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## **ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-319**



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## Assam's tribal communities lost land and forest to mining



For years, Assam's rainforests in and around the Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary have been bearing the brunt of coal mining, both illegal and legal.

Apart from the impact on the biodiversity of the ecologically sensitive area, it is the tribal communities of the region who have suffered due to repeated displacement and pollution.

The tribal community alleges that there have been many instances of illegal mining and they are yet to get respite from the ills of mining.

One of India's most important rainforests, the Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam has become a

battleground for communities and cheap coal mined from the region.

The foothills of Dehing Patkai in the eastern end of Assam is home to the Khamti, Singpho, Sema Nagas, Tangsa, Tai-Phake, Syam, Aitom, Nocte and other communities who have been impacted by mining and deforestation that displaced them from lands that traditionally belonged to them.

Many of the people from this region in Assam have migrated to Tirap district in the bordering state of Arunachal Pradesh, said Raju Deori, a legal advisor to the Tirap Autonomous District Council. He estimates that at least 500 villages in the Dehing Patkai foothills are facing the threat of mining and deforestation. "A lot of people depending on the forests of these areas have migrated to Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, leaving their homesteads after mines and illegal felling of trees destroyed entire forest areas," Deori, who has been campaigning for the rights of these communities, told Mongabay-India.

Some of these tribes have less than 5,000 people among them, said Deori as he stated that mining has widened the income gap in communities between those dependent on the forests and those lured by illegal mining and logging activities. He also highlighted that while the tribal population is going down the illegal mining and logging activities have gone up.

If the Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve and more than a dozen patches of reserve forests and proposed reserve forests are added, the size of Dehing Patkai rainforest situated farther east of the Brahmaputra river would be more than 900 square kilometres. The wildlife sanctuary alone, however, is spread over 111.9 square kilometres only with two narrow elephant corridors and fragmented patches of forests surrounded by coal mines and tea gardens.

Before this globally-endangered lowland evergreen forest and its biodiversity was officially protected as a sanctuary in 2004, industrial activity had been going on for more than 100 years in these parts.

Deori informed that the coal mining started in the land held by indigenous tribes. "Forest department claims that they have leased their land to the mines. That is false. The foothills of Dehing Patkai were never surveyed. The land ownership always remained with the communities," Deori claimed.

Hekei Sema, a tribal elder from Tikok village said that the village had to shift three times as the mine expanded. "We were compensated a couple of times. But there are only six families left in our village. Most have migrated," Sema told Mongabay-India. He said that the Saleki Proposed Reserve Forest next to Tikok has been mined illegally for more than a decade.

His ancestral village was turned into mine in 1888 when the British were laying down railway tracks – it is now operated by North Eastern Coalfields Limited (NECL), a subsidiary of Indian government-owned Coal India Limited (CIL).

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