

Public Sector Unit: the Tacit Dimensions

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Abstract

This paper throws light on some burning issues of human resource in coal mining sector in contemporary West Bengal. Expansion of coal mining to a large scale is required and it presents enormous challenges not only in ensuring safe and efficient resource extraction techniques, pollution control and roadway / railway infrastructure development, but most importantly making the coal industry responsive to emerging social issues related to coalmining. Enormous challenges in this regard include transparent and accountable community consultation, involvement and participatory development, responsible resettlement and rehabilitation of coalmine-affected populations, and reassessment of numerous Government regulations, policies and legal mechanism relating to land acquisition and mine operations. Beside land acquisition factor entire coal mining sector is now facing some problems related to internal human resource management. This paper aims to focus particularly on some underlying issues relating to human resource on one side and society's reaction against land acquisition on the other.

Keywords: exploitation; dilemma; displacement; fundamental rights; human rights; indebtedness; social justice.

Introduction

The aim of this research paper is to present a selective introduction to key concerns in the work and employment conditions in Coal India Ltd. It unfolds theoretical perspectives, comparative, and historical to bear on understanding contemporary transformations of occupation and employment in the 'new economy', with particular emphasis on the Eastern Coalfields Ltd. where social organization and technological content have varied widely across time, space, and industrial sector¹. Employment or paid work, by contrast, is essentially a social construction, whose boundaries in relation to other types of activity like household labor, leisure, superannuation, or unemployment are institutionally and culturally defined. In India like other social parameters, employment is also a social and legal category, which carries with it distinctive rights and obligations (at least for certain sections of the workforce), such as protection from arbitrary removal from office, subordination to administrative authority, procedures for collective representation, and entitlements to benefits like paid leave, pensions, and medical care². Both the boundaries of employment and the position associated with it are thus historically contingent constructs which differ significantly from one public sector units to another, and are currently being renegotiated in response to a multiplicity of pressures, from globalization and technological innovation to the expansion of the service sector, demographic trends, and changing household/family structures³.

It is very perplexing when PSU employees could neither perform the job easily nor they could remain in the job due to permanent indebtedness. Dilemma is a circumstance in which one must choose between two alternatives, it's a situation in which none of the alternatives offers escape. In vast area of Eastern Coalfield Ltd. major number of collieries is situated under this subsidiary of Coal India Ltd. The scenario regarding indebtedness seems to be same in all these coal belts. This disease has grabbed semi skilled and unskilled workers; however Clerical staffs have not been spared. A sizeable number of employees belong to SC (Schedule Caste) and ST (Schedule Tribe) category. Due to multiplicity of reasons many workers take loan from various sources (other than legal institution) with a high rate of interest, which may be 5 to 6 percent per month, means 60 to 72 percent per annum. Many moneylenders become prepared with their purse to trap the victims and the victims fall easy prey in their net. The problem begins with difficulty to repay the installment to the concerned authority and subsequent threatening of moneylenders. With limited

income neither workers become able to pay money easily nor can they maintain their family happily.

The victims cry out for getting out from the crisis but their voices remain unheard and suppressed in the midst of affluent coal workers - the affluence which has been given birth at the cost of the blood of these bereaved. No social justice is there to attain to their crisis. No fundamental rights of the constitution come forward to their rescue. The victims sink in the darkness unfathomed. The workers have right to perform their duty with dignity and prestige and they have also right to look after their family satisfactorily. The right to food and water, housing, which includes resettlement and rehabilitation, access to education, access to provisions of health and healthcare, right to work, and access to information and the right to communication all these are form of social justice.

