

Rat-hole Mining at the Cost of the Lives of Workers!

Meghalaya is one of India's top ten states as far as coal reserves go. But despite the ban of coal mining by the Green tribunal due to its hazardous activity killing workers in 'accidents', illegal coal mining thrives in the state primarily because a large number of those mines are owned and controlled by politicians, bureaucrats and police officers. Due to the nexus between these owners, the government of the state turns a blind eye to enforce law and safety of workers, to protect the interests of the mine owners.

The unscrupulous mine owners exploit desperate workers with impunity, through the method of rat-hole mining. There are many rat-hole coal mines in the state killing workers without providing them any safety arrangements. Many youth from the villages work in these coal mines as there no alternative for them to get any other employment and the rat-mining lures them with higher pay of Rs 1,200-1,500 a day. The poor youth left with no other option choose the rat hole mining work accepting the life risk involved in the job. Though these workers are lured with a higher pay, their payment may not be regular and they are exploited. They often don't get full payment and they are treated as bonded labourers. These mine workers are mostly land-less Muslims from Lower Assam and Meghalaya's GARO hills. At the time of mine accidents killing workers owners pay no compensation to them.

Rat-hole mines are common in Meghalaya mostly located in Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills.

For rat-hole mining the land is cleared by removing vegetation. Subsequently pits measuring from 5 to 100 sq.m are dug to reach the coal bed. From these rat-holes which are big enough for only one person are dug horizontally to extract coal. The workers enter in to these rat-holes and reach coal bed ground, extract it. Very often these mines are flooded with water causing the death of workers trapped underground.

Recently the incident of 15 coal miners trapped on Dec.13 in a coal mine at Ksan a rat-hole coal mine in the East Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya due to flooding with water seeping through from the nearby Lytein river once again high-lights, the plight of these rat-hole mining workers and the apathy of the state and control governments to rescue the workers.

Recently our rulers have grandly proclaimed concern offering help when kids of a foot ball team got trapped in a cave in Thailand. But the very rulers have shown their disregard in arranging the rescue of the trapped mine workers.

Even the highly boasted NDRF could not to do anything to rescue the workers claiming that it has no required equipment -100 horse power motors-to drain the flood water from the mines. Even after 3 weeks of this incident no proper and required action has been taken up by the governments both central and state to save the precious lives of the trapped miners. Experts opine that the trapped workers would have already died.

This is not the first time of the accident of workers trapped in rat-hole mines occurred in Meghalaya.

Two similar accidents occurred in Garo Hills that claimed nearly two dozen lives in 2012, and 2014.

In view of serious environmental degradation and imperilled worker's safety the National Green Tribunal (NGT) had banned coal mining in Meghalaya since it was illegal, unscientific and harmful, on April 17, 2014.

But the state government turned a blind eye to this illegal mining to protect the interests of the mine owners.

Such accidents killing workers has become a regular phenomena in coal-mine sector.

A study on three big flooding accidents published in 2016 by the IIT, Indian School of Mines, Dhanbad concluded that the official approach of fixing responsibility on human error was followed, since it did not try to identify the root cause.

According to the data supplied by the Director General of Mine Safety it is revealed that the number of deaths of workers in coal mines has gone up in our country by 40 percent since 2016.

This is the real-face of our 'fast-growing economy' where workers are killed due to the criminal negligence of the mine-owners towards the safety of workers and the apathy of governmental administration towards the workers safety despite tall claims of providing safety to workers through various acts.

But this apathy of administration is not a mere aberration on the part of the concerned officials or rulers. On the contrary it is the result of class-nature embedded in our very foundation of our system of exploitation ruled by the minority ruling-classes.

Added to this the misfortune of the workers movement in our country following in many a weakness in taking up the real issues of workers and their interests in aiding the ruthless mine owners to exploit and kill workers in their pursuit of earning super-profits, without any compunction.

Unless and otherwise the workers unitedly and constantly fight with working-class conscious-ness against the capitalist-classes and their system, these 'mine accident' killings continue unchecked taking away the precious lives of workers!
