

Diamond Project: Destruction in the Name of Development in The Buxwaha Forests

Buxwaha forest lies in the Chhatarpur district of Madhya Pradesh, about 260 km northeast of the state capital of Bhopal. Around 7,000 villagers of the 17 tribal villages in the territory depend solely on forest and forest products, like Mahua, Tendu leaves, Chironji, Amla, etc, for their livelihood.

In Bundelkhand for the last few months protests are rampant against Bunder diamond mine project. Aditya Birla Group Company's Essel Mining & Industries Limited (EMIL) got lease for the Bunder Diamond Mine area in 2019 for 50 years. EMIL plans to develop a fully mechanized open cast mine and modernized processing plant for diamond production with an investment of about Rs 2,500 crores. The company targets the execution of the mining lease by the end of the financial year 2022. The Bunder Diamond Block is estimated to have 34 million carats of rough diamonds. 382 hectares of land in the Buxwaha forest has been allotted for the diamond project. The forest department has been permitted to cut down 2,15,872 trees in the allotted forest area. This is detrimental to tribal livelihoods and to bio-diversity. It also pollutes water and air. So the project met with fierce resistance from local tribals, social activists and was widely publicized on social media. Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed in the Supreme Court seeking revocation of project permits as well as a petition in the Green Tribunal of India (NGT).

This is not the first time that there has been public opposition to this diamond project. Australian mining giant Rio Tinto Exploration India Private Limited (RTEIPL) was granted a prospecting license by Madhya Pradesh government in 2006. But the project faced strong opposition on environmental issues. The Indian Bureau of Mines has also conditionally approved a 954-hectare mining plan in Buxwaha. But the Madhya Pradesh government in 2016 due to the strong opposition revoked its permission to the project. In 2019, Aditya Birla Company won the auction for this largest diamond mining project in Asia.

Already as a drought-prone region Bundelkhand faces high water scarcity. Now this project will cause more water problems. This is because diamond mining requires a lot of water. From such a drought prone area like Bundelkhand to excavate about five million tonnes of diamond-bearing kimberlite ore per annum the water requirement for the Bunder mine and ore processing plant is about 16,050 cubic meters per day (5.9 million cubic meters in a year), according to the pre-feasibility report of the project. The project is estimated to go on for 14 years. The Bunder mining project was awarded to Essel Mining & Industries Limited in 2019. The company, in its application for environmental clearance, stated that to meet water requirements and protect the mine from inundation, a seasonal nullah (stream) will be converted into a dam. Although the company says it will use stream water,

the percentage of water in the stream drops when the rainy season ends, so the company uses groundwater through large boreholes to meet its needs. Chattarpur was declared a Semi Critical Region by the Central Groundwater Authority in 2017. According to the Indian Meteorological Department, the Bundelkhand region will experience a 24 percent rainfall deficit in 2020. The Bunder forest area is located in the 3000 hectares of protected forest of the Narmada Valley. The percentage of groundwater is likely to drop further if excavations are carried out for this project.

In addition, two major kinds of waste are generated during the excavation of diamond ore. One, overburden (OB) waste which lies over the ore, such as rocks and soil. The other is tailings or the remains of the mineral after the economically valuable components have been extracted from the finely milled ore. Under the Bunder project, five metric tonnes of kimberlite ore will be excavated per annum. Its mining would generate about 3.70 metric tonnes of soil waste, 16.34 metric tonnes of OB waste, and 5 metric tonnes of tailing waste annually. A large part of the auctioned forest land will be used for dumping waste. Over 86 hectares of land will be required to dump OB waste, 12 hectares for soil waste, and over 50 hectares for tailings. Soil and OB wastes are not contaminated. But tailings are disposed of in dams or ponds usually built around the mining site. The tailing ponds contain process-affected water, dissolved metals, and various toxic ore processing reagents that can seep into the ground. There have been several reports of contaminated waste leaching into the groundwater and the tailing ponds overflowing in the monsoon. In April 2011, leakage from the red mud pond containing bauxite residue of the aluminum refinery of Vedanta Ltd. in Odisha entered River Vamsadhara and caused enormous damage to the environment.

Tribal people and social activists are opposing the project because of the devastation it creates. False reports are being made against local tribals for raising concern against the project. The assessment report submitted by Chhattarpur's Chief Forest Conservator (CFC) on 2nd January 2021 claimed that the tribals of the area were 'NOT DEPENDENT' on the proposed forest and that 'no right of tribals has been recognized in the area'. This means that the rulers have an idea of creating false reports for the project and taking the project forward even by driving out of tribals from their forest if necessary. In the name of the diamond project, they are going to unjustly remove the tribals living in the forest, cut down many trees in the sanctuary, pollute the water and air and destroy the environment. The tribals must organize and intensify the struggle against the destruction of the Buxwaha forest area, and the democrats must fight against the national and foreign multinationals that are exploiting the country's natural resources.