

Dark journeys

Since it assumed office in 2014, the NDA government has stressed the use of renewable energy to generate electricity. However, thermal power remains the mainstay of the country's energy sector. According to the NITI Aayog, coal will constitute nearly 60 per cent of India's fuel mix in 2022. Given the well-known pollution hazards and environmental impacts of this fossil fuel, therefore, it is imperative that coal is extracted in a responsible manner. Over the past three years, the government has taken measures to mitigate the ecological footprint of coal mining, including ranking mines according to environmental yardsticks. However, such measures have remained at the level of the coal mine and have not addressed the pollution caused by the transport of coal to industrial units. An investigation by this newspaper, published last week, has revealed how a corridor that transports coal imported into the country - mainly from Australia, Indonesia and South Africa - to the steel mines in Karnataka causes deep ecological wounds in Goa.

Coal imports that are unloaded at Mormugao port in Goa are transported by rail and road to Bellary in Northern Karnataka. Official figures show that, on average, 34,200 tonnes of coal is transported each day through the rail route from the Central government-owned Mormugao port via Vasco, Margao and Kulem, to Karnataka. The nearly 400-km journey of this fossil fuel is putting at risk entire habitations along the way. According to the Goa State Pollution Control Board's (GSPCB) 2015-16 report, the PM10 reading of Mormugao port "exceeded the permissible limits on 14 out of 24 readings". Coal dust has pushed up incidents of respiratory disorder and is threatening fragile forests, paddy fields, streams and rivers, the investigation by this paper has revealed.

The investigation has highlighted instances of regulatory deficit, which the concerned authorities must urgently address. Official records show that coal in excess of permissible limits is being handled at the Mormugao port. A report by the port authority admits: "The consent to operate was exceeded from the year 2011-12 onward and the operator has not obtained permission from the GSPCB for enhancing the limits". The need to beef up the regulatory mechanism has acquired greater urgency given that Mormugao port plans to more than double its coal imports by 2030. Goa is not the only state, of course, which is facing problems due to transport of coal. An environmental audit, cited by a 2014 Comptroller and Auditor General of India report, blamed the transport of coal for the high pollution levels in coal-rich Jharkhand. Last year, the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board acknowledged serious lapses in the way coal was being handled at Mumbai's Bori Bunder. Given the continuing centrality of coal in the country's energy mix, it is imperative that policymakers ensure that it is transported in environmentally benign ways.

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