



Granite quarrying in the B.R. Hills: environmental hazard

## KARNATAKA

# SPARE THE GREEN HILLS

*Environmentalists oppose illegal granite quarrying*

Environmentalism is struggling to come of age in the country, and Karnataka is probably ahead of most other states as awareness has spread to even the remotest parts of the state. The latest issue taken up by environmentalists in Karnataka is that of illegal granite quarrying, especially in the B.R. Hill ranges of Mysore. It was Madan Gopal, the 30-year-old assistant commissioner of Nanjangud in Mysore district, who started the controversy last November by trying to crack down on nearly 90 illegal granite quarrying operations in his area of jurisdiction.

Not only did Madan Gopal issue orders suspending further mining, the IAS officer also confiscated truckloads of granite on their way to Mangalore port. However, a host of cases were filed against the action, with Gopal named as the first respondent, and after complex litigation, the High Court ruled that there was no specific law in the Karnataka Minor Mineral Concession Rules to provide for the regulation of movement of quarried stones, and therefore the revenue officials of the state could not assume such an authority.

Meanwhile, the controversy over the mining has reached the Vidhana Soudha. In the last Assembly session, the government was grilled over the illegal quarrying operations by entrepreneurs out to make a fast buck, since the profit margins in the granite business are very high. The government is aware that legislation governing granite quarrying is inadequate and ridden with loopholes.

Madan Gopal has even pointed out that the government is losing crores of rupees from loss of royalties and licence

fees on account of the illegal quarrying. Kannada Chaluvali leader Vatal Nagaraj has alleged that the government itself is in collusion with the private miners. There are reports that quarry owners are blatantly disregarding labour mining laws by employing women and children and digging for granite much below the specified depths.

But environmentalists are more concerned with the damage caused to the environment as a result of the large-scale quarrying. Visitors to the B.R. Hills, where granite resources are abundant, return with stories of how gaping holes have been caused and the protected forest life disturbed as a result of the activity of the miners. Moreover, the age-old water tracts have been threatened by the dumping of rocky rubble. The granite miners, even those who have government licences, have not bothered to clean up the place after mining. Allegation of negligence have also been levelled against the government-owned Mysore Minerals.

Similar is the story in other parts of the country as well. Take the case of the limestone quarries in the Mussoorie Hills. The indiscriminate exploitation of natural mineral resources came up in the Tamil Nadu government's case against Hind Stone and others. In his judgement, Justice Chinappa Reddy cautioned against any one generation frittering away the country's natural wealth: "Every generation owes a duty to all succeeding generations to develop and conserve the natural resources of the nation in the best possible way," he ruled.

Rohini Nilekani/Bangalore

## MAHARASHTRA

# POISONED BUTTER

*Dispute over Irish consignment in Bombay*

A fierce debate is raging in Bombay over 176 tonnes of Irish butter imported by the government from the European Economic Community (EEC) countries. A large section of the Maharashtra State Government Employees Confederation feels that the butter is contaminated with radioactive residue since most of the countries where the butter originated were hit by radiation in the wake of the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl, USSR. "We will see to it that the butter is not distributed," threatened Dr S.S. Wagle, a technoeconomist and advisor to the confederation. Wagle, who did his doctorate in organic chemistry from Harvard University, told SUNDAY that "neither the scientists of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) nor the officials of the Greater Bombay Milk Supply Scheme have denied that the butter is polluted. The question is whether the product is fit for human consumption."

The government has decided to carry out fresh safety level checks on the imported butter but the confederation has opposed such a move. Their argument: India has not laid down any statutory safety standard as in the West. Moreover, since many other countries like Bangladesh, Singapore, the Philippines and Malaysia have returned all milk products imported from EEC countries, India should also do the same.

In the face of mounting criticism, chief minister S.B. Chavan has ordered a fresh sampling of the butter as allegations have been raised that the sampling done earlier was faulty. But R.G. Karnik, the general secretary of the confederation, argues that fresh sampling would not solve matters as there was a possibility that it would be manipulated to pass the butter.

How did the contaminated butter land in Bombay since Maharashtra is never short of milk products? The Indian Dairy Corporation had, in 1984, taken on a loan basis a large amount of butter from Maharashtra for distribution in other states. In April this year, the corporation returned the loan in the form of the Irish butter imported by it.

Olga Tellis/Bombay