

Digging their own grave

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Extracting minerals and ornamental stone in the Aravallis - despite its environmental costs - is such a flourishing economic activity that political parties are vying with each other to protect it. Because most mine workers have no other livelihood, they refuse to let anything jeopardize their interests, reports, reports Author from Udaipur



---WITH THE run-up to the assembly elections under way in Rajasthan, one would expect senior politicians to be busy plotting campaign strategy -- and not be immersed in the problems of mining in the Aravallis. But their concern is not surprising, given the fact that mining has become one of the major issues in the elections, which are to be held later this year.

These elections may be the first to be contested primarily on an ecological issue, but with a difference: All the contestants are determined champions of the state's mining interests, even if it means overlooking ecological neglect. The main contestants -- the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress -- seem to be locked in a struggle for the title of prominent defender of mining and their campaign slogan could very well be: Anything you can do for mining, I can do better.

Both parties seem unconcerned by fears expressed by the Union ministry of environment and forests (MEF), environmentalists and some non-governmental organisations, all of whom are appalled by the ecological fallout of unbridled mining. Says S S Dhabriya, who heads the remote sensing unit at the B M Birla Science and Technology Centre in Jaipur, "The Aravallis are under stress due to mining."

The state's records show that 18 per cent of the Aravallis, extending from Alwar to Udaipur, Dungarpur and Mount Abu, was densely forested in 1948. This dropped to 13 per cent in 1954 and by 1980-81, the forest cover in the state was a dismal 9.3 per cent. Today, says Dhabriya, remote sensing data indicates forest cover in Rajasthan is just about 3 per cent of its total area.

Ecological cost of mining

Environmentalists blame mining as a primary reason for the loss of forests. "Not only does the land where actual mining takes place get degraded, large areas on the periphery lose their tree cover because of the movement of men and material and the debris left from mining," says Rajendra Singh of the Sariska-based Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), whose battle against miners in the reserve forest there was responsible in many ways for drawing attention to the ecological cost of mining in the Aravallis.

Supporting the findings of environmentalists, Dhabriya confirms that mining has degraded the state's forests, "blighted" surface ecology and possibly brought about an expansion of the Thar desert.

However, mine operators and their supporters insist, on the other hand, that these fears are "untrue", but even if they are justified, the economic returns from mining make taking environmental risks worthwhile. That the battle over mining has reached such a pitch may sound surprising for a state that ranks low among Indian states in terms of mineral wealth and whose exchequer gains barely Rs 150 crore annually in mining royalty. The economics of

Rajasthan mining may appear trivial but not its policies, which explains the enthusiasm of the two main political parties for mining. Consider: About 350,000 people are employed daily in the mines and total jobs in mining-related activities is estimated as high as 5 million. There are more than 30,000 mining leases in the state and last year alone, about 64,000 fresh applications were filed. Many of Rajasthan's most influential individuals have a stake in the mining sector. With all these factors making mining in the Aravallis one of Rajasthan's flourishing economic activities, it makes good sense for the state's politicians to nurture the interests of those who control mining and allied activities.

Former Rajasthan chief minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, who is the most outspoken champion of mining in the state, is adamant that "mining holds the key to Rajasthan's future" (see box). He maintains that it is being done in such a small area it cannot affect the environment of the state as a whole.

Despite such big-name support, a draft notification issued by MEF in January unnerved the miners and their supporters sufficiently to bring them out to the streets. The MEF draft would make environmental clearances mandatory for developmental work, including mining, being carried out within 5 km of forest land. Several states have objected to the MEF draft, but none as vehemently as Rajasthan, where protest became almost violent because it was mistakenly understood to be the final notification and mining interests feared their livelihood would be choked.

A S Mathur, secretary general of the federation of mining associations of Rajasthan, explains why, "Even if on paper the miners are required to get environmental clearance, in effect, it would lead to the closure of the mines because few entrepreneurs would be able to get them." And, Shekhawat points to another danger: "The notification will only pollute the MEF by breeding corruption there. No industry is going to be closed under such rules. Those who are rich and mighty will obtain the clearance while the rest will perish".

The fear of perishing galvanised the state's mine operators into launching a determined counter-campaign against the proposed MEF notification. The extent of their determination and willingness to use their clout can be gauged from the fact that when MEF minister Kamal Nath held a meeting in New Delhi on July 15 ostensibly to hear both sides on the proposed notification, he ended up in assuaging the Rajasthan miners. Their representatives and the state's political leaders made it clear at the meeting that they were unwilling to yield anything that would jeopardise the state's mining interests.

