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Recovery from Coal Mining in Meghalaya's Moolamyliang

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Why in News

Moolamyliang, a village in **Meghalaya's East Jaintia Hills district**, is making progress in becoming a greener place amid abandoned pits from the **rat-hole mining**.

Key Points

- **Background:**
 - The **Jaintia Coal Miners and Dealers' Association** claims there are around 60,000 coal mines across 360 villages in East Jaintia Hills district.
 - Moolamyliang used to be one such village until the **National Green Tribunal** (NGT) **banned** hazardous rat-hole coal mining in Meghalaya in **April 2014** and set a time limit for transporting the coal already mined till that time.
 - Though the NGT **ban did not stop illegal mining** in the district, it **helped Moolamyliang reform**.

- **Coal Mining in Northeast:**

- In the northeast, **coal mining** is part of a larger trend which is the **decimation of natural resources**.
 - For example, there is large-scale **deforestation going on in the Garo and Khasi Hills** of Meghalaya, besides **limestone mining** in the **Jaintia Hills**.
 - Assam, which has lost most of its once extensive forest cover, sees **poaching in the Dima Hasao region, coal mining** in Upper Assam, and **sand/stone mining** from river beds.
- There are three notable **peculiarities of coal mining in the Jaintia Hills** (and elsewhere in Meghalaya).
 - Being a tribal state where the **6th Schedule applies, all land is privately owned**, and hence coal mining is done by private parties. The schedule **does not explicitly refer to mining**.
 - The **sizable coal deposits** in the state, mostly in the Jaintia Hills, **occur in horizontal seams only** a few feet high that run through the hills which is why **rat-hole mining is practised instead of open cast mining**.
 - **Most of the labour** (including children) comes from Nepal, the **poorer areas** of Assam, and Bangladesh. In Meghalaya, the non-tribal is a second-class citizen, as is the poor tribal, which explains the **general lack of concern even within the State about the trapped miners**.
- **Rat-hole Mining:**

It is a term used for a **hazardous and arduous mining technique** where miners crawl into winding underground tunnels that are just 4-5 feet in diameter to extract coal from the deep seams with a pickaxe.
- **Open Cast Mining:**

It is a **surface mining technique** of extracting rock or minerals from the earth by their removal from an open-air pit, sometimes known as a **borrow**.

- **Concerns:**
 - **Ecological Issues:** Unsustainable mining in hilly areas **contaminates the farmlands and turns the streams acidic**, leading to the **loss of biodiversity and local heritage**.
 - **Health Issues:** The prevalence of mining in an area **causes various diseases** like **fibrosis**, pneumoconiosis and **silicosis** in workers as well as locals.
 - **Child Labour and Trafficking:** Majority of the workers involved in 'rat-hole' mining are children. They are suited for this job because of their small anatomy that fits small mine tunnels. Rat-hole mining has **encouraged child trafficking** apart from **engaging with immigrants** from many states.
 - **Corruption: Police officials often collaborate with mine owners** in states where the open cast mining and rat hole mining are the norms.
- **Measures:**
 - The administration tried to make coke factories and cement plants in the vicinity contribute to **earth rejuvenation programmes** in the area under their **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**.
 - Among the projects being pursued is **low-cost rainwater harvesting for recharging the area** that has become dry because of coal mining.
 - Making Moolamyliang a **base camp for tourists to explore caves, canyons and waterfalls** in parts of East Jaintia Hills that have escaped the impact of mining, will **boost tourism and bring in revenue**.
 - Since the 6th Schedule does not explicitly refer to mining, **environmental activists are calling for the coal trade to come under central mining and environmental laws**.

Government Initiatives Related to Mining

- In **April 2018**, the Ministry of Coal launched the **Unlocking Transparency by Third Party Assessment of Mined Coal (UTTAM) Application** for coal quality monitoring.
- **National Mineral Policy (NMP)** was approved in 2019, which emphasises on themes such as sustainable mining, boosting exploration, encouraging the use of state-of-the-art technology and skill development.
- In **September 2019**, **100% FDI under the automatic approval route was allowed** for the sale of coal and coal mining activities including associated processing infrastructure.

- In **January 2020**, the Parliament passed the **Mineral Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2020**.
 - It amends the **Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957** and the **Coal Mines (Special Provisions) Act, 2015**.
 - The **1957 Act** regulates the mining sector in India and specifies the requirement for obtaining and granting mining leases for mining operations.
 - The **2015 Act** provides for allocation of coal mines and vesting of the right, title and interest in and over the land and mine infrastructure together with mining leases to successful bidders with a view to ensure continuity in coal mining operations and production of coal.
 - The Bill **permits commercial coal mining for local and global firms** without imposing any end-user restrictions, also it extends the validity of clearances for mining leases expiring in 2020.

Source: TH