THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE UNORGANISED COAL MINE WORKERS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The unorganized labour is overwhelming in terms of its number range and therefore they are omnipresent throughout India.

As the unorganized sector suffers from different kinds of issues, this paper tries to highlight the socio-economic conditions of the unorganised labourers in coal mines of India.

As per the study paper, 25 unorganised labourers were interviewed, 10 contractors were interviewed. Structured questionnaires were prepared. The research was carried out mainly through interviews and secondary sources such as newspapers, journals and internet. Information was collected from the workers, contractors, labours, welfare officers, to make a comparative study.

The study reveals that the workplace is scattered and fragmented. There is no formal employer – employee relationship. The unorganized workers in urban areas are basically migrant workers from rural areas. The unorganized labourers in the mines are usually subject to indebtedness and bondage as their meagre income cannot meet with their livelihood needs. Since they are unorganised, they are subject to exploitation significantly in their work place. Their socio-economic conditions are extremely deplorable. As most of them were landless labourers, there was no other option left for them. Their main aim is to have two meals a day for them and their families.

Though many researches and study had taken place on mining areas. But this was the first attempt to study the unorganised labourers working in the mining areas and their socio-economic condition on which they survive.

Keywords: Unorganised, fragmented, employer-employee, meagre, indebtedness, deplorable

INTRODUCTION

The working environment and working conditions of worker is equally important to that of capital and organization to promote sustainable development. The socio-economic condition of the unorganised coal mine workers in this study covers various dimensions of workers such as: working conditions, work environments, occupational hazards and industrial accidents and income generation etc. The conditions under which the workers perform their duty have a great bearing on their general health, efficiency and productivity. The performance is affected by environmental problem such as temperature, noise, ventilation, humidity, work zone air quality and ambient air quality etc. The continuous exposure of the miners to such unhealthy atmosphere leads to fatigue and boredom ultimately leading to the serious fatal accidents. So it has been correctly said that a perfect man can be from a good and healthy environment. The piece of research is mainly meant of the economic policy measures for the control of environment pollution particularly in the coal industry. Since the coal industry has been already identified as one of the most polluted units in the country, this study is very
much contextual and worthwhile from the angle of policy decision making. Again, the study is based on grass root level observation covering socio-economic aspect of the groups affected by the pollution due to coal mines.

Work in small-scale mines tends to be low-paid, seasonal and highly precarious, but provides direct employment, though often at a subsistence level, for up to 1 million workers in coal mines of India. Most small-scale miners gain a very meagre living.

While it is impossible to say how many deaths and accidents occur in small-scale mines, due to under-reporting and the clandestine nature of much of the work, the risks of fatal and disabling accidents are high, particularly in underground coal mines. Since they are unorganised and do not belong to any kind of unions, it is extremely difficult for them to fight for the genuine rights.

There has been related study on the unorganised labourers in the various sectors of the Indian economy—agriculture, fishery, marketing including a small report on coal mines as well in the Report of national Commission on Labour- Chapter VII Unorganised sector. It was a generalised report. But it did not indicate the income and socio-economic conditions of the unorganised labourers of the coal mines.

There is another related study on the unorganised labour Force in India and their growing prominence. The social security measures which can be brought into have been referred—ref- VikasPedia.

Most of the related studies covered the unorganised sector and labourers in India, coal mines provident fund and informal sector in general-ref- Unorganised Sector in India-Tony Tacob But all these related studies do not emphasize on the coal sector and the plight of the unorganised labourers.

This research paper intent to improve the existing knowledge in the unorganised sector and undertake special reference to the unorganised labourers in the coal mines of India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Highlights of few past research works on the present topic are being incorporated in this section of the paper.

Aruna Murthy(2006) Ecological- Socio- Economic health Impact Assessment due to coal mining- a case Study of Talabira Coal Mines of Odhisa. –investigated on the health hazards of the mine workers and the problems. The study also investigated on the risks that the mine workers faced due to continuous mining work that are prevalent. How they are prone to different kinds of diseases and also the health and safety issues of the Odhisha coal mines. The study also reveals that Majority of the health problems in mining regions are caused due to unchecked pollution and high levels of toxicity, mine tailings and mine disasters. The health and safety problems vary from one mineral to the other, from the technology used, type of mining- open cast to underground - and the size of operations. The lands, water bodies, air and environment are polluted due to constant release of chemical wastes, dust generated by blasting and excavation, and the dumping of mine wastes and over-burden in the surrounding lands and rivers.

