

Mining Development for Whom ?

Kasia, a non-descript village in Orissa's Keonjhar district, is not any border village, nor it has ever faced the problems of terrorism. But the residents here live under the shadow of terror. A mother gives birth to her child amid sounds of mine blasting and due to frequent noise from the crusher units and movement of hundreds of trucks, day-in and day-out noise pollution level has touched it's height. The entire village including trees, paddy fields, orchids, is virtually coated with red iron ore dusts. "We experience earth quakes like feelings everyday here," said Muliram Munda, a teacher. The existence of the village is under the threat. "One will get mad if asked to live in this village. But we have no option," pointed out another villager.

A visit to the area revealed that the entire population, mostly tribes, is living under panicky situation. Kasia, with a population of 1200, alone houses at least 12 iron ore crusher units and three ore screening plants. At least 500 trucks frequent to the village everyday to transport iron ore, dolomite and limestone. The impact of the mines blasting is evident from the Kasia Primary School. The school building walls developed cracks due to blasting, says Sangarai Majhi, the headmaster.

Kasia is not the lone village in Keonjhar that is experiencing this type of situation. Palasa, Katupalli, Khajuridihi under Joda block and Badabil, Murusan under Keonjhar Sadar block have been identified as high dispersive sensitivity area in the district followed by many villages under medium and low dispersive sensitivity. The villages like Juridi, Jajang, Sayabali, Jaribahal and Rasabeda are worst sufferers. Thanks to large scale and mindless mining activities.

The district now boasts nearly most polluting 18 sponge iron units, 110 iron ore crushers and 119 open cast mines. The mining activities began in Joda area nearly eight decades ago that stores high grade iron ore with iron content as high as 66 per cent. Extensive deposits of manganese ore are found in Joda east hills of Barbil with fairly rich quality having 26 to 58 per cent of manganese. In 1984, out of 92 mining leases, 72 were working.

According to official sources, the mining activities have been compounded in last four years. While the number of total mines in 2001 was confined to 76, it is 119 in 2005. Though mining activities in the district is a "matured" practice, the situation has become grim,

particularly after liberalization policy being implemented in 1994. But what is the over all benefit of the common man struggling for a square of meal? Asks Padmashree Tulasi Munda. "They are left with only diseases, poverty and sufferings", she added.

According to the latest Human Development Report, 2004, Keonjhar stands at 24th position in the 30 districts of Orissa in the Human Development Index (HDI) chart. Per capita income is pegged at only Rs 5286 in Keonjhar against the state's per capita income of Rs 6487. Similarly, Keonjhar stands at 22nd position of the HDI in health sector. Health and sanitation has taken a back seat in the district.

This is evident from the situation at Palasa village where Haladhar Nayak and Prafulla Barik have lost their minor sons, Hruda (4) and Dipak (3) to the man-made calamities and they died of malaria and jaundice. At least one member of 417 households at the village, is infected to some disease or the other. The district is experiencing high death rate in malaria and TB. According to official reports, Tuberculosis is rampant in the district with above 14 per cent of the total population infected to it.

This apart, the district also tops the list of malaria deaths in the country. And there is no sign of decline in the morbidity rates. During 2003, malaria mortality was 28 which increased to 34 in 2004. But the health activists claim otherwise putting the malaria toll over 300 per annum. The village is surrounded by iron ore and manganese mines from four corners. "We do not get a drop of pure water or a fresh air to breath," complains Sushil Champia of Palasa.

The reason behind spread of disease, particularly malaria, is attributed to the abandoned mines. Though according to mining regulations after ore removal the quarried holes are to be concurrently reclaimed for productive human uses. But almost all the mines display a plethora of abandoned quarries in Jurudi, Jajang and Bamberi area. "In unfilled back excavations rainwater collects and work as breeding centre for malaria", pointed out Keonjhar Chief District Medical Officer (CDMO) Dr Sarojini Dash.

Mining of iron ore releases huge amount of iron ore dust and prolonged inhalation causes respiratory disease called "siderosis" according to Dr Madhumita Das who is the professor, Department of Geology, Utkal

Unviersity. Similarly, excess noise pollution causes sudden rise in blood pressure, nervousness, fatigue and change in the diameter of the blood vessel.

Dr Das's statement is evident at Jajang and Juridi villages where a 40-year-old Buddharam Patra, a worker at Rungta mines for last 15 years, now suffering from TB and other respiratory ailments. "I have eaten dust for 15 years, now I have nothing to eat," he said. Gura Nayak, Hari Nayak and Kuna Nayak resident of Jajang are suffering from similar diseases. Buddha was vomiting blood. He could spend only Rs 15 on purchase of local medicine. Many like Buddha suffer the burnt.

Large scale mining activities have lead to loss of forest cover in the district. In a span of only two decades, official statistics reveled, the forest cover has dwindled to 30 per cent from 40 percent of the total 8,303 sq. km. Even as the Forest Conservation Act 1980 provides special provision for compensatory afforestation, the government itself ignores the law of the land, says noted environmentalist Bibhudendra Pratap Das.

