

COAL MINING

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Bharat Dogra

Coal mining is witnessing significant changes. Without yet amending the Coal Nationalisation Act of 1973, ground is being prepared for the entry of several major private-sector players. According to recent reports global and Indian mining companies, including BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto and Sesa Goa, will soon get exclusive rights to mine and operate coal mines in the country. This move is backed by the law ministry reportedly stating that mining companies having firm supply contracts with approved users can undertake mining coal blocks reserved for captive users even without amending the nationalisation law of 1973. The government has already allowed 100% foreign direct investment for captive mining in key sectors like power and steel.

As amendment of the Coal Nationalisation Act of 1973 may be politically explosive, it may be postponed till a convenient date. Instead the lesser known Mines and Minerals Development and Regulation Act (1957) may be quietly amended first. Earlier at the initiative of the Energy Coordination Committee a decision was taken to de-reserve Coal India blocks for offering to other players.

While changes in this direction are speeded up in the near future, what should never be forgotten is the fate of workers and villagers. In recent times there has been increasing concern over the lack of adequate safety for coal miners. 50 miners died in a major accident on September 6, 2006 in Bhatdih colliery located in Dhanbad district (Jharkhand). Reports since then have indicated that a glaring neglect of safety measures had caused this accident. It was a poorly ventilated mine where stowing operations had been highly inadequate. Electric wiring was badly in need of upgrading. Even water spraying was highly inadequate. On top of it the choice of explosives was wrong. The Chairman of Coal India Ltd. Mr Shashi Kumar also admitted on Sept. 25, 2006 that the Bhatdih underground coal mine accident could have been avoided if the mining rules were strictly followed. A recent meeting called by the Coal Ministry's committee on safety expressed concern at the deteriorating safety situation in coal mines and called for strengthening and increasing the staff members in the Directorate General of Mines Safety (DGMS).

What will happen to safety in the days ahead of increasing privatisation? The track record of some private companies already active in captive mining reveals how they sub-contract the work at several levels thereby trying to minimise their own responsibility. Most of the workers have no job security and so dare not complain about lack of safety measures and denial of essential facilities.

Another important concern is that of villagers who are displaced by mining projects or whose land has been devastated by mining. Perhaps the worst example of the

havoc created by indiscriminate coal mining is provided by the Jharia coal fields in Dhanbad. Widespread underground fires and land subsidence have destroyed vast areas and posed serious hazards for the people living there. On September 21 last year three houses in Shimla Bahal village collapsed more than 15 meters into an abandoned mine gallery. Such cases are increasing as underground fires destroy the pillars which support the mine roof. In an earlier major disaster in Dhamdih area about 250 houses had collapsed in a span of just about two hours. An earlier plan had sought to re-locate 4 lakh people, but people have very serious concerns about their livelihood in the new place. Recently residents of Bhuiyan Patti basti were evicted following leaks of dangerous fumes.

On March 15 this year (2007) ten persons, including eight children, were buried alive when a large track of land subsided at the Nayadih Kusunda colliery of the Bharat Coking Coal Ltd. (BCCL). This subsidence is likely to have been caused by an underground pit fire. More than a dozen homes and a madrasa were destroyed. Officials have said this area was declared endangered a decade back.

A K Roy, legendary trade union leader of the coal belt, says, "On the one hand we've many mines abandoned in an unsafe way after years of reckless mining. On the other hand we've impoverished villagers whose farm lands were taken away without creating alternative sustainable livelihoods. So sometimes they enter these unsafe mines to get some coal and pay with their lives. If they are asked to move to safer places, then this can succeed only when they also get secure livelihoods at the new place".

For one thing the spirit of the nationalisation law as well as safety laws is being widely violated. As A K Roy says, "All the laws are in place and all the violations are also taking place."

This situation should be seen in the context of the well-known fact that at the time of nationalisation of mines, public companies had inherited mines which had been badly scarred by decades of 'slaughter mining'. In these conditions very careful mining practices were needed but by and large public companies also failed to live up to the expectations of safe mining. Important measures like sand-stowing suffered heavily due to rampant corruption. There was large-scale corruption in the mechanisation drives which increased costs greatly without contributing adequately to either efficiency or safety. Commenting on the irrationality of imports of expensive mining equipment from diverse sources, an expert had once remarked that "our coal-mines have become museums for machinery and equipment discarded by others!".

India's coal mining has taken too many short-cuts to increase coal-production in the short-run without bothering about a longer-term perspective. This results in tragic accidents like the recent one in Bhatdih, while at the same time balanced development of coal sector also suffers. Coal mining has not yet got a firm foundation based on environment protection, safety and welfare of miners. This was actually the stated purpose of nationalisation but it could not be achieved due to the stranglehold of corrupt vested interests and the grip of short-term considerations.

It is still not too late to make amends. Coal is too important for the country's energy needs to be left to the vagaries of those with only a short-term perspective. Careful planning with emphasis on environment protection, safety and welfare of miners—carried out and

implemented with the involvement of miners and villagers—is the need of the hour. As the National Mineral Policy is being finalised, one can only hope some what against hope that these concerns will be properly incorporated in this policy. □□□