



CHANGES IN COAL MINING SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Government of India has, in recent years, taken multiple steps to encourage private sector participation, adopt a more holistic approach towards expanding its coal base, and improve efficiency in the sector as a whole. However, the existing regulatory framework in India is not adequately developed or in tune with international standards that the extractive industries sector have been putting together. It is thus crucial for the Indian coal industry to consider changes in its regulatory environment to make it a par with the international standards to meet the critical requirement for energy security. In fact coal mining society is passing through havoc changes due to Government's newly introduced multifold policies. The industrial relation now has changed immensely than the previous practices. Coal industry, which contributes 67 percent of total energy requirements of our country. After two phases nationalization the industry witnessed certain developments, which have implications for the human resources management and industrial relation. In the beginning of the 90s one important event was the introduction of the new economic policy and this has a great influence over the coal mine sector. Impact of the policy change is the introduction of a number of private operators in the coal production. Broadly, new economic policy initiated the gradual withdrawal of state from the control of basic industry and infrastructure. Coal mines are no exception in this regard. So the effect of new economic policy in the consequence of globalization also falls on the coal sectors. We now see what sort of impact of policy change has taken place upon the coal sector and coal workers. This article tries to examine the changes taken place due to policy changes and changes in general outlook of the people of coal mines in which they live. Now the industrial relation as well as the mechanism of work has been changed drastically. The traditional practice of work and mental outlook is gradually replacing with global method. It was noticed that people associated in this industry has started accepting the wider scope of work culture.

Key words: Industrial relation, Human resource development, Coal mines, Nationalization, Mines act, Strike, Trade union, Industrialization, Democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Changes are natural. Everything under the sky is changing. Coal mining society comprising of huge heterogeneous work force is also under the process of change. Industrial relation culture in the coal mining industry has undergone havoc change. Right from the pattern of mining with the old industrial relation culture to its modern mining supported by the sophisticated technology having matching workforce is one of the important aspects of change. Industrial relations have three faces: science building, problem solving, and ethical. In the science building face, industrial relations is part of the social sciences, and it seeks to understand the employment relationship and its institutions through high-quality, rigorous research. Simply the relationship between employer and employee is called Industrial Relation. But it also covers the relation between employer vs. employer and employees vs. employees. To safeguard the interests of the all the parties, harmonious relationship is necessary for both employers and employees of the production. In order to maintain good

relationship with the employees, the main functions of every organization should avoid any dispute with them or settle it as early as possible, so as to ensure industrial peace and harmony with higher productivity. The Industrial Relation relations also called as labor - management, employee-employers relations. So the relationship between Employer and employee or trade unions is called Industrial Relation. Harmonious relationship is necessary for both employers and employees to safeguard the interests of the both the parties of the production. In order to maintain good relationship with the employees, the main functions of every organization is to avoid any dispute with them or settle it as early as possible so as to ensure industrial peace and higher productivity. Personnel management is mainly concerned with the human relation in industry because the main theme of personnel management is to get the work done by the human power and it fails in its objectives if good industrial relation is not maintained. In other words good Industrial Relation means industrial peace, which is necessary for better and higher productions and productivity. This study is a comparison between pre independence and post independence era of IR aspects in coalmines.

In 19th century a number of coalmines came in to being where Britishers played a major role. There after came Bengal Coal Company, Equitable coals company etc the major coal giant in the coal industry. Later on Karam Chand Thapper (KCT), Haridas Mundra, and Karnani Groups etc- the national companies came to play a major role in coal mining industry in West Bengal. Work forces were hired from the then central province. Under ground coal cutting job was hazardous and wages of the miner were negligible. There was no sufficient legislation to protect the interest of coal miners. In such scenario the relation between the work force and mine owners was very much strained – almost like master slave relation.