For instance: While Kasia iron ore and dolomite mining lease area is of 194 hectares, 30 hectares of virgin forest and 83 hectares of broken forest were disturbed. During the visit of this scribe to the mines area, fresh cut saal trees are found and overburden is being dumped in the forest area. No compensatory afforestation programme (CAP) is taken up here to repair the damage caused by mining. "Till now not a single hectare of land has been covered by the CAP for loss due to Kasia mines", admits Keonjhar Divisional Forest Official.

Sources said though 10,000 acres of forest land has been diverted for mining purpose, only 3,000 acres has been covered by the CAP. All most all the iron ore bearing hillocks of Keonjhar show complete destruction of slope due to cutting out of the ore and no rehabilitation afterwards. Artificial hills are created out of plain land due to waste dumping alongside mines while existing natural hills are cut down in size. This has resulted in disruption in flow of springs and streams.

Rise in the mining activities have, meanwhile, generated protests in the district. Besides Tulasi Munda, several local activists have raised their banner of revolt against the companies as well as the government that

allows the private parties to "rape" the nature in name of mining. The UK based Rio-Tinto mineral development (RTMD) that forged a joint venture with the Orissa Mining Corporation (OMC) in 1995 to develop Gandhamardan and Malangtoli iron ore deposits with an investment of Rs 4569 crore. Though a JV agreement was signed for production of annually 15 million tones of iron ore for export and domestic consumption. But, the project development agreement could not make any progress in the face of stiff opposition from the people, said Munda. Now with arrival of POSCO, the threat on the two precious iron ore deposits is looming large. The government is likely to hand over Malangtoli mines to POSCO. Though according to the District Magistrate Sushil Kumar Lohani, the POSCO has not applied for the mining lease till now. But people are apprehensive. "We will oppose it tooth and nail," vows Tulasi Munda adding that mechanized mining causes pollution and refrain people from jobs. The multinational's policy is "rip and run", accuses Munda.

The anti-POSCO agitation has been gaining momentum in Keonjhar when a protest rally marched towards the district collectors' office where a memorandum was submitted. Nearly 20,000 tribals in Keonjhar district would be affected and displaced if POSCO is allowed to start mining at Gandhamardan and Malangtoli deposits, according to Kendujhar Surakshya Parishad. Gandhmardan-Malangtoli Surakshya Samiti Secretary Bhagaban Panda has demanded that the MOU signed between the Korean company and Government Of Orissa should be cancelled and not a single tonne of iron ore should be allowed to export.

Keonjhar is now a hot spot in Orissa. The mining activities has also adversely affected the local climate with maximum temperature touching 46.8 degree Celsius during peak summer while it had never crossed 30 degree Celsius in 60s. "One can feel the change in drastic climatic change here in bare body. No instrument is required to realize what has happened to Keonjhar," pointed out Munda, who is engaged in social activities among tribes.

"Cool breeze is a rare commodity in Kendujhar," pointed out Munda adding that the sweet melody of chirping birds is eluding the forests. Due to change in the climate, the local vegetables and indigenous plants have disappeared from the district. The livelihood of the tribal population is also affected. There is dearth of minor forest produce in jungles like sal

seeds and kendu leaves those had kept the tribal people alive since generations. "When there is no forest where to get forest produces," she said adding that when 39,78,516 mt of sal seeds was produced in Keonjhar in 1985, has dwindled to few hundred tones in 2004. The tribal peoples dependency on forest is also gradually declining.

Environmental effects of iron exploration are mainly attributable to the land disturbance by open pit method of mining and to the disposal of waste rock and mill tailings. The agriculture in mines area is largely affected by iron ore dust and waste water from mines. "An estimated 10 per cent of the total agricultural fields have been spoiled due to mining activities," said Das, the President of Orissa Krushak Mahasangha(OKM).

Rise in the mining activities have, meanwhile, generated protests in the district. Besides Tulasi Munda, several local rights activists have raised their banner of revolt against the companies as well as the government that allows the private parties to "rape" the nature in name of mining. The UK based Rio-Tinto mineral development (RTMD) that forged a joint venture with the Orissa Mining Corporation (OMC) in 1995 to develop Gandhamardan and Malangtoli iron ore deposits with an investment of Rs 4569 crore. Though a JV agreement was signed for production of 15 million tones per annum of iron ore for export and domestic consumption, the project development agreement could not make any progress in the face of stiff opposition from the people, said Prafulla Samantara, President Lok Sakti Abhiyan.

Now with arrival of POSCO, the threat on the two precious iron ore deposits is looming large. The government is likely to hand over Malangtoli mines to Posco. District magistrate Sushil Kumar Lohani, however, said that the Posco has not yet applied for the mining lease. But people are apprehensive. "We will oppose it tooth and nail," vows Tulasi Munda adding that mechanized mining cause pollution and refrains people from jobs. The multinational's policy is "rip and run, accuses Munda.

The anti-POSCO agitation has been gaining momentum in Keonjhar when a protest rally marched towards the district collectors' office in September, 2005, where a memorandum was submitted. Nearly 20,000

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Change in climate has adversely affected the lifestyle of the local people. The livelihood of the tribal population is also affected. There is dearth of minor forest produce in jungles like sal seeds and kendu leaves those had kept the tribal people alive since generations. "When there is no forest where to get forest produces," she said. The people who used to lead a free lifestyle boasting on the forest wealth, now have turned into daily wage labourers in mines.

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