The Lungs of the 'Energy Capital'

NGT recognises the health toll of coal and thermal power in Sonbhadra, moves to compensate victims and orders a multi-speciality hospital

22 October 2026

Case	Singrauli Pradooshan Mukti Vahini v. Union of India & Ors.
Forum	National Green Tribunal, Principal Bench, New Delhi
Number	Original Application No. 240/2024 (IA No. 437/2024)
Coram	Justice Prakash Shrivastava (Chairperson); Dr. Afroz Ahmad (Expert Member)
Date of order	22 September 2026
Next date	15 December 2026

THE ORDER AT A GLANCE

In its order of 22 September 2026, the National Green Tribunal accepted that **coal mining and thermal power plants in Sonbhadra are making local residents ill**. Relying on a study by AIIMS Bhopal, it set in motion a **mechanism to compensate the victims** and **directed the Uttar Pradesh Government to set up a multi-speciality hospital** for the affected villages.

The application was filed by residents of Sonbhadra, Uttar Pradesh seeking compensation for pollution-related illness. They alleged that "more than 359 industries including highly polluted industries such as thermal power plants, coal mines, etc. have been set up beyond the carrying capacity in that area which has resulted in uncontrolled pollution in the area creating health hazard to the residents of that area" (para 1).

Pollution from coal and thermal power plants

The Tribunal reproduced the AIIMS report's account of how coal-based industry harms health. Sonbhadra, the report notes, "is known as Urjanchal or 'Energy Capital of India'. It is considered as a critically polluted area due to presence of various thermal power plants (TPPs) and coal mines" (para 2). The report identifies the sources and routes of exposure:

- **Combined emissions:** "Power stations, mining, and ash-handling businesses cause contamination of the air, water, and soil by combined emissions from these sources."
- **Fly ash:** "Fly ash a by product of burning coal in thermal power plants is one of the main pollutants." Its long-term inhalation is linked to bronchitis, asthma and COPD, and "leaching from fly ash disposal in ponds or unlined landfills can contaminate drinking water and groundwater."
- **Coal dust and sulphur:** "In studies, coal dust exposure in school going children was found to culminate in respiratory symptoms."

Health impact: Sonbhadra compared with Varanasi

Asthma or chronic bronchitis was **more than 12 times as common** among adults in Sonbhadra (14.4%) as in Varanasi (1.15%). The AIIMS study used Varanasi as a control because it is "a relatively clean city not having such industries" (para 3). The Tribunal recorded that "the report finds much higher instances of Asthma and chronic bronchitis in adults in Sonbhadra as compared to Varanasi."

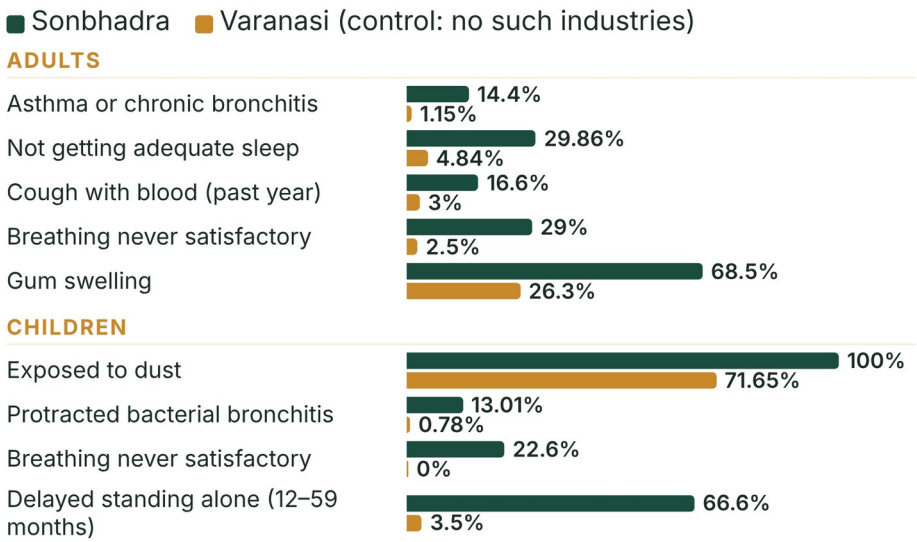
AIIMS BHOPAL STUDY · KEY FINDINGS

Sonbhadra vs Varanasi: share of people affected

12×

Asthma or chronic bronchitis is over twelve times as common among adults in Sonbhadra (14.4%) as in Varanasi (1.15%)

Near the plants it is worse: 17.96% of adults within 5 km of a thermal power plant, against 11.17% at 5–10 km



Sample: adults 355 (Sonbhadra) and 434 (Varanasi); children 146 and 127. Source: AIIMS Bhopal report, Tables 3.6, 3.7, 3.10, 3.12, 4.2, 4.4, 4.6, 4.7, as reproduced in the NGT order.

