

Jerrala bauxite project — a virtual mining bomb

by Amit Mitra

About 150 kms from Visakhapatnam the Eastern Ghat hill range, which has not yet been degraded by the gnawing forces of deforestation, still retains its Nilgiris-type green canopy and deciduous forests, the home for a variety of rare birds ranging from the blue-bearded bee eater to the little spider ant.

But, environmentalists now ask, how long will the nature's munificence remain unravaged? For, buried deep under this virgin mountain forests is a large bauxite reserve of over 200 million tonnes, which the National Aluminium Company and the Indian Government are keen to exploit. Ever since the Geological Survey of India made this startling discovery in the late '60s and early '70s, the question of the survival of the Jerrala mountains has been on the lips of one and all.

The NALCO had, years ago, proposed the setting up of a mining facility at Jerrala and a four million tonne capacity plan at K.D. Peta, which would be joined by a 67-km long conveyor belt.

Although the State Forest Department is unwilling to let go of this area, the Indian Government remains eager to set up the mining facility. According to the Government, the bauxite reserve in this area can take care of the requirements for the next 100 years and can also help in the development of the country's economy.

NALCO had subsequently applied for a mining lease over 1,91,300 hectares in Jerrala for setting up a Rs 1,500 crore bauxite mining complex project.

Initially, the Government had planned to set up the project with the assistance of the erstwhile Soviet Union, with NALCO as the nominated agency from the Indian side. However, in 1991, the Soviet Union lost interest and was cool towards the project presumably because of its internal developments. Hence the Government began exploring the possibility of leasing out part of the bauxite reserves to private en-

trepreneurs."

Financial benefits: When the Forest Department continued to oppose the project, the Government sought to placate the State Government by drawing up the financial benefits that would accrue from the project. It was explained to the State Government that it would receive a revenue of Rs 545 crore per annum for mining of just 2.3 million tonnes of bauxite, as envisaged in the first phase, including Rs 23 crore towards royalty and Rs 85 lakh towards cess.

Thus, while the debate continues and the state government at the point of giving in, environmentalists are increasingly expressing their protests against the setting up of the project. Several environmental groups have painted an alarming picture of the environmental impact of the project. Said R P Sivaramakrishna, director of Sakthi, an organisation working for the welfare of the tribals. "Though NALCO has drawn up grandiose ecological-compensation plans in Jerrala, we have low hopes on it, given the earlier track record".

Not only environmental groups, but even the Government-appointed committees that went into the environmental impact of the proposed project have thrown up ominous images. These groups speak of large-scale destruction of the flora and fauna, disappearance of several rare bird species, alteration of river courses and the disruption of the lives of the 8,000-odd tribals inhabiting this area.

A two-man committee, appointed by the Government a few years ago, had said in its report that the environmental losses from the soil erosion, affect of hydrological cycle, wild life habitat, micro-climate and upsetting of ecological balance will amount to Rs 1,520.88 crore over a period of 10 years. A preliminary survey by the committee has identified at least 10,000 trees that would have to be cut down to lay roads stretching over 50 kms and the conveyor belt to transport the bauxite from the line to the plant.

The committee has further

pointed out that the area required for the proposed cable wing and road in the "high volume stratum", is capable of yielding over 100 cubic mts of high-class timber per hectare. The cable ropeway is also supposed to pass through thick forest of bamboo which constitutes a major catchment area for the Thandava river. "Thus, it is noted that a considerable area of the virgin forests will be adversely affected," the report concludes.

But, even this estimate only scratches the surface, say environmentalists. A comprehensive survey undertaken by the Society for Integrated Development through Environmental Awakening indicates that at least 18 northern migrant bird species pass through the area, 12 of which have made the Eastern Ghat hill ranges their home. The clearing of forests in this area will pose a threat to these bird species, as well as the few surviving mammals like Sambar and barking deer, wild boar and sloth bear.

Ornithologists from the AP Natural Historical Society have also supplemented the IDEA report by listing 19 species of rare birds reported from this area.

It has also been reported that this area in the Eastern Ghat hill ranges supports valuable flora and fauna, some of which are considered unique to this subcontinent. As this area forms into a plateau at an elevation of about 1100 mts, with the surface level at some places rising to 1,300 mts, it has been till now spared of destruction and deforestation.

But, most importantly is the fate of the tribal villages that are sprinkled all over the area. Surveys have indicated that the project would displace 25 major tribal villages and another 20-odd smaller hamlets, supporting a tribal population of about 8,000. Most of the tribals are Valmiki, Konda Doras and Khondas (*amanthas*) who practice podu or shifting cultivation. It is estimated that at least 16 villages fall in the direct route of the proposed conveyor system under the project.

According to Mr Sivara Krishnan

of Sakthi voluntary organisation, the proposed open cast mining can generate about 0.25 kgs of dust per metric tonne of bauxite mined, which would affect the vegetation and tribals of the area.

Environmentalists also fear that the wealth of springs originating from these hills and falling into major streams and waterfalls which remains a major source of water for the tribals, would dry up and the stream beds silted as a result of the mining operations. They point out the example of Gandhamardan hills in Orissa, which faced a similar situation in the aftermath of NALCO's operations.

Environmentalists also point out that so far the Thandava and Yeluru catchments are stable due to the rich forest cover. But, once the project comes up, it will end up like the Sarada valley, starving the tribals of water. The problem is likely to be accentuated further if water from Thandava is diverted for the project, as proposed.

Against this background, a few environmentalist groups have described the bauxite project as a virtual mining bomb, which is likely to spell disaster on the ecology of this stretch of the balding Eastern Ghats but then again there is the question of economics involved ...

Khmer Rouge to attend Tokyo meet

TOKYO — Khmer Rouge leader Kieu Samphan is expected to attend Monday's Tokyo conference on aid for war-ravaged Cambodia after dropping threats to boycott the meeting, a senior Japanese official said on Sunday.

Parliamentary Vice-Foreign Minister Koji Kaki Awa said all four factions of Cambodia's Supreme National Council (SNC) were believed to be planning to attend the one-day ministerial meeting on reconstruction of their country.

Kyodo news service quoted an unnamed senior foreign ministry official as saying Samphan would take part. • **Reuter.**