

VOICES FROM THE GROUND

A TRAVELOGUE

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RESOURCES INSTITUTE
Creating Innovative Solutions for a Sustainable Future



When insights from field level interaction and local experiences are put together, it enormously influences the mindsets and opens newer doors for further research and concerted action. Evidences gathered always create an opportunity to find answers to complex issues aimed at transforming lives on the ground and building a sustainable ecosystem.

Dr Vibha Dhawan
Director General, TERI

Lens that Focuses on People First

The Travelogue written on the basis of our journey across the eastern coal belt regions of Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh, aptly captures the real-life stories of the stakeholders dependent on coal economy. The narration in this travelogue portrays the ground level challenges and concerns.

Such qualitative facets of the coal producing geographies throw light on life, livelihood and other socioeconomic dimensions. Narratives emerging from such evidence speak volumes of coal dependence, which may provide planners and researcher with leads to think ahead.

We are happy to put together stories curated out of field interaction in the coal belt and I believe this would generate sufficient interest and curiosity among different stakeholders. I would like to invite one and all to glance through this document and immerse into the essence of the narrative for a deeper reflection.

A K Saxena

Senior Fellow and Senior Director
TERI

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Background

The eastern coal belt, particularly the states of Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, are endowed with rich minerals and natural resources as well as heritage, culture, and indigenous knowledge. TERI has also initiated various projects in this particular subject in the past making it a well-acquainted topic to carry out further research. Working on the Just Transition project supported by MacArthur Foundation has provided an opportunity to take a deeper dive into the coal sector and comprehend the complexities involved in the coal value chain which may provide valuable insights into the futuristic vision as we think beyond coal. This project provided an opportunity to travel through the coal producing geographies and get a sense of the ground. The field visits and interaction with some stakeholders in the coal value chain throws light on the overall life of local people on the ground in the wake of closure or reduced mining. This on-ground interaction with the local residents enabled us to ascertain their overall preparedness towards a transition from coal. Such dialogue also encourages us to delve into the discourse of a planned closure of coal mining in an inclusive way to ensure the resilience of communities in and around the coal mining belt. As one travels through the coal belt in these



SUCH DIALOGUE ALSO ENCOURAGES US TO DELVE INTO THE DISCOURSE OF A PLANNED CLOSURE OF COAL MINING IN AN INCLUSIVE WAY TO ENSURE THE RESILIENCE OF COMMUNITIES IN AND AROUND THE COAL MINING BELT.

states, the following points surface in the mind---whether prosperity from coal is visible? Locals are often drawn into jobs in the coal sector as the wages are higher, This has taken youth away from the agricultural fields which require investment and hard work and often return is not high. Ironically, higher wages earned in coal sector has not resulted into visible improvement in living condition.

Further, increasingly women are seen managing agricultural fields and engaged in cropping which has become an additional burden for them. However, this also opens up another window of opportunity to train women on sustainable agricultural practices for higher return, food and nutritional security. Eventually, at a macro or sub-national level, this may help in enhancing the share of agriculture sector in the overall State economy. This travelogue is a recollection of the authors' experience and conversations with various stakeholders in the coal belt. It attempts to capture local voices, adversities, and perceptions and present these insights in the form of anecdotes.

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1. Local voices from the coal belt

The varied views and anecdotes captured here basis interaction with various stakeholders open up the space for further deliberation and collective planning to adapt to the changing technological, Socio-economic, environmental demands and mitigate future risks.

1.1 Old Contractor's diary

Back in 1996, Fagu Chaudhury used to work as a contractor for Central Coalfields Limited (CCL) - Rajrappa Project in Ramgarh district, Jharkhand and engaged local youth as labourers primarily for loading coal. He shared how the the locals were solely dependent on coal which was the only available avenue to make quick money as opposed to rain-fed agriculture. Even 3–4 years ago trucks lining up around colliery belts was a common sight and at least 1500 labourers could be seen busy loading coal. This has since become an occasional affair and the Kanta Ghar, once a busy spot, looks deserted today owing to mine closure and / or relatively lesser mining.

1.2 Dhyanesh, the contract labourer

Dhyanesh used to be a labour contractor earning Rs.2000-4000 per week but 3 years ago, he stopped doing this job and started farming



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on his agricultural land. Earlier there used to be 56 operational mines under CCL in Ramgarh district in Jharkhand. 56 mines and all except three, have closed down with the Karma Projects scheduled for closure in the next five years.

