



Rat Hole Mining

Despite a ban, rat-hole mining remains a prevalent practice for coal mining in Meghalaya, where a mine has recently collapsed.

- Rat hole mining involves digging of **very small tunnels**, usually only 3-4 feet high, which workers (often children) enter and extract coal.
- The National Green Tribunal (NGT) **banned it in 2014**, on grounds of it being **unscientific and unsafe** for workers. The state (Meghalayan) government has challenged the NGT ban in the Supreme Court.
- According to available government data, Meghalaya has a total coal reserve of 640 million tonnes, most of which is mined **unscientifically by individuals and communities**.
- Since the **coal seam is extremely thin** in Meghalaya, no other method would be economically viable. Removal of rocks from the hilly terrain and putting up pillars inside the mine to prevent collapse would be costlier. In Meghalaya this is the locally developed technique and the most commonly used one.
- The government **does not have a policy** in place to regulate mining and the new mining policy drafted in 2012 has not yet been implemented, Moreover, the NGT found the **2012 policy inadequate** as it does not addresses rat-hole mining.

Impact of Rat Hole Mining

- The water sources of many rivers, especially in Jaintia Hills district, have **turned acidic**.
- The water also has high concentration of **sulphates, iron and toxic heavy metals, low dissolved oxygen (DO) and high BOD**, showing its degraded quality.
- The **roadside dumping of coal** is a major source of air, water and soil pollution.
- Off road movement of trucks and other vehicles in the area for coal transportation also adds to the **ecological and environmental damage** of the area.
- The practice has been declared as **unsafe** for workers by the NGT.
- The mines branch into networks of horizontal channels, which are at **constant risk of caving in or flooding**.