

People unite as mining shows its ugly face

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Under the protection of the apathetic government, mining businesses are eager to get leases for grazing lands, watersheds, panchayati forestland, and other unmeasured land. Areas where the population is aware, it is protesting. But places where the community bond has been broken, mining has brought havoc. People of Malla Danpur in Bageshwar district, demonstrated at Chaurasthal and overwhelmed the mining traders. The movement against mining in Dwarhat in Almora district and Kataldi in Tehri district continues. The Kataldi issue even reached the High Court.

25 years ago, six different leases were approved in five areas of the Kapkot development area in Bageshwar district (then Almora district). The lease in Chaurasthal was given to Mangal Singh Ethani of Congress. In Farsali, one lease was given to Uttaranchal Congress's spokesperson Dinesh Kunjwal and the other was given to some person named Pathak from Pithoragarh. In Baskuna the lease was given to Katiyar Mines of Kanpur; in Rema the lease was granted to N S Corporation of Kolkata and in Gadera M C Tiwari of Haldwani got the lease. The adverse effects of clay mining were soon visible. This agitated the villagers.

In the middle of Malla Danpur is a very picturesque place Chaurasthal, where there are huge meadows used for cattle grazing. A helipad had been constructed here. East of the mining area are Chauda Malla, Suling, Suling Udiyar, Chauda Talla, Sooding and Loharkhet villages. To the west are Kafli and Kamedi villages; to the north is Chaudasthal Inter College and to the south are Pethi and Ghuratiya villages. Between 1957 and 1976 three major landslides happened in the area killing about 100 people. Large parts of agricultural land were destroyed. 37 people and many cattle were buried alive in Bhayat Tok of village Karmi on July 22, 1983. In 1957, 45 people were killed in Suding village. After the devastation in Karmi, renowned geologist Dr K S Waldia had declared the entire Malla Danpur area as extremely sensitive. Umesh Joshi of a social organization based in the region, 'Grameen Utthan Samiti', along with his colleagues discussed and spoke to the people and organised them. On April 26, 2004, the villagers sent the first letter against mining to the district magistrate of Almora. On February 7, 1985, a red flag was driven into the mining area and work was stopped for four days. Finally, on June 3, 1985, 150 to 200 men and women gathered at the Kalika temple in Chaudasthal and announced the start of the movement against mining. They demanded that mining leases in Chaudasthal and other areas be annulled. The movement got support from other organizations outside the region.

Lease owner Mangal Singh Ethani did cause some minor rift in the movement, but the organization only strengthened. A 54-kilometre walk from Chaudasthal to district headquarters in Bageshwar with drums, laying siege to the administration and fasting forced the administration to come to the area to inspect. After inspection of the situation, the administration gave a report in favour of the movement to the government. The protestors wanted to annul the leases given to miners and stop clay mining; they also wanted the losses due to mining be compensated and craters left by mining be filled up and trees be planted there. As clay mining stopped, the villagers also stopped the already mined clay from going out. On the other hand, the contractor threatened to exact the cost of clay and other expenses. The contractor went to the Allahabad High Court. In the meantime, the protestors got the mining area allotted to the villagers to get houses constructed for them. Finally, on September 16, 1985 the district administrator ordered the mining to be stopped till further orders and so the movement was also deferred.

But 10 years later mining started again and this agitated the villagers. On September 11, 1995 under the banner of Grameen Chetna Manch, protests and fasting started at Kalika temple in Chaudasthal. Women also took part in the protests. 82 year old Bachuli Devi took to fasting. The president of Mahila Mangal Dal Pethi, Rukmani Devi organized the women. In the meantime women and youth in the villages enthusiastically took part in the groups organized by Utthan Samiti, Kapkot. In 1996 mining was banned again only to be restarted in 2002. This time too, movement and protests under the leadership of Chandra Singh Devli, Rukmani Devi, Parvati Devi, Amar Singh, Bachuli Devi, Bala Singh, Khushal Singh Matiyali, Umesh Joshi lead to the ban on mining.

Realising that it wasn't working out, lease owner Mangal Singh Ethani transferred his lease to Haldwani based contractor Hemchandra Upreti. As the villages came to know about it, they got organized again. They presented a memorandum to the Uttaranchal government on September 27, 2004 and then on January 26, 2005 they started their protests again from the Kalika temple. Fasts started from January 29, 2005 and on February 22 they lay siege to Kapkot tehsil followed by a meeting. After a lot of struggle, on March 11, 2005, deputy district magistrate of Kapkot, Girish Chandra Guvant, assured in writing to the protesters that no more notices will be given for mining leases.