1.3 The lookout for alternatives

Md. Hakim Ansari remarked that, "Labour contracting was a lucrative option earlier". He used to make good money when he was engaged as a labour contractor in the CCL coal mining and used to make labour payments to the tune of Rs.1 lakh every month but since 2016 business is down. As coal-related business opportunities have declined with time, he was forced to shift to an alternative means of livelihood in an environment where people hardly thought beyond coal. He has since started ferrying school children and earns about Rs.10,000 a month now. Like many, Hakim also leased out his agricultural land for farming and the return he gets is sufficient to address his family's food security needs.

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Observations

With the closure and abandonment of several projects the labour force shifted to agricultural occupations, and those who have less/ no land, migrated to cities in search of jobs. The high levels of unemployment and lack of alternative sources of income (apart from coal) deteriorated the socio-economic fabric of the region as well. With increased incidence of looting on roadways and chain snatching, sense of insecurity is high which is why the revival of the local economy is a necessity. Prevalent local practices such as saal plate ('Dona pattal') making, oil extraction from forest produce (mahua seeds, karach, kusum), forming collectives of kendu patta collection and bidi making and establishing a supply chain etc. need to be promoted. Inclusive planning would become key to reducing the negative effects of mining on people's lives.





2. Local youth face bleak prospects

The residents of Bhuchundi in CCL mining area in Ramgarh district which has 3000 households, lost a lot of land due to coal mining. While initially they had a chance to earn wages regularly from coal by loading it onto trucks, with a decline in mining their life and livelihood is getting impacted which is evident from the fact that many local youth migrate to nearby cities in search of wage earning opportunities. The local residents perceive that the situation would worsen further with coal phase-out and systematic planning is imperative for a just transition.

The Ansari community, that lives in this village, forms a dominant segment of the population. They own land and are relatively enterprising and educated as well. Interaction with a few youngsters (Sajid Ansari, Azadi Ansari & Tawkir Ansari who were between 24–28 years of age revealed that as many as 30 of their peers (either 12th passed or graduates) have migrated to other locations in search of jobs. On an average every household lost about 2–4 acres of land to CCL for mining activities and during the last 3–4 years, opportunities for coal loading have become scarce and contracts for labour have declined.

Observations

Stitching and tailoring is a traditional skill that enables several women in the Ansari community to earn some money. Proper market linkage and advanced skilling would create a sustainable supply chain and more opportunities.

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3. Of food and fuel

3.1 Running an eatery – no more a gainful idea

Nanku Mahto has been running a small dhaba (Rakesh Hotel) for years in Bhuchundi village in the CCL mining in Ramgarh district (Jharkhand) catering to contractors, loaders, truckers, regular or contractual employees of CCL. He laments how things have changed over the last 4 years. Earlier, around 500 trucks used to remain parked there regularly and now several roadside dhabas closed showing how mine closure affects those indirectly dependent on coal mining for a living and resulting in job and business losses. Earlier, Nanku could easily earn more than `10,000 per month but his income has reduced by almost half.

3.2 Residual in vessels at a desolate food joint—A struggle for survival

Jhala Devi along with her husband runs a small dhaba but shared how their earnings have declined due to reduction in coal loading and fewer trucks plying these days. Earlier her earnings used to range between `700–800 a day but now it has declined to about `100–150/day. Each month they procure 30 Kg. of rice out of which about 5

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Kg. are used for their family's consumption and the rest is used in the dhaba to run the business. The rate per plate meal is Rs.25 and selling these meals are their their main source of income.

3.3 Pan shop still runs!

Pramod Bhattacharya, popularly known as Khoka, runs his pan shop in the mining area. Earlier, he used to earn Rs.500 in a day and now it has reduced to about Rs.150 a day—a sharp decline owing to decreased coal loading and fewer footfalls at his shop. In spite of, the closure of old mines or reduced mining resulted in lower economic activity in the area, he still hopes that the new mining projects that CCL intends to start may again create opportunities for the locals. He has almost half acre agricultural land that he has leased out for paddy, potato, vegetable, and corn cultivation and he manages to get by with the share he gets from the land.

