

# Labour Welfare in the Coal Industry of West Bengal (1920-1973): A Historical Narrative

Santanu Ghosh <sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup> Research Scholar, Department of History, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, Email: sghosh1402@gmail.com

***Abstract:** Good and healthy working condition is one of the key factors for stable labour force in all work places. To reduce the labour absenteeism, it is important to look after the health condition of the labour and for that various measures like lighting arrangements, ventilation system, cap lamps, sanitations etc. are to be maintained in the coal mines area. Besides labour welfare social security were also need for the workers to reduce their mental stress and enhance their working capacity. Financial assistance to the workers in times of unemployment or disability due to their sickness or injury was equally important. In this article I have tried to look into some important labour welfare aspects as determinants of industrial relations in various coal mines of West Bengal.*

**Keywords:** Labour, Welfare, Coal industry, West Bengal, Absenteeism, Social security.

## Introduction

In order to establish a good industrial relation in coal mining area labour welfare plays the most important role. Health is the most important factor regarding the working condition of the miners. Good working condition is recognised as one of the important factors stable labour force. To reduce the absenteeism and labour turnover rate labour welfare is of vital importance. Here in this connection, lighting arrangement, ventilation system, cap lamps, hours of work, overtime work, drinking water facilities and sanitation among others, are to be taken into consideration in understanding labour welfare in the coal mines.

## Labour Welfare Arrangements

For welfare of the labours in the coal mining sector, several initiatives have been adopted. I am dealing with certain initiatives which is considered by me as important.

### **Lighting Facilities**

Lighting facility has a direct influence over efficiency of the workers and minimization of accident rates. Coal mining is essentially different from the nature of operation of work in any industry. Here the workers are to work about 1000 or 2000 feet below the surface away from the light of the sun and thus shut away from unlighted workers should be provided with adequate lighting facilities in the galleries and coal faces.<sup>i</sup> Coal Mines Regulations have been framed in regard to the provision concerning lighting and as such a committee was set up in 1959 in order to make a proper estimation of the requirements of lighting in mines. On the basis of recommendations of the committee statutory orders have been served as to the electric lamps to be provided for the workers employed below ground.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Ventilation Arrangement**

Improvement in underground working conditions is urgently required for enabling miners to work for the periods the Act so fixed. Miners' efficiency depends largely on the ventilation arrangement provided for them underground. Lack of good and proper ventilation arrangement makes the workers discontented and adversely affects their motivation and consequently productivity as well. So, in order to mitigate the industrial rest and to establish a good required.<sup>iii</sup> Coal Mines Regulations have been framed with regard to the provision relating to ventilation in coal mines. In order to make a proper estimation of the requirement of ventilation in mines a Committee was set up in 1959.<sup>iv</sup> On the basis of the recommendations placed by this Committee ventilation standards in mines have been laid down by the Director General of Mines Safety.

### **Cap Lamps**

To guide the workers to their working places the role of Cap Lamps is no less important than any other factor concerning working conditions. Miner wages, efficiency and productivity are dependent upon the light they are provided during the course of operation. In early stage of mining operation open kerosene kurlpies and then hurricanes were in vogue. Now a day's cap lamps have been found the most effective in providing light to the Workers. But the cap lamps supplied to the workers underground coal mines are not upto mark.<sup>v</sup>

### **Drinking Water Facilities**

Supply of drinking water to the workers in their work place has an important bearing on the efficiency of workers. During the course of work the miners get thirsty because of the arduous nature of work, so in order to allay the thirst of the workers

there shall be sufficient water supply. Supply of adequate drinking water to the colliery workers has become one of the major problems in the coalfields and the questions concerning drinking water is discussed practically at every sessions of the Industrial Committee on Coal Mining. But the problem of water supply remained unsolved and the question came up at the 10<sup>th</sup> Session of the Industrial Committee on Coal Mining held at Dhanbad on 30th January, 1967. It was decided in the Session that a three-man Committee would be set up to go into the difficulties that were coming in the way to quick implementation of the water supply schemes.<sup>vi</sup> The Mines Act enjoins managements to provide for adequate supply of Coal and wholesome drinking water for the persons employed in the mines. For the supply of drinking water to persons employed below ground, the Chief Inspector of Mines may make some sort of effective alternative arrangements.<sup>vii</sup>