In 1993, near Dwarahat in Almora district, some contractors from Haldwani, started illegal mining in Mahelkhali tok of Garjia village. This tok is surrounded by protected forests having banj, buransh, wild nutmeg trees, etc. There are more protected forests above Garjiya village and below it is Tadagtal and agricultural lands of the villagers. To protest the uncontrolled mining, a movement was

initiated under the leadership of Mohan Khandpal, the secretary of education and village development committee of Suraikehet. Villagers and students took part in the movement. To make the mining legal, the contractors bought 45 nali of land. Using that piece of land, neighbouring land was also included and in 1993 a lease was taken in the name of Uttaranchal Grameen Vikas Samiti Sheetalakhet for the seven hectare of land acquired. The gram pradhan of Garjia village and other influential people were also included in the plan. The villagers were bribed to mine clay from their lands and the young were bribed to mine clay from the nearby reserve forests. The protestors showed the uprooted banj and buransh trees to the administration. The protestors pressurized the administration into an enquiry. But that report was never made public reportedly due to political pressures. Mining started affecting the areas close to Garjia village. Agriculture, animal husbandry, grazing lands, water sources and the environment started getting affected. With Nepalis brought in as labourers, vices like liquor too entered the area. After much struggle, one of the mines has been closed.

Kataldi village of Tehri Garhwal houses 30 families. Rajendra Bhandari's Parvatiya Mineral Industries had started mining limestone using dynamite between 1974 and 1979. Villager's efforts led to the mine lease being cancelled. But in 1997, Bhandari again acquired a lease for a 13 acre plot. Though mining could not be started due to protests by villagers. Before the lease got over, after the formation of Uttaranchal, Bhandari with the help of the politicians and administrators got a lease of 30 years. The gram sabha remained unawares. Even though to construct one house, villagers have to go through numerous formalities of the gram sabha for land acquisition. The contractor did not mention the 30 families of Kataldi in his lease application. The distance between the houses and the mining area had not been mentioned either. Even though the distance between the houses and the mining area is less than 50-100 metres. There was definitely some fraud happening there.

The mines in Kataldi not only affected the people, but also started affecting the only water source of Khaisera, spread in a 100-acre area, near Nagani. Mining done previously had dried the water source and made barren the agriculture lands of Kataldi. Mountains with deposits of limestone and clay have natural deposits of water as well. But with dynamite blasts the possibility of the water seeping out elsewhere had increased. Water from Henwal river at Henwalghati is pumped to Chamba. If this river dried up, people of Chamba, Badshahithaul and Ranchauri would face severe water problems. The fertile farmlands in the valley below the Henwal river would also be affected. Close by is the grazing land for cattle. The forest department has also planted one lakh plants with heavy expenditure and made a boundary wall around it.

The protesting villagers say that till now they had earned their livelihood through agriculture, animal husbandry and milk production. But mining was threatening their

identity. That is why they would see to it that mining stopped. On December 25, 2001 they brought out a procession along with drums. Previously the divisional forest officer had sent a proposal to the administration to cancel the mining leases in the area under the forest conservation act. The mining area falls under the van panchayat land and only villagers have legal rights on the land. But despite protests from villagers, the lease owner went to the Tehri district court. Unfortunately, the court gave its decision in favour of Parvatiya Mineral Industries in December 2002 and mining continued. Then Shreedhar Ramamurthi of Institute for Mountain Environics and Mahesh Lakheda of Kataldi village filed a petition in the high court and in December 2002 the court banned mining which became effective from February 18, 2003. At the same time the high court appointed a high powered committee which also included the district magistrate. The committee did an enquiry and allowed mining to be continued. It also asked the forest conservator of the Bhagirathi area whether the lease area was falling under the van panchayat land. The chief conservator of forest in September 2003 submitted an affidavit that the lease area was under the forest conservation act of 1980 and permission from the government of India was needed prior to mining in the area. On September 23, 2003, the high court extended the duration of the ban on mining. As of now mining has stopped in the area and the villagers are relieved.

The movements against mining in Chaudasthal, Garjia-Mahelkhali and Kataldi reveal that the mining business in Uttarakhand is growing under the protection of corrupt politicians and irresponsible officials. People have to bear the brunt in order to protect their houses, villages and regions. On one hand, with the mountains weakening it is threatening the villages; forest area has reduced and agricultural land is getting affected. Moreover, water sources are drying up, the dust generated from mining is polluting the area and the labour brought from outside bring with them new problems to the region. In all the quiet life of the mountains is getting affected by social vices. On the other, the villagers often bear the indecency and abuse of the mine owners and have to make constant rounds of the courts. The loss to the environment due to mining is far greater than the revenue generated by it. Unaccounted profits in the region facilitate the mine owners to bribe officials, workers, and villagers. Despite this people are becoming aware of the problems associated with mining. The protests in Chaudasthal, Garjia-Mehalkhali, and Kataldi have yielded positive results.

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