Observations

The primary cooking fuel used in these regions remains coal as it is both easily available and cheap. Interestingly, despite the government's emphasis on universal access to cleaner fuel, the attraction to coal has not gone away yet and the adoption of cleaner options like cylinder gas still has not gained traction in the poorer segments of the coal belt. The local dhabas and eateries continue burning coal. At the same time, these dhaba owners complain of lesser footfall due to mine closure and the roadside shade behind the dhaba where truckers and loaders used to rest and assemble has taken on a deserted and dilapidated look. Hence the newer generation of these families prefers moving to Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and other cities like Mumbai and Hyderabad in search of jobs in turn creating ghost towns or villages run entirely by the women of the households. An attempt at creation of sustainable and viable alternative income choices would do well in retaining this migrating crowd.

DESPITE THE GOVERNMENT'S EMPHASIS ON UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO CLEANER FUEL, THE ATTRACTION TO COAL HAS NOT GONE AWAY YET AND THE ADOPTION OF CLEANER OPTIONS LIKE CYLINDER GAS STILL HAS NOT GAINED TRACTION IN THE POORER SEGMENTS OF THE COAL BELT.



4. Development at what cost and for whom?

Stopping Baleshwar for a quick chat is not easy. He avoids eye contact and makes his best attempt to scurry through as the fear of cops is paramount. People like Baleshwar who lie at the bottom of the pyramid are the most impacted as the following conversation would reveal.

His day usually starts at 3am, when he loads about 200 kgs of coal (sacks of 40kgs each) onto his cycle and pedals for miles to reach his destination in order to sell these and earn a living. He covers approximately 30kms every day, hardly resting in between for the fear of cops. If caught, the only way out is to leave the cycle and run as the fine they would have to pay could turn out to be more than what they can earn in a day. He's been doing this back-breaking work since a young age now earning about Rs.10,000-12,000 a month. He procures the coal for ~Rs.500 and sells it at ~Rs.1000.

He lacks any education or scalable skills, is landless and also a bit hesitant to learn new skills as he feels it is a bit late in the day for



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him. He has little hope of a different reality. Looking into the abyss he remarks that maybe the youth may benefit from up-skilling. At just 35yrs of age, the laborious task makes him feel old.

Observations

Pilferage of coal is rampant in local mining areas and it benefits several segments especially the poorest of the lot. Having no skills or proper source of income, they find it easy to collect coal and sell it. This coal in fact feeds into several smaller coal dependent ancillary industries and perpetuates the vicious cycle. But in the process, many lose their childhood doing such laborious work which even causes postural complexities and impacts their overall growth. The coal stolen from the mines site is also burnt before it reaches the market. Such burning of raw coal is a regular practice as it helps remove volatile organic matter and also minimises fumes. In fact, burnt coal also sells at a higher rate.

However, in the process of burning the coal, these poor people also end up inhaling the harmful fumes which has a grave effect on their lives. Having limited knowledge about the harmful effects of such inhalation as well as having limited resources, results in them ignoring these health risks.

An entire inter-dependent chain is created in which the same coal is supplied to traders, sweet shops, individual consumers, and small ancillary industries that extensively use coal. The life of these cycle bearers carrying 200 Kg. of coal day in and day out means that their existence is hand-to-mouth as they struggle for survival and remain trapped in a chronic poverty cycle.

With no fixed source of income, poor working conditions, threat to life and bare wages, the plight of these people make us wonder if coal really is 'black gold'. Will it manifest any social capital or social protection for them to restore their dignity and voice? Also given this reality, how does one design an inclusive process to humanise the coal ecosystem and minimize vulnerability?

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5. Conservative thought that supports status quo

The general belief among these local entrepreneurs from MSME sector is that it is difficult to move away from fossil fuels and the transition to cleaner energy would take generations. They voiced their fear that the segments that are dependent on coal today will be deprived if we move away from coal. However, a few prominent MSME sector entrepreneurs highlighted the following pre-requisites for any transition from coal:

- Mindset change
- Political will
- Local skill building
- Participatory development planning

Observations

The MSME sector seems apprehensive about switching to non-coal based economy and hence justify the status quo in a way that suits their purpose. However, there is a common understanding on the need for alternative energy sources that meet the demand of businesses/ industries and consumers. The four pre-requisites mentioned by several of these entrepreneurs highlight the mammoth task at hand. To combine local skill building with political goals and also influence a mindset change in people – all of these simultaneously is a big ask. But we need to start somewhere.

