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Government widens scope of Saxena panel to scrutinise Orissa mining project

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NEW DELHI: Armed with the Attorney General's opinion giving it the right to deny forest clearance for bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri Hills, the environment ministry has broadened the scope of the NC Saxena Committee. Going beyond the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and impact on wildlife and biodiversity, the panel will now also study the displacement that the project will cause, the proposed rehabilitation plan.

The four-member committee under NAC member NC Saxena was set up in late June to determine whether to allow the diversion of nearly 661 hectares of forest land in the Niyamgiri hills in the Kalahandi and Rayagada districts of Orissa. The proposal to mine bauxite from the Lanjigarh mines in the Niyamgiri Hills was submitted by the Orissa Mining Corporation. The Anil Agarwal promoted Vedanta will source bauxite mined by the Orissa Mining Corporation for its alumina plants.

The environment ministry has broadened and redefined the scope of the committee. Going beyond the scope of investigation spelt out in the June 29 order, the committee will now investigate and ascertain the status of implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 in and around the proposed project area. The panel will study the "likely physical and economic displacement" that the project will cause as well as the "resource displacement" of forest users and the plans for their rehabilitation.

The impact of the project on the ecology of the land has been included in the panel's scope of investigation. It has been given a carte blanche to study any issue that they may consider to be germane to their report. In the June 29 order, the committee's scope was limited to ascertaining whether the Forest Rights Act has been properly implemented, determining the impact of the project on the livelihood, culture and material welfare of the Dongria Kondhs, a notified primitive tribal group, and impact on the local wildlife and biodiversity.

The widening of the panel's scope came after Attorney General GE Vahanvati opined that the Supreme Court nod to Vedanta Resources' bauxite mining project in Niyamgiri does not bind the environment ministry to give an automatic clearance to it, and that the project must be approved only on "merits".

The other members of the committee are Tata Institute of Social Sciences director Dr S Parasuraman, retired IFS officer Promode Kant, and associate professor at Delhi's Institute of Economic Growth Amita Baviskar. The committee will submit its report in late August.

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