

It was the compensation cheque, for ₹1 lakh, that convinced Solibar Rahman, 64, that he would never see his 20-year-old son, Monirul Islam, ever again. Monirul is one of the 15 miners trapped in a coal mine barely 2 ft wide – hence called a ‘rat hole’ – in Meghalaya since December 13.

There has been no official word on the fate of the miners. If he had had to make a choice, rather than the modest compensation, Rahman would have preferred a “more valuable” death certificate. He and two others, Md. Abdul Mian and Abdul Salam, whose sons are also trapped in the same mine, had travelled 330 km from their villages in western Assam to Khliehriat in Meghalaya to collect the cheques, which were handed to them on January 7. The return trip, in a hired car, cost them ₹12,000.

Khliehriat, which is Meghalaya’s coal trade hub, is the headquarters of East Jaintia Hills district (EJH), which also has the most mineral resources among the eight mining districts of the north-eastern State.

Says Rahman, “This cheque means the value of my son’s life was a mere ₹1 lakh. I had earned more in my last year at a coal mine in 2012.” In April 17, 2014, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) had banned rat-hole coal mining in Meghalaya, but conditionally allowed transportation of extracted coal. Rahman was among the first in Bogidari, one of 22 villages in the flood-prone Bhangnamari village in Assam’s Chirang district, to have worked in the coal mines of EJH. Bhangnamari is about 140 km west of Guwahati.

A bad crop on a small farm and mounting interest on a loan taken from the local mahajan, or moneylender, had forced Rahman to venture out of his village in 1983. A recruitment agent working for coal mine owners introduced Rahman to Mookhain in EJH. Rahman earned enough money to repay the loan and sustain his large family for a few months. His experience marked the beginning of a trend that saw men in the villages of Assam take loans to escape poverty, grow a crop if they had some land, and take a bus to the mines when the yield was low. They would crawl into rat holes and take on the back-breaking job of cutting coal for about 180 days. The wages enabled them to repay their loans. It was not long before Bogidari and adjoining villages became a regular source of labourers for the mines.

But this trend came to an abrupt end with the NGT ban. Now the hunt for employment took scores of Bhangnamari’s men – who had the mines to fall back on in times of need – to stone-crushing units in far away Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Says Tajuddin Ahmed, ward member of Nizdamugaon near Bogidari: “At least 200 men from our villages have died of tuberculosis and breathing complications after working in these stone-crushing units. The wages were also much lower than in coal-mining. When they came back to their villages, many decided to go back to the mines, thinking that these were a better option compared to dying a thousand deaths elsewhere.” Ahmed’s brother-in-law, Amir Hussain, is among the 15 miners trapped in the 380 ft deep mine at Ksan, near Lumthari village in EJH district. Officials say the miners must have either hit an aquifer or the wall of an adjoining abandoned water-filled mine, causing the ‘hole’ to get flooded.

Blackmailed

Rahman knows that the ₹1 lakh he received on day 26 of the mining accident will not last long. Much of it will go into repaying the interest and principal of a ₹30,000 loan that Monirul had taken from a small bank last year for a farm project that failed to take off.

Monirul would probably have been alive today had the sirdar (mine manager or supervisor) of another mine not withheld his payment for the two months he had worked. Miners are paid on a weekly basis, but Monirul had opted to take his wages all together. Says Manik Ali, Monirul’s elder brother: “I forced him to return when I visited him in Meghalaya two months ago. I was scared when I saw the working conditions. There was no coal left in the mine he was working in, and the sirdar was pressurising him to work in another mine. He let my brother go, but said his dues would be cleared only if he came back and worked.”

The sirdar, a man named Mahesh from Mankachar in Assam, has not been seen since the tragedy at Ksan. According to Nizdamugaon’s Saheb Ali, one of five survivors of the December 13 disaster, they were not even supposed to be working in the Ksan mine in the first place. He says, “We needed a vehicle to move our belongings to the new location that Mahesh had taken us to earlier, but he diverted the mini-truck to a jungle atop a hill. We had no option but to work.”

In the two mining seasons that he worked – typically from October to March, but invariably stretched by greed – Saheb never knew who the owner of the mine was. It is a rule: nobody asks questions. Says Manik, “Monirul rang me on December 12, a day before all communication was lost. He said he had to work one more day for the weekly payment, and would return home with a little more than ₹30,000. In a way, I am responsible for his



Circles and wheels: “The mining is still going on in broad daylight because of the nexus between miners, politicians and administrators.” Labourers loading coal dug out from rat hole mines in the East Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya. • RITU RAJ KONWAR

Meghalaya’s rat hole traps

As efforts are under way to reach 15 miners trapped in an illegal coal pit in Meghalaya since December 13, the tragedy puts the spotlight on the dark underbelly of coal mining in the State, despite a ban by the National Green Tribunal. **Rahul Karmakar** reports



death.”

Jrin Shullet, 32, is the owner of the mine that devoured the 15 workers. From Narwan village, an hour’s drive from the Ksan mine, he is listed as a coal miner in the ‘Directory of Establishments’ in Meghalaya’s Sixth Economic Census, 2013 for establishments having eight or more workers. He was arrested a few days after the accident. His partner and mine manager, James Sukhlain, is absconding.