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6. Involuntary displacement agonizing

A resident of a CCL Resettled Area in Jharkhand shared his ordeal without revealing his identity. In 2012–13, 2 acres of his land were acquired by CCL for Rs.3.60 lakh plus compensation based on house type (Rs.1800/sq ft. for pucca and Rs.700/sq ft. for kuccha houses). His son got a job in the company but his uncle who lived next door did not receive any compensation as he owned little less than 2 acres of land. In fact, out of the 125 households resettled in that area, 10–15 residents or their siblings/adult members did not get any jobs as they possessed less land.

Landowners and their relatives normally pool their land for cultivation as well as to lease it out for cultivation and the subsequent yield or income gets shared. This resulted in the resettlement process and compensation criteria benefitting some but depriving many others.



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Experiences of involuntary displacement, painful losses, and relocation to a new area is a common thread bringing together many who get affected due to large projects such as mining or dam construction. Although some money is received as compensation, people are subjected to involuntary displacement that destabilizes the old social fabric and the sense of attachment to the homestead land and community resources. There is an emotional value of staying in one's ancestral location which doesn't get compensated by staying in the resettled area even if it is just a kilometre or two away from the original land. This disillusionment and human suffering seem a common misery for all.

The process is complex, time taking and often the promised benefits remain unfulfilled. It was evident even in this resettled colony when one found that a health centre created but never became operational and recreational facility promised but is still a dream! The resident opined that the people are not united and corruption is rampant which causes more chaos and misery for the people who are the most vulnerable. Can this involuntary displacement and resettlement process be carried out in an inclusive and participatory way to minimise misery and antagonism? Can industries adopt an alternative mechanism that focuses on people, risks and opportunities to build resilience?



THERE IS AN EMOTIONAL VALUE OF STAYING IN ONE'S ANCESTRAL LOCATION WHICH DOESN'T GET COMPENSATED BY STAYING IN THE RESETTLED AREA EVEN IF IT IS JUST A KILOMETRE OR TWO AWAY FROM THE ORIGINAL LAND.



7. Local NGO perspective:

The thought of transition drives one to think of the immediate impact on life and livelihood, local economy, and the possibilities ahead. Representative of a grassroots agency observed that coal phase out would hit the local people and the labour force hard as they are excessively dependent on coal. Hence, detailed mapping and micro-level livelihood planning are essential. Advocacy with State and industry is crucial. Agriculture and agri-allied activities, adoption of high-value agricultural practice, organic vegetable hub promotion with market linkage (through a tie-up with NABARD), aggregation centre and end to end solution (seeds to market), etc. would be the proposed action points to minimize potential risks in the wake of coal phase-out.

This would address food security challenges and check distressed migration. It would also require assessing skill gaps, local demands, resources and strengthening collective forums e.g. SHGs, FPOs as well as creating a pool of service providers.

Observations

Mobilization of farmers collectives, formation, and strengthening of Farmer Producer Organizations(FPOs) would be crucial in empowering the local populace. Institutional linkages, digital solutions, multi-stakeholder coalition (Government Organizations-NGO-CSR-Technical/Research institute) for effective advisory, disease control, market negotiation, etc., would also be indispensable. Further, existing local or artisanal knowledge and skills needs to be mapped and local products could be marketed around for gainful engagement of the local populace. Systematic documentation of the existing and perceived challenges in the context of coal transition and open multi-stakeholder dialogue on the theme may enable in comprehending the complexity and map opportunities and possible action points.

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8. Blue collared labour economy: Victims of a fragile ecosystem

Only 1–2% contract workers who work within the mines have vocational training as supervisors, mechanics and helpers as well. Wage structure is defined on the basis of skill levels—unskilled, semiskilled, skilled and highly skilled categories (range varies between about Rs.437-724). These grades are revised annually. Skilled workers are employed as operators & drivers and highly skilled work as Supervisors, Coordinator, etc.). Other contractual workers who are unskilled or semi-skilled remain involved in cutting, loading, and dumping.

