

On the Edge of Safety: The Coal Mine Workers in Eastern India

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Abstract

In today's time, when the world is rife with discourse on strategies and propositions for bringing down coal consumption, the centuries old practice of extracting the black diamond still plays a dominant role in the Indian economy. The transition to green energy consumption and alternative technology for fuel demands brings with it challenges of accommodating the communities dependent on coal for their livelihood, thus making adaptation plans and rehabilitation schemes complex and their execution - a long-drawn process. Although production, trade and commerce fuelled by coal mining, through the years, have reinforced the growth of coal towns and planned steel cities that have been designed with self-sustaining civic amenities and social security and benefits and welfare schemes for employees and residents, the risks posed by occupational hazards at such sites of production induce conflicts between development, provision of protection and sustainability. Operations in the mining industry declared as essential service, in 2020, under the Disaster Management Act 2005, during the COVID-19 pandemic, raised tumultuous health risks for workers toiling at the coal mines, threatening them with the infectious disease in a work environment encumbered with the menaces of coal extraction. This study attempts to trace the challenges of safety for workers at the coal mines during the phases of pandemic due to the outbreak of COVID-19. While the Directorate General of Mines Safety (DGMS) in India, assured of safety measures in the mining industry during lockdown, the workers were reported to have struggled to keep themselves at bay from contracting the infectious disease. Doubled with the health problems the mine workers already suffer in the risky and polluted work environment, at times, labourers had to bear the burden of occupational hazards, and carry on the work despite sickness; leave or absence from work not only meant financial losses, but also aggravated the possibilities of losing jobs, thus, jeopardising survival during the pandemic. Workers at the mines struggle with the precarious nature of extraction of minerals, owing to the contractual nature of employment for some, whereas temporary engagement for others. The restrictions of the pandemic left the informal miners picking at the coal seams of both operational and abandoned mines with little options of earning livelihood.