Another serious problem is up-rooting of people for the industrial expansion. This is becoming very serious issue for the policy maker day by day. Dislocation or up-root of settled people is widespread as well as hanging crisis in any coalmining area and obviously treated as an age-old setback of coalmining areas like Raniganj. North Searsole Colliery also faces all related issues due to coalmining activities connecting ecological as well as socio-economic degradation and resettlement of adjacent people. Relocation is a term used to explain the movement of persons or mass from one place to other, although the word can refer to intentional or unintentional human migration, it is frequently an euphemism for forced resettlement due to a few such activities. The rising demand for energy requires an extension and speeding up of coalmine exploration, production and processing in India. A huge ongoing 'social-challenge' for the coalmining industry is the difficulty of coalmining induced displacement and relocation in the present study area. Eastern Coalfields Limited (ECL) is taking special concern to provide openhanded package of compensation to persons affected by projects. But the complicatedness lies in the actuality that not only do the inhabitants lose their residence, but they are also deprived of the property and natural wealth that comprised their economic survival base. The natural resources are nonformal sources of earnings which are not often documented or recognized, and hence hardly ever compensated for. So, lots of environmental and social problems are generated due to such activities deliberately or unintentionally in coalmining areas. Other apprehensions due to coalmining-induced dislocation and movement are some of the socioeconomic, demographic and cultural complexities together with the changes in populace dynamics, physical condition impacts, economic disparity, addictions, and disappointment. All these are affecting not only financial, but moral, socio-cultural degradation, which are restructuring the prevailing lifestyle in holistic mode. Consequently, dislocation of rural communities along with religious, their long standing, cultural activities, economic and societal is inevitable. When coalmining occurs in property held traditionally by aboriginal community, mining activity gives rise to issue of social justice. Dislocation has a discouraging influence on societal bonds and psycho-cultural roots of the whole society, and leads to social and economic problems. The leaseholds for the under-ground coalmines are obtained from the landlords who grant coalmining authority the right for under-ground coal mining. The land for residences, dwellings and the connected activities are procured bit by bit from several sources while large segment of the surface land right remained under the control of cultivators and landlords. Under-ground coalmining in these vicinities is conducted with full liability of the surface safety by the authorities who normally maintain pillars as the natural support to the surface features. Escalating demand for opencast coalmining process requires huge land. These lands sometime are acquired at the cost of cultivable land. Coal mining has direct impact over agriculture in the study region and residual impacts of mining bring far reaching consequences⁴.

Objectives of study

Present study is an attempt to know the various causes of indebtedness among the employees of North Searsole Colliery. It is also intended to know the intrinsic factors motivating the workers for loan, which may be beyond the capacity to repay with high rate of interest and to know the socio-economic background of workers of this colliery. This study is to reveal those disguised people who are giving loan illegally with high interest rate on day light in front of administration. An attempt has also been made to know the process of modus operandi of moneylenders and relationship between giver and taker. One of the objectives is also to know the role of welfare/personnel department in understanding this problem.

Area of study

The area of this study is North Searsole Colliery. It is situated in famous Raniganj coalfield in West Bengal, India and 9 km from Raniganj Railway station towards Grand Trunk road. It is one of the best collieries in ECL for production and good quality of coal. This colliery has manpower of 1061. Most workers belong to surrounding places and majority stay at colliery quarters. This colliery has opencast mining as well as underground mining. Here Public Sector Unit (PSU) stands for ECL.

Methods of study

This research paper is mainly based on primary data, which has been collected from 100 samples on the basis of interview schedule. Purposive sampling was used to choose the sample. All the workers are semi skilled or unskilled. An interview has also been taken from personnel officer of this colliery. Through participant observation with workers few data is collected. However secondary sources are also used for data collection.

Various issues of indebtedness in Coal India

In North Searsole Colliery all workers are involved in different job as per their skill and eligibility. Present context of study is about the semiskilled and unskilled workers. During study particularly it is revealed that those who have taken loan from any individual or private firm their condition is more miserable than those taken from legal sources. Most of the workers who have taken loan from any individual moneylender are taken in confidence. They are made to convince about reasonability of interest rate, which may vary person to person. Loan from moneylender is primary concern and focal point in the present study. The rate of interest is 5 to 6 percent per month, which means 60 to 72 percent per year. Due to illiteracy and inadequate knowledge these section of workers become soft victim of moneylenders. Most of the moneylenders do not belong to the colliery but they operate outside from the colliery. Their operation is clandestine their targets are fixed. They take pay slips, Identity card, PF / Pension books, Bank passbooks etc as mortgage before giving loan to anybody. Without these statutory documents nobody can draw their salary. They also obtain written agreement on stamp paper from the worker. During salary days workers are asked to pay initially the interest of loaned money. Gradually, it has been observed that the principle with the rate of interest exceeds the worker's salary. Few workers have multiple loans from several places. Paying off the interest every month to moneylenders has become unmanageable to them. Some of the workers have taken more than one loan only to avoid inconvenience from the first moneylender. This way they get trapped in the vicious cycle of loan interest⁵.

Main causes for loan were marriage of family members, or for treatment of serious disease. But some workers regularly consume alcohol, drugs and have gambling habit. Those who have taken to fulfill situational exigencies seem to be more painful than the latter category. They have a strong sense of social prestige and fame. Moneylenders reach to them every month during salary. They take major part of worker's salary. If due to any reason workers fail to pay interest they are often threatened or even physically assaulted. During interview it was felt that workers were very much scared. On the way from home to the colliery either moneylender himself or his appointed person gives reminder to his prey. This happened to every person who obtained loan. This situation creates two fold problems. Neither the workers are free to perform their duty nor can they sit at home doing nothing. If they come to work places moneylenders harass them, if they sit at home the fear of termination from the job for unauthorized absence from duty drives them to restlessness. This is real dilemma. It becomes very difficult to choose either option.