The coal mines are increasingly seeing an informalisation of labour especially in mines which are expanding as this minimizes the economic burden of the company. It also results in reduced obligation towards the workers and lack of social protection which is worrisome. In the Bhubaneswari project, Odisha production capacity increased from 7 MT in 2013 to 28 MT in 2021. This resulted in the engagement of contractual workers increasing from 1200 workers to 3000 workers. The TERI team visited the Kulda-Garjanbahal OCP, Basundhara (W) extension OCP, Siarmal OCP in Odisha and saw that the contractual



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workers are being engaged in coal extraction, transportation, and other civil work. Generally daily wage ranges around Rs.450 and the rate for agricultural wage is around Rs.350. A contractor engages about 30-40 workers in a month and each contractual worker engages for approximately 1000 to 1200-1500 annual man-days.

Many workers in Talcher area come from distant districts which are 50-60 km away like Keonjhar, Akhmoli (sub division of Angul) as opportunities there seem restricted. Similarly, many are from UP and Bihar who migrated with their families 15–20 years ago in search of a better life in coal belt but they continue to grapple with adversities. Normally in-migrants shift with their families and settle in labour camps near the mining project site or in unauthorized/encroached localities. Interaction revealed that about fifty percent of workers are locals and the rest come from other states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. Some workers live closer to the underground mine in a slum and many commute 10–20 km every day in bicycle to work in these mines.

Many who worked in underground mine or also worked in civil work for long, suffer from tuberculosis, a common health issue. The contractual workers do not get adequate medical benefits and depend



INTERACTION REVEALED THAT ABOUT FIFTY PERCENT OF WORKERS ARE LOCALS AND THE REST COME FROM OTHER STATES LIKE UTTAR PRADESH, BIHAR, JHARKHAND, CHHATTISGARH AND RAJASTHAN.



on the private doctors and neither can their children access school promoted by the coal company.

Interaction with a large group (more than 30) of contractual workers who work in underground mines in Orient area, Brajrjnagar, Odisha was revealing. After the Orient III mines of Mahanadi Coalfields Limited (MCL) closed and operation discontinued, workers shifted to civil related contractual work, or other wage labour work in ancillary industries. Sudden closure did create temporary challenges for the people. There is a strong element of uncertainty in life as contractual work is available only for a limited time period and switching to another contractual opportunity may not create regular income flow for all. It is common for poor wage labourers to sit at home for few months or take up odd wage labour jobs in the agricultural fields or construction site. Few who have little land, grow rice and vegetables for own consumption and few who have additional skills like electrical repairs, find opportunities around and that becomes a supplementary source of income. Padmalochan Singh, from Rampur (Odisha) works in an underground mine, and simultaneously also grows rice and vegetables in 4 acres of land. Discussions with him revealed that he grows rice through traditional methods and sells the surplus rice (25 quintals/year) in the market.

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The contractors take up jobs through tendering and quote lower amount to win the bid. This also impacts opportunities and duration of engagement as contractual workers. Sometimes workers take up work with lesser wage as they do not find other income choices that can fetch equal or more income. Most of them said they hardly have clear idea about CMPF (Coal Mines Provident Fund) deductions. They know certain amount gets deducted but whether it goes to their PF account or not is unknown or they lack clarity. They cited a case of a contractual worker, who worked for 4–5 years and got back his money whereas, in few other cases where the workers died but families are yet to receive any PF benefits accumulated during their lifetime while at work.

Observations

Post coal closure the workers can only depend on agriculture related work or daily wage opportunities. In between contracts also at times one needs to wait for 1-2 months before entering into another contractual agreement. For a poor labourer uncertainty and wage earning or job breaks even for a week makes his life challenging and calls for a greater empathy while planning for a resilient future that can offer decent opportunity even to the poorest of the poor. Diversifying livelihood choices through engaging and collectivizing families and youth groups, skilling, financing and market linkages for supplementary income could be plausible options that may be explored. Technical know-how and adoption of newer and sustainable technologies in the field of agriculture can make a difference especially for the farmers who still have some land and that would be a good way of diversifying livelihood.

