LISTEN to that voice. My world is crumbling down," says Bihari Das as his voice dwindles 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 Goverdhani 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 Phaisalini 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 Jadkhon — where Krishna took shelter with his hundreds of cowherd friends, Saugandhini Shila — by touching this rock Krishna took a vow before Brajwasis 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 60 percent 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
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.

But 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 Vrishbhvan 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.

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