

Coal mining linked to serious respiratory and skin diseases among workers in three States, says study

Every household in six districts of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha spends ₹300-₹1,000 a month on medical needs, says study

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Workers at an open-cast coal mine in Jharia on the outskirts of Dhanbad in Jharkhand. | Photo Credit: AFP

Prolonged exposure to coal mining pollutants has resulted in widespread respiratory and skin diseases among the workers and people in six districts in India, where coal extraction is a major occupation, says a survey involving 1,200 households and published by the National Foundation for India, an organisation that works on social justice issues.

At least 65% of participants interviewed reported issues such as chronic bronchitis, asthma, and skin ailments such as eczema, dermatitis and fungal infections.

The six districts covered for the survey were Koriya and Raigarh (Chhattisgarh), Dhanbad and Ramgarh (Jharkhand), Angul and Jajpur (Odisha). On average, a household in these districts spent ₹300 to ₹1,000 on monthly medical-related bills. The average annual hospitalisation expenses in Dhanbad (₹28,461 per household) were the highest.

The surveys, on average, spanned 18-20 villages per district.



A worker shows her hands covered in coal dust in a mine Jharia on the outskirts of Dhanbad in Jharkhand on May 24, 2024. | Photo Credit: AFP

People living closer to the mines were relatively more vulnerable. Dhanbad and Ramgarh, which had more people living in such zones, had higher incidence of lung and breathing-related diseases as well as skin infections.

Shift from coal

The broader thrust of the study was to investigate 'just transition' – or how those who are directly dependent on coal mining may be effectively and sensitively transitioned

away from these jobs.

The world's shift away from coal is expected to result in significant job losses and economic downturns in coal-dependent regions. This will not only impact the coal miners and workers directly but also the broader local economy.

“Social and economic disparities were evident across districts, with varying income levels and irregular wage receipt patterns,” said Pooja Gupta, co-author of the study and a research associate at the NFI. “Dhanbad (Jharkhand) and Koriya (Chhattisgarh) are solely reliant on coal production, and reported lower incomes compared to more diversified industrial districts like Angul (Odisha),” she said in a press statement.

Renewable energy

While India has committed to source nearly 500 GW of electricity – or nearly half its projected installed capacity for 2030 – from renewable energy sources, coal is expected to be the mainstay of power generation in India for decades.

Nearly half of India's installed power generation capacity, or about 205 GW, are coal-powered thermal plants. Change however is in the air as for the first time this year, renewable energy accounted for 71.5% of the record 13.6 (GW) power generation capacity added by India in the first quarter (January-March) of this year (2024), while coal's share (including lignite) of the total power capacity dropped below 50% for the first time since the 1960s.