

Human Life at Stake: The Situation of Labourers Working in Unregulated Mining Enterprises

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Abstract:

Right to live is the most fundamental of human rights. We work in order to earn and we earn so that we can survive. To be able to live is the basic, most fundamental need of human beings and from there arise the follow up notions of accumulation or multiplication of wealth, of luxury and comfort. But the core factor that stimulates human action is the basic biological need to keep the body and the soul together. This necessity to earn his bread makes man tread on to difficult, hazardous areas, areas which can put his life in danger. To remain alive and with dignity is a common human quest. To be able to live with dignity includes, in a big way the life and work situations which are conducive to ensure a life of dignity.

It is against this backdrop that the present paper talks about the situation of labourers working in the coal mines of Meghalaya, a state in the north eastern region of India.

India is a land rich in mineral resources. The black diamond – coal is found in abundance in many regions across India. “India is a developing country today. However, few centuries ago, it was nicknamed as ‘Sone ki chidiya’. It had everything including agriculture, minerals, nature, intellect and beauty”¹

In the long period of its history, this picture of India as an affluent place changed and subsequent invasions and foreign rule led to gradual depletion of India’s wealth.

After India gained independence from the British rule it had to build itself from scratch and one of the crucial ways to do this was to strengthen the core or basic industries. This necessitated and increased the demand for mining of coal and other metals. The five year plans prioritized in this direction. A huge country like India, required energy in abundance, necessitating the focus on coal mining endeavours. Coal has immense commercial use in India. Maximum utilization of coal has been the focus of different governments, with each coming up with its own plans and policies chalked in the direction of maximum energy production and revenue generation from coal mining exercises.

India is a country of immense diversity and this is most apparent from its multi cultural facet best evident from the different states and regions within it. Even though there is a national policy for coal mining yet region specific scenario speaks about the fact that a national mandate is not followed at the regional level. This is best known from the case of Meghalaya.

¹ <https://thecsrjournal.in/csr-india-a-sone-ki-chidiya/> CSR: India – A ‘Sone Ki Chidiya’ By Hency Thacker August 15, 2018)

Meghalaya has a rich reserve of coal. "The coal reserve in the state is estimated to be about 640 million tonnes but its production has been increasing at a snail's pace because mining is being carried on in an unscientific, unplanned manner."(Giap et.al. 2014: 652). It exports a large amount to neighbouring countries like Bangladesh , as well as to other parts of India. Meghalaya and other states of northeast India have rich deposits of sub-bituminous tertiary coal. It is used for different purposes , as fuel for cement, bricks, tea , fertilizer industries.

The coal reserve in Meghalaya is mainly found in the Lhasi Hills in the areas of Laitryngew, Cherrapunji, Laitduh , Mawbehlarkar, Mawbehlarkar, Mawsynram Rongsakham, Jathang and Mawsngi area, Lumdidom, Langrin, Pynursla- lyngkyrdem, Mawlong- Shella-Ishamati . In Garo Hills it is found in West Darranggiri, Siju, Pendengru-Balphakram areas. In Jaintia Hills, it is found in Bapung, Lakadong, Umlatdoh, Sutnga, Jarain, Musiang Lamare, Loksi ²

Coal Mining in Meghalaya: A Threat to Life

Coal mining in Meghalaya is done in an unscientific, unregulated way leading to the destruction of the natural environment as well as harm to those working in this enterprise. This type of coal mining is known as Rat hole mining, as it involves extracting coal from holes as small as burrows made by rats. Rat-hole mining in Meghalaya is primarily controlled by persons as private enterprise and does not come precisely under the control of the Government. Due to the lack of State control, this type of mining has continued as per the most unsystematic , unscientific and illegal processes.

