

Mindless Mining

the Tragedy of Kudremukh

By Shekar Dattatri

To generations of Indians who have been through school the name Kudremukh means one thing, and one thing only – iron ore. So it was with me, until I went there five years ago. Nothing had prepared me for the devastation I witnessed, and I came away convinced that the textbooks ought to be revised immediately. Kudremukh should no longer be held up as a shining achievement of development but as an example of the worst kind of damage we can inflict on our planet.

The hills of Kudremukh are cloaked in undulating, velvety grasslands and lush, wet-evergreen forests. The scenery from various vantage points is spectacular – except for the enormous, ugly wounds inflicted by mining. Chopped, hacked, gouged into and stripped bare, an entire chain of once verdant hills has been laid waste and turned into a Martian landscape during the last 25 years.

One of the highest rainfall areas in India, Kudremukh receives about 6,000 mm. of rain annually. The worst

thing you can do in an area of such high precipitation and steep slopes, is opencast strip-mining. To make matters worse, the mine is located just above the Bhadra river at its source. Every monsoon over 100,000 tonnes of loose soil is washed down from the mined slopes and into the river. For about three months during the peak monsoon season, the Bhadra turns a bright orange from the erosion. The mining company describes this as ‘cosmetic’ pollution, which causes no harm!

To get to the truth of the matter, I travelled downstream to meet farmers who have been cultivating along the banks of the Bhadra for decades. They had quite a different story to tell about the ‘cosmetic’ pollution. Santhappa Gowda, a village elder, farmer and former vice-chairman of the Samse Gram Panchayat was livid when I spoke to him. Since the mining started, Gowda’s fields have become barren and he has seen his annual agricultural yields drop to a fourth – from 1,600 kg. per acre to just 400 kg. He told me, “the silt from the mined area has filled

up the river bed, obstructing the natural flow of water and causing the river to overflow on to our fields. When it recedes, it leaves a thick sludge of iron ore behind, making cultivation difficult and expensive. Our fields have become rock hard because of the ore and heat up like a tar road, but all our protests to the company have fallen on deaf ears.”

Fortunately, others were listening. A Bangalore-based NGO, Centre for Wildlife Studies, gathered and analysed scientific data on the siltation of the Bhadra. The studies revealed that the heavy silt loads threatened not just farmers living along the banks of the river, but the Bhadra dam downstream, which was fast filling up with mud. In 2001, an allied advocacy group, Wildlife First, in association with the Delhi-based NGO, LAW-E, filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court asking for the mining to be stopped. The mining company’s 30-year lease had ended, they argued, and it was time to accept the monumental folly of the past and call a halt to the devastation. They

petitioned for denying the mining company's demand for another 20-year lease, which would destroy forests and grasslands over an area three times as large as the existing mining area.

The PIL highlighted the fact that Kudremukh is one of the most important biodiversity hotspots in the world, at par with Kerala's famed Silent Valley, and that it was declared a National Park in 1987 to protect its biological riches – an extraordinary variety of medicinal plants and endangered wildlife. To continue mining within a National Park, the petitioners reasoned, is absolutely irrational, and against the spirit of earlier Supreme Court judgements.

Of vital importance, three major rivers have their origins in Kudremukh – the Tunga, Bhadra and Nethravathi. In these water-stressed times, the perennial abundance of water they produce is a lifeline to millions of farmers in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The relatively meagre profits that the company earns from permanently destroying a landscape by mining have to be weighed against the far greater value of the crop production enabled by the rivers – an estimated 780 crores per year from just the waters of the Bhadra!

Most ironic of all, the ore produced in Kudremukh is of such a low-grade that it cannot even be processed in the country. So it is converted into pellets and exported to China, Japan and Taiwan, to be turned into products that are probably sold back to India.

The ore extraction process itself is incredibly wasteful. The iron ore content in Kudremukh is quite low – only 30 per cent. The remaining 70 per cent of waste mud, known as tailings, has been dumped for years into the picturesque, 100 m. deep Lakya Valley, destroying it forever. The dam that was built to contain the

tailings is now filled to capacity (see box), with over 150 million tonnes of mud, and a dam burst is a disaster waiting to happen. In 1994, the dam developed a serious crack, causing panic downstream. If it had burst, the resulting mudslide would have been catastrophic. If mining is allowed to continue, more forested valleys – important rainwater catchments – will have to be dammed to contain the enormous amounts of waste mud generated.

