

## When Government spoils..

Bhubaneswar: Incredible it may sound, the Orissa has a forest wealth worth Rs 4, 36, 940 crore which is more than ten annual budgets for the state. But this wealth is not preserved for or properly utilized for the benefits of the people. This is apparently being sacrificed for the industrialization and the mining activities. "The manner in which the dense forests are being cut for setting up industries may lead to loss of huge amount of forest covers in Orissa," apprehended environmentalist Bibhudhendra Pratap Das, who is also president of the Orissa Krushak Mahasangha.

According to the latest report prepared by the state government, if the average minimum value of tropical forests is of US \$ 2,080/ha/year, as estimated by a multi disciplinary research team, is applied to Orissa forest (recorded as 48,838 sq.km), the total economic value of the ecosystem service provided by the state's forests amounts to US \$ 12 billion or Rs 436 billion per year.

Industrial circles, however, do not accept the recent net present value (NPV) of the Orissa forests. P. K. Rout, consultant for Tata Steel argued that NPV appears to be very high. According to him NPV depends upon on density of forest, as mentioned in the working plan (WP). The WP is not up to date. Most of the forests are now degraded and fresh assessment is necessary to arrive at the current density for fixing the NPV cost.

Das's apprehensions are supported by the forest department records. During the last 25 years, the state has diverted 31,537 hectare of forest land for non-forest use of which, 10417 hectare have been sacrificed for mining activities alone. Similarly, 6,921 hectare for irrigation projects while industries and other allied activities have engulfed 6825 hectare, roads and railways consumed 2200 hectare, thermal power plants took 3,000 hectare and 16 hectare for hydro-power projects. According to the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, compensatory afforestation has to be taken up to repair the damage to the forest covers. Sources, however, said that not a single tree has been planted by the government under compensatory afforestation program at nearly 100 projects of total 290 projects in last 25 years, even as thousands of big trees have been laid down to pave ways for mining.

For instance, Kasia iron ore and dolomite mining project in Keonjhar district covering 194 hectre, that was developed in the year 1995-96. A total of 113 hectares forest land comprising 30 hectares of dense forest and 83 hectares of broken forest, were damaged for the project. After ten years of the project, not a single grass has been planted under the CAP, leave alone raising jungles of 217 hectares. "Nearly 5,000 huge sal and teak trees have been cut down from Kasia reserve forest in last 10 years," pointed out Singhrai Majhi, a local school teacher.

The Supreme Court's "polluters Pays" principle seems to have no meaning for the Orissa government that has set the industrialization spree at the cost of environment. The government has gladly agreed to sacrifice 672 Hectares forest land for an Aluminium plant in Kalahandi and 845.69 Acre of forest land is likely to be affected by the mega steel plant developed by the South Koeroan steel giant Posco.

Sources in the forest department, however, said that till 2004, more than Rs 63 crore has been deposited by the user agencies for the CAP out of which only Rs 19.41 crore has been spent for the purpose. Thereby leaving as many as Rs 43 crore meant for the afforestation with the government.

The Supreme Court also on a judgment in 2002 has observed that the states were not doing enough of the mandatory planting of trees to counter the affects of cutting forest for development projects and the funds were not properly used. According a price set by the Apex Court on the net present value (NPV) every hectare of forest land being utilized for non-forest purposes, one has to pay Rs 5.8 lakh for scrub forest, Rs 7 lakh for open forest and Rs 9.2 lakh for dense forest. Taking this price into account, the total forest wealth of the state is pegged of at Rs 4, 36, 940 crore. According to official sources, the state government has already collected Rs.60 crore on account of NPV. But till now the Centre has not finalized NPV guidelines. So funds collected from the users as NPV is lying idle in the state exchequer.

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