

Four decades on, a village in Jharkhand is still haunted by the ghost of asbestos mining

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Mohan Sundi, 35, belongs to the Ho Adivasi community of a remote Roro village in the West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. Roro is at the foothills of a mountain where one can see massive mounds of white or chrysotile asbestos dumped. This form of asbestos is used in building and other material but has significant health risks. Asbestos mining in the region stopped in 1983 – nearly four decades ago.

Then, in 1986, the Indian government banned giving new mining leases for asbestos mining and in 1993 it stopped the renewal of existing mining leases. The ban on asbestos mining was done in phases between 1986 to 1993.

But the aftereffects remain. Unaware of the health hazards, several generations of Roro's residents have been exposed to the asbestos waste lying near the village and in 12 more adjoining villages. Mohan told Mongabay-India that during their childhood days, he and many others used to slide along the dumped asbestos without knowing the harm its exposure could cause to their health. Mohan, like many others in his village, migrates out for seasonal work. He worked at a theatre in Kerala and is now back home to Roro – and back to the ghost of the closed asbestos mine.

The village is still facing the effect of asbestos mining even after almost four decades of its closure in the area, he said. "My father has breathing disorders," he said. "There are many other elderly people who struggle to breathe. There are also cases of eye disorders and cancer in the village."

"The village has struggled a lot in the last few decades as many of the ailing patients were forced to visit Ranchi, Hyderabad, Delhi and other areas for treatment," he said, while sitting in his courtyard where he had spread recently-plucked mahua for drying, which he would then sell in the local market.

Birsingh Sundi, who is in his 60s, is also from Roro village, inhabited mostly by the Ho Adivasi. He is the Munda, traditionally the village head of the local Adivasi clan. He stated that though mining stopped in 1983, the exposure still exists and said that he suffers from a breathing disorder and many other ailments.

"I face difficulty in breathing ... a cyst has also developed on my back," Birsingh told Mongabay-India. "This is quite common in our village. The mining has been closed four decades ago but a large amount of asbestos waste is still lying on the hills."

"As our village is just below the hills, due to winds, the waste often gets into our villages and farmlands during the rainy season," Birsingh said. "Now, we hardly have any fertile land to plough ... it is because the asbestos waste layers have destroyed the farmlands."

Manki Sundi is also a resident of Roro, whose father used to work in the mines. Roro's father and almost all those who worked in the mines are dead. Manki said that he had tuberculosis but despite completing the full course of medicines, his breathing issues are yet to be cured.

Like him, there are many others in the village who have breathing issues. They told Mongabay-India that the local doctors diagnose them with having tuberculosis, but despite taking medicines for years for the illness, many of these alleged tuberculosis patients have never recovered.

An Adivasi woman walks in Roro village. Women in this village collect mahua and other minor forest produce from the forests nearby. Photo credit: Manish Kumar/ Mongabay
Soro Sundi, 62, has chronic back pain. She claimed that most women suffer from similar health issues but despite suffering they do not land up going for testing and treatment. Her husband, who is the Munda (tribal village head), is also suffering from a breathing disorder and was declared a tuberculosis patient years ago.

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Roro is primarily a remote tribal village where the majority of the villagers are dependent on the minor forest produce for their livelihood. Its population is estimated to be around 500. It is situated around 20-km away from Chaibasa town, which is the district headquarters of West Singhbhum district. But due to the lack of proper roads and other amenities, the local people are only able to reach the city in two hours by cycling. During the rainy season, the movement of two-wheelers and four-wheelers on the roads gets difficult.

The villagers told Mongabay-India that most of them consume water directly from the nearby river, where asbestos waste dumped on the mountain trickles down into the river during the rainy season.

Asbestos and health

The British Medical Journal in 1924 said that asbestos fibres are cancer-causing (carcinogenic). Asbestos is also found to trigger mesothelioma (a type of cancer) among the exposed workers and communities. Asbestos is a silicate compound found naturally in the environment and like in the case of Roro, the mining operations used to extract it from the hills which had a rich source of this compound. According to medical studies, once inhaled, the asbestos fibres remain on lung tissues for a longer period leading to scarring and inflammation which ultimately leads to difficulty in breathing.