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9. The complexities of pension funds

Ishat Bhoi works as a contract labourer under a contractor for civil work and lives about 15 km away from the workplace. He studied up to middle school and his four-member family is entirely dependent on him. With about 2 acres of land, which is his only asset, he utilises it to grow seasonal vegetables. In the coal sector work he earns Rs.270/day. He and his 2 other colleagues who were at work had similar story to share. None of them are aware of any PF deduction and wouldn't ask either out of fear of losing their job. Their contractor, being an LIC agent, has opened a 10-year LIC policy for them and the premium of about Rs.500 gets deducted from their monthly earnings. Many young men from Ishat's village opt for contractual work in the coal sector as they get a bit higher wages compared to agricultural labour and they do not have other alternative livelihood choices around. However, when mines close down they would have no other choice but to depend on agricultural labour work.

Akshay Majhi resident of Telangdihi village, Sundargarh, Odisha studied up to class 12, and recently started working as a driver under a contractor. He receives Rs 10,000/ month after PF deduction. Water supply pipes are seen in his village but there is no water supply. Villagers



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generally dig the sand at the river bank and collect water which they filter with a piece of cloth and the same water is used for drinking and cooking purposes. Many households in his village do not have access to toilet and upon probing further it was revealed that as the land on which they're living has been acquired for coal mine expansion, they did not invest in any new construction there and continue to live while waiting to receive their compensation. When coal mine closes they will have to pick up daily wage opportunities in agricultural field or migrate to locations where opportunities exist.

Rinku, Ajay residents of Jhanspur village, Sundargarh, Odisha come to work on bicycle every day and are engaged in fire extinguishing in the mine area. They studied up to class 2 and earn Rs.5000/month, but don't know about the contractual period clearly. Young men remain caught in their day-to-day struggle. During monsoon they also work in agricultural land. Most of the villagers are engaged in agriculture and agricultural labour work. Again regarding PF they lack clarity and the contractor never briefs them about it. They aspire to learn new skills from vocational training centre of MCL.

Pabitra is a resident of Sumrai village where about 100 households live. He is a gardener and has been working as contractual worker for more than 15 years now. Presently he earns about Rs.8000-9000/month and about Rs.2000/month gets deducted for CMPF (19%) but he had no clarity about PF account and what happens to this money. He used to receive slip regarding PF deduction earlier but now he does not get any such slips. Monthly payment dates are not fixed. Apparently for many who left after completion of their contract, even though their PF money got deducted, they could not claim the money later. He and his family collect Mahua flowers, seeds, Tendu leaves and char (oil seed, sold @ Rs.160/kg). Regular collection of such forest produce is another source of income and they annually earn about Rs.20,000. Kendu leaves are sold to the forest department and they earn between Rs.10-15,000 per annum from just that. Such opportunity creates a cushion for the family and helps them to deal with gloomy days. Flowers and oil seeds collected by his family gets sold in the local market.

HE USED TO RECEIVE SLIP REGARDING PF DEDUCTION EARLIER BUT NOW HE DOES NOT GET ANY SUCH SLIPS. MONTHLY PAYMENT DATES ARE NOT FIXED. APPARENTLY FOR MANY WHO LEFT AFTER COMPLETION OF THEIR CONTRACT, EVEN THOUGH THEIR PF MONEY GOT DEDUCTED, THEY COULD NOT CLAIM THE MONEY LATER.

In contrast to the above narratives, we also have Radheyshaym Patel from Raigarh (Chhattisgarh) has been working as a security staff in MCL since 2009 under a contractual agreement. He is educated, his children study in MCL promoted school and he is quite updated about CMPF and its deduction, etc. However, he mentioned that there is no fixed date for salary disbursement. He has computer skill and completed a diploma course on photography. He runs a parallel business in a small way at this stage. In a coal closure situation he is confident to open a studio and pursue his business venture.

Observations

These stories bring to the fore the issue of PF deductions and PF payments. There seems to be a lack of clear communication on this subject which is crucial as this is a means of savings for poor contractual workers. Lack of knowledge or inability to access that fund essentially deprives them of this benefit. Besides, general awareness about various government schemes is lacking among the contractual workers. Information about several State/Central Schemes designed for the poor often does not percolate and they fail to leverage any benefits. Radheyshyam Patel's story may not be a common story across



THERE SEEMS TO BE A LACK OF CLEAR COMMUNICATION ON THIS SUBJECT WHICH IS CRUCIAL AS THIS IS A MEANS OF SAVINGS FOR POOR CONTRACTUAL WORKERS.

