India: Report from Kalpavriksh on mining on ecologically sensitive areas

The Indian Environment Action Group Kalpavriksh has recently reprinted the report titled: 'Undermining India - Impacts of mining on ecologically sensitive areas', which it had published in March 2003.

While a substantial number of the mining threats in India that are destroying some of the country's most ecologically-sensitive areas are from ongoing mining (both large and small), a major emerging threat is new mining, warns the report, particularly in the light of the liberalization of the mining sector in the past few years. Since economic liberalisation began in the 1990s, the mining sector has opened up thousands of sq km for reconnaissance and prospecting

The report conveys a national picture of ecologically sensitive areas threatened by existing or proposed mining activities; an analysis of the legal and policy framework on mining and environment; the response of citizens and Indian courts to mining threats; a review of current practices for ecological amelioration of abandoned mines; and provides a set of concrete recommendations on the issue.

Since 1996, says the report, 65 large prospecting licences covering over 90,000 sq km have been granted. Since 2000, 119 reconnaissance permits covering 155,000 sq km have been given out.

At least 90 wildlife sanctuaries and national parks, as well as, hundreds of other areas with unique biodiversity and wildlife –including catchments that provide water to millions of people- are threatened. Some examples of the threats cited are the proposed bauxite mining in the Eastern Ghats in Andhra Pradesh, which will impact the catchment areas of four rivers; mining in Bailadila in Chhatisgarh which has hit the Sankhini river; iron ore mining in the Western Ghats which has impacted rivers in Karnataka and Goa; iron ore mining in the Saranda forests of Jharkhand which is impacting the Koina river; limestone mining in the Hemwalghati in Uttaranchal.

Many of these areas are crucial to long-term water security and also overlap with some ecologically-rich and culturally-sensitive areas in Rajasthan, Chhatisgarh, Maharashtra, Orissa and Jharkhand. The threat to ecosystems and livelihoods posed by mining seriously affects many culturally and economically fragile communities residing in these areas, including many Adivasi/ tribal groups, leading to conflicts such as those of tribal communities in Kashipur (Orissa), against bauxite mining in the Eastern Ghats, tribals in Andhra Pradesh against proposed calcite mining around the famous Borra Caves, and villagers in Hemwalghati in Uttaranchal against limestone mining.

Many mining activities are in gross violation of environmental policies and laws, of the constitutional guarantees to Adivasis and other communities and of the National Mineral Policy's own assurances that "ecologically fragile and biologically-rich areas" would be avoided. The country's environmental rules, too, have been diluted to permit mining, and environmental public hearings were done away with for mining leases of major minerals up to 25 hectares.

The report urges the Union and state governments to declare sensitive areas off-limits, change

mining policies and laws, have an independent assessment of impacts of the mining sector, restore mined areas, provide alternative employment to workers before closing mines in sensitive areas and set up an expert group to explore ways of sustainable material and energy use, among others the reduction of luxury and wasteful consumption of minerals.

Calling on communities, people's groups and NGOs to unite and network more strongly, to resist the increasing take-over of sensitive areas for mining, the report stresses the need to make a critical examination of current development policies, including those in the mining sector, to assess how they are impacting Indian ecological and livelihood security –especially of the most under-privileged sections of society who are dependent on natural resources. Finally, it appeals to make an introspection on the very many wasteful ways in which we use minerals, including luxury minerals like diamonds, marble, granite, and gold.

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