Breman, Jan (2008): investigated that Conditions of work in the coal mines of Korba are far from satisfactory .Working hours are irregular and longer, there is no security of jobs ,the job ends with contractors ,leave with wages is not available to these labour. Whatever contractors make advance payments to their labour, accounts are manipulated.

Omprakash S. Sarate(Vol.76, December 2010, pp.557-564 ): The unorganized coal miners from Mailaram Coal Field Andhra Pradesh have a sorry plight. It has been investigated that the labourers working there do not have any accident benefits in case there are any unforeseen circumstances.

Maureen Salamon ( August 26, 2010 ) Live Science- Miners Face Health Risks, Even on Good Days – Investigated on the miners' chances of dying from explosions, cave-ins and equipment accidents are ever-present, and many chronic and fatal conditions are linked to their toxic work
conditions. “There's no question mining is a dangerous occupation, but it doesn't have to be unsafe’. In the report it was stated that the miners are exposed to dust, welding fumes, radon, mercury, noise, heavy loads. Modern safeguards – including ventilation systems, respirators and ear protectors – are mandated to reduce or eliminate exposure to all of these risks, greatly lowering injuries or fatalities from the levels recorded in the late 20th century, but all these are hardly looked after in the coal mines of India. Miners are “always exposed to moving machinery, roof falls, explosions and fires”.

**Hindu News National Article (2011):** investigated that there are a number of child workers who work in illegal coal mines, each a “rat hole,” 10 X 10 foot and 400 foot deep, where a mere slip of the foot will plunge one to a certain death. A large number of children aged below 14 are working in such mines, built unscientifically, in Jharkhand’s Hazaribagh district. These mine workers are mostly from Orissa, West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Assam. They belong to the Below Poverty Line and have no choice according to their families but to work. Local mafia has a strong link with the politicians.

**Kaushik (May 2011) Child Labour in Indian coal Mines-Amusing planet**-reported a fantastic photo essay on the mining situation in the Jaintia Hills district of India, located in the north eastern state of Meghalaya. As many as thousands of underage workers as young as 8, lured by the wages and leave school to work in coal mines under perilous conditions. The country officially upholds mining safety standards and forbids child labour, but loopholes in state laws allow widespread abuses. The young miners descend on rickety ladders made of branches into the makeshift coal mines, scrambling sideways into “rat hole” shafts so small that even kneeling becomes impossible. Lying horizontally, they hack away with picks and their bare hands: Human labour here is far cheaper than machine.

**Arup Chanda (Hazards of Coal Mining in India-The Wall street Journal (02.07.2012)**

Investigated one of the mines–Karanpura in Jharkhand state. He wrote that for the miners in this hilly region of India’s eastern Jharkhand state, it’s a dangerous and potentially lethal assignment. The coalfields here are run by Central Coalfields Ltd., a subsidiary of Indian state-run giant Coal India Ltd. The several thousand miners here must contend with air filled with coal dust. Some say they have developed asthma and other respiratory problems. Others say the environment exacerbates existing health conditions. Workers here suffer from asthma, tuberculosis and eye diseases. There are no proper medical facilities available. The miners say that after coal is taken out from the open cast mines, water should be sprayed to prevent flying of coal dust and trucks are to be covered with tarpaulin sheets. Those rules aren’t followed. The article gives a vivid description on the miners’ conditions.

**LOCATION AND AREAS OF STUDY**

Mining areas of Jharsuguda (Odisha) , Korba(Chhattisgarh), Jharia(Jharkhand). The unorganised poor mining workers were interviewed.

**OBJECTIVES**

The main objectives of the present study are as follows:

- To examine the conditions of the socio economic condition of the unorganised workers over a period of time.
- To determine work environment and working conditions of the workers.
- To probe into the occupational diseases, health hazards and industrial accidents and to assess the measures taken towards these problems.
- To suggest appropriate policy measures on the basis of findings to raise the socio-economic conditions of the miners.

**RSEARCH METHODOLOGY**
All these conditions have been investigated in a number of ways. In this study data have been collected mainly through primary sources. Primary data are collected through both census and sample surveys in the form of structured questionnaire through direct personal interview method.