However, India still imports the compound and uses it. According to the World Health Organisation, all types of asbestos can cause cancer. "All types of asbestos cause lung

cancer, mesothelioma, cancer of the larynx and ovary, and asbestosis [fibrosis of the lungs]. Exposure to asbestos occurs through inhalation of fibres in air in the working environment, ambient air in the vicinity of point sources such as factories handling asbestos, or indoor air in housing and buildings containing friable [crumbly] asbestos materials,” the World Health Organisation says on its official website and also claims that around 12.5 crore people around the world are exposed to asbestos in their workplace.

Asbestosis is a notified disease under The Mines Act, 1952. Ramesh Jerai is a human rights activist working in Chaibasa with the villagers for their testing and welfare. He said that his local voluntary organisation, Johar, conducted a health survey way back in 1996 and found that more than the average number of people in this village were dying due to lung-related disorders often attributed to tuberculosis.

His organisation helped in the treatment, diagnosis and testifying the asbestosis cases of patients from this area and still working on the health and rehabilitation of the people of Roro.

“You can see many people in the village have breathing disorders,” Ghanshyam Gagrai, Convener, Johar told Mongabay-India. “But they assume or are told by the local doctors that they were tuberculosis cases. It is because they are misdiagnosed as there is a lack of diagnostic services in Chaibasa district to diagnose asbestosis.”

“We took many of these patients to Jamshedpur for X-Ray and other tests to know the exact reason behind their deteriorating health,” said Johar. “Only after getting the tests done outside the district, we came to know about several cases of asbestosis among the villagers.”

Bhawesh Jha, a Patna-based public health expert who has worked earlier in Jharkhand including Chaibasa, told Mongabay-India that there is a dearth of training of medical professionals and a lack of working knowledge on occupational hazards and environment-induced diseases like asbestosis and silicosis.

Besides Roro, 12 other villages nearby area are also said to be affected by the exposure of asbestos for decades. Photo credit: Manish Kumar/ Mongabay

“There is a lack of training among medical professionals and a dearth of resources at the local level to diagnose occupational diseases like asbestosis and thus many cases of occupational hazards are misdiagnosed as tuberculosis in such areas. In asbestosis, the disease manifestation can take 20-30 years. The health policies in India are often treatment based and thus lack focus on documenting, diagnosing the real ailments the people who are exposed to mining and hazardous industries,” he explained.

He further said that there are other social and mental aspects in such cases. “The people who mostly suffer are tribal, marginalised and poor ... they lack a voice unlike the urban mass,” Jha said. “Many of these people living in mining-affected areas are

most vulnerable to health hazards but continue to suffer in silence. Government has special funds especially meant for the welfare of these affected communities but even those get used in urban and non-priority areas while those mainly affected, suffer.”

He pointed out a study by Lancet in 2010 that talks about the lack of training and resources in the public health system in India when it comes to the diagnosis and treatment of diseases triggered by the asbestos industry.

Gopal Krishna, an environmental lawyer and co-founder of Ban Asbestos Network of India noted that as health is a state subject, the Jharkhand government must compensate the villagers for their poor health owing to a mining operation. He highlighted that Brazil has banned it for domestic use but is yet to ban its export to India. Russia, China and Kazakhstan, meanwhile are yet to ban its domestic use and export. All the asbestos used in India is imported asbestos, he said.

“Asbestos is a proven carcinogen,” he told Mongabay-India. “Many countries have banned its extraction and usage but we are still using it and its usage is very common in the automobile sector, talcum powder, construction and other sectors and many Indians are exposed to the toxic element. These are small fibres that, after entering the lungs, could make the person sick gradually. Their breathing potential is highly compromised even decades later.”

According to a paper from the International Labour Organisation, asbestos is the number one carcinogen in the world of work and its usage has increased in developing countries.

