



FOREWORD

This 'State of India's Environment' report began by chance. It also began with a question.

In early 2004, we had visited Nimmalapadu in Andhra Pradesh where tribals had fought and won a significant battle against mining by a big corporation. Nimmalapadu is a remote, idyllic hamlet, with lush green rice fields surrounded by hills. Its tale was truly heroic – for over 10 years, the people in this otherwise poor village had fought the might of one of the biggest industrial houses in the country. Their struggle had taken them all the way to the Supreme Court, where a historic judgement had ruled that mining will not be allowed in India's tribal districts unless the locals were the owners (or majority stakeholders) of the mines.

But as we travelled back on the dust road to town, we had one big question: how long would these people be able to hold out against the mining industry? The people were poor, but the lands they lived on were rich and coveted. The minerals under their houses were the drivers of economy across the world. Should mining be banned in such places? Or would it be better to change the terms of the mining contract, so that it benefits people and their environment? What is sustainable mining? Is it at all possible?

In 2005, our research on the cement sector enlightened us about another facet. We learnt how the booming Indian cement industry, which was more energy-efficient than its counterparts in the West, was callous and negligent about mining its raw material. The cost it paid for its minerals was miniscule, but the imprint it left on the environment was debilitating. Clearly, our mining regulations were either deficient or not being enforced.

It was also apparent that our policy to price mineral raw materials used to manufacture products like cement, was at a variance with new realities; moreover, it paid absolutely no attention to the need to compensate local people whose lands were being devastated. We realised that the cement industry was not unique or unusual in these traits, nor in the grinding poverty and economic backwardness which characterised the areas in which its plants were based. Modern industrial growth needs the resources of the region: its minerals, water and energy. It does not need the people. Employment in the cement sector was dipping. It was clear to us that inclusive growth would require ways to value local resources – be it water, minerals or energy – so that industry could give back more than it took.

This was also a time when I was working on a report for the Prime Minister on tiger conservation. We had assembled a map of India which superimposed the districts which are classified as the poorest in the country, on the forest areas, the watershed areas and the areas of maximum tiger density. There was a complete match. My colleagues, however, pointed out that the map was incomplete

unless we added the mineral-rich regions and the areas where Naxalite violence was at its most intense. We did, and a new geography emerged. When I presented my report, I told the Prime Minister that his tragedy was that he headed a country whose poorest people lived on its richest lands. Obviously, something was desperately wrong with the way we practised 'development'.

But these issues were fragments, at best, of the bigger story – one that was still eluding us.

In 2006, we gave a fellowship to journalists to investigate mining and its impacts on environment and people. Media professionals from across the country traversed the mining districts to unfold the harsh realities – of mining mafia, pollution, deforestation and people's anger. The reports were a revelation: we learnt how the fissures were widening between the miners and the inhabitants of these lands.

This is when all the pieces in the puzzle fell together. It became clear that after services and manufacturing, the mineral sector was on its way to becoming the next boom sector for the economy. India is sitting pretty on huge mineral reserves. The demand in China is driving up prices to new heights. The government has already opened out the sector to private players – players who are big. They are desperate for entry. The stakes are high.

The contest – an unequal one – is on. Ranged on the one side are all the interests that define the 'incredible' India dream; on the other side are people whose land is up for grabs; whose survival depends on the forests which will be needed for mining; whose animals graze on the lands where mining rejects will be dumped; and whose water comes from the hills which will be blasted. The life of these people is in their environment. Its degradation is their devastation.

The question, then, is if there is a balance in this challenge. This is what my colleagues have tried to understand and present in this report. From this understanding, they want us to look for the meaning of 'sustainable mining' and to see if we can break this logjam of wealth in the midst of destitution and degradation.

The first 'State of India's Environment' report, published in 1982, had built the foundations of India's green concern. It had provided us with the insights to understand why a poor nation as ours needed to care for its environment.

Almost 25 years later, the sixth 'State of India's Environment' report tells us that the old challenges – of poverty and environmental degradation – remain as urgent as ever for new India to resolve. We know that we need a new bargain. How we get it is the only question.

— *Sunita Narain*