

Rat-Hole Mining: Why the Practice Persists Despite Its Hazards

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A Vain Rescue Attempt

Efforts are underway to rescue laborers trapped inside an illegal rat-hole coal mine in Dima Hasao district, Assam, as of January 9, 2025. Tragically, four bodies have already been recovered. This incident highlights the grim realities of rat-hole mining, a hazardous practice that continues unabated.

Desperate Risks for Higher Wages

Laborers from Assam, Nepal, and neighboring Bangladesh often brave the severe dangers of rat-hole mining, including asphyxiation due to poor ventilation, mine collapses from inadequate structural support, and flooding. The lure? They can earn three to four times more than they would on farms or construction sites.

Recent Tragedy

On January 6, 2025, nine workers were trapped in a flooded coal mine in Assam's Dima Hasao district. Rescue operations are ongoing, and this tragedy is a grim reminder of the perils of illegal mining.

What Is Rat-Hole Mining?

Rat-hole mining involves digging narrow tunnels, often no more than 3-4 feet wide, where workers crawl and squat to extract coal. There are two types:

1. **Side-Cutting Mining:** Done on hill slopes, miners follow visible coal seams.
2. **Box-Cutting Mining:** A pit about 5 sq. meters wide and 400 feet deep is dug. Workers descend using makeshift cranes or rope ladders, then dig horizontally in all directions, resembling an octopus's tentacles.

This crude method is prominent in Meghalaya, where some workers from Assam have lost their lives, both before and after the **National Green Tribunal (NGT)** banned it in April 2014.

Why Is Rat-Hole Mining Banned?

Meghalaya's unique land laws, under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, give

landowners ownership of the minerals beneath their land, circumventing the **Coal Mines Nationalisation Act, 1973**. This autonomy, combined with the challenging terrain and cost of advanced machinery, led to the proliferation of rat-hole mining.

However, the practice comes with severe consequences:

- **Safety Risks:** Asphyxiation, mine collapses, and flooding.
- **Environmental Damage:**
 - Deforestation and land degradation.
 - Water contamination with sulphates, heavy metals, and toxic pollutants.
 - Acidification of rivers like **Lukha** and **Myntdu**, rendering them uninhabitable for aquatic life.

The NGT, while imposing the ban in 2014, noted:

“There are countless cases where, during the rainy season, water flooded into mining areas, resulting in deaths.”

Yet, illegal mining persists, often with the alleged complicity of officials. For example, 17 miners drowned in an illegal mine in Meghalaya’s East Jaintia Hills in December 2018 when a river flooded the tunnels.

What Triggered the NGT Ban?

Environmentalists and human rights activists had flagged the dangers of rat-hole mining for decades, but momentum grew when **Impulse**, a Meghalaya-based NGO, highlighted cases of human trafficking and child labor in the mines.

Their reports estimated that about 70,000 children, primarily from Bangladesh and Nepal, worked in these mines due to their small stature. Despite initial denials, Meghalaya’s Department of Mining and Geology admitted in 2013 that 222 children were employed in East Jaintia Hills mines, prompting the NGT to act.

Challenges to Sustainable Mining

Unlike in Chhattisgarh or Jharkhand, Meghalaya’s coal seams are thin, making rat-hole mining more economically viable than open-cast methods. With estimated coal reserves of 576.48 million tonnes, the economic stakes are high.

In May 2023, Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma announced that the Coal Ministry had approved mining leases for four of 17 applicants. These leases are intended to enable **‘scientific’ mining** — sustainable and legally compliant extraction methods.

However, critics argue that ‘scientific’ might simply be a euphemism in a state where

profits drive mining, often at the expense of lives and the environment.

Conclusion

Rat-hole mining epitomizes the struggle between economic incentives and human and environmental costs. As illegal mining continues despite the ban, ensuring safety, sustainability, and compliance remains an uphill battle. Addressing these issues requires strict enforcement, transparent governance, and alternative livelihoods for the vulnerable communities involved.

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