The investigation was carried out for almost two weeks in various mining areas. Seeing the coal mining area and talking to some labourers, it was really insightful and inspired us to dig a bit deeper into their conditions.

Both underground and open cast mines were covered under the study. Information was collected from the workers, contractors, labours, welfare officers, to make a comparative study. The interviewer has off and on lived with the miners in their cottages & quarters and also visited the neighbouring villages, mines hospitals, child official centres, crèche officials and interrogated the concerned person.

Questionnaire-Twenty five unorganised labourers were interviewed. As most of them were illiterate, questions were read out to them in the common spoken language.

Ten contractors were interviewed.

Socio-Economic profile

Almost all are uneducated and belong to the poverty stricken belt. For them two meals a day is sufficient. The speed with which we are marching towards objective of social equity has not been fulfilled till the completion of sixty years of planned economic development. The coal mine workers of Orissa, who constitute the bulk of State mining forces, are quite away from decent earnings, minimum and comfortable standard of living and working conditions. The socio-economic conditions of the workers are changing day by day to a small extent. The prospect of job in mining area is better and hence attracting the young and active workers into its fold. Many of the landless agriculture labourers are turning into the mining areas so that they can earn a living if they work hard. It is so because there is a high demand for unorganised and contract labours from the so called middlemen who provides them with work. Many of them make huts in the nearby mining areas, which is near to their work place. The children of these unorganised labourers are equally involved in the mining activities with their parents. For most of them education is a far away dream Most of them do not prefer to send their children to the nearby schools as they feel that working would earn them an amount sufficient for them to have meals. So work is more preferred than schooling.

But if we compare the children of the organised workers, there is a marked difference. The organised workers send their wards to schools. In some cases bus facilities are provided since the school is situated at a distance from their residential quarters.

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<tr>
<th>Basis (out of 100)</th>
<th>Organised Sector</th>
<th>Unorganised Sector</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schooling for Wards</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-curricular Activities</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work for income</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>75</td>
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<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>78</td>
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It is to be noted that samples were carried out on school-going age group (for schooling). In the unorganised sector, a few cases were also noticed that few children who have their names enrolled in schools seldom go to schools. They also prefer going to work. As far as entertainment in the form of cinema, theatre or public shows are concerned; the people in the unorganised sector are least interested.

It was also found that most of these unorganised labourers are landless labourers, mostly tribal from the nearby districts. Life for them was hard in their previous places so they have migrated to these mining areas. Most of them have no problem with the middlemen (who keep a healthy amount from their income) who provide them with jobs. For them two meals a day is sufficient.
Income pattern

This socio-economic measure to a great extent determines the standard of living of any group of the society. The standard of living refers to the actual mode of living conditions. The mode of living in any country depends primarily on the fundamental factor of food, shelter, and clothing.

A low standard of living is characterized by chronic under-nourishment, under-nutrition, inadequacy of something, which doesn’t allow a worker to have average strength and competence etc. On the other hand a high level of standard of living is associated with a well-designed material development and a system organized to maintain it. In the present study attempt has been made to enquire into the income pattern of the mineworkers to measure the standard of living, which is the most vital indicator of socio-economic status.

Wage/salary is the main source of the income. However, due to inadequacy of their earnings they have to depend upon subsidiary occupations such as sales of forest product, part time works, small business like beetle shop, poultry, goatery etc. to supplement their earnings. Almost 80% of the total monthly income is earned from wages and next to that it is the bonus, which constitutes around 6%. Remaining earnings are from the supplementary sources.

The organised labourers and the permanent workers get bonuses up to 10% of their wages or salary during the festive period. But the unorganised workers get 2%-2.5% bonuses of their wages.

They are even more threatened by displacement, but they are mining villages in the sense that their economic and social daily lives revolves around mines, either by direct employment services

Work environment and working conditions

Working in mines involves physical accident and blows, muscular and nervous strain, monotony, noise, unhealthy dust and air, which diminish and dampen workers efficiency. Different physical environments, say, cold, heat, dampness and noise also influence the efficiency of labour and can be
measured for purposes of correlating conditions and results in output, accidents, lost time and turnover. Working conditions should be compatible with an employee’s physical comfort. It contributes to enhance the job satisfaction by maintaining the normal temperature, combating humidity, proper ventilation, illumination, noise and work place. Long hours of work and poor working condition render them inefficient and make them physiologically unwilling to work. So, on the whole we can say work environment has a considerable impact on the efficiency as well as on the health of the worker. Hence a supportive environment is a prerequisite to keep the physical and mental stress of the employee at its minimum. It can also be said that these workers work in a very unhealthy and risky conditions in the mines.

