

TRANSLATION OF THE FELLOWSHIP ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN ASOMIYA PRATIDIN AS A SERIES TITLED "NISHIDDHA NOGORIT ABHUMUKI (A PEEP INTO THE FORBIDDEN CITY) BETWEEN OCTOBER 21 TO OCTOBER 24.

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Labourers spending dark days in collieries

The brick-steps in front of the cave in the lap of the greeneries lead to 600 metres long and 50 feet deep tunnel. At the other end of the tunnel there is nothing but darkness. Amid the impassable darkness about 10 workers are busy in drilling the hill to find out coal. Each man equipped with a faded helmet, a lamp connected to the helmet and a pair of worn out mining boots.

It is raining heavily and the rainwater is pouring through the roof. The water pumped out at the "0" level through a water pump heavily contaminated with polluted gas and sulfur. The sulfur contained by the water is about 1.3 to 2.3 per cent. The water, not far away, meets the river water through the drains. The tunnel is filled with the red soil, polluted water and the floor is too muddy and sticky to carry on. One can find a worker in a horrible condition with all the gases and mud from his head to toes. The stink from their sweating bodies compels one to hold his breath for a moment.

Two workers wearing masks are drilling the rocks to spread the cave to find more coal. The powdery substances like coal dust and other gases coming out during the drilling process instantly spread all throughout the tunnel and create an atmosphere of suffocation. In the process the whole tunnel trembles and the echoing sound can almost left someone deaf for a while. The coal dust finding no way to go outside moves around the tunnel and along with other gases like carbon dio-oxide, carbon mono-oxide and methane enters into the nostrils and easily effects the heart and lungs of the workers as these gases cause many dreaded diseases in human bodies.

This picture of coal mining is not a filmy version of a 19th century coal mine but a real and familiar picture of the 21st century underground coal mining, termed as the most hazardous job in the world, in the Makum coalfields of Upper Assam which is conducted by the North-eastern Coalfields under the Coal India Limited, a Central Government organization. The area is a no entry zone to the common people. No body is allowed to enter into the coal mining area.

Under a media fellowship offered by Delhi-based organization Centre for Science and Environment, I was to conduct a field survey of the coalfields. But I was not allowed by the authority concerned to enter in the coalfields of Ledo, Tipong, (underground mining), Tikak and Tirap (open-cast mining) to carry on my field studies. So I had to resort to take a fake identity and secretly carried out the study with the help of a trade union leader.

The workers pay little attention to the dreaded skin diseases, tuberculosis, and cancer caused by the contaminated gas and suffocating atmosphere of the collieries. They have been working in such an atmosphere for decades and accustomed to the toxic gases and the polluted atmosphere.

The workers are not worried about the poisonous results in their health caused by the coal powders and the toxicant air. After coming out from ruthless work of eight hours at a stretch in the collieries, the workers rush to find out some *desi* liquor to shake off the frustration and monotony - an outcome of their routine life.

In such an inhuman atmosphere, the workers have to go to about two kilometers through the tunnels and find out the highest quality coal in India graded as A, and A+, which is the most valuable in the Indian coal market. According to an official, though less in production, the coal produced in Assam is so high in quality (with less ashes) that the brick factories can use them twice as fuel. Main buyers of the Assam coal are the states like Punjab and Chandigarh. Sometimes buyers are seen fighting to get the Assam coal. The official added that the Ledo railway station conducts the transportations of coal produced in the state and is one of the main stations to earn heavy tax.

On that particular day, the workers were working in -1 level and work was going on full swing at the (-7) level too, which is 300 ft below from Zero level. The Manager of the Tipang Colliery informed that in the current financial year they are trying to meet the target of producing 75,000-ton coal from the colliery. It may be well mentioned here that during the year 2004-2005 the Tipang colliery had produced 65,000-ton coal.

How one can go into the deep of the mines? As an answer, a hole covered with a wooden cover was shown. As soon as the hole was uncovered, air; polluted with different gases especially carbon di-oxide, flush out and left the place too suffocating to stay further. Through the hole a narrow wooden stairs came to notice, which was the only connector with the deep of the mine to the -1 level. There were various such holes along the 600metre long tunnel. A worker with his helmet, mining boot, light and the self-rescuer, (which provide oxygen to the person for 45 minutes and he can use this during an accident), has to enter into the deep levels through this stairs and works till eight hours at a stretch. During this time, they even don't get a drop of pure drinking water. All because of safety!

Worth mentioning here that to carry on mining works they have to break the hard rock walls of the tunnel for which they have to resort to blasts. During the blasts, gases like carbon di-oxide, carbon mono-oxide and methane come out in a heavy amount. Methane can cause a big fire from a spark of fire. Such an accident claimed 10 lives in 23rd November 1993. But for Coal India Limited such accidents are not much a big issue because they provide a very good salary and bonus from time to time to the workers and again they provide a handsome amount of compensation with an assured job to the very next kin of the victim in case of accidents. It seems to the Coal India Limited, providing a good working atmosphere to the workers is less considerable in comparison to the monetary benefits it has been giving them from time to time. While the modern day world is doing all hazardous works by well-skilled machines, the coal labourers of the underground mining in Makum Coalfields are still working in an inhuman and insecure condition. The Coal India Limited is so quick in giving compensations but so lazy in improving the working conditions of the labourers! A large number of workers appointed in the underground mining are deep mining workers.

For example, in 1924, in Tipang Colliery, the total number of workers was 984. Out of which 525 are underground workers. In each day, the workers work for eight hours in three shifts without any break.

As safety measures they are provided with helmet, mining boot, light, and self-rescuer. An official informed that the workers are provided with two pairs of specially made mining boots, helmet, cap lamp, dust mask etc. That day, most of the workers were coming out of the mines wearing a *ganji* only. They are piteously ignorant about the bad effects of the dust particles on their skin.

Most of the workers of the Ledo and Tipang colliery complained that they are not provided with mining boots timely. The coalmines of the State are at the foothills of the Patkai range, a region of heavy rain. When it starts raining the water come down from the hills and enters through the face of the cave. As a result, the shoes made of canvass and rubber torn apart within a short time. Still, they are not provided with another pair of mining boot. Almost thirty labourers, I met, complained about authority's inability to provide mining boots at time. Another problem they are facing is of lighting. There is no facility to provide artificial light in the collieries. The only source of light is the cap lamp. Sometimes the cap lamps could not provide sufficient light for eight hours at a stretch and they had to come out from the deep mining area without light. The allegation was made by Biren Baruah of Tipong Colliery, a worker engaged in cutting logs as wood is used to prevent the roof from falling down. The continuous allegation made by the workers of Tipang Colliery compels to question that when the workers of a Central government organization are facing such problems then what will be the condition of the workers of private sector undertakings?