Mining mafia gaining political clout in Uttarakhand

Mahesh Joshi

The police and the administration were disgraced when infamous criminal Ramesh Bambaiya reached a court in Nainital in a drunken state. The special judge (gangster act) G K Sharma summoned the five policemen who had brought Ramesh Chilwal alias Bambaiya and the station in-charge of Kaladhungi police station. Accused of hindering the legal process, police driver Satyaveer Singh was fined Rs 200 and constable R Kumar’s mobile phone was confiscated and was fined Rs 1000. Ramesh had been summoned on October 17 to the court for his involvement in Vineet Joshi murder case. In this case, apparently, the police are also involved along with seasoned criminals. Only after an investigation will it be known who supplied the liquor to Ramesh, but the case has put a doubt on the police and administration’s role.

This is the same Ramesh who has 33 serious criminal cases against him. When he was fighting elections for the state assembly, he always carried a foreign made 3.8 mm mouser worth Rs 1.5 lakh. For last more than 10 years he ruled Sheeshmahal Gaulagate area. His dumpers were not even stopped, leave alone getting royalty. But last year, when the administration set up electronic weighing bridge, the tender for the new weighing bridge at Sheeshmahal Gaulagate was given to Vineet Joshi and that was a challenge to Ramesh’s monopoly. As the Gaulagates opened doe chugan, Ramesh sent his dumpers to gaula; on returning back Vineet’s men took royalty from Ramesh’s dumpers. Ramesh couldn’t bear this and Vineet had to lose his life. Till a week into the murder, cases of fire, stone pelting, skirmishes and panic were reported from the Sheeshmahal area. This wasn’t a natural response to the murder. But people supporting Vineet had brought in criminals from other areas to riot in Sheeshmahal. The local people did not move out of their houses for days.

In Tarai-Bhabhar area, along with the clearance of chugan from Gaula river, illegal business worth crores is flourishing. In this business people are murdered to gain control. Some cases are brought to light. But most cases are buried in the huge piles of sand, gravel and stones or are lost in the forests close to the mining areas. With the backing of this business many people are ruling from within the government and others are ruling the political scenario from outside the government. During elections the mafia has a huge hand in the election of candidates. The head of the party is bribed so that their candidate can stand in elections. In the end, one fourth of the 35 to 45 per cent votes caste decide who will rule as the people’s representative.
Unrestrained mining and trade of sand, gravel and stone, on one hand, has led to landslides and land subsidence and fertile land is becoming barren. On the other the social fabric of the mountain areas is getting affected. Most crimes in the Haldwani-Lalkuan area are somewhere linked to the mining business. The sand from the rivers gives huge revenues to the state government. Private contractors, concerned departments and their officials and workers and politicians are earning fat packages through mining in Gaula river, thus impacting the politics in the state. Moreover hardcore criminals are now treating this river as their private property.

After the formation of Uttarakhand, the interim government of Nityanand Swamy transferred the responsibility of sand mining in rivers in the forest areas from private contractors to the Uttarakhand Forest Development Corporation and in revenue areas to Kumaon Division Development Corporation and Garhwal Division Development Corporation. According to mining policy, these corporations give contracts for mining to private contractors in their areas and get revenue in return. A royalty set by these corporations is given to the government.

Before the electronic dharmakanta was set up, during 2003-2004, 2962835 quintal of minerals from gaula river were cleared and much more was mined and cleared illegally. According to the divisional forest officer of the eastern Tarai forest department, besides the money entered into ledgers of the department, the royalty and the deposits of the forest corporation yielded in 2004-2005 a total of 267447112.15 rupees. Sand mining in Gaula river yielded a total revenue of 409761232.15 rupees, which was 175750948.65 rupees more than last year’s revenue. Despite strict measures, illegal clearance was also a part of it. If revenue from Gaula river alone is more than Rs 40 crores, then what will the revenue from mining of other rivers and minerals be, can be inferred. After liquor trade, mining is the other trade through which the related government machinery, transporters, contractors, stone crushers, some politicians and media persons are prospering.

This time the release gates of Gaula river opened a little late. The mining businessmen used the opportunity to protest, in the name of mine labourers. On October 13, 2005 some release gates were opened. To reach Gaula river there are 12 release gates – mainly Sheeshmahal, Rajpura, Indiranagar, Chor Galiya, Devrampur, Mota-haldu, Halduchaud, Lalkuan II, Gorapadav, Beripadav, Amlachauki, and Lalkuan I. The release and chugan of minerals happens for nine months between October 1 and June 30. Chugan does not happen for the next three months – July, August and September. But experts say that mining and release of minerals continues discreetly.