**Occupational hazards**

Despite considerable efforts in many countries, the rates of death, injury and disease among the world’s mineworkers remain high, and mining remains the most hazardous occupation when the number of people exposed to risk is taken into account.

There are many related deaths of the mining labourers inside or may be near the mines. Some of these deaths were due to gas or coal dust explosions. "Inadequate, inappropriate or unsafe equipment are real problems in many small-scale mines." Cave-ins from unsupported tunnels, rock falls, perpetual dampness, inadequate ventilation, faulty equipment, exhaustion and constant exposure to heat, noise and dust also take a toll on miners health and safety. The frequent anarchy prevailing in the often coal rush conditions of many small-scale mines sites means that health and safety considerations are often ignored. These unorganised workers are mostly in the hands of middlemen.

The dangers of mining accidents, however real, are not nearly so acute as the health hazards and sickness found in mining communities, which are commonly overcrowded, consisting often of makeshift huts with inadequate facilities for sanitation and water. Processing of raw minerals is often done in the home and water sources that might be used to treat minerals may also serve as the domestic water supply. Silicosis from exposure to dust and mercury poisoning are occupational hazards of miners. This kind of pathetic condition has been prevailing for decades in the coal mines. These labourers are illiterates and unorganised as a result of which it has been extremely difficult for them to fight for their rights.

**CONCLUSION**

We have found that the conditions in which they survive are rally pathetic. The condition at work place such as extensive unbearable heat, irritating noise and unhygienic dust tells upon the efficiency of the workers and causes industrial fatigue. However, under such working environment the tribal workers discharge their duty up to the satisfaction and are found to be more efficient, industrious, than the non-tribal. Working in the mines involves physical accident and blows, muscular and nervous strain, monotony, noise, unhealthy dust and air, which bring down the workers efficiency. Poor ventilation and foul smell in underground constitute a serious problem. Open cast coalmines also have the same problem, which cause diseases in the respiratory system. The present study reveals that the miners suffer from various occupational diseases and accidents due to adverse working conditions. Occupational hazards in coal mining occur due to (1) personal factors like negligence, carelessness etc; and (2) material factors like unguarded and defective machinery, industrial and chemical explosives, defective equipments etc. So in mining industry accidents are not uncommon. Some accidents result in a temporary or permanent disablement of the miners, which is the outcome of irresponsibility of the workers, poor supervision, and poor and inadequate safety measures made available by the company. Safety appliances such as globes, leg guards, goggles, helmets, boots, and masks are not adequately supplied.
SOME SUGGESTIONS

Following suggestions can be offered to improve the socio-economic conditions of the unorganised workers of coal mines in India:-

- Wages and salaries are not sufficient to run a decent life, it may be hiked.
- Exploitation of employer is minimized.
- Creation of new employment activities in the periphery.
- Coal dust being the chief cause of air pollution it is suggested to take appropriate abatement measure to control spreading dusts in the mining area.
- Medical facilities at work place should be provided to all the workers and the workers must be trained in giving first aid.
- Clean drinking water facilities should be provided to all work place as well as to the ‘basti’ areas. Proper spray of water at a regular interval on the main roads of the mining area for avoiding dust is essential. The safety department should ensure this.
- Informal education and appropriate training etc. should be provided to the illiterate and ignorant miners regarding their environment and working conditions to avoid occupational hazards and diseases.
- Proper display of information on the notice board and display of pamphlets in square places is essential regarding the causes of occupational hazards, awareness camp on safety to maintain consciousness throughout the year.
- ‘Prevention is better than cure’ the message of health statute should reach each and every worker so that accidents and occupational diseases can be checked to a great extent.
- Last but not the least the government should create ideal industrial environment and good working conditions for the workers in the coalmines, those who produces ‘black diamonds’ for us which ultimately strengthen the country.

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