The drinking facilities provided by the colliery owners are not sufficient. Only 47.5 percent of the workers are provided with water at a rate of two liters per head as approved under mine rules.<sup>viii</sup> Under the Mines Rules, at least two liters of drinking water are required to be provided to every person working in mine. If the water is not from a public water supply system, the management may be required to obtain a certificate of its fitness for human consumption from a competent health authority.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Sanitation**

Sanitary arrangement has no less effect in improving health conditions of the miners. So, latrines and urinals should be kept free from unhygienic, dirty and stinking conditions and arrangement should be made to clear urinals and latrines with disinfectants regularly. As per mines act there shall be provided, separately for males and females in every mine. A sufficient number of latrines and urinals which shall be adequately lighted and ventilated and at all times maintained in a clean and sanitary conditions.<sup>x</sup> But sanitary conditions in coalmines are not satisfactory. It will be seen that the workers are not provided with latrines and urinals in a clean and sanitary condition. It is found that in coalmines because of the slackness of maintaining latrines and urinals in a clean and sanitary conditions by the management a major part of workers remain isolated to utilize the latrine and urinals.

### **Working Hours and Over-time Payments**

The length of time for which workers have to work each day in filthy and dismal surroundings has a preponderant effect on productivity. Moreover, the irregular daily attendance is associated with long working periods and a greater regularity of attendance can be secured if the hours of work is shortened.<sup>xi</sup> Working hours in coal

mines in West Bengal are regulated by the mines act. The act provides that no person shall be allowed to work in a mine on more than six days in any one week. The persons employed above ground in a mine shall not be required or allowed to work for more than nine hours in any day and for more than forty-eight hours in any week.<sup>xii</sup> The spread over of the work has been fixed to twelve hours a day including half an hour interval after every continuous five hours of work but the Chief Inspector may for reasons to be recorded, increase the period of spread over to fourteen hours in any day. For the persons employed below ground, the Act fixes up the working hours to eight hours in a day and forty-eight hours in a week, but in order to facilitate the change of shift the daily working hours are subject to increase with the prior approval of the Chief Inspector. The hours of work so fixed by the Act in coal mines are not congenial to health of the workers because of the hazardous and strenuous work they are to operate and unfriendly environment they are to face. So, the reduction of working hours in Coal Mines becomes imperative. The rate of an absenteeism can be decreased and productive capacity of labour can be improved if the working hours shortened to a certain extent so that the colliery workers do not themselves exhausted both in mind and body because of long hours of work they have to do. The committee on hours of work at the 45<sup>th</sup> session of the International Labour Conference held at Geneva in June, 1961 expressed the opinion that the existing 48 hours of work in coal mines especially underground was harmful to the health of the mines and as such it opined that normal hours of work should be reduced to 40 hours in a week without any curtail in the wages of workers.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Medical Facilities**

Condition of health is one of the most important factors that affects the efficiency of the miners and ultimately the production of the colliery concerned. Bad health leads to labour turnover, absenteeism which breeds industrial unrest. The Royal Commission on Labour in India emphasised this point that the health of the industrial workers is of cardinal importance not only to himself but also in relation to general industrial development and progress.<sup>xiv</sup> Medical facilities include provision of a network of specialized Central and Regional Hospitals, Maternity and Child welfare centres, T. B. treatment in the T. B. Hospitals, Domiciliary and Outdoor Domiciliary, Dispensary services, Static and Mobile Ayurvedic Dispensaries, X-ray facilities, Family Counselling services, Leprosy Treatment, Facilities for treatment of Infectious cases, Treatment of Cancer and free supply of Spectacles and Dentures. Besides, Antimalarial operation and Filarial Control operation constitute other major medical service to colliers.<sup>xv</sup>

