

## **In Search of Sustenance: Opportunities and Challenges in the Coalfields of Bengal**

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Working out a livelihood in the coal mines often comes at the cost of life risk, despite the opportunities of income that the economic activity has to offer. The western half of the erstwhile district of Bardhaman, now delineated as the Paschim Bardhaman district in the state of West Bengal, in India, holds within its confines the urban industrial corridor of Asansol-Durgapur. This urban area constitutes the second largest urban agglomeration of Bengal, following Kolkata metropolitan area. The opening of coal mines in the region since late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (initially privately-owned, thereafter British controlled and eventually nationalised) predates the development of the industrial corridor. Commencement of operation of the coal mines led to the establishment of mining towns, which initially witnessed people migrating from the neighbouring districts in West Bengal to populate localities surrounding the then settlement of Searsole (Raniganj) under zamindari rule. Indigenous population of marginalised castes and tribal people were joined by other communities migrating into the region around 1820s. Consequently, people also started migrating and settling down from nearby districts of Jharkhand (then part of Bihar), Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Bordering the plateau fringe of Chota Nagpur, this region is also the locus of large and medium scale manufacturing industries which subsequently grew, triggered by the opening of mines and demand of iron and steel in the early half of twentieth century and the decade following Indian independence. This part of the state had thus received an overwhelming influx of migrants in two distinct phases of the twentieth century – one during iron and steel industry boom in 1920s and the other in the decades of 1950s and 1960s owing to migration of workers finding employment in the industries of public sector undertakings in the region.

Asansol-Durgapur industrial region seated at the heartland of the coal reserves of Raniganj Coalfields (RCF) has acted as an immigrant economy at a micro regional scale and has held an important position in the economic and urban development of West Bengal. However, the environmental and health hazards looming large in the Raniganj Coalfields of Bengal draw attention to the dichotomy of development and degradation. Temporary and permanent migration of workers into the income opportune locales of collieries is obscure at present, owing to the fact that employment provision by the mining authority Eastern Coalfields Limited (ECL) is in most cases on contractual-basis with coal production revealing an irregular trend over the last few decades; thereby placing question on the future prospects of coal mining as a promising occupation in the region. Illegal access to mines now commonly replaces the earlier documented settling down of workers in the environs of coalfields. With the opportunities of income, come in the challenges of maintaining safe and healthy work environment.

The Raniganj Coalfields of Bengal not only offer myriad sources of income, for those engaged in extraction of coal and associated with allied occupations and ancillary industries, but also reel in issues of sustainability. With the multitude of dwellers residing over acres of unstable land sprawling through vast stretches of collieries and across townships alike -

vulnerability and safety of those migrating to work the coal seams as well as those settled in the vicinity, specifically in the census towns close to coal mines raise environmental and social concerns. The paper attempts to trace the significance of coal mining as an industry in West Bengal, with focus on environmental problems and risks associated with coal mining as an occupation for those migrating to the coalfields of Raniganj and for those settled in the towns and cities nearby. This research seeks to look into the initiatives taken up for protection of workers and the healthcare facilities accessible to the inhabitants of the coalfields.