

MINING IN INDIA NEEDS A HUMANE APPROACH

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Distribution of Key Natural Resources - Minerals & Oil Resources of the World

Opposition from local populations to big development projects has now become de rigeur, the latest being coal mining in Chhattisgarh. Chief minister Bhupesh Baghel on Tuesday stopped all work related to iron ore mining in tribal-dominated Dantewada's Bailadila hills after a five-day protest by tribals who claim the shrine of a goddess is located on one the hills and is associated with their faith. Mr Baghel also ordered an inquiry into the bogus no objection certificates acquired from gram sabhas (village councils) and illegal felling of trees in the area. Since the Bailadila hill range is a part of Schedule V of the Constitution, it is governed by the provisions of Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, which makes the consent of gram sabhas mandatory for any development activity. The mining company in question, the National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC), is bearing a loss of Rs 12 crore a day due to the protests.

In a situation like this — India has seen many such instances — there are valid arguments on both sides. While the mining companies say that these resources are needed to fuel the country's economic engine, the project affected communities — mainly tribals since India's forested areas where they live are mineral-rich areas — don't want to give up the forests since their lives are dependent on them, and they also share a cultural bond with the jungles, an issue that policymakers sitting in faraway capital cities fail to appreciate and understand. The situation goes out of hand when tribals find that consent for development projects has been given without due legal process. All is this compounded by the fact that India's compensation and rehabilitation record is bad.

A sustainable mining policy, as laid out in the National Mining Policy 2019, could bring about a quantum jump in employment generation and even benefit the environment. Mining in India also needs a huge upgrade in technology to make it safer and cleaner. More importantly, the Indian State and the companies must follow the rules in letter and spirit when it comes to acquiring consent, and also use the district mineral funds, a neat pile of cash contributed by mining companies, for things that communities require and not just what the authorities think to be useful.

As it stands now, mining contributes just 2% of India's GDP against 5% for China. While China's methods may be less than democratic, India has in place the appropriate legislation and checks and balances to increase the potential of this industry. The Chhattisgarh example should occasion a rethink on the issue of sustainable mining.

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