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ROW OVER MINING

Gowda's stand on Kudremukh baffling

By Praveen Bhargav

Undoubtedly the iron ore mining in Kudremukh has posed a threat to both river systems and farmers.

It is paradoxical that former prime minister H D Deve Gowda, a proclaimed champion of farmers, has now decided to fight for the continuation of iron ore mining in Kudremukh by questioning the Supreme Court judgment which directs the mining company to shut down due to a serious threat to rivers and the impact on the livelihood of lakhs of marginal farmers.

In 2001, the Karnataka government, responding to public concern, and after a debate in both Houses, took an environmentally sound and socially just decision to wind up the destructive mining operations in Kudremukh. This decision, filed before the apex court, was based on the scientific reports that mining of low grade iron ore in the heart of the biodiversity-rich Western Ghats, a 7000 mm rainfall area where three major rivers — Tunga, Bhadra and Nethravathi — originate, caused massive sedimentation in the Bhadra river posing a grave threat to the livelihood of marginal farmers and the sensitive rain forests of Kudremukh.

Studies of the impact of damage from mining on the Bhadra reservoir, carried out by the Karnataka Government's own Water Resources Development Organisation in 1985-87, as well as studies by independent research institutions such as Mangalore University, Edinburgh University (Shankar et al. 1994) and the Centre for Wildlife Studies/ATREE (Krishnaswamy et al. in press), have confirmed the massive damage to the Bhadra River and reservoir from mining activities. The studies, carried out during the monsoon period when the silt flow is at its peak, have been accepted by the scientific journal Elsevier after a rigorous peer review. Another study by IISC has verified the ecological damage to the National Park.

It is now irrefutably established that 100 -150 lakh tonnes of sediment has entered the Bhadra river and reservoir since mining began. Of this more than 90 per cent has been contributed by mining in Kudremukh. Since this poses an immediate threat to the Bhadra left bank canal which irrigates over one lakh hectares of agricultural land, Deve Gowda's stand for continuing the mining is baffling. Has he been misled by vested interests?

The end of mining will result in some loss of employment of unionised workers. But the Supreme Court has not ordered the company to wind up, it has only ordered that mining in Kudremukh must stop by December, 2005. So, the pellet plant at Mangalore will operate from the ore being sourced from other mines through public tenders. It is the responsibility of the company to provide suitable compensation for its employees. It is for this reason that the Supreme Court provided three years for alternative arrangements. So the brinkmanship of the company raises serious questions?

Facts are being cleverly twisted by vested interests who are hinting at a Naxal problem. Will Deve Gowda pause to analyse the spread of Naxalism if marginal farmers, who do not fly red flags, lose their livelihood?

The fragile Lakya iron ore tailings dam with over 150 million tonnes of mud is filled to the brim and can take no more. So, any attempt to allow mining under the garb of slope stability and safety will actually cause a bigger safety problem.

Let's not forget that the dam developed a serious crack in 1994 leading to emergency evacuation of thousands of farmers living on the banks of the Bhadra river – a mudslide can be catastrophic for agricultural land downstream of Kudremukh.

Since the landmark judgment of the Supreme Court has considered all these aspects and rejected repeated attempts of the company by again issuing directions in September that no mining is permissible after December 31, 2005, the government and political leaders must respect the directions of the apex court.