Though Monirul and the 14 others are still officially only ‘trapped’, the EJH administration, in its SOS letter of December 13 to the National Disaster Response Force, said that “efforts are being made to recover the dead bodies by pumping the water with the help of generators”. Manik, too, speaks of his brother’s death, as he knows that no trapped miner has ever come out alive from a rat hole in Meghalaya.

After receiving the compensation cheque at the Deputy Commissioner’s office in Khliehriat, Abdul Mian, 60, wondered when his son, Md Saheb Islam, would be declared “officially” dead. Khliehriat is 45 km from where his son remains trapped. He says, “I had gone to the doctors and officials in Chirang district seeking a death certificate. They said they were helpless as he had died in Meghalaya. My son took a loan to pay the labourers after having sunk ₹4 lakh in a disastrous bamboo business. The bank said the loan would be waived if I can produce a death certificate.”

Ending up nameless

The EJH district authorities are not clear about the formality. Says Deputy Commissioner Frederick M. Doph: “We are waiting for the rescue operation to end. Let us concentrate on the work at hand. Everything will be done as admissible.” Veteran miners of Bhangnamari such as Md Hussain Sheikh, 48, know that it will not be easy to get a death certificate. Even before the December 13 disaster, there was a long history of coal mine workers dying without a name. For instance, 15 labourers each had died in the flooded mines of Meghalaya’s Garo Hills area in 1992 and in 2012.

Says Sheikh: “Apart from flooding, there is also the danger of the rat holes collapsing. But the risk in those days was less because the coal seams were closer to the surface. Money was also better in those days. You could make ₹250 per gaari (wheelbarrow) of coal then, compared to ₹150-170 now. The payment decreased after rat-hole mining was declared illegal.”

It is not only miners who die in these mine shafts. According to Balios Swer, president of the Jaintia Coal Miners and Dealers Association, there are about 60,000 mines spread across 360 villag-

es in the EJH.

Says environment activist Brian Kharpran Daly of the Meghalaya Adventurers’ Association (MAA): “There are thousands of huge holes, 90-100 m deep, all over the place. They just leave them like that after extracting all the coal. Many children and livestock have fallen in these mines and died. But there are no complaints lodged because the coal barons are too powerful and everyone is scared.”

Daly says that the December 13 incident, like most mine accidents, would have remained unreported had it not been for the fact that three of the trapped miners, Shalabas Dkhar, Dimonme Dkhar and Melambok Dkhar, are locals from Lumthari village. He adds, “In the pre-ban days, when coal was available closer to the surface, all the miners were ‘outsiders’ from Assam, Nepal and even Bangladesh. So they died nameless and nobody cared. But things have changed. The mines have poisoned the land, forcing even the local villagers to work there.”

A woman from Lumthari village, who does not want to be identified, says that the Lytein River valley used to be a productive paddy-growing area until 15 years ago. But today she barely ekes out a livelihood, breaking slabs of limestone. This is equally damaging to the environment but it is not illegal. The Jaintia Hills, especially West Jaintia Hills district, are rich in limestone too.

Says Daly: “The whole valley has become acidic, like a desert. Mining has robbed the poor villagers of their farmlands. There are no trees around, hardly any birds, only shrubs that you associate mostly with barren land, as the topsoil has disappeared. Worse, all the water sources in Jaintia Hills are polluted. The toxic cocktail unleashed by coal and limestone mining and the cement plants has turned the rivers either orange-yellow or a sickly blue.”

The Meghalaya Pollution Control Board, in its report of 2008 titled ‘Investigation Report on the Contamination of the Lukha River’, had blamed toxic effluents from the mines and cement

plants for the death of the Lukha as well as Lunar rivers. The cement plants began large-scale limestone mining and production activities in the area in 2007, when the Northeast Industrial Policy that offered tax holidays brought investors to the State.

The NGT’s order banning rat-hole mining came after the All Dimasa Students’ Union in neighbouring Assam filed a petition stating that the non-treatment of toxic discharge from the coal mines of Meghalaya was polluting streams and rivers downstream in Assam. Their petition was based on a study by O.P. Singh, a faculty member at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya’s capital.

Meghalaya and Bangladesh too are suffering. For instance, Kharkhana, in West Jaintia Hills district on the Bangladesh border, used to be a fishing village. Says Daly, “Today not even a tadpole is there in the river that flows into Bangladesh, which is also bearing the brunt of mining-induced pollution.”

What fast-tracked the NGT ban was the presumed death of 15 miners at Nengkol in Meghalaya’s South Garo Hills district on July 6, 2012. A petition by Impulse, a Shillong-based non-governmental organisation, claimed that the mines employed 70,000 children. This, too, had influenced the NGT, though the State government maintains that a survey found only 222 child labourers. Children are preferred because their smaller physique makes them ideal to navigate the narrow rat holes from where the coal has to be dug out manually. Former miners says the burrows

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Activists say enforcement is lax because it is coal money that funds elections and runs the State machinery. A series of rat hole mines in the East Jaintia Hills district.

