

Uncertain future lies ahead: Khumtong Hakum

“What will you do if coal is extracted from your jhum land?” Lidu’s Khumtong Hakum, a native of No 3 Mallowgaon of Tikok hill, has got no answer to this question. Their maybe a way out of this problem, is all he can say, showing signs of uncertainty. Khumtong, traditionally, belongs to the Tangsa Naga tribe. The Tangsa Naga tribes have been living in villages no 1, no 2, no 3 Mallowgaon in the forests of the Patkai range in the Upper Assam for decades. But due to open cast mining, which resulted in the environmental degradation and pollution, two of the villages shifted to another place.

Along with Khumtong this correspondent had to travel on foot for about 5 kms through the narrow footpaths to the top of the mountain range where once no 1 Mallowgaon stood; now it is deserted. During this journey the correspondent could see the marks of machineries, like excavator and dumper, on the entire of range. But places, which were spared by excavation, are still untouched and beautiful.

After trekking for about 1.5 hours, one could see the remains of no 1 and no 2 Mallowgaon, which were once developed villages. The remains of two villages of Tangsa Naga tribes can still be seen – the betel nut tree, the guava trees, concrete staircases and a beautifully crafted church specially made up of bamboo constructed by the villagers in the deserted place.

But it was the result of open cast mining of coal by the Coal India Limited (CIL) in Tikok range which created dome like dumps of soil mixed with coal. The pressure of the dumps, and the excessive use of heavy machinery and explosives to excavate coal, led to land subsidence. The villages subsided mainly because of the uncontrolled open cast mining of coal. This is a common phenomenon in coal mining. The villagers then protested against the mining activities. As a result CIL authorities had to relocate the people of these two villages on the banks of Namdung river.

Hakum says that no 3 Mallowgaon doesn’t have coal reserves but coal has been found in the jhum fields. Private companies have already started open cast mining of coal in the Tikok mountains. Hakum is certain that in near future their jhum field will bear the same fate.

Significantly, these families are not educated and hence have no other means of livelihood but jhum cultivation. If, in this situation, any company does coal mining in their fields then what will happen to them? Khumtong was uncertain for this very reason.

Industrialisation has been the important asset for the development of human being. It is true that economics is the main lender and transporter of any industrialisation. But it is also true that in this haste to industrialise policies have been anti-tribal. Numerous industries, based on natural resources, are often found in regions where tribals inhabit. In the process of resource extraction lakhs of people have become homeless or have been relocated elsewhere. Thereby their traditional cultural life has been wiped out. In some cases they are promised jobs in the industry that is being set up. But are not absorbed due to lack of desired qualification, even for a fourth grade employee.

Take for example of Khumtong Hakum. If in near future, Hakum's jhum land were taken then he would face problems. There is no doubt that CIL authorities will provide some compensation to the affected families. But these people will not benefit, as there has been no hiring for the last 15 years.

In terms of educational qualifications (Khumtong Hakum has studied till 10th) they are only suited for helper or labour jobs. Significantly, only three people out of 35 families who are living in Tikok mountain were absorbed as casual labourers at the rate of Rs 1000-1500.

At the time of evacuation from the Tikok mountain each family got a rehabilitation package of an average of Rs 10,000. But this was not sufficient. Also rehabilitation of tribals is difficult. They do not own any land apart from their village land; the land used for jhum cultivation is not private but public land. That is why they do not get proper compensation. Though the policy talks of rehabilitating the tribes but in reality this does not happen.

Coal mining started way back in 1881 in Assam to fulfil the requirement of tea gardens. The nationalisation of coal industry was also done three decades ago. The people living near coalfields affected by them had to evacuate due to pressure from the government. But they were not given adequate opportunities. CIL has enough resources to prepare a plan for proper rehabilitation but in reality it is never executed.

Under the aegis of media fellowship awarded by the New Delhi based Centre for Science and Environment, this presentation has been prepared on the Makum Coalfields.

Written under the aegis of CSE Media Fellowships