INFORMATION ABOUT SEVERAL STATE/CENTRAL SCHEMES DESIGNED FOR THE POOR OFTEN DOES NOT PERCOLATE AND THEY FAIL TO LEVERAGE ANY BENEFITS.

all the coal locations but it highlights the fact a lot may depend on one's work profile, education, awareness, and class positions. Access and opportunities to basic facilities appears unequal. Addressing this knowledge divide would go a long way in ensuring social protection for all.

The contractors' side

Local contractors voiced their own concerns regarding hiring workers. They feel that the state policies that support the poor through food security measures acts as a deterrent. Once the people are fed, they care little about searching for a job. Contractors highlighted a lack in the motivation amongst workers to opt for hard labour and hence their participation in contractual work becomes a challenge. Additionally, they also mentioned that earlier margin was more as there were relatively less contractors. With more contractors, competition has increased and they also grapple with manpower issues. This sentiment was echoed by the President, Truck Owners' Association, Deb Prasad Das who also mentioned that there are 25,000 trucks on the road or parked in the coal area of Sundargarh, however, these many trucks are run by 10,000 drivers only. Orient area in Jharsuguda district has 5,000 trucks but 1,500 drivers run the show. This labour shortages as well as rising wage expectation often impacts their business.

It is interesting to note these differing opinions between the contractors and the contract labourers. Both have their legitimate concerns albeit one is exploited far more than the other. A people-centric transition would have to include both parties with a higher focus on the labourers who face the brunt of the situation deeply.

CONTRACTORS HIGHLIGHTED A LACK IN THE MOTIVATION AMONGST WORKERS TO OPT FOR HARD LABOUR AND HENCE THEIR PARTICIPATION IN CONTRACTUAL WORK BECOMES A CHALLENGE.



10. Bridging the divide between company and workers: A balancing act of unions

Surendra Patel, union leader of Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) mentioned that about 50 years of coal deposit is still left and in a way sounded majorly in favour of continuing the coal-based dependence. However, he believes that development of solar system and its adoption is a necessity moving forward. He also observed that contractual workers need to be trained in solar technologies and small businesses could be set up with select groups for solar fittings and maintenance as well as other appliances (such as refrigerator, TV, air conditioners, etc.). Local capacities should be created.

Manoranjan Patel, union leader of Odisha Colliery Mazdoor Sangh (OCMS) acknowledged the need for sensitizing the contractors and the contractual workers regarding the CMPF and addressing the issues pertaining to deductions, rights of workers and processes. He supported the idea of diversifying livelihood opportunities in the coal belt, skilling of the youth and promotion of new enterprises aligning with future demands and opportunities.

Biswadutt Roy, Area Secretary, All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), addresses day-to-day grievances of workers. He noted that in 15 years due to transitions in energy sphere new challenges and opportunities have emerged and would continue emerging. Unions need to stay engaged with companies and plan strategies to upskill the contractual workers looking at the future demands and opportunities.

THE UNION LEADERS SUPPORTED THE IDEA OF DIVERSIFYING LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES IN THE COAL BELT, SKILLING OF THE YOUTH AND PROMOTION OF NEW ENTERPRISES ALIGNING WITH FUTURE DEMANDS AND OPPORTUNITIES.

THE UNION LEADER OBSERVED THAT CONTRACTUAL WORKERS NEED TO BE TRAINED IN SOLAR TECHNOLOGIES AND SMALL BUSINESSES COULD BE SET UP WITH SELECT GROUPS FOR SOLAR FITTINGS AND AINTENANCE AS WELL AS OTHER APPLIANCES (SUCH AS REFRIGERATOR, TV,AIR CONDITIONERS, ETC.). LOCAL CAPACITIES SHOULD BE CREATED.

Observations

The union leader seems to be driven by the thought that the life of the contractual workers should be safe and secure, their families should have access to the medical benefits and children should be able to access good education facility promoted by the company. If such rights are denied to the poor contractual workers, the talk on human rights becomes futile. However, ironically unions do not seem to have become a unified voice of the contractual informal workers as such. A lot more needs to be done by the labour unions who could mobilise the poor workers and engage in a constructive dialogue, empower them and address grievances, issues of social protection, PF and violations if any.



