

## Clay mining has destroyed farmlands

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The black mixing with the blinding whiteness of clay is discolouring the colourful Nakuri. The changing colours are visible not only in humans but also in the air, land and other living beings. Mountains, disfigured by clay mining can subside anytime. The clay dust is degrading the agricultural lands. A terrible uncertainty envelops the environs of Nakuri. Once satisfied with the livelihood earned from the available resources in the environment, the villagers are now competing with each other in the race to earn money. The easy money that has flowed in through clay mining has brought with it evils like gambling, liquor, and uncontrolled consumerism. The new market oriented culture has destroyed the socio-cultural fabric of the region. The competition to earn money through mining has not only affected the social relations of the region but has also destroyed the *community feeling that was once a part of the mountain life.*

The continuously changing and hence vulnerable earth system of Nakuri area, rapidly gathering socio-economic tensions and the dangerous diseases spreading in the environment along with the dust of clay mining has become a curse for the beautiful Nakuri in the Himalayas.

Situated in the Bageshwar district of Uttaranchal, and known for its natural beauty, independent rural life and uncommon festivals, Nakuri is called 'Rangeele Nakuri'. Till 20 years back there was no commotion in Nakuri. The people had been for years *lived a life dependent on natural resources. In 1982, the opening of the newly constructed Bageshwar-Dharamghar motorway attracted miners towards the clay deposits of the region. Initially, some local people worked with the contractors from outside to extract clay, but then using the clay businessmen's network, the mine-owners established their links with the politicians and administration of the region and captured the entire Nakuri area. Besides the local heavyweights and miners from Bageshwar, Almora, Nainital, Haldwani, miners from as far as Kolkata and Kanpur came for a piece of the clay mining cake. These people together formed a system that not only marauded the environment but also addicted the simple people to easy money. The people, in the greed for money, excavated their farmlands full of crops. Even van panchayat forests were mined. Those who adapted to the new social fabric became rich overnight and those that dared to protest became the target of the mining mafia and had to pay for it.*

Breaching all rules and regulations to mine the area, the impacts are now showing up. On one hand, landslides have affected one of the rooms of the junior high

school located in the Surkali village of Rema area. On the other hand, Harish Singh Raikhaula of Raikhaula village lost his entire crop (20 nali) due to his farmland being buried in the mining rubble. The house and shop constructed through a loan has been lost to landslides caused by mining. The huge craters formed due to mining get filled with water during the rains, which overflows to destroy the crops and agricultural lands of the residents of Gaderia village. The people of Nakuri Patti fear the possibility of land subsidence in their area due to the destruction caused by mining. They can't do anything but regret.

Notably, clay traders got active in the 1990's only with the construction of Balighat-Dofad-Rema-Dharamghar Motorway, five kilometres from the Bageshwar district headquarters. Along with clay mining, gradually, liquor and gambling also became popular in the region. Seeing the profits from clay mining, N S Corporation of Kolkata, West Bengal and Katiyar mines from Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh followed by many people from Haldwani, Almora, and the area got involved in the business. Currently illegal clay mining is on in Tuped, Chidang, Dofad, Chhatikhet, Kirauli, Surkali, Raikhaula, Baikaudi, Saneti, Kidai villages and in its areas. Any kind of interference with nature here can cause havoc in the region. But mining goes on irrespective. Dinesh Singh Gudiya of Surkali village says that clay mining has made people handicapped. Those farmlands where clay is being found farmers are not paying attention to farming and animal husbandry. The million dollar question is when there is no more clay in their farms, what will the farmers do? Pointing towards the junior high school they say that due to landslides the toilets in the school can give away anytime. The areas close to and below the school field are now in danger from clay mining.

Yogesh Singh Haradia, gram pradhan of Surkali village says that agricultural land is being destroyed due mining. The Nepali labourers involved in the mining activities use areas near the water sources for sanitation and this is polluting the area. Some people have got employment due to mining but there is no stability. Shop owner Mohan Singh Bhaunriyal of Dyali-Kuroli says that there are more losses from mining than profits. Mining has affected irrigation canals, roads, forests and water sources. He gives the instance of Naule of Syuni village, "Clay mining below has caused the water to leak into the clay mines. Many other water sources have also been affected. The dust from the mines and the dust generated by the seasonal movement of trucks carrying mined clay affects agricultural land and also causes eye, respiratory and skin diseases.

Kunjar Singh Raikhaula, pradhan of gram panchayat Baikaudi, agrees that due to mining the future of the region is at stake. But he also knows that mining cannot be stopped now. With the local politicians involved in mining the problems have only increased. "We can protest against people from outside the region, but if people from within flout regulations, the situation has to deteriorate."

Harish Singh Raikhaula of Raikhaula village is from a poor family. Despite his protests, mining was done below his farmland. He says, "His land of about 20 nali was washed away with the debris from mining and the remaining land of 5 nali was used up as road. When I protested, the influential people bribed and bullied the members of my organization into giving up the protests and also threatened me. No action was taken even after complaining to the registrar of the village's land records. Scared Harish is now worried about the future.

After detailed survey of the region and talking to people it has been concluded that ignoring the losses due to clay mining, to get revenues, the state government and administration has no control over the unrestrained mining businessmen.

Mining has not only affected health and environment but has also adversely impacted the social fabric of the region leading to bitterness between the people. Literacy in the region has also fallen. Access to easy money has concentrated people's attention on worldly resources. If the situation continues then one cannot deny the possibility of all round destruction. Obviously, with the forests, land and water sources being affected it will be difficult for future generation to live here.

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