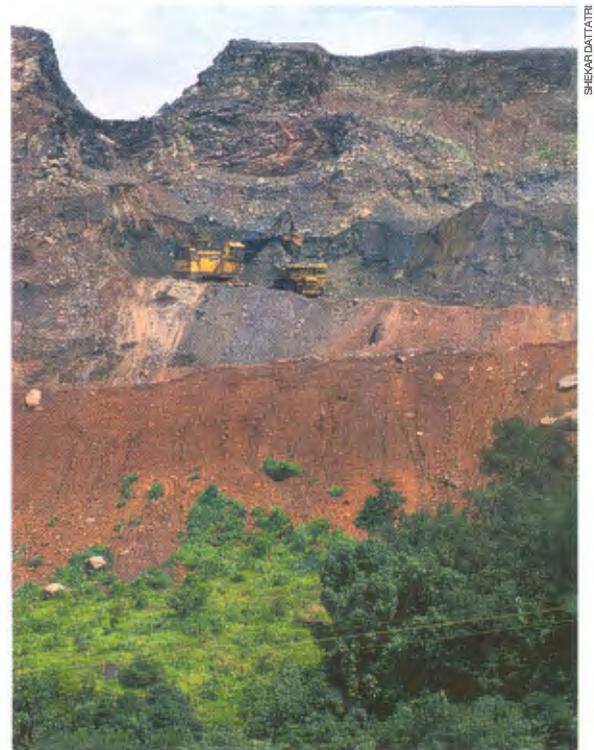
Whichever way you look at it, the continuation of mining in Kudremukh just does not make any sense, especially as it is now known that iron ore is a common mineral in India. It is no longer necessary to mine it in ecologically fragile areas. This was the conclusion reached in October 2002 by the Supreme Court. Roundly condemning “the matricide of mother earth” the Court ordered that the Government-owned Kudremukh Iron Ore Company Limited wind up its operations in Kudremukh by December 2005. Yet, nearly three years after this landmark judgement was pronounced, and with only months left for the deadline to expire, the company apparently shows no signs of heeding the Supreme Court's orders.

The decision to mine in Kudremukh 30 years ago was a tragedy. Today, given the precarious state of our forests and all that we know about the enormous value of intact ecosystems, it is unforgivable. Iron ore can be mined elsewhere, but once the forests and rivers are destroyed, nothing can ever bring them back. It is time we started looking at ways to repair the damage, not how much more we can extract from these hills. In the larger interests of safeguarding priceless river systems and the preservation of our irreplaceable biodiversity, the mining in Kudremukh must stop now. 🐾

DIRTY TRICKS

During the three years since the Supreme Court announced its judgement to close down mining operations in Kudremukh, NGOs and individuals who campaigned against the mining company have been targeted for harassment by some Forest Officers, apparently acting at the behest of the mining lobby. Kudremukh Wildlife Foundation and Wildlife First have borne the brunt of these attacks, but even a scientist who conducted a Government-approved study of siltation in the Bhadra river was not spared. Thirteen criminal cases were filed retrospectively against 18 individuals, in four courts spread over three districts, citing reasons such as “trespass into the National Park”, “illegally collecting water samples from the river,” etc. The cases were filed three years after the supposed ‘crimes’ took place, with no dates or witnesses cited! Thankfully, higher courts have stayed all the cases. More recently, in a blatant attempt to tarnish the reputation of the NGOs and show the mining company in a favourable light, malicious and baseless stories were planted in English and Kannada newspapers belonging to a well-known media group. The NGOs have initiated legal action against the publications. Meanwhile, the mining company has suffered more legal setbacks and was recently reprimanded by the Supreme Court for apparently attempting to deliberately misinterpret the court's directions.

The irreplaceable evergreen forests of Kudremukh have been systematically destroyed by mining. The beautiful and serene Bhadra river (facing page), once rich with mahseer, is badly affected by sedimentation from iron ore mining and even the banks are black with iron ore deposits.



LAKYA DAM – A DISASTER IN WAITING

The grave concerns expressed by the Indian Institute of Science and environmental groups about the stability of the Lakya tailings dam, and its likelihood of bursting, is neither idle speculation nor a hypothetical doomsday prediction. A similar ‘tailings dam’ in the Stava Valley in Italy broke on July 19, 1985 sending six million cubic feet of semi-fluid mud hurtling down at 90 km. per hour towards an unsuspecting community. Flowing like lava, the violent rush of sludge killed 268 people and completely destroyed two hotels, 53 homes, six industrial buildings and eight bridges. The estimated financial loss was 133 million Euros. Since then, there have been 33 similar accidents around the world including eight in the United States.