

Rape Of The Hills

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The freckled morning winter sun shimmered, on the small splintered ruby in the hollow bowl of a sapphire near Konkan-Goa border, and on the frescoed bangles of Asaniye village women.

The women walking on the paths- where generations have walked and animals trodden worn shiny like a polished wood undulated with ridges and emerald crested waves loping slowly, threw gold blue red pink lights on the water.

The sleep-choked roads were ringing with protests and under the cobalt pink sky with blue swirl of clouds, women voiced anger and anguish against the attempt by the state government to take over their lands, village and forests.

The fight between the people and the State is fast snow-balling into a major confrontation. The mineral and bio-diversity hot spot of Konkan region, last month witnessed one of the major conflagration wherein a handful of villagers from a small hamlet Asaniye dotting the tip of Maharashtra-Goa border forced the State to back out from a public hearing posted for declaring a green signal for mining operations.

The government has plans to lease out major chunks of hills to a Goa-based major firm Dempo for open cast mining operations.

The locals, who for centuries and generations shared an evolutionary cultural umbilical cord with the hills and trees, ripped apart the lies of technocrats, scientists and government officials in the public hearing. The public hearing was postponed.

Refusing to look at the shaved head of hills, stony-faced government officials retreated in the face of undulating waves of protest, against the proposed takeover attempt of hills by a powerful mining giant.

The villagers from Asaniye after watching the rape of the hills in nearby Kalne village and devastation of the atmosphere with people especially children and the massacre of wild life with whom they have a special bond, have decided to take up cudgels with the State before it embarks and resort to jugglery in order to issue clearance certificates.

Metals and Minerals Corporation have already left hills and forests— where incidentally the elephant trail emanating from Kerala exists— ravaged, bleached and gnarled skeleton of dirt paths running endlessly with lorries spewing out poisonous fumes.

Talking about the struggle, one of the activists said that the company which is owned by Maharashtra political bigwig Rohidas Patil's son Vinay Patil, in order to grab the hills used police repression.

“At one point of time it was like a state of army rule. Entire Kalne village was empty. The doors were locked or open. Villagers had fled from their houses because police had clamped down heavily picking up everybody at sight,” said Mugdha Desai. The women who had managed to escape sought shelter in a nearby temple and irrespective of their religion caste or creed-incidentally Konkan is one region in Maharashtra where communal tensions despite Bal Thackeray's fascist Shiv Sena and its counterpart Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra

Navnirman Sena MNS presence is totally absent- came together and chalked out a protest movement collectively.

The lessons learnt from Kalne village, where the State through legal trickery managed to lease out the commonly owned village land to a private firm for pillaging it, is helping Asaniye villagers.

After studying all the documents provided by the State as to how it will benefit the villagers, Sandeep Sawant, one of the active members of the movement said, "We found not only discrepancies but even fabrication of research papers. They were all put up to justify the land acquisition."

Realising the simmering anger having all the potentiality to erupt into violence, the district collector sent his deputy to chair the public hearing. The company personnel who were present at the meeting were chucked out from the venue on legal grounds as they had no authorized passes.

Ironically Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB) officials were unable to answer any of the queries raised by the villager. They were even not able to answer the lacuna in the documents submitted to the villagers, stating, they "were not responsible for the documents prepared."

The district administration after finding itself in tight corner postponed the public hearing for further date, stating, "that the relevant authorities will be intimated about the allegations as well as the deficiencies in the documents. No further action would be taken till the matter is resolved."

Vaishali Patil who is spearheading the movement said, "The protest is grassroots based and people are realising their power. A handful of people have managed to bring down the State to its knees. The public hearing clearly revealed that the State is functioning for the industrialists and have nothing to do with people...and people have realised that they will not allow their land, forests or hills to be doled out for exploitation."

Come dusk and under the muddy yellow light of bulbs, the gloaming silent shadows dance with an angry energy in the porch of the houses, as strategies and tactics are thrashed out to stop the usurpation of their land, forests and water.

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