

The innocent workers of the collieries are becoming venomous sons

During the last week of the month of September, the Central Hospital under the Coal India Limited at Margherita was filled up with patients. Among them, there was B Mollesu from Borgolai Colliery, a worker who carries blast materials in the underground mines. Like other patients Mollesu has also been suffering from chest pain, anemia, headache, and body pain. In the deep mining area, they consume enough contaminated air with carbon di-oxide, carbon mono-oxide and methane to destroy their heart and lungs. After consuming such poisonous air for a long time Mollesu himself becoming a venomous son. Today he is suffering from the dreaded disease -- tuberculosis. A number of underground mining workers other than Mollesu from Ledo, Borgolai, Tipong and Tikak are today suffering from various dreaded diseases like tuberculosis, bronchitis, skin diseases, anemia, and cancer etc. These diseases are recorded in the history of coal mining as occupational health disease.

On one hand, finding out coal from deep mining is itself a hazardous task; on the other, the working condition is also deleterious to health. The workers here suck in all the harmful gases like silica dust, coal dust, carbon mono-oxide (CO), methane and sulfur etc. and they have to live with direct contact of these for decades. The heavy rain always leaves the floor of the mining tunnels muddy. While the workers on one hand have to face a hot atmosphere in the process of mining coal from the interior of the earth and on the other the rainwater increases the humidity.

Coal mining in Assam is quite an old history. The British invented the coalfields in Assam in 1881. Their sole aim was to fulfill the need of fuel in the tea industry. Like the tea labourers the coal labourers were also brought from the states like Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Most of the present workers are the successors of those brought by the British. From the beginning to the nationalization the workers have been working in a barbaric condition generation after generation.

In 1972, coal was nationalized in India and various welfare schemes were come into force. In this context, if we pay little attention to the socio-economic condition and the coal-mining scenario of Assam, we will find that despite a Central Government undertaking and one of the pioneer organizations of coal mining the Coal India Limited has been neglecting the welfare measures of the workers to the hilt. We can cite examples from the Ledo worker's colony. The colony was built during the British reign where there are almost 40 families living in a congested way. The British brought the predecessors of the most of the families to work in the coalfields. The colony was looked like a barrack – tapered, filthy, unhygienic and sparse. During last September at about 4 O'clock in the evening the workers were seen drunkard and they created a hurly-burly atmosphere in the colony. Rainwater teemed down on the floor through the pouring roofs. Each family was provided with 8x10 ft room with a verandah of three feet that they use as their kitchen. Two families have to share the same toilet, while there are two to three children per family.

It will be worth mentioning here that the Coal Indian Limited, as part of environment conservation, transformed an old quarry, a place where large amounts of coal dug out of the ground, into a stadium and along with it through plantation the CIL also created a park. The stadium is named as Patkai stadium. The water gathered in the main quarry where coal has been dug out throughout the years, is transfigured into an artificial lake and the filtered water from the lake has been supplied to the worker's colony.

Even the workers express their doubt over the sterility of the water supplied by the authority concerned. Though officials have good awareness and they always boil the water before use but the workers are not sufficiently aware of these. The workers of the Ledo Worker's colony alleged that they are provided with 'gas water' to drink.

It is astonishing that the salary of the workers is too high in comparison to their tapered, filthy, unhygienic and sparse living conditions. Balram got Rs. 8,780 as his salary for the month of September, (the gross salary is more than 12,000) leaving the taxes, PF etc. Narsimlu, who works as a chowkidar, gets Rs. 8,000 as his salary per month after all the pay cuts. Moreover, the workers of Coal India Limited as Central Government employee get an increment of 30 per cent on their salary. Such an amount is no less to spend a healthy life but these workers are very poor in their knowledge about healthy living conditions and living a barbarous life. Before the nationalization of coal the workers used to get a little amount as their salary, which was not enough to improve their living conditions and lived almost like animals. But after nationalization, the wage agreement was revised and the workers started getting a handsome amount as their salary. No step was taken by the authority concerned to improve the socio-economic condition of these workers. As a result, the new wage agreement remained meaningless to these workers and they remained where they were. They even do not know to spend their salary properly.

The Coal India Limited is providing all the facilities to the workers to buy a colour TV, VCD player and other luxurious goods on installment basis but the authority is silent on the issues like family planning and providing good health and education facilities to their children. A heavy portion of their salary is spent in consumption of liquor and gambling. It is a bitter truth that the inhuman working condition of the mines kills their emotions, which is why they run to liquor stalls as soon as they finish their work.

It is worth mentioning here that the 35 per cent of the total 3500 workers spend such savage lives. The imbalance between the salary and living condition bears another problem that is crisis of humanity. Dr R K Patnaik, The Deputy Medical Officer at the Central Hospital at Margherita informed that more than 80 per cent of the patients admitted into the hospital are suffering from diseases like tuberculosis caused by severe alcoholism. Alcoholism among the workers is too outspread and intense to stop without psychological counseling. The medical authority expressed their inability to cope with the problem, as there is no de-addiction center or a psychologist to counsel the labourers.