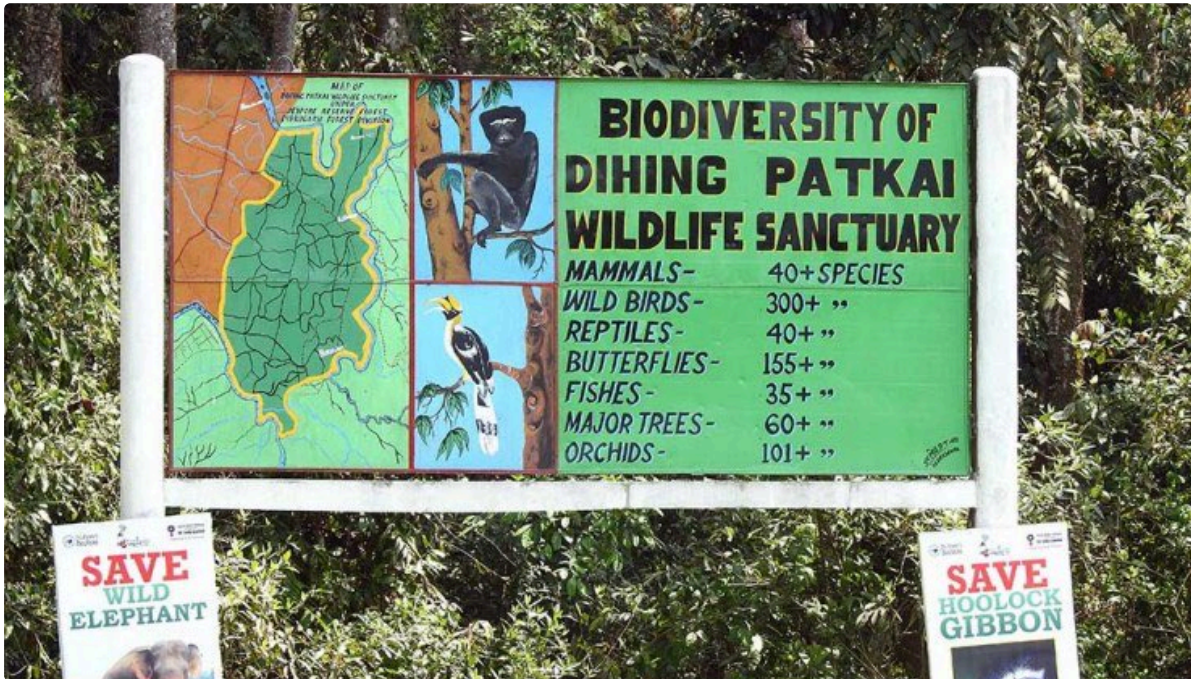


The Dihing Patkai Issue: It's time to blink



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Shantikam Hazarika 22 May 2020 Updated 24 May 12803 views

Guwahati: I have been very enthused by the vitality with which youth of this region have taken up the case of preserving the pristine purity of the Dehing Patkai Rain Forest and opposing the grant of coal mining permission in the Elephant corridor adjacent to the Forest to the North East Coal Fields (NECF).

I have spent almost fifteen years of my service life in that area and have pleasant memories of driving around the forest roads in my 1956 Model Fiat Millicento. Anyone who has stayed at the Forest Chaang Bungalow on the Dehing River Bank near the sleepy town of Jeypore can never forget the once in lifetime experience.

One of the largest stretch of tropical lowland rainforests in India, many calls it a smaller version of the Amazon Rain Forests. Its Flora and Fauna, including Avifauna, are not only unique, but also exquisite.

While I fully endorse the movement against granting of mining rights to North East Coal Fields (NECF), which is a unit of Coal India Limited (CIL), I would like to raise two issues. First is the very purpose of NECF operating in the North East and second is the role of the State Government viz a viz CPSUs operating in Assam.

Coal in Assam has almost a 200 years old history and the Assam Railways and Trading Company (ARTC) was incorporated sometime in the 1880s. Incidentally ARTC built the first Railway lines in Assam and also promoted the Assam Oil Company at Digboi. Coal has, undoubtedly played a crucial role in Assam's industrial growth in preindependent India.

India has the fifth largest coal reserves and is the fourth largest producer of coal in the world. While in the entire NE region, the coal reserves are from the newer Tertiary formations, in rest of India they are from the Gondwana formations. Characteristically, NE coal has high Sulphur content which have adverse environmental and chemical consequences. In today's context, mining of this pernicious product in an ecologically fragile region like the NE, by itself, is a questionable proposition.

Economically what does NECF contributes to CIL? The total reserves of coal in the NE region are estimated to be around 1,588 Million Metric Tonnes (MT), while in the rest of the country it is 3,17,433 MT. Thus. The amount of coal in the NE region is hardly 0.005% of the total reserves in the whole country.

In 2018-19, NECF produced 0.78 Million Tonnes (MT) of coal, compared to All India production of 606.89 MT. Thus, the NECF production is 0.00128%, (yes, two zeroes after the decimal point) of the total production of the giant behemoth of CIL. And the entire 0.00128% of production is through Open Cast Mining. NECF does not produce coal through underground shafts any more. In the process, NECF removed 8.5 Million Cubic Metres of overburden. This means, the entire production of NECF is at huge cost to the environment.

Does it really make sense for CIL to keep the NECF running? Huge Coal based Fertiliser plants in Sindri, Gorakhpur and Barauni were closed down earlier because they became economically unviable. NECF had long ago closed down the Dili and Jeypore collieries near Namrup because of their non-viability. For a piddling 0.00128% of contribution, is it necessary for NECF to maintain such a huge establishment in Margherita? Isn't NECF a big drain on CIL? Can't India, for that matter Assam, survive without Coal being mined in Assam?

I believe the NE region's biggest natural asset is its ecological environment. If Coal mining is stopped in Assam, the biggest benefactor would be the region's fragile environment. And today, no factor gets greater priority than preserving the environment. And since NE coal is an environmentally unsafe product, stopping its availability would be a big contribution to the preservation of the environment. The pernicious nature of the product can be gauged from the havoc caused to the NEEPCo project at Umrangshu and the eco system of the Kopili river.

Once the coal fields are closed down, the industrial infrastructure of the coalfields can find alternate usage, and the highly skilled and experienced staff in the industry can catalyse the industrial resurgence of the state that has been long envisaged.

CIL is sustaining the white elephant that NECF is mainly because they give a cover to the rapacious rat-hole coal mining that goes on in the NE region. The way the liquor lobby in the past used to dominate Assam politics, to a great extent NE politics is today controlled by the rat-hole coal mining lobby. Such lobbies do not have any political hues; whoever is there in Delhi or in the state capitals, they are comfortable. I strongly believe that but for the coal mining lobby, CIL would have jettisoned NECF long ago.

I am an ardent environmentalist. One of the first activities we undertook at Assam Institute of Management (AIM), back in 1986 when we started it, was to organize a quiz of environment, organized by DN Sarma's son under a group called Florican. Also, AIM was one of the first Management institute to make Environment Management a compulsory full credit course and has sustained it all through. Incidentally I hold a few CIL shares and hence the above data is from its Annual Report.

About the second aspect, sometime later. I hope no hornets' nest has been shaken.

[#savedehingpatkai pic.twitter.com/g3x10dBOgY](https://twitter.com/g3x10dBOgY)

— Sanjit (@BorthakurSanjit) [May 19, 2020](#)

Shantikam Hazarika

BY SHANTIKAM HAZARIKA

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