Mining silt is damaging rice fields, water sources are drying up. Villagers in Sanguem are a worried lot

Jacintha Fernandes | TTN

Sanguem: The fertile rice fields spread across 200 hectares in Collim-Neto and Collim village of Sanguem taluka have sustained generations of farmers. But now farmers say that silt flowing down from the mines in the hills above are spoiling their fields. Mining is also drying up the natural springs that once nurtured their fields.

"There is no water, the grain is less, the chaff is more," says Ramalal Valip from Collim-Rivana. Agriculture is the mainstay for this 45-year-old and his four brothers and their family of 17.

The Collim-Neto stretch of fields is located at the foot of Gokhond Donger, where mining is now on. From the base of Gokhond Donger, two springs used to nurture the fields. While the ones on the eastern side, called Collimab, has already dried up, the other one on the west, called Gogoro (cascade), is gradually drying up, its flow now reduced to a trickle.

Rama explains that over 90% of the people in Collim depend on agriculture. "It is the best profession because all year long your get food. If not anything, there is at least rice cookies to eat. But the main thing is water. Without water, you can't grow crops."

When asked why he does not avail of loans that are so easy now, he says banks will not lend him money as there are seven police cases against him. These cases had been registered against him, Ramalal Valip and many others by mining companies, he alleges.

Motesh continues, "We are facing a lot of issues. The police harass us. They arrest us, make us sign papers and slap cases on us. Then we have to make repeated trips to courts. Their intention is to harass us into silence and eventual-ly into submission."

Millaipada, Motesh's mother says, "The comparison create division among the villagers. Now there is lot of enmity among people. Earlier, we used to collect firewood from the forest and our cattle used to graze there. Now they don't allow us. We have sold all our cattle, gave them to the village."

"There are doubts about farmers' claims regarding the flight of mining in Goa, the state government-appointed monitoring committee's findings should put that to rest. The monitoring committee, headed by the chief conservator of forests, has found violations in 54 of the 110 operational mining leases in Goa. Many of the 54 are in Sanguem. Goa Foundation has obtained details of the violations in each lease under the Right to Information Act. Said Chaitali Avare of Goa Foundation, "These violations were found only in the leases that the committee visited. There are many other leases. We will make a presentation to the ministry of environment and forests. If they don't act within one month, then we will act."

Avare said most of these forest violations were due to mining activities. "There is no balance between mining and environment. The companies have not been doing anything to protect the environment," she said.

Mining and its accompanyingills dominate the Sanguem landscape. In Shirvao, 62-year-old Prabhakar Safari, a retired teacher, said he had seen the forest change from green to brown in his lifetime. But a mining lease has been issued for the area and the company is offering Goa State Electricity Board for the land. The forest has started losing trees and the mining claims have not resolved near Gaunkar's fields yet. Gaunkar is getting a steep price for his fields in order to dismantle the company from buying. The mining company has not agreed yet. Gaunkar's young daughter-in-law gets sentimental about the land. "The field is all we have. We will sell the field, where will we go with our small children?"

The cluster of houses around Goanka's house is nestled between two operational mining leases. The water level in the well opposite Geonkar's house is precariously low. The village women nearby are sure the well will dry up by April.

The women are angry that mining dust has ruined their agriculture. After much fighting by Shirvao residents, one mining company sold the families Rs 15,000 per acre as compensation. Another company paid Rs 25,000.

Says Premaram Gaunkar, "Our sugarcane cultivation suffered because we were all worried. What can we do with the land if there is no water? The miners are arrogant and don't listen to anybody. The village panchayat is not helping us. Last year, we agitation quite a lot. This year, we are feeling hopeless."

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