More than 40,000 labourers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are involved in mining sand, gravel and stone from Gaula river. Unemployed and impoverished, these
labourers mine the river to earn their meals for the day. They can get involved in the release work only after being registered with the forest corporation. According to rules they are provided insurance cover, fuelwood, drinking water and health check-up facilities. These labourers live close to the release gates in a 10 by 10 feet or 10 by 15 feet hut; 15 of them live in one hut. These huts also have their mining tools and other important things. These huts, made of dried leaves and grass can easily burn down catching fire from the cooking stove. In the scorching heat of May-June these incidents are more often. Often, robbers attack these colonies and rob the labourers of everything. Working from morning 4.00 to evening 5.00, these workers live in pitiable condition, though they are the main reason behind the prosperity in the trade.

25-30 families displaced from Adarsh village, near the durga temple across the Gaula river, had settled near the Lalkuan gaula gate 15 years ago. These labourers have the right to vote too, but no political party bothers to resolve their housing and other problems. 70 year old Dudhari Devi sys her four sons died mining in the Gaula river. Suffering from malnutrition and other diseases, she couldn’t get her sons treated. In huts made of leaves and grass and polythene, they live a cursed life. A shopkeeper at Gaulagate, Trilok Singh says that despite writing to the administration and politicians, no steps were taken to solve their problems.

According to the mining policy, for clearance of minerals only 75 cm chugan can be taken. To mine deeper than that is illegal and one can be fined. But when we reached the Gaula river through Lalkuan and Halduchaud clearance gates, we found that huge pits had been dug into the banks. Many people also told us that illegal clearance was also happening. The illegal miners have good connections in the political circles. We also found out that senior officers set a target for the fines and to reach that target they fine the miners – an entire game. Before the inspection of the officials, the information reaches the mining areas. Those who mine more than the chugan are fined. But mostly people new to the trade get fined. Old businessmen either stop mining or bribe the officials.

Mafia is taking over the natural resources of Uttarakhand. They have monopolized mining of sand, gravel and stone from Gaula river. Due to them, more than 300 trucks belonging to more than 200 transport companies carry mined sand, gravel and stone from Haldwani-Lalkuan area. Sardar Harvansh Singh, a transport company manager from Lalkuan complains that after the formation of Jharkhand, the business has suffered due to the dual tax. For every truck royalty of Rs 900 for a small vehicle and Rs 1,500 for a big vehicle is charged from them. Closure of clearance for three months also causes losses to the businessmen. There are two organisations active here – Lalkuan Truck and Transporters Association and Lalkuan Transport Owners Welfare Association. They often use the welfare of the labourers to get their demands accepted and to pressurise the government.
Between Haldwani and Lalkuan there are three stone crushers. These crushers belong to people involved in politics and who hold influence in the field. Since we had been pre-warned about the fearful atmosphere in the mining and crusher areas, we did not visit these places. When fellow journalist Vishesh Vidrohi attempted to study and understand the mining practices in Gaula, he came across numerous similar situations. He had already dared to enter two stone crushers. He told that the workers inside the crushers weren't in a better position as compared to the mine workers. The workers were not allowed to speak to people from outside. They were made to sign on a daily wage of Rs 140 to Rs 160 but they actually got just Rs 70 to Rs 80.

Between Haldwani and Lalkuan, during the Gaula clearance season, piles of sand-gravel, and stone can be seen on both sides of the road. It is said that the land mafia, related to the mining business, first take a land on rent. But when the land becomes barren and useless, the helpless land owner sells the land to the land mafia itself. Then they create plots on that land and sell them at high prices. Lands where sand and gravel is piled up, the sand along with the wind gets deposited on nearby lands and destroys their fertility. The land then cannot be cultivated and is neither located at a place where it can be sold at good rates. Then the same land mafia buys this land at very low rates. This way the land mafia, on one hand, is mining the riverbed and causing land erosion in the plains, and on the other, it is capturing fertile and productive lands.

The politics in Uttarakhand has become a puppet in the hands of liquor traders, and mining and land mafia. Experts say that 16 MLA's and 2 MP's get a huge amount of money from the mafia during the elections. These are the same people who once opposed the state. Differentiating between the mountains and the plain, they created rifts between the people. After the state was set up, they demanded that the Terai region be separated; they opposed the land policies of the government and are now for their convenience asking for demarcation. This is the reason why the common man has to wait for days in Dehradun, the temporary capital, to meet the politicians and MLA's and that too is not assured. But these politicians on being invited by the mining businessmen attend the birthday parties, marriages and even naming ceremonies.

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