

## Underground mine fires mar marriage prospects in Jharkhand town

Jitendra Agrawal is good looking, in his 30s and desperate to get married. But sadly, there are no takers for this eminently suitable groom in this Jharkhand town. The reason - smouldering underground fires in the vast reserves of coal below the township that has claimed several lives.

Jitendra's marriage had been fixed three times, but each time the girl's parents backed out at the prospect of their daughter having to stay in the town. Finally, Jitendra, who has a business of his own, decided to leave Jharia town and settle down in Dhanbad.

Jharia, situated in Dhanbad district, is around 270 km from state capital Ranchi. The town has a huge deposit of coal, which is under the Bharat Coking Coal Limited (BCCL). The underground fire is raging over an area of 17 sq km.

The Jharia coal fields are referred to as 'cremation ground' as more than a dozen homes have been engulfed by the underground fire, which has claimed at least 30 lives in the past few years.

BCCL authorities claim that due to the mine fire, the company has lost 39 million tonnes of coal worth billions of rupees in 92 years.

Ganpati Lal, a resident of the area, says that the underground mine fire has transformed their happy life into one of sorrow. 'My son got married at the age of 37 after he left Jharia. People outside Jharia are scared of the threat posed by the underground mine fire,' Lal told IANS.

The residents blame BCCL for spreading 'rumours' regarding the threat to life faced by the residents by the underground fire. 'BCCL has created panic by sending messages to the outside world that Jharia is not safe. BCCL is spreading the rumours in order to use the underground coal deposits for commercial purpose,' alleged Madanlal Khanna, member, Jharia Coalfield Bachao Samiti (JCBS - Save Jharia coalfield committee).

Pinaki Roy, another member of JCBS, echoed him: 'There are two parts in Jharia. One is a township area and the other the coalfield area. The underground mine fire can be controlled in the township area, but BCCL is trying to commercially exploit the coal reserves of the township area.'

'People from other states think their children's lives will be in danger if they stay in Jharia. This has caused the break-up of some marriages in the area,' he said.

According to experts, the Jharia mine contains 1,000 million tonnes of coal deposits and it can be extracted only when the people are shifted to other places and efforts are made to extinguish the fire.

The Jharia mine was opened for coal mining in 1896. The underground fire was detected for the first time in 1916. It started spreading during the 1970s.

The mine fire issue has been raised several times with the central and state governments. A proposed rehabilitation package was rejected by the people. Residents of Jharia have taken out processions demanding that a scientific method be adopted for extinguishing the fire without shifting them.

*Nityanand Shukla ( © IANS / India eNews)*