"This is because mining, unlike in most other states, is not an activity limited to a few giant entrepreneurs," Rajendra Singh Mehta, convenor of the federation of mining associations of south Rajasthan explains. "The majority of mine-owners are in this business to gain their bread-and-butter needs and so if the mines were to close, a large number of them may just starve."

While the spectre of starvation may be an exaggeration, it is true that mining lease-holders in Rajasthan are mainly from the middle-class. This is because most mineral concessions involve plots that rarely exceed one hectare. The major mineral leases do not number even 1,500 out of the total of 30,000 leases. Furthermore, many of the major lease-holders are public sector companies.

Pick-and-shovel technology

Hence, while there are some big players in the field, most of the mine leases are held by people with limited resources and lacking in means and inclination to make the investments required to extract minerals in an environmentally safe manner. The normal mining practice in the Aravallis continues to be the primitive pick-and-shovel method.

"It is not possible for most lessees to invest any more than what they already have," says Kedarnath Khaitan, an affluent lessee in Kherwada in Dungarpur district. "Even if they could, most lessees are reluctant to do so because they are not sure if their lease would be renewed after ten years." Khaitan points out that many of the mine operators have already taken risks in making even their initial investment, because in the absence of a detailed prospect study of the Aravallis, they cannot even be sure of striking quality minerals in their lease area (See box). Mehta says another problem is that lease areas generally lack even basic facilities such as roads and electricity. "So, considerable investments have to be made at the outset," Mehta explains. "After this, the miners cut corners largely

to ensure viable profit margins." But mining observers in Rajasthan disagree and say the miners' reluctance to modernise has more to do with their disregard for social responsibilities.

This attitude would explain the lack of concern among the miners that by destroying the Aravalli forests, they have also destroyed the resource base for the poor villagers living on the periphery of these forests. "They have now either become wage labourers or are forced to work in mines under inhuman conditions," says TBS' Rajendra Singh.

Threat to crops
Another problem created by the miners is the run-off from mine sites that Rajendra Singh says has destroyed crops in several villages in the Narayani Mata block near Sariska. Elsewhere in the state in places like Rajnagar and Dungarpur, where extensive mining is going on, white calcious effluents are produced. "This gets carried into the fields by rains and it reduces the productivity of the land," says Madan Modi, a Udaipur journalist who has studied mining problems closely.

Environmentalists also express concern that mining has affected the miners' health and the social ecology of the Aravalli area. Says L C Tyagi, who heads a Jodhpur-based NGO, "The health of the workers is the most neglected aspect of mining." A survey of sandstone mines in the Jodhpur area disclosed high rates of diseases among the mine-workers.

And, Kishore Saint of the Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal (UVM) in Udaipur notes, the villagers have indeed obtained employment at the mines. But mining has destroyed their traditional habitat and the sudden inflow of money has led to a spurt in social evils such as excessive drinking.

Because the number of mines in the Aravallis has multiplied during the past decade, resulting in wages being linked, the only way mine operators can cut costs is by compromising on environment-protecting technology.

"The mine operators," says M L Jhavar of the Social Policy Research Institute in Jaipur, who has closely investigated the Bijolia mines near Bhilwara, "would gladly invest in equipment like diamond wire saws to reduce wastage, but few would spend money on buying equipment that would reduce injury to the environment or improve working conditions in the mines."

But the use of primitive but cheap technology, besides damaging the environment, also affects profits in time because it cannot extract minerals from great depths. "Our lessees do not even exploit the potential of their concessions fully," says Jhavar. "Most of them in fact only scratch the earth's surface, take away some mineral and then abandon it." Indeed, there is no dearth of abandoned mines all over the Aravallis.

In fact, the pick-and-shovel technology has determined the very nature of mining in Rajasthan. As this technology can be utilised only when the mineral is buried shallow, mining entrepreneurs prefer to lease sites that do not require deep digging. Because limestone and building stones are found just below the surface in the Aravallis near Alwar and Udaipur, there is heavy competition to secure leases in these areas. This is clearly reflected in the production growth rate of various minerals in the state during the past five years.