Impact of taking loan can be identified with economical aspect in specific and social in general. The workers become less interested to work or they get gradually alienated from the work, from society and ultimately from themselves. This may be the real case of Marxian notion of alienation. In this way colliery's production is adversely affected on the one hand and social life of workers become hell on the other. Some time they become a psychotic patient. The high rate of absenteeism is observed among these category workers and this lead them to get unexpected charge sheet and termination from service subsequently. From the first hand experiences about the workers it has been observed that they can't lead a general smooth social life as others do. Their family life becomes worse. Their children are affected with parent's disturbance. Sometimes such

workers resort to fasting for want of money and take food only once in a day. This is strange that a public sector service holder can't have stomach full food twice in a day far to speak about nutrition level. Past experiences revealed that some workers had committed suicide. Apparently it seems that the workers are responsible for their own misfortune. They have chosen their own destiny. We all would agree that partially the workers are responsible for their misery. But what's about those who are openly borrowing money with high rate of interest? It is not only inhuman but a naked violation of human rights. Money lenders are operating openly, they don't hesitate to use unfair means to get back their money. Neither management plays a role to prevent them nor does civil administration think seriously on this matter. We can't deny the role of high profile racket monitoring behind the small moneylender. Throughout the colliery this loan giving business with high interest rate is on the increase. If this business could not be stopped in near future there might be a serious IR problem in the coal mining industry. Not only the worker's ignorance is responsible for this dilemma but also whole civil society is also responsible for this sort of problem⁶.

Realizing their problem the workers take loan generally from legal authority such as Bank, co-operatives and PF. But low literate and illiterate workers often don't want to go through bureaucratic and administrative system to get a loan. So the easiest and fastest way to fulfill the situational financial exigency they go to moneylender. Here moneylender having nuisance value has a crucial role to misguide and often mislead such innocent workers. Moneylender make the workers understood that they have to pay only 5 to 6 percent interests. Which may seems to be lower than the nationalized bank also. They tend to confuse per month interest rate with per annum. But the moneylenders resort to jugglery of calculation of percentage of interest. Here neither worker has to pay a processing charge nor has to mortgage lots of documents. So they become easy victims. Generally these workers get a salary of about Rs.10, 000 per month. In this salary if they pay 60 to 72 percent per annum interest it is really difficult to maintain the normal family life, though it all depends on the amount of the loan. So every month workers have to pay the interest irrespective of the constraints. They may remain in empty stomach but interest should reach moneylender. The essential documents concerning payment have already been mortgaged to secure constant inflow of interest. In many cases borrowers have failed to pay some installments.

Thus the loaned amount gets multiplied for compound rate of interest. During the time of superannuation a huge amount of money from the borrowers is grabbed from his superannuation benefit like Provident fund, gratuity etc. As per the version of the management the gratuity cheque handed over to workers is ultimately collected by the moneylender well before it goes to concerned Bank for encashment. The amount in many cases is large. In some cases the workers don't turn up to collect their gratuity cheque because by the superannuation time the borrowed principle money with interest exceeds the gratuity amount. As information supplied by the authority such superannuated persons whose native place is far from colliery left the colliery without any information.

The role of local political party is not satisfactory in this regard. The trade union leaders are also silent. They were asked about this burning problem of workers but failed to answer logically. Leaders replied passively to avoid contradictions. They said that this was worker's personal matter and didn't fall into their jurisdiction. On the other hand the concerned officer has taken it as a serious IR problem. On their level they are making the workers aware about the far reaching consequences. Management has done some sincere effort to solve this problem between workers and moneylenders unofficially. In North Searsole Colliery this problem is getting momentum day by day. Due to high rate of absenteeism the management now awake from long sleep.

Social justice for these workers is like a myth⁷. Both the work place and home become unbearable for them. Neither they could remain silent nor could they cry. It is a paradox in which the workers become the worse victim of permanent indebtedness. Ultimately workers loose the right to work with dignity and right to look after the family freely⁸. Here one unwritten constitution works where no social justice functions according to the provision of law and the writ of the moneylenders runs here. An individual become puppet of another individual. It is said that the social justice is the guardian and protector of the interest of the socially handicapped, disable, poor, downtrodden and deprived section of people. The workers are in dilemma. Dilemma doesn't only exist outside or externally as has already been mentioned but dilemma resides within also. One-side workers feel inferiority complex within themselves, on the other side they find no place to redress their grievances. Taking loan or lending money on interest is not the violation of social

justice. But social justice is violated when any one takes the advantage of weakness of another. When normal life is threatened by unwanted social elements, when life becomes burden, then the social justice seems to be a futility. From interaction one person revealed that he couldn't die unlamented, because if he remains alive, moneylender will not spare him to live peacefully under any circumstances. If he dies the family has to bear the burden of loan⁹.

