

SC order: Vedanta sees hope

Sandeep Mishra, TNN | Apr 20, 2013, 12.45 AM IST

BHUBANESWAR: Even as those opposed to bauxite mining at [Niyamgiri hills](#) welcomed Thursday's [Supreme Court](#) judgment on the issue, state-owned Odisha Mining Corporation (OMC) and the Vedanta group, the mining project proponents, see the apex court order as an 'opportunity' to achieve their objective.

"We welcome the SC judgment and hope it will help remove the obstacles in ensuring raw material availability to our alumina project," chief operating officer of [Vedanta Aluminium Limited](#) (VAL) Mukesh Kumar told TOI on Friday. He refused to elaborate on his company's views to the much-awaited verdict, saying, "OMC can offer detailed comments as it had moved the apex court on this issue."

Chairman-cum-managing director of OMC Saswat Mishra felt the judgment was 'positive' for the corporation, the state government as well as the company. "The MoEF (ministry of environment and forests) had rejected the bauxite mining proposal (by withdrawing statutory clearances) in 2010, but the apex court order has kept the door ajar. To that extent, it is a positive judgment for us," Mishra told TOI.

The OMC had moved SC in 2011, challenging MoEF's August 24, 2010, order rejecting the Stage-II forest clearance for diversion of 660 hectare of forest land for mining of bauxite in Niyamgiri hills spread over Kalahandi and Rayagada districts. The OMC and the Sterlite Industries (Vedanta's parent company) had floated a special purpose vehicle to mine Niyamgiri, home to Dongaria and Kutia Kondhs.

A senior OMC officer said the judgment could take the mining proposal a step closer to fruition. "Contrary to the view of some activists that the mining was proposed in an area where tribals worship Niyam-Raja, the court has said the mining site at Niyama Danger is 10 km from Hundaljali, revered as the seat of Niyam-Raja, the deity of the local Kondhs," the officer said. "The court has said the gram sabha should examine if mining would affect the religious rights of the locals. The gram sabha (palli sabha in Odisha's case) has to justify whatever decision it takes. So it has to establish how mining can affect the place of worship which is 10 km away," the officer added.

The VAL sources said the verdict has given hope to the company's alumina refinery project at Lanjigarh as it had settled certain contentious issues like including loss of forest, loss of ecology and individual claims pertaining to the mining project. The VAL has closed its refinery on December 5, 2012, due to shortage of bauxite.

"The court has not upheld the report of the N C Saxena committee (which was critical of the project) or the grounds based on which MoEF had rescinded Stage-II clearance. It has rather focused on implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), especially relating to protection of customary and religious rights of local tribals," a company executive added.