

Himachal village at risk of disaster about to strike

Villagers say company which constructs roads to by-pass Pinjore, Kalka and Parwanoo, adopts unethical methods

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KAMLI VILLAGE (HIMACHAL PRADESH): Even as heavy to moderate rainfall is incessant in the northern States, this "non consequential" village along with a few other habitations are waiting for a disaster to strike them and stir the political and the bureaucratic executive out of their apathetic slumber.

People from this as well as the neighbouring Purla village along with many others from the Taksal gram panchayat, have been running from pillar to post to caution the authorities.

They seek immediate intervention to prevent any eventuality that may be caused due to what they describe as "unprofessional and unethical" methods adopted by a private construction company, assigned the task to construct the road to bypass Pinjore, Kalka and Parwanoo towns aimed at de-congesting three major bottlenecks along the National Highway 22, from Ambala to Shimla.

'No NoC'

Meanwhile, the work along the road has been undertaken without obtaining the mandatory "No Objection Certificate" from the Taksal Panchayat, which administers about 17 villages. Claim-

- No steps taken by the firm like constructing retaining walls and putting up meshed 'danga'

- "People not against construction but the manner in which it is done"

ing to have withstood unprecedented pressures, Sarpanch Amarnath Sharma says that he refused the NoC as the malba dumping spots were not identified nor did the construction company take necessary preventive steps like constructing retaining walls and putting up meshed 'danga' (checks).

Ecological imbalance

"When they exerted excess pressure, I convened a gram sabha, which passed resolutions against any NoC till the necessary steps were taken. The resolutions were sent to all concerned from the Block Development Office to the Chief Minister, but to no avail," says Mr. Sharma, who seeks to stress that the people were not against the construction of the road or any development activity. "We just do not accept the manner in which the work is being executed, especially when it endangers our basic survival."

A resident, Avinder Singh points out that malba (debris) from the reckless chiselling,

cutting and flattening of hill-tops to make way for the "state of the art" road, has created major ecological imbalance in the region apart from disrupting the lives of the people since Diwali last year, when work on the road started.

He pointed out that the 'malba' was strewn around arbitrarily, which has blocked the natural flow of rain water and has raised the threat of floods in the inhabited areas as well as cultivated areas.

Even the "centuries old" pathways which have served as lifelines have been buried.

The 28 km stretch from Zirakpur in Punjab, through Panchkula and Kalka in Haryana to Parwanoo in Himachal Pradesh, is being constructed at a cost of approximately Rs.600 crore.

The National Highway Authority of India allotted the contract to M/s J.P. Associates, which subsequently off-loaded the project to the Delhi-based M/s Chadha and Chadha (C&C). While most officials preferred to be tight-lipped on pretext of guide-

lines, they disclosed candidly that the project, which was to be completed by March 2011, had stalled due to bad weather. They said that further work could be resumed only after restoration jobs were carried out.

They also claimed that necessary clearances were obtained and compensations were paid in the past, in the presence of the authority from the concerned district administrations.

Miseries

A visit to the village and its surrounding areas brought to light the miseries faced by the ordinary citizens as well as owners and workers at the 70 odd manufacturing units that were set up in Kamli after the Union government granted special incentives to Himachal Pradesh.

A school run by a Eicher company and many units have been shut since July as tonnes of slush, gravel and small rocks were washed into their premises by rain water.

The municipal water supply system of Kamli has been completely destroyed and natural 'baoli' (springs) filled up with malba, forcing people to get water from a running stream.

Farmer Roshan Lal alone has lost almost 10 bighas of land under rice cultivation to

malba and slush.

His repeated communications with the construction company, local administration and the State government, for assistance to remove the material and compensation for the losses, have not moved a fig.

Munish, who owns a unit that manufactures cooking gas stoves, says he was saved about three weeks ago by some workers from being washed away in the slush while he was proceeding along the Kamli-Khadeen-Bhojnagar road towards his factory.

The road which is the only means to connect Kamli to rest of India often remains closed for days, telephone and electricity wires get snapped when major quantities of malba are offloaded at the whims of the drivers of vehicles of the construction company.

The 76-year-old Rattan Singh, who retired as a Panchayat Officer, fears that his Purla village was most precariously placed, as major portions of the hill below the inhabited area had been chiselled without taking any precautionary measures.

He points out that a woman labourer had fallen to death before the construction company put up metallic sheets to cordon off the area.



A view of the ecological degradation caused by construction of a by-pass road near Kamli at Parwanoo in Himachal Pradesh.

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