Legal battle

With the intervention of some voluntary organisations, the people of Roro village have approached the National Green Tribunal, National Human Rights Commission and other platforms to seek redressal of their complaint. In 2019, before the National Green Tribunal, the state government vowed to use the District Mineral Foundation funds and other resources to mitigate the effects of exposure to asbestos to the village, but the implementation of that announcement is yet to be seen.

The Jharkhand government had talked about a fund of Rs 13.45 crore for the development of the area, barricading the exposed area, and creating a green corridor to tackle the issue. But, in 2022, the dumped waste continues to lie in the open, and the local tribal community is exposed to it.

In January 2014, the National Green Tribunal admitted a case on the issue. During the hearing, the Hyderabad-based mining firm that had undertaken the mining claimed that they were involved in manufacturing fibre cement roof for which the raw material was asbestos. During the mining process, chromite and chrysotile asbestos (white asbestos) were mined through horizontal shaft-mining and milled on-site technique to derive chrysotile asbestos fibre.

Roro village is primarily inhabited by the Ho tribe that depends on forests for their livelihood. Photo credit: Manish Kumar/ Mongabay

The miner, in its affidavit before the National Green Tribunal, claimed that asbestosis was not notified as an occupational disease before 1983 and that all the legislations made after 1983 were not bound to them. It also claimed that there were less scientific reports on record to hold the company liable for compensation or reclamation of the alleged dumped asbestos waste.

During 2014-2020, several discussions and plans were made. According to the National Green Tribunal order, a joint inspection team was formed that recommended ways to counter the exposure and an action plan was submitted to the green tribunal. However, till date, the village is yet to get justice. The National Green Tribunal order, in 2018, did not talk about any monetary compensation to the aggrieved villagers even though it asked for a scientific closure of dumped waste.

According to the Indian government, in 1986, it decided not to allow expansion of existing asbestos mines. Recently, Ashwini Kumar Choubey, Minister of State for Environment, Forest and Climate Change told the Indian Parliament that there were no proposals under consideration to ban use, manufacturing and trade of asbestos.

According to government data, in 2019-'20, India imported 361,164 tonnes of asbestos. The main imports were through Russia (85%), Brazil, Kazakhstan and Hungary (3% each), besides imports from Poland and South Africa. India is also said to be the largest importer of asbestos in the world. However, the government records claim that the imports have declined in the past few years.

In a landmark judgment in 1995, the Supreme Court of India had asked the asbestos industries to pay compensation for the health hazards to their workers besides ordering asbestos industries to keep health records of their employees for 40 years since their recruitment and up to 15 years after they leave the company besides their accurate diagnosis from the National Institute of Occupational Hazards, Ahmedabad.

Mining reclamation woes

The Indian government in 1988, under the Mineral Conservation and Development Rules, 1988, talked about restoring and reclaiming the mined areas for sustainable development. However, most of these acts, rules and court orders came after the closure of the Roro asbestos mining, making the task of reclamation a cumbersome exercise for the state government.

Experts on the issue, however, claimed that despite the laws being there, several miners continue to flout the reclamation and restoration laws.

Sankar Prasad Pani is a Bhubaneswar-based lawyer who deals with the environment and mining-related cases before the National Green Tribunal.

“In terms of legislation, there was the original Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act of 1988 that talked about reclamation and restoration,” Pani told Mongabay-India. “But the reclamation issue got bolstered through the Progressive Mining Closure Rules of 2003 which mandated the miners to ensure regular restoration of the mines. This shows that legislations progressed towards the environment but flouting still continues unabated when it comes to the abandoned mines.”

“During mining, the land sees several levels of degradation. The whole land pattern changes and with the dumping of waste, new land structures are created. Often the topsoil, rich in nutrients, prerogative for plant growth, washes off during the course of land, further degrading the land,” he said. “Several miners blatantly flout laws or with some excuse, fail to restore and reclaim the mines sites, leading to health threats to the locals, despite the closure of such mines. Such cases could be found across the country,” he said.

Documents of discussions and correspondences at the district and state levels revealed that the main contention of who will remove the dumped asbestos from the mined site remained a complex question to answer, leading to the delay in the exercise while the affected communities continued to suffer in silence.