

The 111 sq kms Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary (DPWLS) and the mining near its boundary in 98.59 hectares of land for the Tikok Opencast Project by the North Eastern Coal Fields (NEC) in the Saleki Proposed Reserve Forest, as approved now by the National Board of Wildlife (NBWL) in its 57th meeting is evoking strong emotions amongst conscious citizens and Nature lovers. Though most sentiment is against any mining for coal in a bio-diverse area and in the 937 sq kms Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve, some feel that the mining in this area has been going on for decades, albeit illegally since 2003, so why the furore and protest now? They also ask: Is coal not needed for the country's development?

To understand these issues, we need to be clear about the location of the coal mining areas, the biodiversity status of the areas, etc., and the Google map which is part of this article shows these details.

The Tikok Open Cast Project (252 ha) in the Borgolai area since 1973, whose one end includes the 98.59 ha of illegal mining area, lunges as a dagger into the DPWLS to within 10 kms of its Eco Sensitive Zone (ESZ). But you need an adequate buffer, not just 10 kms, between human activities like opencast coal mining and wildlife sanctuaries. The 10 km ESZ as fixed by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, for all projects is totally arbitrary and has no scientific basis. These areas are habitats of elephants, hoolock gibbons, diverse and endangered flora and fauna in a true hotspot area. Also, the area is part of the Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve, comprising 937 square kilometres of area, which includes the Dehing Patkai WLS and the Saleki Proposed Reserve Forest. The area is contiguous with the Deomali Elephant Reserve in Arunachal across the border and together constitutes a significant bio-diverse hotspot area, which is part of the Indo-Burma biodiversity area. Also, more significantly, the area is part of the Assam Valley Tropical Wet Evergreen Forest – the largest stretch of tropical lowland rainforest in India.

Occurrence of coal in the Tikok Parbat Hill was known from the early days of British occupation. Work on coal seams began in 1882 – after formation of the Assam Railway and Trading Company in 1881. The Borgolai colliery was started in 1809. In 1888, the British declared the Upper Dehing (West) as a Reserve Forest. Quite unimaginable, especially for Public Sector Undertakings and governments of today! The British, in their sagacity, made a clear distinction between commercial activities like coal mining and preservation of bio-diverse forests way back in 1888! But the Tikok OCP thrust by NEC since



Guarding the green

PRADIP BHUYAN advocates the urgent need to declare National Park status to the Dehing Patkai area.



Photo: Abhishek Dey – Green Bud Society

1973 towards the Dehing Patkai WLS exemplifies complete disregard of biodiversity and Nature today.

One may ask why mining in the 98.59 ha of land in Saleki was not challenged earlier – the answer is simple. People, in general, didn't know about these activities and also didn't understand many aspects of the damages of a biologically diverse hotspot area. People were not knowledgeable enough about the environment, biodiversity, etc., as the younger generation today is. Some NGOs, however, were raising issues and some environmental stalwarts have contributed immensely through their scientific studies.

Coal of Assam and development of the country

In their application for the renewal of mining lease of the Tikok Open Cast mining, the NEC has mentioned that 70 per cent of the country's energy is generated by coal and the renewal of the lease will contribute to the country's power sector, but the reality is that the total production from Assam, Meghalaya, Jammu and Kashmir combined is only 0.37 per cent of the country's total production of coal in 2017-18, as per the *Indian Minerals Year Book of 2018*. It is simply laughable that such arguments are put forward by public sector undertakings but these are

deliberate, insidious misinformation that can harm the State's interest. The Makum coal belt starts from Golai area and is about 30-35 kms long south of Margherita-Ledo towards the Arunachal border. These are legitimate areas for coal mining.

Dehing Patkai Rainforest – The Amazon of the East

The Assam Valley Tropical Wet Evergreen Forests are dominated by Hollong and Mekai trees. These rainforests stretch over an area of over 500 sq kms in the districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, and is the largest stretch of tropical lowland rainforests in India. The area encompasses the Jeypore Rainforest, Dilli Rainforest, Upper Dehing (W) Rainforest, the Dehing Patkai WLS, and some fringe rainforests – known in its entirety as the Dehing Patkai, also dubbed as The Amazon of the East.

Declare the Dehing Patkai area as a National Park and Rainforest

The British drew the line when they declared Upper Dehing (W) as a Reserve Forest in 1888 itself. They clearly demarcated what can be commercially exploited – coal, oil, etc., and what needs to be left alone. One need not destroy one's national heritage and biodiverse forests to achieve so called progress. The area is a habitat to around 47 species of mammals, 293 species of birds, 47 species of reptiles, seven species of cats and many species of butterflies, orchids, etc.

The Jeypore Reserve Forest is contiguous to the Namdapha National Park with an area of 1985 sq kms and DPWLS is contiguous to the Deomali Elephant Reserve in Arunachal. The declaration of Dehing Patkai as a National Park and Rainforest should have been done long ago. The entire proposed Saleki Reserve Forest with illegal open cast mining by NEC must be included in the National Park area. It will be a buffer between coal mining activities and preservation of a biodiverse Elephant Reserve and Rainforest. Also declaration as a National Park will stop illegal rathole mining in some rainforests, and all other illegal activities.

Nature is merciful. Some of the degraded areas within the confines of the proposed national park will regenerate over time, if human activities stop. Scientific measures like planting Hollong trees and a few other species of the rainforest will accelerate the process.

Covid-19 has taught humankind a great lesson – give Nature its space. Our younger generation has come forward admirably against the mining of 98.59 ha land next to DPWLS, but now we must make a rallying call for the Dehing Patkai National Park and Rainforest, which will, when declared, create a diverse terrestrial ecosystem for posterity.

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