

hindustantimes**Chetan Chauhan, Hindustan Times**Email Author
New Delhi, July 24, 2010First Published: 17:35 IST(24/7/2010)
Last Updated: 17:44 IST(24/7/2010)

More trouble for Vedanta's bauxite mining project in Orissa

Troubles have mounted for Anil Aggarwal promoted Vedanta's bauxite mining project in Orissa with the Environment ministry asking the four member committee to probe in detail the likely physical and economic displacement of the primitive Dongria Kondhs tribe and its impact on their cultural and social lives.

This comes close on the heels of Attorney General G E Vahanvati's opinion that the Environment ministry has full right to decide on the final approval to the company's bauxite mining project in tribal dominated Nyamgiri hills in backward Lanjigarh district. Before the opinion, the ministry officials had said the Supreme Court had already given approval to the project in 2008.

After receiving the opinion, the ministry widened the scope of NC Saxena committee, constituted on June 29, by including five new stringent terms of reference in addition to the existing two. The committee has been constituted to study on ground impact of the bauxite mining in Nyamgiri before the ministry decides on final approval to the project.

One of the most important clause added is on investigating whether Forest Rights Act, which provides for seeking approval of locals before implementing the project, has been implemented or not. This has been a long standing demand of activists, protesting against the project.

The ministry also wants to know about the "economic and physical displacement" due to the Vedanta's mining project and whether the locals were provided adequate rehabilitation with regard to resource displacement.

Tribals under the Forest Rights Act have a right to minor forest produce but in most project areas it has not been allowed. Dongria Kondhs tribe, which live in Nyamgiri hills, the project area, is said to have been adversely impacted because of the project and civil society organizations have constantly highlighted their plight.

The committee has also been given discretion to investigate any issue related to the project, thereby opening a can of worms for the company.

The Environment ministry has asked the committee to submit its report by end of August. Saxena and other committee members have already visited the area twice. "We have asked them to submit a concrete report on the project, on basis of which the ministry will decide on the final approval," said Environment and Forest minister Jairam Ramesh.

Vedanta's mining project has been a caught of war of letter between the ministry and the Orissa government with the latter refuting the claims that the company has failed to abide by the Forest Rights Act while implementing the project.

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