

BAUXITE MINING: THREATENED EASTERN GHATS OF INDIA

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Since decades the Andhra Pradesh (AP) government has been trying hard to unearth the vast bauxite reserves in the Eastern Ghats despite campaigns and protests from the tribal community. The tribal communities believe that bauxite mining would not only render thousands of tribal people homeless, it would also sound the death-knell for the cultural diversity of the community and the endemic biodiversity of Eastern Ghats. Instead, the state government is in a hurry to sign agreements with private firms for bauxite mining.

Large deposits of bauxite have been discovered along the east coast in the states of Orissa and AP. The bauxite deposit in AP alone is estimated about 700 million tonnes. Several attempts by the successive governments to establish mining plants have faced severe resistances from the people. Five years ago, Chandrababu Naidu, then Chief Minister, tried unsuccessfully to establish a bauxite-mining plant in the Visakhapatnam's tribal belt with Dubai based Dubal Aluminium Company. Protests from tribal people along with the verdict of the Supreme Court in the form of the historical Samata Judgment resulted in abandonment of the project.

The present government has gone a few steps ahead by signing two MoUs: one with Jindal South West Holding Ltd (JSW) of O.P.Jindal Group and Ras al Khaima, a Gulf country to establish bauxite based aluminium industries. The agreement with the latter was signed for Rs. 9,000 crores in the second week of February 2007. The agreement with JSW was inked in July 2006, for a total cost of 9,000 crores, with JSW having a stake of 49% and the remaining 51% going to Andhra Pradesh Mineral Development Corporation (APMDC) - a state owned agency. Other prospecting companies include Essar Group, the Australian-based BHP Billiton and NALCO. Under the proposal JSW plans to establish an alumina smelter (for purifying raw bauxite) at Sabbavaram in Visakhapatnam district or S Kota in Vijayanagaram district. According to the

above agreements the APMDC would mine bauxite from the Visakhapatnam tribal area and supply the same to JSW. Despite Constitutional provisions and the Land Transfer Regulations Act to prevent transfer of lands in the tribal area to private companies and non-tribals, and even after the verdict of the Samata Judgement that nullifying all private mining leases, the government has started activities to evict tribal people and start operations for bauxite extraction and processing. By using APMDC as a dummy corporation the government is attempting to circumvent the ruling in the Samata Judgement.

Ravi Rebbapragada of Samata, which is in the forefront of the anti bauxite mining campaign, said that the government had signed the MoU with JSW in a hurry. He said bauxite mining in Orissa and elsewhere had left a trail of destruction and the tribal people were and will be affected. Samata organized a yatra in September 2006 with the slogan “The health of the hills is the wealth of the plains” targeting the farmers and people living in four coastal districts.

While government is trying to woo private mining companies with all its tricks, the government has failed to address the issues of livelihood, displacement and environmental impact due to the mining projects in the state. According to the Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI) report, 2001 “ to have access to the bauxite deposits around 25 major tribal villages in Eastern Ghat have to be displaced, around 10,000 trees have to be pulled out, and the state will lose around Rs. 1,520 crores in terms of environmental degradation like soil erosion, etc”. Last year the Environment Protection and Research Institute (EPTRI), Hyderabad has submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) to declare the area as “ecologically sensitive” owing to its rich natural diversity. The proposed mining area is the catchment of Machkund and Sileru rivers and their tributaries and that of Gosthani and Sharada rivers. Mining will result in large-scale pollution of these water bodies, which are the main source of drinking water for the Visakhapatnam town and also the groundwater systems.

The area which comes under the Fifth Schedule is also home to several tribal populations belonging to Bhagata, Khond, Konda Reddi, Samantha and other communities. Twenty-seven hills in the Visakhapatnam district have been identified for bauxite mining. Each mining site has at least 10 villages surrounding it, which means that approximately 270 villages will be adversely affected. The affected that include the tribal people from Visakhapatnam and Vijayanagaram districts and agriculturists near the proposed smelters in Sabbavaram and S Kota are strongly protesting the government's efforts to start mining. NGOs including Samata and AP Girijana Sangham demanding that the project be stalled and have been organizing awareness programmes about the harmful effects of bauxite mining and protest rallies and dharnas to stall the project. In this regard Gram Sabhas in the tribal villages have also passed resolutions under Panchayati Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA).

JSW has started threatening the tribal communities to vacate their lands or face violence. The ruling Congress party has given orders that all clearances must be obtained immediately and openly declared that any opposition would be brutally suppressed. In November the scheduled public hearing for the smelter in Sabbavaram was held in the city of Visakhapatnam 30 km away from the project site making it difficult for the affected people to attend. To make matters worse those who did try to attend were stopped from entering the city or were thrown out of the hall by hired goons of the company. The government ignoring all protests continues signing fresh MoUs like that in February 2007 with the Gulf country Ras al Khaima.

The government instead of going ahead with the bauxite mining and claiming it will provide employment should explore alternatives which will involve tribal people with no damage to the environment. These include wind power generation, micro hydel projects, education for tribal youth, eco tourism, decentralized economy and sustainable alternatives like organic farming,

horticulture etc. Though the tribal people and affected cry out in protest, the government continues to turn away without listening to their hearts. But these voices in time will turn into a roar and demand to be answered.

Source: *Srinivas Ganjivarapu is a special Correspondent of DHIMSA, a Telugu Monthly published from Andhra Pradesh*