For the treatment and hospitalization of coal mines in West Bengal, one central hospital has been set up at Kalla, Asansol and two Regional Hospitals have been set up at Chora and Salanpur one in each region. The bed strength of this hospital totalling 165 in 1955-1956 had increased to 350 in 1969-70. Free treatment for prolonged period was given to all the T. B. patients. Most of them were hospitalized in the acute phase for a short period of 2 to 6 weeks and for the rest of the period treatment was continued on domiciliary basis. Number of beds to afford treatment facilities to colliery workers in West Bengal suffering from T. B. had increased from 12 in 1958-59 to 150 (100 in T.B. Wing Central Hospital, Asansol and 50 in T.B Hospital Searsole) in 1969-70. The number of new patients treated in the various departments of the hospitals accounting to 2445 in indoor and 6243 in outdoor in 1955-56 had increased to 11,109 in indoor and 1, 31,713 in outdoor in 1969-70.<sup>xvi</sup> As regards the activities of Regional Hospitals in Raniganj Coalfields.

### **Educational Facilities**

Education is highly essential to the workers for the interest not exclusively for themselves but for the interest of industry as a whole. Modern machine industry depends in particular degree on education and the attempts to build it up with an illiteracy body of workers must be difficult and perilous.<sup>xvii</sup> Because of the prevalence of illiteracy, the workers remain dark as to their rights and responsibilities. So, they become quite unable to form their own organisations and consider and take actions on their own problem a concerning the industry. It is also important to maintain that the success of the works committee gets hurdled because of the illiteracy of the workers. So industrial peace gets hampered and rather enhances the industrial conflict.

In coal fields of Raniganj Miners' Institutes with an Adult Education Centre and Women Welfare- cum- Children's Education centre has gained popularity to some extent. To look after the welfare of women and children in the coalfield, 64 workers' Welfare- cum- Children's Education centres were functioning in Multipurpose Institutes and 15 Feeder centers for women also continued to function in Indian Coalfields.<sup>xviii</sup> At these centers elementary education to children and vocational training to workers' wives and their female dependents were imparted. In all 163 Feeder Adult education Centers, 3 boarding Houses, 4 Holidays Homes were running for the benefit of the colliery workers during the period 1969.<sup>xix</sup> In order to get the workers acquainted with family planning scheme a family welfare Centre attached to each Regional Hospital continues functioning in different ways.

## Housing Facilities

Housing facilities have important bearing on productivity, absenteeism and labour turnover. But the housing arrangements so far made to the colliery in India are not satisfactory. A proportion of the housing in the Jharia Coalfield is a mere pretension of housing, incredibly dark, damp, ill-ventilated, filthy with no privacy or sanitation. Some of the huts are only leafy shelters and sleeping in the same room is common enough. The congestion in these huts is appalling. Stagnant pools and open drains with foul smell are a common sight.<sup>xx</sup>

In the collieries of West Bengal before the takeover of non-coking coal by the India Government a lot of lacunae in functioning the Coal Mines Labour Welfare Organization was observed which pushed the destitute miners to acute state of sufferings. It was noticed that a major portion of the workers had not been accommodated and even the workers who has got accommodation in colliery dhow rah were not properly housed as because all the ingredients that might have an adverse effect to the health of collier were present in dhow rah. Houses allotted to coalminers were not upto standard. Only 26.61 % had housing but not of the requisite standard. Leaving a small percentage of workers who did not require to be housed nearly 56 % of the workers had yet to be provided for.<sup>xxi</sup>

In order to extent the housing facilities to coal miners the trade unions must be active to put pressure on managements of the collieries so that they can utilize every help of the Coal Mines Labour Welfare Fund in the shape of *Subsidised housing scheme, Subsidy-cum-loan scheme* and *New housing scheme*. At the same time the managerial hierarchy of the collieries should be enlightened and considerate enough to realize that good housing reduces absenteeism and migration of workers, increases efficiency and smoothens industrial relations all of which are in the interests of the employer.<sup>xxii</sup>