• RITU RAJ KONWAR

are pitch dark, the ground slippery with constant water seepage, and stale toxic air makes it difficult to breathe inside.

Resource curse

Coal-mining has been taking place in Meghalaya since the 1840s, but production accelerated from the 1980s. The Meghalaya government’s latest estimates put the State’s coal reserves at 576.48 million tonnes, though only 133.13 million tonnes are classified as ‘proved’. The coal boom in Meghalaya saw annual production rise from 39,000 tonnes in 1979 to 5 million tonnes in 2014. Unlike open-cast mining in central India, rat-hole mining involves side-cutting – tunnelling in from a hill slope – or digging pits into the hills until miners hit a seam of coal. The tunnels are then made from the bottom of the pit, where the extracted coal is collected and hauled up by cranes. In the shallower ‘traditional’ mines, labourers carried coal in conical bamboo baskets using makeshift wooden stairs.

Sheikh, who had worked in the mines for 12 years until 2012, says that certain precautionary measures were taken in the pre-ban days. He says, “Water is always there in the mines. My job was to get into a rat-hole four-five hours before the coal-cutters went in, and pump out the water. The pump would be turned off only after the miners left.”

Says Sheikh, “They [rescue agencies working at the Ksan mine since December 30] can keep dewatering, but the flow will not stop as thousands of mines are interconnected because of the labyrinthine tunnels.”

“It is like an ocean underneath,” adds Daly.

Activists say that all the seams in the Jaintia Hills were exhausted a decade ago. So the mine owners are now exploring remote forest areas that were once out of bounds. Only a handful of rich coal barons can afford the machines that can dig deeper. The illegality of the whole exercise has let them throw caution to the winds.

A Citizen’s Report (prepared by civil society groups in Meghalaya and submitted to the Supreme Court a month after activists Agnes Kharshing and Amrita Sangma survived an attack by the ‘coal mafia’ in November) observes that the State’s mineral wealth has been a curse. It says: “Coal mining in Meghalaya operates as a ‘shadow’ economy, wherein district councils, traders’ associations, armed extortionists and insurgents, various tiers of government, border security forces (in the case of exports to Bangladesh), and even weigh bridge and toll gate operators have long operated with legal impunity – that is, until the 2014 NGT ban.” It blames loopholes in the Sixth Schedule and the land tenure system. Miners and local councils have allegedly been using exemptions given to tribal people (under the Sixth Schedule) to justify rampant mining.

The government has control over only 5% of Meghalaya’s land, with the rest being either community or privately owned.

Says Kharshing, who has been documenting illegal coal mining and transportation: “Earlier, people used to mine their own land. As the trade boomed, rich miners took lands on lease and ended up owning mine after mine. Today, they are openly flouting the ban to mine fresh coal and passing it off as coal extracted before the ban.”

While imposing the ban, the NGT had allowed miners to transport an estimated 1.76 million tonnes of extracted coal. But traders are alleged to have transported 5.5 million tonnes, because of nine extensions of the deadline, the last of which expires on January 31.

Says Dolly Khonglah, a former coal exporter: “The coal extracted before the ban was exhausted long ago. But the mining is still going on in broad daylight because of the nexus between miners, politicians and administrators. This needs to be stopped immediately.”

Catch-22 situation

Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma’s ruling National People’s Party (a Bharatiya Janata Party ally) had promised before the Assembly polls in 2018 to get coal mining back on track. He believes that Meghalaya needs regulated and safe mining to generate livelihoods. His government had challenged the NGT ban in the Supreme Court last November.

Congress MP Vincent H. Pala, among a dozen politicians named in the Citizen’s Report as coal mine owners, also wants coal-mining to continue with regulations. He says, “The ban was unfair to Meghalaya, where the topography necessitates a different type of mining.”

Former State Chief Minister Mukul Sangma had earlier said the ban was costing the State ₹600 crore in annual revenue. Balios Swer adds that mining has been sustaining lakhs of people directly and indirectly. “The ban has virtually destroyed the local economy,” he says.

Says Daly: “It is a catch-22 situation. The State is addicted to mining. People think they will be doomed if they stop, but they will not live long if they continue. Since they are going to mine anyway, it might as well be legal. But for that the State needs a proper mining policy which needs to be enforced strictly.” Activists say enforcement is lax because it is the coal money that funds elections and runs the State machinery.

Daly’s adventure group had, in 2007, petitioned the Supreme Court for a mining policy to protect Meghalaya’s cave systems from unregulated mining. He says, “Now it is 2019 and there is still no policy. This has come back to haunt us, with ordinary people vanishing in the mine shafts.”

But the last word is Rahman’s: “I am hoping that my son’s body will be found so that he can get a decent burial. The rat hole is not the place for him.” As he waits, his thoughts drift to the 20 men from Bhangnamari currently digging for coal near Ksan. “The least that mine owners can do is to follow some safety measures so that the sons of other fathers don’t end up the same way.”