



## EDITORIAL: THE HINDU

**GENERAL STUDIES 3: SECURITY**

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### **BURROW TRAGEDY: ON THE COAL MINING TRAGEDY IN ASSAM'S DIMA HASAO**

#### **Rat-Hole Mining: A Hazardous Legacy**

##### **What is Rat-Hole Mining?**

- **Definition and Process:** Rat-hole mining is a traditional coal extraction method involving the creation of narrow tunnels into the earth, often no more than a meter in diameter. Miners manually extract coal by burrowing through these tunnels, a process that lacks mechanization or scientific planning.
- **Hazards:** The method is fraught with risks, including flooding, tunnel collapses, and poor ventilation, creating highly unsafe working conditions.
- **Prevalence:** Despite its dangers, rat-hole mining is common in northeastern India, particularly in Meghalaya and Assam, due to its simplicity and low operational costs.

##### **Ban and Continuation of Rat-Hole Mining**

- **NGT Ban in 2014:** The National Green Tribunal (NGT) prohibited rat-hole mining in 2014, citing severe health, safety, and environmental risks.
- **Economic Challenges:** Mechanization and proper geological surveys are not only absent but would render this method economically unfeasible, discouraging its use.
- **Illegal Operations:** Despite the ban, illegal mining persists due to high coal demand for cement and thermal power plants, showcasing the gap between policy and enforcement.

##### **Role of State Administration in Illegal Mining**

- **Administrative Lapses:** The Dima Hasao coal mine tragedy highlights the lack of oversight by the State's Mines and Minerals Department. Even abandoned or illegal mines continue to operate, pointing to systemic negligence.
- **Judicial Observations:** In 2019, the Supreme Court raised concerns about the involvement of officials in facilitating illegal mining, underscoring the need for accountability.
- **Impact of Inaction:** Without strict monitoring, the ban remains ineffective, allowing dangerous practices to thrive.



## Exploitation and Role of Miners

- **Human Cost:** Unregulated rat-hole mining has led to repeated accidents and fatalities, with little recognition for the miners involved. Children and marginalized workers often face exploitation in these operations.
- **Irony of Utility:** Authorities have turned to experienced rat-hole miners during crises, such as the Uttarkashi incident in 2023, when advanced technologies failed to deliver results. This highlights the miners' expertise but also their systemic neglect.

## Need for Decisive Action

- **Breaking the Cycle:** Incidents like the Dima Hasao tragedy temporarily draw attention to the issue, but lasting change requires sustained effort.
- **Disrupting Economic Viability:** To curb illegal mining, it is essential to enforce stricter penalties, provide viable livelihood alternatives, and reduce coal dependency.
- **Policy Implementation:** Comprehensive action plans focusing on rehabilitation, stricter monitoring, and sustainable mining practices are crucial to address both environmental and human costs.

## Conclusion

Rat-hole mining continues to claim lives and damage the environment, despite bans and repeated tragedies. To end this hazardous practice, decisive action is required to enforce existing regulations, disrupt economic incentives, and introduce sustainable alternatives. Only through a concerted effort can the cycle of exploitation and disaster be broken, ensuring safety and dignity for miners while protecting the environment.

**Source:** <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/%E2%80%8Bburrow-tragedy-on-the-coal-mining-tragedy-in-assams-dima-hasao/article69101103.ece#:~:text=India%20must%20learn%20from%20its%20mining%20disasters%20and%20enforce%20regulations&text=With%20four%20deaths%20so%20far,hole%20coal%20mining%20in%20India.>

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