

India: Meghalaya urgently needs a policy to ensure safe mining practices

Thirteen men have been trapped in a rathole mine for days in a state where mining has been banned since 2014.

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Hope is ebbing for 13 people trapped in a rathole mine in Meghalaya since December 13. According to local accounts, such disasters are common in the state's illegal rathole mines, though they go unreported and unnoticed. Folded into this tragedy is a story of administrative failure, corruption and crime. Rathole mines, which consist of a deep vertical shaft and narrow sideways tunnels, are death traps common across Meghalaya. In 2014, the National Green Tribunal banned mining in the state, citing environmental concerns and pointing out that rathole mining, which failed to meet regulatory standards, was illegal. It also ruled that the ban could be lifted if the state government formulated a policy for safe and regulated mining. Two successive state governments now have failed to take this order seriously.

Mining in Meghalaya is entangled in questions about tribal rights to land and customary laws. The state falls under the Sixth Schedule, which protects these rights and autonomies, insulating it from national laws to a certain degree. But the state is not officially exempt from the Coal Mines (Nationalisation) Act of 1973, which gives the Indian state ownership and control of underground minerals, neither has the state government applied for exemption. The only mining policy passed by the state government in 2012 anxiously assures that the "small and traditional system of mining followed by local people in their own land shall not be disturbed". But it is only in the 1980s that commercial rathole mining really took off in the state. Since then, it has had a devastating impact of the environment, turning rivers acidic and once fertile land uncultivable. Even as other sources of livelihood dried up, coal became the mainstay of the state economy, providing jobs, boosting trade, sprouting ancillary businesses, feeding other industries. When the ban came into force in 2014, much of this economy was driven underground. It was after this week's tragedy that the Meghalaya government was forced to [acknowledge](#) illegal mining in the state.

The Congress government that was voted out last year failed miserably on the regulatory front. But what is stopping the National People's Front government which came to power in 2017, backed by the Bharatiya Janata Party? One of the BJP's campaign promises had been that it would resolve the coal impasse within eight months of coming to power. Sensitive questions regarding tribal rights may be one reason state governments have found it hard to arrive at a mining policy that would meet the approval of tribal bodies, environmental activists, traders and miners, but there could be another reason for the lack of political will. In the shadow economy that has sprung up since the ban was imposed, activists have repeatedly alleged, there is a nexus between political leaders and the coal mafia. Money from coal flowed into political coffers, claimed Agnes Kharshiing, an activist who was recently attacked, soon after she had taken pictures of trucks ferrying illegally mined coal. It is

a vicious circle that must be broken if future tragedies are to be avoided. Meghalaya urgently needs a state policy that lays down rules for safe mining practices and is rigorously enforced.

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