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11. Local residents grappling with adversities

Visit to Dera village, Angul, Odisha

About 300 households live in Dera and interaction revealed that the village is surrounded by mines such as Jagannath, Lingaraj, Bhubaneswari and Ananta. 60% residents here are land oustees and 40% are engaged in business as agriculture is not possible due to water scarcity and land degradation due to constant mining. People who lost their land were paid huge amounts as compensation. Despite this the younger generation in their families is suffering at the hands of contractors. This is happening because people do not have financial literacy and many did not channelize the money for better education. Money was spent on alcohol and bikes and this created a social menace. Women in Dera generally do not work outside as its not societally acceptable and being from the general category they would prefer to remain engaged in household chores rather than working in the informal sector. Some educated youth have limited choices and hence opt for working under the local contractors in nearby mines.

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Visit to Sanjob village

Water scarcity, unemployment and restricted livelihoods are the key issues emerged during an interaction with the residents of Sanjob (under Brajragnagar municipality) adjacent to Orient mine area, Odisha. More than 250 households reside there, out of which 75% belong to OBC and General caste. The rest 25% are SCs and STs. These days people avoid working in underground mines due to poor ventilation and higher risks. They feel small businesses cannot run as people do not have adequate income and savings and beyond mine or post mine closure people many not be left with other options but migrate to other locations in search of jobs. One youth after his college education could not get any job and now is forced to work as a helper under a contractor in Rajkura mine. About 10 youths are engaged in contractual work in Rajkura open cast mine adjacent to their location. In absence of occupational stability in the coal sector especially in contractual engagement, the sense of uncertainty is quite high.

Dutiya Shah whose husband is a MCL employee and engaged in coal drilling expressed her anguish over limited economic opportunities and water scarcity. Pusha Devi, Shanti Devi and herself raised the issue of water shortages and mentioned that wells dried up, supply of water is erratic, in 2–3 days tankers are sent from Mine II. Apart from drinking water issue they also spoke about lack of water availability for bathing and cooking. Rajkura open cast mine adjacent to their area releases water that contains chemical and residents suffer from skin irritation, blackening of skin and diarrhea. Overall quality of life appeared low.

Observations

People residing in Dera particularly the poorer segments and residents of Sanjob are grappling with limited opportunities, access to clean water and health issues, indicative of poor living condition. Greater investments in addressing local needs and strengthening local capacity is a necessity to convert adversity into an opportunity.

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12 .Does life around coal belt look happy and healthy?

A local medical practitioner observed that asthma, respiratory/pulmonary issues, skin allergy, hyper urisemia, hypo thyroid are common health issues diagnosed in the coal mine area. TDS is also high in that belt which means higher presence of minerals like iron and high metal deposition. The diseases mentioned above seem to be having direct correlation with this as well as overall environmental condition owing to coal dust and smoke. Among regular workers alcoholic liver disease is a common ailment. Besides, they regularly deal with cases of heat stroke and dehydration. Villagers also face similar health issues.

Observations

Regular awareness camps and health camps organized by the health team in coordination with the CSR team help reach out to the needy, provide better, preventive and palliative care and referral on case-to-case basis which has made some difference. However, issues pertaining to drinking water, water treatment and alcoholism need urgent attention. Further, a holistic and systematic study and mapping of coal belt is needed to ascertain the health risks and develop a preventive action plan. This will also indicate convergence of schemes and scope for partnership at the sub-national and local level.

A HOLISTIC AND SYSTEMATIC STUDY AND MAPPING OF COAL BELT IS NEEDED TO ASCERTAIN THE HEALTH RISKS AND DEVELOP A PREVENTIVE ACTION PLAN.

Final reflections

Ground experiences around plight of contractual workers in coal mine economy, residents and street vendors living near mining area, risks and living condition, skills and blocked opportunities, denial of certain rights etc. throw light on various facets of socioeconomic reality in the coal belt. Some of these dimensions need further reflection and sectoral convergence for pooling resources and capacities to meaningfully target them through phase wise and people-centred local planning.

Equality in the existing engagement and production processes, integrating it into the system and ongoing practices is imperative for such value transfer during coal transition, coal closure or phase down. This flow of a value proposition should begin from now and this will create the ground for fair systems and practices. This again needs to be seen as a part of systemic and cultural change which may require different monitoring mechanisms, participatory governance and streamlining ethical practices with a greater objectivity, rigour, transparency and ownership. This would revolve around the axis of equity, inclusion and justice.

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