

India's illegal coal mining problem | Explained

Published - July 25, 2024 10:40 pm IST

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Labourers carry baskets of coal from an open-cast mine in Jharkhand

The story so far: **On July 13, three workers died of asphyxiation inside an illegal coal mine in Gujarat's Surendranagar district.** The officials said that the workers were working in a mine near Bhet village in Thangadh taluka without helmets, masks, or other safety equipment. The first information report (FIR) indicated that the accused failed to provide essential safety gear to the labourers, who died after inhaling toxic gas in the mine. The police have registered a case of culpable homicide not amounting to murder against four people.

What is the issue?

The Surendranagar incident is not an isolated case.

In June 2023, three people, including a ten-year-old child, were reportedly killed after an illegal mine collapsed in the Dhanbad district of Jharkhand. Similarly, at least three

people were killed in October 2023 after a coal mine collapsed during illegal extraction in West Bengal's Paschim Bardhaman district.

These are just a few examples of how illegal coal mining has led to worker fatalities in India.

Coal in India was nationalised in two phases: first with the coking coal (used for the production of coke in the steel industry) in 1971-72; and then with the non-coking coal mines in 1973. The Coal Mines (Nationalisation) Act, 1973 is the central legislation that determines eligibility for coal mining in India. Illegal mining constitutes a law and order problem, which is a State list subject. Hence, the onus of dealing with it falls on State governments rather than the Union government.

Why is illegal coal mining rampant in India?

According to the Ministry of Coal, illegal mining in India is mostly carried out in abandoned mines or shallow coal seams in remote or isolated places. Several factors contribute to illegal coal mining in India.

Coal is the most abundant fossil fuel in India, accounting for 55% of the country's energy needs. The high demand for power in India translates into a high demand for coal, which often outstrips the legal supply, prompting illegal supply. Many areas that are rich in coal are also situated close to homes for populations struggling with poverty and unemployment, which contributes to illegal mining in these areas.

In remote areas, mining regulations can be weak due to inadequate monitoring and lack of resources, leading to weaker enforcement. This can result in the rise of "coal mafias," as has been alleged in multiple cases of illegal coal mining in India. For example, in 2018, activist Marshall Biam of the North East Indigenous People's Federation registered a complaint accusing a "police-backed" coal gang of threatening him. Mining tragedies are not uncommon in coal-rich Meghalaya.

Illegal coal mining also allegedly receives tacit support from political leaders in areas where it is prevalent, making it difficult to curb. In 2023, the Assam-based political party Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) submitted a petition each to the President, Vice-President, Prime Minister, Chief Justice of India, the National Green Tribunal (NGT), the National Human Rights Commission and the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, alleging that some BJP leaders are behind illegal coal mining in the State. AJP

president Lurinjyoti Gogoi and general secretary Jagadish Bhuyan said that illegal rat-hole coal mining has continued in Assam, as well as in Meghalaya and other north-eastern States, with the alleged patronage of BJP leaders and in collusion with officials despite a blanket ban on such mining by the NGT in 2014.

Illegal mining is often carried out using rudimentary techniques like surface mining and rat-hole mining, rather than the scientific methods required for legal operations on a larger scale. In areas where coal seams are closer to the surface, illegal miners access them with limited safety equipment. Minimal operational costs can also turn into significant profits, making illegal mining lucrative.

Why do so many workers die in illegal coal mines?

The lack of safety equipment and protocols is the primary reason for deaths during illegal coal mining. Miners face increased respiratory risks due to inhaling coal dust, and the lack of safety equipment significantly increases this risk. The miners in the Surendranagar incident also died of carbon monoxide poisoning. According to District Collector K.C. Sampat, 2,100 wells had been filled in recent times, but some of them might have been illegally reopened, where the incident happened.

Illegal mines lack proper structural support to carry out the extraction of coal, making working conditions hazardous and vulnerable to cave-ins, landslides, and explosions. Workers may also be exposed to high levels of toxic substances like lead and mercury, which can cause acute poisoning or long-term chronic medical conditions.

Several people who work in illegal coal mines are untrained for the job and for the risks it poses. There is a lack of proper training, quick response facilities, and knowledge in case of emergencies.

Operator negligence and worker exploitation are also rampant in illegal coal mining.

Why do governments struggle to cut down illegal coal mining in India?

Questions regarding illegal coal mining have been raised in the Parliament, but since it is a law and order issue, the Union government often shifts the blame to State authorities. A mix of economic, social, political, and regulatory factors makes it difficult for governments to shut down illegal coal mining in India.

Illegal coal mining, by any means, is not a novelty. It has existed since before coal was nationalised and continues to exist in pockets in coal-rich areas or near abandoned mines. The high demand for coal as a fuel makes illegal mining rampant and challenging to control. Local economies in many areas depend on mining, and once official operations run their course, illegal mining takes its place to support the local community.

The legal framework governing mining is complex, which can possibly lead to bureaucratic hurdles and inefficiency in governance, allowing illegal mining to exist.