Thus the darkness of coal mining industry remains enveloped by dark. Everybody knows but no initiatives have yet been taken to eradicate this problem⁸. The problem in context is dynamic and multi-casual. From the worker's side awareness is required and from the administration side a vigorous proactive role should be initiated to prohibit such immoral and inhuman business. Colliery authority should simplify the loan sanction process and provide adequate amount of loan to meet up the urgent demands of its workers. The cases of those unfortunate drugs addicted and money abuser should be handled with sensitivity and sympathy. The help of NGO's may be sought to bring about a solution to the burning problem¹⁰.

In Eastern Coalfields Ltd we can comprehend the present aspect of industrial relation adopted by the employer's end. These are promoting and developing amiable labour-management relations. They are enhancing the economic condition of the employees by improving salary, benefits and by helping the employees in developing sound financial plan and regulating the production by diminishing industrial conflicts through legal control. The administration has given endeavor to socialize the industries by providing an opportunities to the personnel to have a say in the administration and decision-making. The executive is also keen to improve upon workers skill with a view to solve their problems through mutual negotiations and consultation thereby sustaining industrial democracy¹¹.

In West Bengal employers' associations are desirous of associating themselves with different administrative agencies taking into consideration the general, social, public and economic issues affecting employers and workers relations. In West Bengal, Eastern Coal Fields Ltd has taken part in developing many rural projects in the surrounding villages such as community development in the form of constructing community well, clubs, hospitals, schools, rural roads and play grounds through CSR fund¹². The ECL administration has extended amenities of electrification in many villages. A good percentage of coal mines workers reside in the surrounding villages of the mines who continuously share their views with the masses of coal mining society. All these happened for very good industrial relation.

Land degradation and consequent land loss is the unique type of environmental effect associated with mining and is generally not encountered in this scale in any other industrial activity¹³. Opencast mining in scale and in intensity creates most severe form of land degradation and therefore, coalfield communities all over the region hold strong views against open casting as mining operations. In India the coalfield community's resistance towards land acquisition for an opencast project has delayed the starting of many projects. Such resistance has been most intense in the state of west Bengal¹⁴. A number of opencast projects in west Bengal including '*Sonepur Bazari*' opencast project is considerably delayed because of the local citizens' resistance toward the land acquisition. The reason of such resistance from coalfield community being most intense in West Bengal may be understood from a perusal of the history of Indian coal mining itself¹⁵. The industry and the government should keep this possibility in mind and should devise schemes to fulfill local aspirations.

It is a difficult task to estimate the number of farmers and agricultural workers displaced or affected due to land loss and land degradation. From the relevant data it is revealed that in *Satgram* area alone the number of cultivators decreased from 4103 in 2000 to 1753 in 2010, which means a decrease in cultivators of 2350 in a span of 10 years¹⁶. It may be noted that in *Asansol*, *Salanpur* and *Katras* development blocks (all located in coalmining area) there have been a decrease in number of persons employed in agriculture by approximately 3300, 3500 and 2600 respectively over a period of ten years (2000-2010) there has been increase in agricultural employment in non mining areas. In actual terms, it is not that a particular group of agricultural labours become completely redundant, but the partial loss of occupation pervades in the agricultural labour class¹⁷.

Conclusion

Indebtedness is a social stigma. It neither allows people to live peacefully nor does allow dying peacefully. The practice of loan in North Searsole Colliery is not only illegal but also inhuman. Providing loan with high interest rate is a manifestation of cruel capitalistic culture. It's exploitation against humanity. Few clever persons are taking advantages of the simplicity and weakness of workers. Most of the workers who have taken loan from moneylenders belong to SC and ST section. They are lagging behind on the social ladder. Gradually the borrowers get into the trap of the moneylenders. However those fortunate who could manage to pay off their loan completely could not find a place in the process of further sustainable social development. They couldn't socially be rehabilitated. Those who are still in the service are limping with the burden of interest and are drifting in the darkness. Scared, physically assaulted and mentally humiliated sections seem to have no bright future. Social justice appears to be making a mockery with the fate of these unfortunates. However no formal steps have been taken so far by the competent authority to stop this malpractice going on inside the colliery. Few formal complaints have been recorded but due to invisible reasons concrete action to stop this business not yet been taken.

Another important issue is dealt with importance regarding mining induced displacement. Mining has degraded the land not only by denuding it of its forest cover, and choking up the natural drainage lines, but has also destroyed the agricultural potential of this region. The human dimensions of these physical impacts have been marginalization of the poor tribal and scheduled caste groups from the mainstream, formal economy, displacement of peasantry, the growth of small scale, informal industries, and illegal coal mining under local initiative. A degraded environment has fore closed alternative employment opportunities especially in the forestry and agricultural sector, leading the poor people to unlawful activities. These two bifocal problems should be taken seriously otherwise in near future insurgency may breakdown from the employee side from inside Coal India and outbreak by the local people may happen.

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