

Mining in Orissa will affect 35 falls, two rivers, say tribals

Tribals in Orissa are campaigning against the right of bauxite mining awarded to a London-based company, saying it will affect at least 35 waterfalls and two rivers in a sprawling region.

Tribal leaders say mining in the Niyamgiri mountain range in western Orissa is also bound to destabilize its wild life that includes elephants and rare lizards besides plants rich with medicinal values.

Vedanta Alumina Ltd has signed an agreement with the Orissa government to set up a bauxite refinery. For this purpose it will mine bauxite ores from the mountain region.

The Dongaria Kondh tribes, who populate Kalahandi, Gajapati and Rayagada districts, began their campaign nearly four years ago. In recent times they have scaled up their protests. They have now brought their message to the capital.

'Niyamgiri mountains have at least 35 small and big falls. Two rivers, Bansidhara and Nagabali, are flowing from it. The mining will affect our water bodies seriously,' said Jitu Jackseka, a tribal from Rayagada.

'There are a lot of elephants and rare lizards and the region is rich with medicinal plants. The rivers are helping us in agriculture, and bauxite mining will destroy the ecology,' the under-graduate told IANS.

Praful Samantra, a tribal rights activist, said: 'The Central Empowered Committee appointed by the Supreme Court has spoken vehemently about tribal rights but we can see the court is going to grant Vedanta mining rights.'

'In the name of economic uplift, the government and Vedanta are interfering in the life and culture of tribals. Why are they hell bent on polluting the region and creating ground for forced displacement of innocents?' Samantra asked.

'The government was planning to open an elephant corridor in that region due to its rich bio-diversity but everything seems to have been forgotten.'

Said Dandu Sikara, another tribal: 'Both the rivers from Niyamgiri help us to cultivate farm products such as maize, pulses, pineapples, orange, turmeric and other crops.'

'Apart from 300 villages of our region, pollution and drying up of these rivers are going to affect fellow tribals in Andhra,' she said, almost pleading: 'Don't take our Niyamgiri.'

Ranga Kadraka, another tribal, said tribals were never beggars. 'They work hard and earn their livelihood. In the name of development they are going to throw us out of our homes.'

'We are getting free water, free food and there is no restriction on our livelihood. But after the company sets its base, we have to pay for everything. The same thing is happening in other places of Orissa.'

'I am in Delhi for some days but I am not happy at all. You people don't have fresh air and you cannot see clean sky. All these are due to pollution. We tribals don't want this happen to us in Orissa,' Kadraka said forcefully.

The activists said the Vedanta refinery and mining would displace at least 300,000 people, tribals and non-tribals, living on the top of Niyamgiri mountain range and adjoining areas.

D. Manjit, a Delhi University professor, has thrown his lot with the tribals. Hailing from Orissa, Manjit said the government had no right to displace tribals when they had not settled others displaced elsewhere in the state.

'They are yet to satisfy the displace people of the Rourkela steel plant even after four decades of it's commissioning. People displaced due to construction of Hirakud Dam are still protesting,' he said.

'When a lot of talk is going on about climate change, ecology and vegetation, why is our government set to destroy areas like Niyamgiri and Lanjigarha?' he asked.

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