

Odisha's story about pollution, mining and the environment

Priya Ranjan Sahu, Hindustan Times, Bhubaneswar, June 05, 2015

Odisha's resource-rich Sukinda valley acquired infamy as the fourth most polluted place in the world in 2007, ranked by the Blacksmith Institute of the US.

The finding was vigorously contested by the state pollution control board as vastly exaggerated, but it did manage to cause a constructive debate on environmental issues in the region.

The valley in Odisha's Jajpur district has around 97% of the country's reserves of chromite ore, a vital component in the production of stainless steel, leather and alloys.

The downside to the heavy tapping of mineral resources from a dozen open cast mines in the area over 70 years has been the utter degradation of Sukinda's landscape. Water in the region has been severely contaminated, the soil polluted with toxic substances, the forests almost wiped out and farms laid waste.

Locals say half the mines now stand closed but the damage has already been done, thanks largely to the improper disposal of waste in river water by the miners.

Hrudananda Nayak, a local resident who used to work in a mine that was closed in 2002, says people in a 20km radius of the mines have no choice but to drink toxic water and inhale chrome dust. "You will find people suffering from skin diseases, gastroenteritis and diabetes in every family across the valley. Every village has at least two cancer patients," he said. After Nayak lost his mining job, he took up farming on his four acres of land but the production remains low as the soil has been degraded.

Besides the 60,000 people falling under the seven "gram panchayats" [districts] of Sukinda, more than 40,000 in another five gram panchayats of the neighbouring Dhenkanal district have been directly affected by the fallout of mining.

The importance of mining as a source of livelihood has also seen a rapid decline. In 1975, more than 40,000 labourers worked in the mines. The number is now down to 4,000 because of modernisation of processes. Modernisation, though, has not led to a let-up in the pollution level.

Veteran labour union leader Mayadhar Nayak says mine owners should have been more responsible about waste disposal. "Dumping of waste in the river has worked like slow poison. Diseases take time to surface but their seeds were sowed over a long period," he says.

The Brahmani, Odisha's second-largest river that runs through Sukinda valley, is the state's most polluted because of excessive hexavalent chromium exposure, which has multiplied

the risk from cancer-causing carcinogenic substances for the 2,600,000 people dependent on the river. Surveys have indicated more than 80% deaths in heavily mined areas are caused by chromite-related diseases.

Though the state pollution control board disputed the Blacksmith Institute report as highly exaggerated, its own findings also showed high levels of hexavalent chromium in surface water.

Hearing a writ petition in May last year, the Orissa high court was not satisfied with a report by the state pollution control board that the pH and hexavalent chromium levels after treatment were within the limits prescribed under the Environment (Protection) Rules, 1986 and asked the central pollution control board to conduct an independent study on Sukinda's pollution.

The central board gave its report in October last year, saying that hexavalent chromium pollution had gone up due to chromite mining and recommended the constitution of a consortium of members from all mines operating in the valley to take remedial steps.

Casting doubt over the consortium's efficacy, noted environmentalist and water activist Ranjan Panda says local authorities cannot evade responsibility as without their connivance mine owners could not have polluted the area with impunity.

"Though an independent assessment was done upon the high court's intervention, we doubt it will address the alarming proportions of pollution," says Panda. "Only one season's data was analysed. A thorough study is needed. The consortium does not address issues related to the damage already done."