

Mine — not yours!

Kanchi Kohli *in collaboration with Kalpavriksh/ National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan*

People of Hemwalghati have taken a lot of effort to save the rich diversity of their land. And now they are upset that mining is proposed in this area.



Marching to the mining site...

It was December 2001. Women, men and children marched the forest *pagdandi* (village paths). The mountain air gave strength to the echoing of songs and slogans.

Messages like *Paharh ki haddi tootegi, desh ki dharti doobegi*. (If the backbone of the hills breaks, the plains below will be submerged), rang loud and clear, along with the booming sound of *dhols* and *nagarhas*.

Emotions were charged, and with every passing moment the slogans grew louder. The voices of Hemwalghati were fighting in unison for the health of their land. Hemwalghati (Hemwal river and valley) in the Tehri Garhwal Himalayas is one of the centres of the well-known Chipko (Hug the Trees) movement. In Hemwalghati, is the village Kataldi. About 50 metres from Kataldi, as the crow flies, is a patch of limestone. And not so far away from all these, is Dehradun, from where a lease to extract this limestone was granted. There were various

reasons why the people were upset, and continue to be so. The area where digging and blasting (in other words mining) is proposed is an extremely valuable area. It has very important water sources. Several villages in the area depend on these sources for drinking water throughout the year.

Tankers for villages without water sources also fill up water from here throughout the year. It also helps supply water to nearby towns. Then, there is more to these sources than just drinking water. Over 100 acres of prime agricultural land belonging to six villages in Nagni valley's Khair Sera area depend on this source for their agriculture.

If these sources dry up due to mining, it will destroy dozens of varieties of rice (including the Nagni Basmati), over 100 varieties of *rajma* beans, millets and other crops. People of this area have taken a lot of effort to save such a rich diversity of seeds and crops. Another reason why the people have been protesting is because if mining activity takes place, it would disturb their being able to collect fuel wood for their houses and fodder for their cattle. They would also lose access to the land where their cattle graze. The nearby forest area also helps them get timber for building and repair of houses etc. People of this area have not left any stone unturned in their fight against the mining activity. But the mine owner is also smart. He approached the district court to help him to start mining in the area, and disallow people to enter the area. He succeeded, and for a while, in early December 2002 there was total frenzy, as mining activity began. Trees were cut, roads were built. Blasting of the stone had begun.

This was dangerous, as it was all happening so very close to Kataldi village. Thankfully with the help of some supporters in Nainital and Delhi, the villagers were soon able to go to High Court seeking justice. The High Court immediately ordered for mining to stop. This was December 20, 2002, and continues till date. But, though there is no mining taking place presently, the struggle of the villagers is far from over. Not that they have given up hope! But, some of the people from the area fear that the court can also undo its own order. Then what? The mine owner presently has got permission to mine for 30 years. How long will they have to continue to fight, they wonder? But, in that wonder is a determination. This is what gives everyone strength.

And there is logic too, which is something that makes people stand up and fight for their rights. After all, this area is their life and without it, they would struggle to fend for themselves. Only wish the mine owners would respect and understand this!

Limestone extraction in India is being carried out on a large scale. The requirement comes from industries such as cement, chemical, fertilizers, aluminum, steel, ferro alloys, foundry, glass, paper, sugar and so on. All these are in some way or the other connected with our lives and we can, if we want, make a small difference. For instance, if we reduce the requirement of paper in our lives by using one sided paper for rough notes in our school, or re-use envelopes for sending letters, then the paper industry will not need to produce so much paper. Which also might mean that they need to extract less and less limestone, right? So, look around you and see where else is limestone used? Can you think of other ways to reduce the use of limestone?