decade back. “It’s choked with mining silt. Most springs in the area have dried up. Scientifically one can’t generate destroyed village resources. Cashew, acacia and coconut trees have been cut down. All mining rejects are dumped on a hill owned by the government. The ideal height for it should be 60 metres but it goes up to 150-200 metres. Vaghure village, known for its tigers, has seen them disappear once the blasting started.”

A drive through the village and you can see it. Deeply sliced hill slopes, ore/dump-laden trucks roughly whirring past every few minutes, trees and plants bowed under dry red dust, faded blue water drums in place of wells, which have dried up...

Parab says, “Old mines have already destroyed the village. New ones will let it exist only on the map now. For a three km radius mine, the impact is up to five km. We even had a mining induced flood in 2000. We don’t want new mining, others benefit, but the village loses. What is the solution for the village after 15 years when the ore is finished?”