This type of mining is considered illegal because the very act of mining , the post mining operations as well as the up keep of the mined areas – all of these flout the established norms which come with ensuring mining exercise as one which prioritises safety and minimises the risk of loss of life. Rat-hole mining involves an erroneous method of extracting coal. It entails the following steps – the ground is cleared of vegetation; small pits /holes are dug to reach the level of the coal. *“As the name suggests, these are crudely built, narrow holes, hand-dug from the surface directly to the coal reserve underground. These holes can be as small as two feet in height: workers crawl through them, chipping away coal by hand, day and night. Those operating these mines have found the perfect workers like children. Employment in the mines represents one of the worst forms of child labor. Despite a national ban, children work in rat hole coal mines in the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya state for 12 hour shifts underground in flip-flops and jeans (AFP, Feb. 21, 2013). A sustained media campaign led the National Green Tribunal to pass a directive in April 2014 completely banning rat hole mining in the state of Meghalaya, but the state is petitioning the national government to permit and recognize informal mining,*

²(Source: neidatabank@hub.nic.in)http://

www.moef.nic.in/sites/default/files/SoE%20report%20of%20Meghalaya_0.pdf)

with improved safety measures (National Green Tribunal, April, 2014). A study estimated 70,000 children work in these mines, most of whom were illegally trafficked from the neighboring countries of Bangladesh and Nepal. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights has confirmed these dangerous conditions. A few years ago, local newspapers reported the discovery of skeletons in the mines, believed to be of child workers. No inquiry was conducted. According to a local NGO, children get trapped and die there, but are not recovered due to lack of means. They also are not reported due to their status as illegal migrants (Impulse NGO Network).

Rat hole mining is done with hands and with traditional equipments. The labourers are not equipped with the most basic and essential requirements like gloves, shoes, head torch, helmet that are crucial for protection. Due to lack of the minimal security measures, labourers meet with frequent accidents leading to limb loss. Mine deaths are common. The labourer has to enter the slippery and fragile pits and extract coal through the dark tunnels. Weak wooden hand rails barely offer support to the labourers in going up and down the mine. The ordeal becomes all the more difficult to deal with when the rains come in. Meghalaya is a state which witnesses heavy precipitation. The wettest places in the world – Cherrapunjee and Mawsynram are in Meghalaya. Mine accidents increase during rainy season. Mines very often cave in leading to trapping and death of labourers working inside these. Make shift wooden pillars are erected to prevent the caving in of the mines, but these fail to prevent the same. Working for long hours at stretch inside the narrow mines also leads to asphyxiation.

Rat hole mining has a long history in Meghalaya. It was in the nineteenth century that coal in Meghalaya started to be extracted for commercial enterprises. The coal reserves were in small deposits and located as isolated pockets. This made carrying out scientific mining as an organized sector look like an impractical possibility. The indigeneous people – the Khasi and Jaintia who had been extracting coal for personal use since the long past were allowed to carry out coal mining as a cottage industry. In due course of time, the tribal miners accepted coal mining as one of their customary rights. (Directorate of Mineral Resource, 1992; cited in Sarma 2005:2).

In Meghalaya, coal mining is completely in the hands of private individuals, the indigenous tribes - mainly Khasi, Jaintia and Garo. Administration of Meghalaya comes under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution of India. This Schedule grants major autonomy to the traditional institutions of these tribes. These local people consider themselves to be the traditional and sole masters of the land and its resources in Meghalaya. Thus, they are out of the jurisdiction of the State Government as far as their land rights are concerned. Their customary laws say the same. Hence they continued with rat hole mining as their prerogative.

Coal mining in Meghalaya has been continuing without any Environment Clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forest or without availing mining lease from concerned authority (Mohrmen 2014).

This has led to massive destruction of plants and water bodies with the water become highly acidic and polluted due the mine waste.

Labourers are “outsiders”

As stated earlier the labourers working in the coal mines hail from neighbouring areas of Nepal, Bangladesh, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand etc. Abject poverty pulls these migrants to come to Meghalaya and work in the rat holes. Ethnographic studies (Upadhyay and Ranjan 2014, 2016, 2017) on the Nepalese migrant workers in the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, inform about the trauma the migrants have to go through not only in the coal mines but also when they become victims of harassment by the border police when they cross the India-Nepal open border.

Conscientious citizens have time and again raised the issue of rat hole mining demanding its ban. The All Dimasa Students Union and the Dimasa Hasao District Committee took a major initiative to check this menace by approaching the National Green Tribunal. Rat hole mining was finally banned in 2014. However, speculations are rife about rat hole still continuing in the interiors of Meghalaya and different stake holders are hands-in-glove in this exercise.

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