



By AMITA KANEKAR

## Sustainable Mining can only be done by Local Communities

This article is about two mining villages: Sonshi, which has put the focus back on Goa's nefarious mining mafia and the government that supports them tooth and nail; and Caurem-Maina, which has just succeeded in registering a village co-operative which aims to take charge of mining in the village.

Mining re-started in Goa only late last year after it was stopped in 2012 following the Shah Commission's report of widespread illegalities and looting of public money to the tune of Rs 35,000 crore. But the villagers of Sonshi have exposed that, despite clear orders from the Supreme Court, not to mention any number of complaints from citizens, nothing has changed with either the unscrupulousness of the mining companies, nor the government which is supposed to enforce the law and protect public interest. Sonshi, located in the heartland of Goa's mining belt, is the proof. 1200 truck-loads of iron ore rumble through the village every day. Everything in the village—roads, houses, trees, fields, the few children in the government school—is covered in red dust. The mining has dried the village wells; water is supplied through tankers by the mining companies and stored in covered drums, but it is both insufficient and covered in dust. People report all kinds of ailments connected to dust.

All of this is in blatant violation of the law, for which strict action should have been taken by various agencies of the government: the Directorate of Mines and Geology, the Directorate of Road Transport, and the Goa State Pollution Control Board. But they've done nothing.

And there is also a livelihood issue. Many villagers were employed in the mining industry before 2012, but no longer. Some of them had invested in trucks to transport ore; those trucks are also idle since 2012, even as other trucks roar past their houses. So the people languish in unemployment and loss, while profits are extracted from the land under their feet.

This too was of no concern to the government. The only action it took is to arrest the villagers

themselves when they decided to stop the passage of trucks through their village. 45

villagers spent twelve nights in jail, refusing to pay the bail amount. It was only after the Sustainable Mining can only be done by Local Communities story hit the headlines that they were released, with government assurances that all their concerns would be addressed.

But who believes this? Everything in Sonshi points to Goa going back to the pre-2012 days of illegal and rapacious mining, destroying the environment, robbing the public exchequer, and dishing out violence of all kinds on the local communities. Will the villagers of Sonshi too finally be forced to accept some pittance of compensation and disappear, as they are being pressurised to?

No—not if another Goan village has its way. The village of Caurem-Maina in Quepem has a solution to the mess and, what's more, has just achieved a milestone in the struggle to realise it. After nearly three years of struggle, the Sadhana Multipurpose Co-operative Society Ltd., a co-operative intended to take up all development issues in the twin hamlets, has finally been registered by the Assistant Registrar of Co-operative Societies, Quepem.

This is an important step for Goa, because at the heart of the mining imbroglio is the question of who decides about development. Thanks to the colonial approach to Goa's development, both before and after 1961, especially with regard to the top triumvirate of mining, tourism and real estate development, development is a scary word for bahujan and tribal communities of Goa. It means robbed lands, destroyed occupations, polluted fields, gentrified villages, resource-guzzling resorts and casinos, and now coal-poisoned water and land. It means development along the neo-liberal capitalist model, providing good times and massive profits to bhatcars, corporates, and other elites, Goan and Indian. It means maximum extraction of every resource possible, while bahujans and tribals pay the price.

But there is hope. The decision of the tribal villages of Caurem-Maina to set up a co-operative to take charge of all development in the village, is the culmination of a fight against illegal mining that began in 2008. Even though the villagers were dependent on mining jobs themselves, they made innumerable complaints, petitions, and RTI applications over the past decade, and also organised demonstrations and protests, all to expose over-extraction, the

concealment of ore as dumps, the making of fraudulent inventories (showing lower quantities than actually mined), pollution, etc. In return, they were met by harassment, savage beatings, and arrests on numerous counts.



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The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Indian Constitution, and laws like Extension of Panchayati Raj to the Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) of 1995, and the Rights to the Forest Act (FRA) of 2006, were supposed to ensure that locals take all decisions regarding land, forests, and development, especially in tribal areas. This is precisely what the villagers were trying to do. It is ironical but sharply clear that, in this entire struggle, it is they who have been on the side of the law, trying to monitor the industry and check illegalities—i.e. doing the job of the government—while the government itself has been on the side of the criminals. Even the application for the registration of their co-operative first met with refusal; they had to fight all the way up to the Bombay High Court before they were accepted.

The fight is not over, of course. The Sadhana Co-operative has now petitioned the Chief Minister's office to cancel the existing leases in Caurem-Maina, all of which are in violation of the law, so that the co-operative can take charge of mining. Will the government agree? No prizes for guessing.

*(With thanks to Ravindra Velip, chief promoter, The Sadhana Multipurpose Co-operative Ltd.)*

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