In respect of recreation and educational facilities almost absent in-the coalfields of West Bengal. The importance of amusement and recreation as character-building forces has been recognised the world over at all times and stages of human development, but even in this respect India is woefully backward.<sup>xxiii</sup> The miners of a very few collieries in West Bengal had got opportunities to keep themselves in touch with these facilities. Hence in order to increase efficiency of the workers to establish a cordial industrial relation the recreation and education facility are to be extended to such an extent that there might not have any room to breed industrial-conflict. As regards medical facilities were not satisfactory to the needs of the workers in the

coal fields. Most of the colliery dispensaries were mere show things and were lacking in charge of whole-time medical practitioners.

The consideration of the well-being of each individual worker promoted improved industrial relations and encourages general cooperation in the work of the undertaking. Besides, for industrial peace, along with labour welfare social security for workers is also of fundamental importance.<sup>xxiv</sup> For a social security based on social insurance serves two-fold functions. Firstly, it ensures core welfare and give confidence to workers that they have certain status in society, thus society cares for their well-being and that in times of unemployment, disability due to sickness or injury and in old age they will have certain financial assistance to depend upon. Secondly, it creates an attachment with the concern to which the workers belong. So, it helps to remove the hostile attitude on the part of workers towards the employer and thus establishes a good industrial relation.

<sup>i</sup> Giri, V.V., *Labour Problems in Indian Industry*, Asia publishing House, Bombay, 1958. P.322

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Soni, H.R., *Indian Industry and its Problems*, vol. 1, Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd, 1932. P. 282-283.

<sup>iv</sup> Kumar, S.S., *Mining and the Raj: A study of Coal Industry in Bihar (1900-1947)*, Patna, 1996. P.25.

<sup>v</sup> Giri, V.V., *Labour Problems in Indian Industry*, Asia publishing House, Bombay, 1958. P.323

<sup>vi</sup> Guha, B.P., 'The Coal Mining Industry', in Singh, V.B. (ed.), *Economic History of India 1857-1956*, New Delhi, 1987. P.308.

<sup>vii</sup> Section 19 of Mines (Amendment) Act, 1959.

<sup>viii</sup> Annual Report of the Director General of Mines Safety, 1968.

<sup>ix</sup> Annual Report of the Director General of Mines Safety, 1968. P. 68.

<sup>x</sup> Section 20 of the Mines (Amendment) Act, 1959.

<sup>xi</sup> Section 30 of the Mines Act, 1952.

<sup>xii</sup> Annual Reports of the Director General of Mines Safety, 1969. P. 69.

<sup>xiii</sup> The Report of Royal Commission on Labour, Vol. 1. P. 120.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xv</sup> Annual Report on the Activities of Coal Mines Labour Welfare Organizations (Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Employment), 1969-70. PP. 1-10.

<sup>xvi</sup> Annual Report on the Activities of Coal Mines Labour Welfare Organizations (Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Employment), 1969-70.

<sup>xvii</sup> Report of the Royal Commission on Labour, London, 1931. P. 27.

<sup>xviii</sup> Report of the Labour Investigation Committee, 1946. P. 347.

<sup>xix</sup> Annual Report on the Activities of Coal Mines Labour Welfare Organizations (Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Employment), 1969-70.

<sup>xx</sup> Aggarwal, S.C., *Industrial Housing in India*, New Delhi, 1952. P. 177.

<sup>xxi</sup> Labour Year Book, 1967 & 1968 and Report of the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, Government of India.

<sup>xxii</sup> Giri, V.V., *Labour Problems in Indian Industry*, Asia publishing House, Bombay, 1958. P.339.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Soni, H.R., *Indian Industry and its Problems*, vol. 1, Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd, 1932. P. 282-283.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Srivastava, K.N., *Industrial Peace and Labour in India*, Kitab Mahal, Bombay, 1955. P. 306.