

Mining costs Keonjhar hills green cover

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KEONJHAR: Twenty years ago Gandhamardhan hill was a lush green forest inhabited by wild animals and birds. Tribals used to collect fruits, nuts, firewood, medicinal shrubs and herbs and sell them in the market. This hill near Ichinda village in Banspal block was also a rich mine that proved a bane for it.

Miners dug up the forest, their heavy vehicles spewed smoke into the pristine environment and sounds broke the silence of the forest invading the privacy of forest-dwellers and driving away wild animals. As the coffers of miners filled up, Gandhamardhan lost its greenery.

The entry of outsiders also helped the timber mafia loot the forest. They felled precious trees, stole medicinal plants and warned the innocent tribals against entering the hill.

The erosion of greenery have led to the destruction of habitat of elephants and their corridor, extinction of many animals and plants and drying up of at least 10 natural streams.

"Several species of medicinal plants and fruits no more exist in the forest. Natural streams such as Mankadanacha and Bhanjpani have been obstructed by mining resulting in the shortage of drinking water," said sarpanch of Talakainsari gram panchayat Basanti Behera.

"Pastoral fields and farmlands have become polluted and shrinking in area due to dust pollution. Now we are fighting to get back our rights over the forest and live peacefully," she said.

The miners, who promised the authorities to bring a radical change in the lifestyle of tribals by taking up peripheral development such as healthcare, sanitation, drinking water supply, provide better education facilities and employment have gone back on their words.

The pollution caused by mining activities have led to the outbreak of many diseases. Tribals alleged that they are yet to receive land pattas for their rights over the forest. This includes people of Talakainsari, Nitigoth, Suakati and Kumundi gram panchayats.

There might be some succour for these suffering tribals. "All applicants will be given land patta under the Forest Right Act," said project director of Integrated Tribal Development Agency Umakanta Nayak.

Coming to the erosion of green cover, the administration blamed the miners for it.

"It is the duty of miners to take up peripheral development activities, control pollution, provide healthcare, drinking water and education facilities as well as employment to the local people. They have to abide by the government norms," said additional district magistrate of Keonjhar S K Swain.