

Govt's confusing signals confound tribals

Venkatesh Bayya, TNN | Apr 2, 2013, 03:27 AM IST

G K VEEDHI: Residents of Jerella and Mondigedda in G K Veedhi mandal of the Agency area in the district are a confused and helpless lot. They are confused because of the suspension orders on bauxite mining and helpless as they feel that too many people are trying to dictate their lives.

The tribals believe that the standoff between the state government and Union ministers Kishore Chandra Deo and Jairam Ramesh has virtually ignored them. The state government's determination to go ahead with the mining process despite the stiff opposition from within the party has further confounded the residents of the interior tribal region.

On the other hand, an unperturbed Anrak Aluminium Ltd is going about putting up its factory, which is expected to be ready for production by January 2014. In fact, Anrak acquired over 75 acres in G Koduru and Rachapalli villages of Makkavaripalem mandal as late as January 2012.

While nearly 2440 hectares of land has been leased to Anrak in the Jerella region, the environmental clearance was accorded only for 465 hectares by the central government in 2008, which later came under the scanner after tribal rights activists raised the issue of violation of provisions under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution and Forest Rights Act. Also, the villagers of Jerella and its surrounding villages are themselves a divided lot, with 30% of them standing in support of mining and 50% dead against it. "Tribals such as the Bhagathas, Valmikis, Porjas, Kondru and Moka Dora are to some extent divided over the entire issue. The Porjas, constituting about 25% of the total population, are totally against mining in the region and have the support of the Maoists," said a government official from G K Veedhi mandal.

There are about 39 settlements abutting the bauxite mines and a majority of them fall under the Mondigedda and Jerella panchayats. When the issue was first raked up in 2008-2009, the local tribes were promised 4,000 jobs by the Andhra Pradesh Mining Development Corporation (APMDC), which means at least one person from each household would get work in the mines. However, there was opposition on the grounds that bauxite mining would pollute the region.

Confirming this, Jerella panchayat president S Venkata Ramana, said, "If jobs come at the expense of the environment, then we don't want any mining activity here." He, however, refused to comment on the Maoist angle. The sarpanch, who received the support of the Leftist parties and the TDP to get elected as an independent candidate, was also mum on youngsters being keen on getting employed in the mines or the Anrak plant.

When asked if the gram sabha had objected to the mining activity, Raja Rao from the Valmiki tribe replied, "We have not had a single gram sabha in this area so far." However, Rao's relative K Lakshmi revealed that most of the sabhas were either held by political parties, the Maoists or the Leftists. "District officials proposed to conduct the gram sabha here many times but their efforts came to naught mainly because the Maoists warned them off. As for public hearings conducted by the collector and other

government officials, a few were held in Chintapalli," said Lakshmi.

Bhagatha tribal and Jerella resident V Narayana Rao (name changed), who is employed on the Anrak site, criticised the party leadership for not taking a clear stand on the issue. "We get conflicting messages from our MP (Union minister K C Deo), local MLA and state tribal welfare minister," he said.

On the issue of deforestation, Raja Rao and S Bala Raju of Jerella, who now reside in Chintapalli, scoffed at the idea that pristine virgin forests would be knocked down to make way for mines. "When a geological survey was conducted in 1975, there was a lot of forest area. However, 35 years down the line, the forest is totally gone. There are only a few thousands of acres of Podu (deforested land where shifting cultivation is practised) and today the Porjas and other tribes in our panchayats are being given pattas there, especially over the last couple of years."

When asked if there were any settlements in the proposed mine lease areas in the Jerella region, Raja Rao and Bala Raju replied in the negative.

According to activist G Srinivas, Anrak is possibly considering import of bauxite, which was also hinted at by a source in Anrak who works at Makkavaripalem. Srinivas said Anrak may have to import the mineral either from Rajasthan or elsewhere if they are not allowed to exploit the mines in the region.