

**A society destroyed by mining**

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Pain of broken dreams is clearly visible in the eyes of residents of Chandak, Mostamanoo, Sikrani, Dhari and Dhoonga villages of Pithoragarh district, who had gladly given their land and pastures to magnesite companies in anticipation of development of their region. 27 years later, they have lost the employment provided by the companies and their ancestral lands rendered useless. Let alone the rehabilitation of 600 persons in the employment of the companies, companies have robbed their hard earned 2.5 crore rupees. It is to be noted that along with the ill intentions of the companies this situation is the outcome of globalisation policies adopted in the nineties, because of which the Dead Burnt Magnesite (DBM) produced here could not compete with the production of China and Korea due to the reduction in the import duty. DBM imported from China and Korea was not only cheaper it was also purer. Indian Steel companies welcomed the imported variety and these companies lost their regular customers. Even cutting of costs could not make any headway and eventually the factories closed down.

For the first twenty years Chandak Magnesite Limited was doing well. During this period the company availed all the facilities given to the industries, including 75 per cent transport subsidy. Twenty years later, when the company had to stand on its own, industrialist J K Jhunhunwala packed his bags and disappeared. Hundreds of workers, who were dependent on the company, were rendered jobless. Chandak market, which used to buzz with activity, 7 years after the lock out, now keeps a deserted look. Sikrani village, just above the mine fields, is full of unemployed people. The fields, covered by the dust of the factory are unable to produce any crops. Grazing grounds have become deserts because of irresponsible mining, with no trace of grass for the cattle. Dust borne diseases are common. Natural water resources, which have been destroyed by explosions, are not in a position to be recharged. Villagers, who were dependent on the natural water sources, now wait for the taps to yield some drops.

Says Jeevan Singh of Sikrani village, "Closing down of the factory has deserted the market of Chandak and two dozen shop-keepers have nothing to do."

Tarigaon is in a similar situation. One industrialist, Khetan had started Himalayan Magnesite Company in 1976, with a promise of lucrative jobs to villagers. The company acquired 360 hectare land on 20 years lease for magnesite mining. Later it extended the lease for another 100 years but closed down even before the termination of lease. Now comparing to Chandak, the fields in Tarigaon are much

fertile, so the villagers are managing somehow. Devendra Singh Mehra, a youth of Tarigaon says, “before the factory started its operation, most of the land was irrigated and fertile. Use of explosives for mining dried the water sources and the land became infertile. 15 hectares land, which consisted of grazing and panchayati land was left wasted by the big mining pits. Even grass doesn’t grow on that land.” He added that after so many years dust still afflicts the area. Cattle are having diseases like dysentery by eating dust-laden grass. One benefit, that the company provided, was a motorable road upto the village, which it constructed for its use and is now being used by the local residents. But the public works department refuses to repair and maintain it.

Hundreds of people of Ghunsera, Puneri, Silpata and Mad villages, besides Tarigaon have become jobless with the closing down of the factory. Some of them have changed their area of employment, but most are unable to find something worthwhile for their livelihood. People hold bad management responsible for the closing down of the factory. Dhirendra Joshi, who was a geologist in the company, says that officials not only violated the environmental laws but also did fraud with the owners and robbed the company in purchases etc. He says, “In expectation of a bright future, we willingly handed our panchayati land with plenty of oak trees. But now there is neither employment nor agriculture, cattle or forests to earn from.

One exception among these failed magnesite companies is the company running successfully in Jhiroli in Bageshwar district. But this success is not because of its magnesite production, but because of the support it is getting from the government and the banks. Being a public sector company it is not easy for the management to fire the workers. This company is now entering into limestone mining to save itself from bankruptcy. Failure of magnesite companies have devastated the lives of the villagers of Chandak and Tarigaon, but this example has taught a lesson to the residents of Askote in Pithoragarh district, where a Canadian multinational company Pebble Creek is planning to mine ascot ore and alluring the villagers into its plan. But the villagers have formed a sangharsh samiti and are pressurizing the company for the guarantee of employment and development of the region.

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