

No Rule Of Law In Niyamgiri

With the Supreme Court's high power committee recommending no use of the deep forest land in an ecologically sensitive area like Niyamgiri hills, the entire attention is now focused on this hill range. While the government is adamant on allowing bauxite mining in hill tops of Niyamgiri, the local tribes, environmentalists and activists, are working overtime to foil the bid.

Niyamgiri hills, that forms part of the Eastern Ghat Range, came to the lime light after the Orissa Mining Corporation (OMC) entered into an agreement with the Vedanta Alumina Limited (VAL) to explore, exploit, develop and operate bauxite mine in Lanjigarh area which is considered as a safe home to a number of vulnerable wildlife species including Royal Bengal Tiger (RBT), leopard, sloth bear, pangolin, giant squirrel, mouse deer, langur and sambhar and others.

The Niyamgiri bauxite mining issue has, meanwhile, reached a point of intense debate with the Apex Court setting up a high level Central Empower Committee (CEC) to access the truth. The CEC, on its report have categorically stated that: "the ecologically sensitive area like the Niyamgiri hills should not be permitted for mining activities."

"Since the mining activities are to be carried on hill tops, there should be no problem with the tribes and the biodiversity," an official argued, that was outright rejected by environmentalists and villagers. Kalahandi Sachetan Nagarik Manch (KSNM) president Siddharth Shankar Nayak, on the contrary, claims once the mining activities starts on hill top, the ecology of the entire area would be highly disturbed. The local peoples' apprehension that damage on the hill tops and surrounding areas due to mining activities would turn the entire southern parts of the state into a desert, was compounded by environmentalists who work on the environmental impacts.

It is the source of survival for many and also an origin point of two major rivers like Vansadhara and Nagavali. Nearly 100 streams flow from Niyamgiri hills and 36 originate from within the proposed mining site. Most of them are perennial, according to environmentalist R. Sreedhar of Academy for Mountain Environics (AME), because they originate just below the bauxite escarpment.

For instance, Vansadhara (locally called Raja Jharana and lifeline for lakhs) originates at the height of estimated 1,000 meter just below the bauxite escarpment of the Niyamgiri hills. Similarly, large number of springs also cut down the bauxite deposits to flow downwards. Most of the springs flowing from the western flank into Vansadhara are used for irrigation as well as drinking sources by the people living in villages of Tentulipadar, Balabhadrapur, Semilibhata, Pataloma, Kendubaradi, Kaleijhula, Narangpur, Dongijhula, Rangapalli, Basantpada, Sindhebahal, Kansari, Belamba and Bundel.

According to the latest spiral study of Vansadhara river basin conducted by State Water Resources Department, more than 10 lakh people in Kalahandi, Rayagada, Gajapati and Kandhmal district depend for their irrigation and drinking water requirements. Water Resources expert Subrat Kumar Das is worried over the mining project, which will be taken up near the sources of Vansadhara. According to Das once the source dries up then people down below will suffer a great deal.

Wildlife activist Biswajit Mohanty argued that Niyamgiri was once identified to be given status of a wildlife sanctuary as it is the natural habitation for many endangered threatened and conservation dependant fauna species. A number of wild animals like leopard, tiger, elephant, deer, striped hyena, bison, nilgai, gaint squirrels and four horned antelopes and found in Niyamgiri hill range most of which are in the IUCN red-list of endangered species.

Besides, rarest lizard like golden Gecko, large termite hill Gecko, Pit viper, travancore wolf snake. Large colonies of the golden Gecko is found in Niyamgiri hills by a visiting team of herpetologists, says Dr Debashis Patnaik, a young legislator. He pointed out that in early 70s, the Orissa government used to post DFOs to encounter man-eating Royal Bengal Tigers (RBTs) in Niyamgiri forest range.

Quoting surveys, Mohanty claimed that more than 75 per cent of the Niyamgiri hills land mass is covered with dense forest. The rapid environment impact assessment report prepared by the TATA AIG Risk Management Services (TARMS) mentions that dense forest with variable tree density ranging from 1300 to 1400 tree per acre, surrounds the mining lease area. A team of taxonomists observed that at least 300 plant species including seven rare endangered and conservation dependent flora, are found within the hill range.

So far medicinal plants are concerned, Dr Tribhuban Panda, Scientist, who is carrying out research on Ethno-Medicinal plants says that nearly 300 ethno-medicinal plants are found in eastern ghat range including Niyamgiri hills. The local people, mostly tribes largely depend on the herbal medicines collected from hill range. "Bhuin Nimba (Andrographis Paniculata), Swarna Khirini (Argemone Mexicana), Naga Bela (Aristolochia Indica) and many others are found in Niyamgiri," says Vaidya Jatindra Kar, president of Ashwini Kumar Kalahandi Vaidya Sangha.

According to Vaidya Pramod Kumar Rana, Niyamgiri hills is the only place in the country where the medicinal plants like "Bhanra Mari" that cures diseases like leprosy and cancer, are found abundantly. While Bhuin Nimba is treated to cure diabetics and skin a disease, Swarna Khirini is for jaundice and Naga Bela for snake bite and pregnancy prevention. Satabhari and many other rare plants can cure many diseases, the Vaidya claimed

Under the prevailing situation, the people of the locality are up in arm against the government that plans to hand over Niyamgiri to the VAL for mining activities." Is it sign of development to destroy the place that has been known for its ecological sensitivity?, asks KSNM convenor Nayan Ranjan Das.

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