

RAT HOLE MINING

Context:

On 13 December, at least 15 workers were trapped in a 320-350 feet-deep coal mine in the East Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya after it was flooded by waters of the nearby Lytein river. Rescue operations led by the National Disaster Response Force and the Indian Navy are on to locate the trapped workers. The recent accident is one of several such accidents that have taken place over the past few years, leading to the death of workers.

What is rat-hole mining?

- It is a primitive and hazardous method of mining for coal, with tunnels that are only 3-4 feet in diameter (hence, rat-hole), leading to pits ranging from 5-100 sq. mt deep.
- There are two types of rat-holes: First, when dug into the ground these are vertical shafts leading to the mines where horizontal tunnels are dug; the second type is where horizontal holes are dug directly in the hillsides to reach coal (bed of coal).
- The coal is taken out manually, and then loaded into a bucket or a wheelbarrow and dumped on a nearby un-mined area. From here, it is carried to larger coal dumps near highways for trade and transportation.

Is rat-hole mining illegal?

Yes, it is illegal as The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has banned rat-hole mining in Meghalaya in 2014 on a petition that said acidic discharge from the mines was polluting the Kopili river. But the practice continues unabated.

How does it hamper the environment?

Water of rivers and streams in the mining area has become unfit for drinking and irrigation, and is also toxic to plants and animals. A study by the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, suggests that the Kopili river has turned acidic due to the discharge of acidic water from mines and the leaching of heavy metals. Layers of rock above the coal contain traces of iron, manganese and aluminium and this layer gets dissolved in the mining sites through the acid run-off or are washed into streams as sediment.

Other Concerns

- Coal mine owners have left thousands of abandoned mines.
- The Government does not insist that they reclaim and afforest those mines.
- In 40 years of mining and profiteering, the mine owners have till date not constructed a single hospital or even a school. There is complete disregard for corporate social responsibility because the mines are privately owned by the tribals.

How does the ban affect local people?

Mining has provided jobs to local people. Following the ban, there are demands for rehabilitation or alternative employment. It was a major issue in the assembly polls. The new state government challenged the ban in the Supreme Court in November that allowed the transportation of already extracted coal till 31 January. A citizens' report filed in the apex court names several state legislators who have stakes in the largely unregulated coal mining and transportation industry.

Voices of Civil Society is divided

- Few people who care for the environment and for a future for their children and grandchildren want an end to the practice of rat-hole mining and reckless limestone mining.
- On the other hand, the coal mine owners have mobilised forces to demonise environmental activists.
- Coal mine owners insist that since Meghalaya is a State under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, national mining laws should be exempted here.
- The Sixth Schedule protects the community rights of tribals from any form of exploitation of their land and resources.
- But the coal mines of Khasi and Jaintia were nationalised under the Coal Mines (Nationalisation) Act, 1973. Also paragraph 9 of the Sixth Schedule clearly stipulates the need for “Licences or leases for the purpose of prospecting for, or extraction of, minerals”. In addition, it is legally established that all central mining and environmental laws are applicable to the coal mines in Meghalaya.
- How can it now be used as an instrument to protect an activity that is a private enterprise, that is inhuman, and that violates Article 21 of the Constitution