

Safety measures for the workers in a complete shambles

On 21st of September last, the union leader Swapon Roy introduced Murli, a young boy from Hyderabad, who had newly joined the Lachit Colliery at Ledo. To Murli, the Lachit Colliery is an ill-fated underground mining. Last year, during the month of July, his father, mining sardar R Chennaiya lost his life in this colliery when the weak roof fell upon him. Murli got the job on the compensatory ground. During last two years, two workers lost their life while working and that is why the colliery has been declared as accident-prone. No visitors are allowed to enter into the mining area. But with the help of the union leader I went to the -2 level but no workers were seen working at this level. The 'gas water' is constantly pumped out through a big pipe, which is well fitted on one side of the cave while on the other side there is a steep stairs of 1.5 feet dimension to commute to the interior of the cave. At the middle of these, there is a rail through which the dug out coal carried out on trolleys. On that particular day, the workers were working at -10 level. The stairs were too steep, wet and slippery. The rainwater flooding inside, harsh wind and darkness almost made it impossible to go through the stairs at the -2 level. Going to this level, it became clear how risky it would be to the workers to dig out coal from the interior of the earth. While visiting the caves it came to notice that the roof was protected with some logs of wood. A senior official said that this single protective measure was applied in all the collieries to protect the roof from any accident. According to him this is the cheapest safety measure. Though this is the sole safety measure to prevent the roof from falling down, it is very clear that the weak protection made with wild woods can fall down at many moment and can claim several lives. Due to constant touch with the rainwater the wooden protection, starts decaying. Fungus and mushroom can be seen easily over the decaying surface of the wooden-protection.

There are 200 underground workers in the Ledo colliery while other 154 are surface workers. These workers work for eight hours per day in three shifts, without any break. Prone to any kind of accidents, what safety measures have been taken to the workers? On this, an official at the office of the Directorate at Margherita, who looks after the safety measures of the workers, informed that the workers were provided with safety lamps to check the status of different gases like Carbon mono-oxide, oxygen, methane etc. in the underground mines. He added that the level of oxygen never becomes less than 20 per cent while the level of methane never increases to more than .5 per cent. And, there is a good ventilation system in the underground mines to flush out the contaminated air, according to the official. Moreover, to close the area with brick walls, which becomes fire-prone after digging out coal for a long time, to make other pumping systems and to build new paths to come out if any accidents occur are some of the safety measures which should be taken into consideration. It was informed by the officials that a rescue station always stays alert at Ledo Colliery. Though the officials informed that modern technologies like tele-monitoring system to know the status of various gases in the underground mines has been applied, but in Tipong Colliery the system was seen lying in a deformed status. Contradicting the information of this official, Kanhaia, a worker who runs the coal-cutting machine, said, "there is no facility to prevent coal dust from affecting a worker." But during this study, the workers had mentioned nothing about safety of their eyes. Despite working eight hours with coal dust, the workers are piteously ignorant about using spectacles to keep their eyes safe from coal dust. The authority concerned also too silent over the matter of providing spectacles to the workers who have to work in direct contact with coal dust, silica powder, etc. for hour after hour. While contacting an official of Ledo Colliery in this regard, informed that though Assam coal is the most valuable, the North-east Coalfields, as a whole, has been witnessing great loss for years. According to him, the 50 per cent of the income of the North-east Coalfields has been spent in wages of the workers. Again the underground mines are very old, (The Tipong colliery was started in 1924 while the Borgulai was started in 1901) as a result, the coal mining process has to

be conducted in the deep of the mines and the process taking up protective measures through these long underground tunnels are very expensive. Despite India's total coal production of 348 million ton, Assam produces only 0.9 million ton. It is due to less production the Coal India Limited is not much eager to apply scientific methods for mining here. It is also alleged that in spite of great potentiality the Coal India Limited has closed the Jaipur Colliery, as it needed more investment. According to the workers' union leader Swapon Roy, if we look on the ground of affecting the bio-diversity, the underground mining is less destructive than the opencast mining. Moreover, there are more employment opportunities in the underground mining system, as it needs more workers. The Coal India Limited has been closed new appointments for last 15 years on the ground that the underground mining system is more expensive and the authority, except providing good salary and bonus to the workers, is quiet silent in matters regarding good working facilities. As a result, the numbers of coal workers are very less in comparison to the potentiality of production. The policies that have been taken up by the authority concerned in the Makum coalfields go against the workers' rights and gradually the most potential and profitable industry has been going to the hands of the private companies is becoming an issue of great concern. Despite all the facilities including standard of coal, good facilities of transportation through trains and motors, the Coal India Limited had to witness a loss of Rs 41 crore in the financial year 2004-05 only because of corruption and mis-management. The loss was Rs 36 crore in the financial year 2003-04.

It is noticeable that there is still the potentiality of more than 191 million ton good standard coal in the Makum coalfields. Again, there is no transportation problem as all the coalfields of the state is connected through broad-gauge rails. Despite great potentiality of a market and after passing so many years of coal mining, Mr. D B Prasad, the Deputy Director of Mining, in an interaction at Digoiboi said, 'A good market and buyers are still a challenge to Assam coal.' Due to such short-sightedness and in the name of competitive market it is most likely that the Coal India Limited is going to adopt more policies against the workers and going to hand over this coalfield spreading over 35 km in the lap of eye-catching beauty of nature at the foothills of the Patkai range to the private companies.