

## Reserve power

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The slaughter of Sariska effectively portrays the determination of the local people to halt the devastation wrought by mines. Opencast mining: wrecking the < A kuccha road leading to village Mallana near Sariska in Rajasthan is blocked by villagers. Faces bright with anger, they say: "We will free Mallana from the miners. We will do or die." A truck approaches cautiously and then turns tail.

Harshawardhan Varma's moving documentary, *The Slaughter of Sariska*, drives home a message: that power flows from the people. Since 1989, villagers living in the vicinity of Sariska -- particularly in Mallana and Baldevgarh -- have been fighting a battle to free the land of their birth from miners. Despite a Supreme Court order, mining has continued with impunity.

Opencast mining of marble has wrecked the eco-system. An elderly sarpanch wistfully describes the dense jungle which is now a wasteland: "Our cattle used to graze here."

Cracks in the dam Blasting in the mines has created cracks in the historic Mangalsur Dam built by Raja Jai Singh. The villages, dependent on the dam for their water, are now afraid of a dam-burst. Stones and dust fly after blasting. A six-year-old girl is injured and a neighbour's house comes crashing down. There are complaints of ill health. The water in the wells has gone down even as miners pump out water from their mines, waterlogging the area.

Local people speak of young boys dying because of the deplorable conditions in the mines. People raise objections which are stilled by death-threats. The Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), an NGO which has taken up cudgels on behalf of the people, has borne the brunt of several threats, including the beating of TBS's Rajinder Singh.

Strangely, the sanctuary was meant to protect wildlife. But mines in the area are doing just the opposite. A shifty-eyed forest officer claims that the mines are not in the sanctuary itself and that the animals are unaffected by blasts or by changes in the eco-system. Rajinder Singh contradicts him: the tiger population has gone down and animals tumble into mine pits.

The film highlights the sheer insensitivity of the government's diktats. Villagers are denied access to any forest resource. If they collect stones for their homes, a fine of Rs 100 is slapped on them. Yet, mine-owners strip the forest of wood and stones while officials look the other way. The surrounding villages united under the leadership of Mallana's sarpanch and blocked all routes to the mines. Contractors working at the site were heckled. Then, justice was sought from the highest court of the land.

A symbiosis exists between the Sariska's humans and animals; they depend on each other for survival. The mine mafia flouted a Supreme Court order, threatened and injured local activists, but they couldn't kill the agitation. And eventually some of the mines were forced to close.