



A tragedy that was long in the making

Posted at: 25/01/2019

Illegal rat-hole mining in Meghalaya persists despite ruinous effects on the environment

- The efforts to reach the 15 miners trapped in an illegal coal mine in the East Jaintia hills of Meghalaya since December 13 2018 continue, but they began belatedly and have faced many problems.

Doomed from the beginning

- First, the Meghalaya government has no idea what happens inside these rat-hole mines, which are barely 2 ft wide, since mining is a private activity.
- Despite the National Green Tribunal ban of April 2014, mining continues in the State.
- Second, it was unfortunate that the district administration assumed the miners to be dead on the very day of the tragedy.
- This assumption was evident in the letter written to the National Disaster Response Force.
- It was only after a Delhi-based lawyer, Aditya N. Prasad, represented by senior Supreme Court advocate Anand Grover and his team of human rights lawyers presented their suggestions to the court that the Meghalaya government got different actors to the accident site.
- When a mine is flooded, the immediate response, apart from pumping out the water, is to stop further flow of water into it.
- This requires a hydrologist to scientifically map out the area from where water entered the mine.
- Sudhir Kumar, a hydrologist from the National Institute of Hydrology, Roorkee, arrived only two weeks after the disaster.
- This shows the kind of disaster preparedness we have in our country.
- One shudders to think what the response would be if there was a massive earthquake in the Northeast, which is listed as Zone 5 on the seismic scale.
- There are many questions that arise with respect to rat-hole mining of

coal.

- Reports from other agencies suggest that pH of the water and sulphate and iron concentrations indicate significant deterioration of the rivers.
- Acid mine drainage from abandoned mines was a major cause for water pollution in the areas investigated, the reports added.
- The coal mine owners have been hiring the best legal brains to argue for them in the highest court of the land.
- They say that rat-hole mining should continue because no other form of mining is viable (which means that their profit margins would reduce if other forms of mining were to take place).

The fault-lines

- The tribes of Meghalaya are divided on the issue of rat-hole mining.
- The fault-lines are clear.
- Those who care for the environment and for a future for their children and grandchildren have been clamouring for an end to the practice of rat-hole mining and reckless limestone mining.
- On the other hand, the mining elite have mobilised forces to demonise environmental activists.
- The other troubling factor is that coal mine owners are insisting that since Meghalaya is a State under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, national mining laws should be exempted here.
- The Sixth Schedule was enacted to protect the community rights of tribals from any form of exploitation of their land and resources.
- Acid mine drainage has rendered even agricultural land non-productive.
- Mine owners do not care about environmental degradation.

Abandoning responsibility

- The Supreme Court placed a heavy penalty on Lafarge and asked it to strictly implement environmental laws apart from generating livelihoods for people residing within 50 km of the mining areas.
- In the case of coal mine owners, there are no such strictures.
- The State 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.