

## Murky mining: on SC cancelling mining leases in Goa

The [Supreme Court order](#) to halt the murky course that mining has taken in Goa should help restore some balance to the exploitation of iron and manganese ore in the ecologically fragile State. As the court observed this week in the Goa Foundation case, commercial mining activity can be rapacious in the absence of clearly laid down and strictly enforced conditions. This is exactly what has happened in Goa, with the State government displaying shocking disregard for rules and processes while renewing licences for a second time in 2015. It inexplicably chose not to exercise its right to view the licences as fresh leases that require new environmental impact assessments. The Bharatiya Janata Party government in Goa invited a cloud of suspicion by hastily launching the renewal of licences just a day after it unveiled a Grant of Mining Leases Policy on November 4, 2014. Quite extraordinarily, it issued 31 orders on a single day, January 12, 2015, apparently to pre-empt the Centre's Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Ordinance that came into force the same day. Now that the Supreme Court has ordered the termination of 88 licences, grant of fresh licences and proper accounting of the losses, mining activity in its entirety should begin on a clean slate. Future decisions should be guided solely by the true cost to the environment and to human health.

Goa has argued that the [mining industry](#) is crucial to its economy as it brings in foreign exchange, provides employment and supports a transport industry. Yet, it is also true that the ore mined in the State is low in iron, reducing its value to the domestic steel industry. Given that mining has a severe destructive impact on the ecology, resumption of large-scale activity should await a scientific audit of how sustainable it is. Any more mining should also account for the loss of employment while calculating economic gains. Just last year, public protests over contaminated groundwater and fouled air, as in Sattari taluk, underscored the need for strict environmental controls. It is relevant to point out that the Union Environment Ministry's Expert Appraisal Committee found in 2013 that many of the past leases had been issued without the approval of the National Board for Wildlife, and miners had extracted ore in excess. The requirement for clearance from the Central Ground Water Board was ignored. Going forward, the Environment Ministry must display zero tolerance to such violations, reversing its indefensible decision of 2015 to lift its own abeyance order issued against unsustainable mining. The Supreme Court's directions provide Goa with an opportunity: to change course and become a mainstream tourist State. It can regain its position as a top destination for global visitors and broaden employment in services. Tourist charters need to replace its open cast mines and dust bowls.

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