Telegana's 'Villages of widows'

What is the issue?

In the 1970s, hundreds of women from Mahbubnagar's villages in Telegana lost their husbands to silicosis, an occupational hazard that could have been prevented if safety protocols had been followed.

What is the ground reality?

- The victims were workers in a quartz-mining and crushing factory of the Andhra Pradesh Mineral Development Corporation (APMDC) at Elkatta.
- Elkatta village is in Telangana's Ranga Reddy district which was earlier in Mahbubnagar district.
- Quartz was mined at Chowlapally and brought to the crushing unit at Elkatta, where it was heated to 1,000°C in a kiln, broken into smaller pieces, and turned into fine dust in an oblong closed shed.
- This shed proved to be a virtual death trap, as the workers kept inhaling the odourless silica dust that gave them a racking cough and led to shortness of breath.
- APMDC is a public sector undertaking and now it is known as Telangana State Mineral Development Corporation (TSMDC).
- APMDC ran the mines from 1965 to 1974.
- After 1974 they shut the mines down abruptly when they saw that the workers were succumbing en masse to silicosis.
- According to the villagers, around 350 workers were employed in the mines and the crushing unit, and a majority of them were exposed to silica dust.
- Until the shutdown, whenever a worker fell sick, he was simply told that his cough was a temporary phenomenon.
- The workers were not told that they were victims of silicosis.
- The locals called the disease as "guttala bimari", or "the disease from the hills" and weren't aware that the disease was silicosis.

What is silicosis?

- Silicosis is a lung disease caused by breathing in tiny bits of silica, a mineral that is part of sand, rock, and mineral ores such as quartz.
- It mostly affects workers exposed to silica dust in occupations such mining, glass manufacturing, and foundry work.

- Over time, exposure to silica particles causes scarring in the lungs, which can harm the ability to breathe.
- Exposure to large amounts of silica can go unnoticed as it is a non-irritant and does not cause any immediate health effects.
- According to the World Health Organization (WHO) the symptoms of silicosis — shortness of breath, cough, fever and bluish skin — show up only after prolonged exposure to silica dust.
- Silicosis is incurable, and so clinical management includes removing the worker from the industry and giving symptomatic treatment

Did the authority turned a blind eye towards the workers ailment?

- The government and the corporation left the workers didn't accept the responsibility and left the workers to fend for themselves.
- There was no help that was offered to the workers to take care of themselves from this disease.
- The authorities quietly abandoned the quartz-mining and crushing activities in 1974.
- Even though the mining lease was valid till 1985 and the mineral was available in abundance.
- The corporation told the workers that operating the mine had become uneconomical instead of acknowledging the toxicity of the workplace as the issue.
- The corporation laid off the workers in batches and paid paltry amounts instead of the full compensation and severance package.
- This was done to avoid the liabilities under Section 25-O of the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947 and Section 6 of the Metalli-ferous Mines Regulations, 1961.
- These sections mandate that the mine owner should submit a notice to the Chief or the Regional Inspector, stating reasons for abandoning the mine and the number of persons affected.

What were the other major negligences in this issue?

- **Misdiagnosis:** In the local government hospitals, quartz mine workers who fell sick were wrongly diagnosed as having Tuberculosis (TB).
- SO the workers were referred to TB hospitals in Vikarabad and Hyderabad.
- There was no clinical management of silicosis as they continued to get treated for TB.
- **Bureaucratic Red tape:** Government agencies are not willing to recognize the disease as silicosis.
- Various inquiries by different group of people such as private doctors, Director General of Mines Safety etc hadn't yielded a concrete result to help

the victims and their families.

What is the present status?

- As the last resort the victims approached the Andhra Pradesh High Court in 2000.
- Three petitioners helped by the Banjara Development Society NGO (BDS) moved the court under Article 226 of the Constitution**.**
- After more than a decade of litigation, the High Court converted the writ petition into a Public Interest Litigation.
- It directed the authorities, including the APMDC, to propose a scheme to safeguard the life and liberty of the persons suffering from silicosis.
- In response in 2013 the APMDC submitted a scheme under which it agreed to pay the silicosis-affected workers compensation as decided by the Compensation Commissioner under the Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923.
- However after 5 years only now an official team of the TSMDC has started a preliminary survey of the villages.
- The scheme submitted to the High Court speaks about submission of proof of employment and confirmation and verification of workers who suffered silicosis
- The need of documents shouldn't add to the agony of the widows as the case is to be dealt with a humanitarian concern.

Source: The Hindu

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