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23 farmers seek Prez permission to end lives

Proshun Chakraborty | TNN

Wani: For the distressed farmers of Yavatmal in Maharashtra, the reasons driving them to suicide have been crop failure and crippling debts. There is another now: pollution by state-owned coal mines. The spraying of coal dust on the fields by the hundreds of trucks rolling out of Coal India Ltd's Western Coal Fields (WCL) has severely hit farmers in the region.

Farmers say the coal dust from the open mines settle on the top soil and on crops jeopardising farming. As many as 23 farmers of Pinpalgaon, Junad and Brahmani in Wani, about 130km from Nagpur, have now written to President Pratibha Patil saying they want her "permission to end our lives".

"The open mines of WCL in Wani shower heaps of ash on our farms. The flow of water too is restricted because of these heaps. There have been heavy crop losses," says Balu Pundalik Khamankar, former sarpanch of Brahmani village and a farmer.

As many as seven farmers have killed themselves in Vidarbha region, which includes Yavatmal, in the last month alone. All of them have borrowed heavily from moneylenders and banks and had not been able to repay because of crop failure. "The pollution from coal dust has led to failure of crop at the first stage itself," says Khamankar.

Prabhakar Bode, who also owns a 10-acre of farm land in Pimpalgaon village, has a similar complaint. Bode says because of the heaps of ash near his agricultural land, there is no water for his crop. "Already the open cast mines have reduced the ground water level and the heaps of ash have left us no option but to end our lives," points out Kavdu Khamnkar, another farmer from Brahmani village.

The farmers have complained to WCL authorities and the district administration several times in the past five years.

Yet, they have got no relief. In 2003, the farmers staged a 'rasta-roko' to seek compensation, which forced the state government to issue directives to the agricultural department to conduct a survey of the affected farmers. In its report submitted to the WCL chairman and managing director, the agricultural department said the crops of 143 farmers who owned land near the open cast mines have suffered due to coal dust particles. "The report also mentioned that the WCL should disburse compensation of Rs 17.65 lakh to all the farmers of the affected villages," says Khamankar.

Amravati divisional commissioner Sharad Kinkar said he was not aware of the pollution caused by the WCL mines. "I'm not aware of the problem. But I will now look into it," he said.

Wani police station's inspector Jiaraj Chapria said he didn't know of any suicide motive of the farmers.

A WCL spokesperson told TOI on Tuesday that waste from coal mining, comprising dust and stones, is dumped but only "on land acquired by the company". WCL also claims to have given compensation to farmers who have been affected due to this to the extent legally permissible. The farmers, however, denied they have received compensation.

