

Khandadhar sacrificed at the mining altar

Sara Dehuri of Upper Kadakala village under Bansapani block in Keonjhar district is not happy with the "Sarkar." Dehuri along with several other women in the locality residing near world famous Khandadhar water fall, are worried for the drinking water. The women are up in arms against the state's decision of allowing iron ore exploration surrounding the fall. The government has already issued prospective license to eight private parties to explore iron ore from the area.

Dehuri's apprehension regarding unnatural death of twelve natural springs originating from Khandadhar water fall, has already echoed in the Parliament where the local MP Ananta Nayak wanted to know what the government has done to stop indiscriminate mining and felling of trees around the waterfall. "The mindless mining and tree felling has lead to destruction of flora and fauna the area," Nayak observed. The BJP MP urged the government immediate suspension of mining activities till adequate air and water pollution control measures be taken. He also asked the government to direct the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB) to ensure water pollution control in the district.

Sara Dehuri, Sundari Nayak and Ahalya Dehuri were among the women who has joined under the banner of Khandadhar Surakshya Samiti, to draw the attention of the Government. They want assurance from the government that the mines surrounding Khandadhar fall is not allowed for exploration in order to preserve the water fall which will ultimately keep alive all water sources in the locality.

"Once mining activities begins, it will severely affect the perennial streams like Ambila pani, Haldi pani, Jambiri pani,, Kriya Kudar, Pidi pokhari, Gambhiri nala, Nal pani, Dhudu pani, kadali badi jharana and three other natural springs those work as life line for nearby 20 villages," says Kolu Dehuri the head of Kadakala village. "What can these poor tribal people do? Please save us from the demon called-mines," urges Nabaghana Mishra, Head priest of the Lord Shiva temple to the Collector Sushil Kumar Lohani. Shri Lohani is reported to not favouring the mining lease in and around Khandadhar.

Meanwhile, noted social activist Padmashree Tulasi Munda has asked the government not to go on mining spree. "The government must protect its natural gifts and then earn revenue," she reminded Naveen Patnaik.

The mindless and indiscriminate mining activities have led to water scarcity in ever green Keonjhar. "The very nomenclature of Kendujhar signifies that it was once rich in forests and water falls," Munda says adding that "kendu" means ebony trees and "Jhar" means springs. The present day situation is that there neither trees nor water in the region. "Indiscriminate blasting disturbs water sources in hills," admitted Bhaktabandhu Senapati, who is engaged in executive blasting in mines since 1998.

Khandadhar water fall that is situated on the border of both Keonjhar and Sundargarh districts, attracts thousands of tourists across the country and outside for its unique pattern of water falling. One can observe water falling down 500 meters in a sharp edge like that of a sword. "We will virtually be pushed to the ambit of miseries once the water fall dries down," says sundari nayak. "We would have to walk miles together for collecting drinking water like the women of Palasa and Jurudi area. The people in that part of Keonjhar drink red mud water which causes several diseases like jaundice and skin ailments," she pointed out.

Khandadhar water fall that is part of the Gandhamardan range of hills, houses several medicinal herbs. "As such we are facing difficulties in getting the herbs. The mining activities on hill tops would ensure disappearance of all kinds of medicinal plants," apprehended local "Vaidya" Rupa Dehuri. He says: "the hill tops are full with plants like-Bhanra Mari, Bhuin Kakharu, Rangaraj, Chereita and Patal Garuda." While Bhuin Kakharu is effective for TB, Patal Garuda is most successful for snake bite patients. "If one goes for treatment for snake bite to government hospitals, it requires nearly Rs 6,000. But a small stick of Patal Garuda root can cure a patient. I don't think these poor tribal people could afford to avail costly treatment. They would rather die without treatment with loss of herbs on hill tops," says the Vaidya.

Deforestation has also led to man-animal conflict in the district with more than 64 people killed by wild elephants during last 4 years. "The elephants used to invade into human habitation area for food and water. As they do not get sufficient water to drink due to drying up of natural springs, the elephants come to human locality and cause devastations," admitted forest department officials. "Now that the mining activities are allowed on hill tops, the elephants have no choice but to come to villages and create disturbance," said, Duskar Barik, a leading activist for protection of environment.

The areas in Khandadhar which is slated to be allowed for mining activities comprises safe home of elephants. The elephants meet their food demands by consuming, bamboo leaves, banana, ebony roots, mango and others available inside the forest. The 68 families living at Upper Kadadala village are panicked as the face elephant menace and which is likely to go up with mining activities in hill tops, pointed out Jadumani Thakur of Prakrutik Baivav Surakshya Samiti. Thakur said besides elephants, the Khandadhar area is also home of number of snake, birds, deer, bear species and endangered peacocks.

The nature's gifted Keonjhar district seems to be sitting on the volcano of environment disasters. The Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) has already warned the state government that there has been remarkable fall in the ground water level in the district. According to Ground Water Year Book (2003-04) prepared by the CGWB, there has been fall of water level in Keonjhar by nearly four meters. "The water level may further fall due to mining activities and deforestation," warned noted Water Resources Consultant Subrat Kumar Das.

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