

# From sublime to lime!

Heritage hills of the Braj in Rajasthan — the abode of Krishna — are falling prey to mindless mining. **Shafi Rahman** reports

**L**ISTEN to that voice. My world is crumbling down," says Bihari Das as his voice drowns in the shrill crescendo of dynamite explosions that envelop the heritage hills. With people like Das, a priest at the Sita Devi Temple in Charan Pahadi, ready to take on the mining mafia in Krishna's land, life couldn't be 'Hindutva-happy' for the BJP.

The Krishna land, Braj *bhoomi*, is fast losing its innocence and beauty of its Kunds and ghats in the mining market place. The Braj spans across the Mathura district of UP, parts of Bharatpur district of Rajasthan and the Faridabad district of Haryana. The Braj comprises of over 1,300 villages, each of which has some connection to Krishna — magical, mystical and playful of all Gods.

The illegal mining for masonry stones and quarrying is mostly restricted to the Bharatpur district in Rajasthan where the BJP is in power. Most of the hills are considered to be demi-gods personified in hill forms. Nandishwar Parvat in Nandgaon is revered as Lord Shiva, the four hills in Barsana (Brahmanchal) are considered to be the four heads of Lord Brahma. Giri Goverdhan is Lord Vishnu personified and the Ashtakoot hills in the district of Bharatpur are considered to be associated with the eight main sakhis of Radha Rani.

Besides there are other heritage spots like Phisalini Shila — natural slider over which Krishna used to slide with his friends, Bhojan Thali — naturally carved stone thalis in which

Krishna and his friends used to have their packed lunch, caves of Jadkhor — where Krishna took shelter with his hundreds of cowherd friends, Saugandhini Shila — by touching this rock Krishna took a vow before Brajwas that he will never ever leave Braj.

In Braj, the mining has contributed towards transformation from the sublime to slime. Even for those who think all mythology is mumbo-jumbo, Braj does not offer sumptuous visuals. Of more than 1,000 kunds in the area, more than 80 per cent have been filled with silt. The mining in most of these hills is going on in full swing. The entire hill track is being defaced and denuded of the rocks, vegetation and plantation and the loss that has already incurred is irreparable. "The loss inflicted can-

not be compensated by any means and in our humble opinion such unwarranted interference with ecology deserves to be stopped. The mining activities witnessed by us has compelled us to reach a conclusion that the miners have only one motive and i.e. as to how and in which manner they can accelerate their pace of profit earning at the cost of ecology, environment and total degradation of the existing flora and fauna, exploiting the natural resources brutally and insidiously," Rajasthan High Court said in an order dated May 18,

2004.

The Rajasthan government says it is taking all the possible steps to close down illegal mines. "We have already deputed three engineers and as per their directions we have closed down 16 mines. Regular checking and campaign are going on," says Ashok Singhvi, the secretary, department of Mining, Government of Rajasthan.

In spite of the court order and the Government's promises, mining is going on playing different strokes with livelihood in the area. Despite

poor wages, poor working conditions and low wages, the employment is touted as sign of development. "Braj was one of the poorly-developed areas in the country. With the onset of mining, the people have started getting jobs. We have contributed about half of Bharatpur district's revenue in the form of mining licence fees, sales tax," says Gurbinder Singh, proprietor of Baburam Grit Udyog, operating in Pahadi Charan.

The hills of Braj have traditionally been the pasturelands for cattle. Even the pastoral communities from

far off areas of western Rajasthan migrate towards Braj in search of fodder for their cattle. The scattering of mining waste and mines abandoned without any effort to replant trees have drained fodder for cattle and hit the livelihoods of people who make a living by selling milk and milk products. "The areas lying close to mines cannot be used for agricultural purposes. My entire crop of mustard was destroyed when it was carpeted with dust off the blasting units," Ashok Yadav, a farmer. "There were around 400 deer and peacocks

living in the vicinity and all of them perished due to heavy mining activity. The Braj now wakes up to dynamite blasts, not chirping birds," laments Raju Sharma, a furniture businessman in Kama village.

Disillusionment over livelihood issues has brought together Muslims and Hindus in the area. When local groups organized protests against mining, it was Muslim farmer Abdul Majeed who went first on hunger strike. The mining lobby gets extensive support from the political parties as politicians from both the BJP and the Congress are reportedly engaged in proxy mining.

**B**UT there is hope. Organisations such as the Braj Rakshak Dal have chipped in as grass-root whistleblowers. Braj Rakshak Dal has restored over 16 major kunds like Gomati Ganga at Kosi, the Pawan Sarovar at Nandgaon and Vrishbhanu Kund and Dohni kund at Barsana. "We are currently working on an integrated Braj Development programme that will include restoration of all 1,000 kunds, revival of 48 groves, afforestation of hills as well as revival of the Yamuna.

"The mining activities in Braj area of Rajasthan expose the hypocrisy of the BJP which portrays itself to be patron of Indian heritage and culture but refuses to conserve a 5,000-year-old heritage," says Vineet Narain, a journalist and convenor of Braj Shakti Dal.

And in spite of local protests, the first round of battle has gone in favour of the Government and mining companies. With protests gaining momentum, round two could well be another story.

*The article is written under aegis of Centre for Science and Environment Media Fellowships*