The AIIMS Bhopal study

The Tribunal's findings rest on a research report by AIIMS Bhopal titled "Health related effects of air and water pollution due to operation of thermal power plant and ash generating industries in Sonbhadra District of Uttar Pradesh" (para 2). The report states its own premise: "Air and water pollution can cause cancer, neurological abnormalities, cardiovascular ailments, and respiratory issues."

It was conducted because, in its words, "rarely any scientific study has been conducted to analyse the health impact of pollution in Sonbhadra district." Its main findings, as recorded by the Tribunal:

- **Adults:** "various health problems faced by the residents of Sonbhadra are much higher as compared to the residents of Varanasi" (para 6). These include cough, breathlessness, fever, eye irritation, gum problems and skin symptoms.
- **Children:** "the instances of the health problems faced in children of Sonbhadra is much higher as compared to the normal status which is reflected in Varanasi" (para 9).
- **Early development:** the report discloses "developmental milestones delay in 12–59 months for children on account of adverse effect of such pollution" (para 10).

The applicant pointed out a gap: AIIMS did not study effects on fertility or miscarriage, which she submitted "have also gone up in the villages of Sonbhadra" (para 11).

The need for compensation

The applicant invoked the **Polluter Pays principle**, praying that "those who are adversely affected on account of the pollution caused and are facing serious health problems are required to be adequately compensated" (para 12). The Applicant also sought health infrastructure near the affected villages.

The State of Uttar Pradesh opposed compensation. It relied on health camps and on Ayushman cards issued to 347 families (1,071 beneficiaries) in Anpara, and submitted that "no compensation is warranted as claimed in the present Original Application" (para 18). The Tribunal recorded:

> *"The above stand reflects that the State has denied payment of any compensation to the persons whose health is adversely affected due to the pollution caused in the area concerned."* **Para 19**

The Tribunal's own observations show why existing measures fall short:

- **No hospital:** "no specialised hospital in the affected area has been set up till now though the problem is grave and serious" (para 15).
- **Limited reach:** roughly 29 health camps had covered 29 villages, against the applicant's submission that about 1,000 villages are adversely affected (para 16).
- **Remediation is not relief:** the CPCB recommendations were "mostly relating to the action which should be taken to remediate the problem" (para 14), not to the harm already suffered.

Directions on compensation and a hospital

> *"In order to settle the issue of payment of compensation to the victims/those who have suffered the harm and health issues on account of pollution caused in Sonbhadra region, we propose to accept the suggestions and form the Committee..."* **Para 21**

DIRECTION · PARA 21

A Committee to settle compensation for pollution victims



The suggested procedure is victim-friendly. Although a proforma may be prescribed, "no application will be rejected by the Committee on the ground that the claim has not been submitted in the prescribed proforma." The Committee "will fix the environmental damage compensation taking into account the seriousness of the ailment/health issue, its temporary or permanent nature, the age of the victim and other relevant consideration" (para 22).

SUGGESTED PROCEDURE · PARA 22

How victims' claims will be heard and decided

1 — Camp in every affected village
With prior notice of date, time and place to the villagers

2 — Villagers file claims
With supporting material, before the Committee

3 — No rejection on form
A proforma may be prescribed, but no claim is rejected for not using it

4 — Medical examination
Health status and ailment examined by medical experts, if required

5 — Compensation fixed
By seriousness, temporary or permanent nature, and age of the victim

Next step: State authorities may respond to the suggestions within four weeks (para 23)

Next hearing: 15 December 2026

Pending this process, the Tribunal issued a **firm direction** to the State Government to set up a multi-speciality hospital (para 24).

DIRECTION · PARA 24

A multi-speciality hospital for the affected villages

THE STATE GOVERNMENT IS DIRECTED

"...to set up a **multi-speciality hospital with medical specialists** at the location which is **easily accessible** by the villagers of the affected villages."

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specialised hospitals in the affected area so far, "though the problem is grave and serious" (para 15)

29 / 1,000
villages reached by health camps, against about 1,000 villages the applicant says are affected (para 16)

Significance

The order treats harm to health from coal mining and thermal power as a **compensable environmental injury**, and not merely a matter for future pollution control. It grounds that recognition in scientific evidence from a premier medical institution. Despite the State's reliance on health camps and Ayushman cards, the Tribunal moved ahead on both compensation and specialised care.

The compensation framework is still at the proposal stage, pending the State's response within four weeks. Its design is nonetheless significant: village camps, no rejection on technicalities, and compensation scaled to severity, permanence and age. These features make it a possible template for other critically polluted coal belts. The hearing on 15 December 2026 will show whether the Committee is formally constituted and whether the hospital has moved from direction to reality.