Records of the state's department of mines and geology prove the much-publicised spurt in mine output in Rajasthan is due to decorative stone. The production of important minerals such as china clay and rock phosphate (raw material for fertilisers) actually dropped during this period. The production of granite has soared by 92 per cent a year and of marble, by more than 30 per cent (see box).

Other catalysts that have spurred mining of these items in the past decade include feelings of insecurity that has led Rajasthani entrepreneurs in India's troubled northeast, Punjab and Bihar to look to their home state for a fall-back arrangement. Mining was the obvious choice because there has been little industrial development in Rajasthan. Says Ravi Kabra, a marble dealer who returned to Makrana though his ancestors migrated from Rajasthan to Patna many decades ago, "Marble mining does not require very high investments and the gestation period is not too high. If you strike quality stone, the returns are very lucrative. That's why many Rajasthanis have decided to invest here." For the state government, reeling under a resource crunch in the 1980s, these entrepreneurs were a welcome lot because they would create jobs and augment revenue without much effort from the government. However, because the state government lacked the resources for detailed geological prospecting of the Aravallis, notes G D Sharma, the

state's director of mines and geology, few investors were willing to risk their capital and preferred to go in for mining of marble and other decorative stones. An indicator of this is that while the number of major mineral leases grew from 805 in 1970-71 to only 1,341 in 1992-93, minor mineral leases shot up from 1,400 to more than 10,000 during the same period (See box).

Lacking scientific information on the potential of leased areas, a number of entrepreneurs found their mines yielded inferior marble. For them, the only way out was to sell cheap and sell more. As substandard stone was not acceptable in the international market, they promoted sales in the Indian middle-class, for use in their kitchens and toilets. Says M Alam, who owns Taj Marbles in Makrana, "Suddenly, there was a marble slab available for everybody. Marble prices that ranged around Rs 200 per square foot until the end of the 1970s, could be bought for as little as Rs 20, provided you were not fussy about the quality" (See box).

Burgeoning domestic market The discovery of a domestic market for decorative stone, such as marble, sandstone and granite, probably provided the biggest impetus to mining in Rajasthan because it offered a reliable hedge against international market fluctuations. For instance, when Italian importers -- the biggest importers of decorative stone -- failed to pick up consignments of marble, there was no undue worry in Rajasthan mining circles because five-star hotels and posh homes throughout India were only too willing to buy the marble. The fact is as long as there are buyers in India for all kinds of decorative stone, there will be entrepreneurs willing to mine all kinds of decorative stone, whatever be the toll on the environment.

This is why NGOs and environmentalists, alarmed by the runaway mining in the Aravallis, welcome the MEF intervention, though many doubt the usefulness of the proposed measures. Says UVM's Kishore Saint, "There is little doubt that these rules will only further strengthen the hands of bureaucrats -- and this may not necessarily result in environmental benefits." Mehta is more blunt and adds, "This whole exercise is about making more money."

In many quarters, NGO support for the proposed MEF notification is interpreted as "a conspiracy to stop mining in the state". This impression is being nurtured by politicians of every stripe, because they know it will mobilise both votes and campaign funds from mining interests. So strong is the propaganda concerning NGOs and environmentalists it has created uncertainty in the minds of mine workers about their future and many have started looking for other work. These mine workers form a strong vote bank, ready to vote for politicians who can convince them that he or she will protect mining in Rajasthan and ensure it goes on.

Environmentalists blame the lack of a proper mining strategy on the part of the state government as being responsible for much of the degradation that has taken place in the Aravallis. Dhabriya describes the scramble for marble as being reminiscent of the 19th-century gold rush in California and adds that though mining in forest areas is clearly prohibited by law, a large number of such mining leases have been awarded in the past 15 years. The extent of mining in the Aravalli forests is evident from a Supreme Court order shutting down 262 mines in the Sariska forest alone (Down To Earth, May 15, 1993).

State officials lack consistency even in relation to mining leases already issued in forest areas. In Kesariyajee mining belt near Udaipur, says Mehta, mine leases were freely awarded, but recently state authorities refused to renew 136 of them. Complains Mehta, "Why were the leases given in the first place? The lessees got no-objection certificates from even the forest department. Now, after 10 years of making substantial investments, the government suddenly refuses to allow mining there."

In such circumstances, the mining lobby is putting up stubborn resistance to the MEF draft, even though many of the leases may have been obtained by unfair means in the first instance. Akshaydeep Mathur, a mine-owner from Jaipur, warns, "If the mines are closed, there will be a law-and-order problem."

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