Now the Industrial Relation culture has undergone changes. The feudal culture has been substituted by the corporate culture having well-organized HRD wing. The department of Human Resource Development in Coal India has been set up to deal with the development of existing Human Resources also, it is looking ahead with clear perspective to all-round growth of manpower to fulfill demand of production vis-a-vis technology. With the change in the scenario with reference to status of mine, specifically in ECL (mostly cover the territory of West Bengal) the vision of the company, health of organization - profit & loss, criteria for raising productivity, cost parameters and criteria for excellence in performance for survival of the company are being changed. And this way new industrial relation - democratic in nature is developed gradually through bilateral relation between employer and employee

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

This study was persuaded with the following objectives,

- To identify the quality of changes in Industrial relation culture.
- Relevance of changes in contemporary society in West Bengal.
- To ascertain the aspects of progressive transformation of IR culture.
- To know the direction of changes in industrial relation in coal mines in contemporary west Bengal.

METHODS OF STUDY

For the present study secondary sources are used for data collection. Content analysis method is also used for this purpose .The field study was conducted during 2010. However to understand the present scenario through participant observation the executives and workers of

coalmines were interviewed. For this purpose the samples were selected randomly from several collieries in E.C.L. The samples were taken from several strata starting from line level worker to top executives from various areas and collieries of E.C.L.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Various aspects of changes in industrial relation in coal mining society in West Bengal. Coal is said to be Black Diamond- the terminology aptly given to coal. The coal being the base of many industries contributes a lot towards the GDP of the country. At the time of inception of the industry coal mining was not as easy as it is present day. It was hazardous. Underground coal mining through pits or inclines was fraught with danger of explosion for explosive gas like Carbon Monoxide, Methane. There was danger of inundation, roof falling, air blasting etc. Almost all the underground mining was death trap. Incidence of accidents was kept suppressed at that time. The workforce was hired from outside Bengal as because the local people were not interested for job in the coal mining industry. Before them mining job was hazardous and laborious. They preferred only white colour job. At that time workers from central province came as underground miners. They were gradually called Gorokhpuria loaders – in short GKP loaders. Also miners from Bilashpur known as Bilashpuria loaders – in short BP loaders were hired. Such workers lost their identity and they were recognized through their token number. All such loaders used to come in a group and there was a group captain who used to control these miners. Sometimes these miners used to flee from the mines since the underground job was very difficult. The wages of such miners were very low. There was no sufficient legislation to protect their interest or right of the miners. The relation was just strain between employer and employee like between capitalist and workers in the process of production. Government attitude was to follow laissez-faire policy in this regard. It's a pre independent scenario.

In order to protect the interest of workmen to improve the industrial relation Government had taken certain initiatives. In 1923 The workmen compensation act, in 1926 Trade union act and Payment of wages act 1936 came in to being. But these pieces of legislation were almost kept in the book without any implementation. This scenario of coal mining society before independence will help in understanding the aspect of industrial relation at that time. In such situation the relation between the labour force and the mine owner were very much strained. The work force was illiterate and the owners were totally reluctant to provide the basic amenities like education, health care and good wages. There was no provision of good accommodation, safe drinking water. Surrounding environment was totally unhygienic. Almost unlettered, exploited as if destined to suffer, working mass in one side and wealthy mine owner living on the blood of thousand bereaved in other with antagonistic contradiction was the picture behind the dismal strained industrial aspect.

Only after independence the industrial relation scenario in the coal mining industry had started changing very fast. People got freedom after a prolonged foreign rule. The wave of freedom started penetrating all sphere of society of Bengal. Society in coal industry could not be the exception. A number of legislation namely Industrial disputes act 1947; Minimum wages act 1948, CMPF act, Mines act 1952, etc came into existence. As if these pieces of legislation would bring about total emancipation of the working masses and that too overnight. Suppressed anguished was now released giving rise to militant trade unionism with its ugly instruments of intimidation, gherao etc to force the management to yield to even its unethical demand. The role of trade unionism started changing. The industrial relation got changed. Strike could be called at grass root level and on a trivial issue. The workers also resorted to wildcat shrike. So the industrial relation was not up to the mark and in which union took upper hand.

Coal mining industry was nationalized in 1971(coking coal) and in 1973(non coking coal) and it was thought of that there would be very good industrial relation good enough to bring remarkable changes in coal mining industry. Public sector industry signed wage agreement one after another thereby ameliorating lot of its workers. The coal mining people were getting very good pay packets matching that of the standard business houses. Coal mining society had changed itself substantially by this time- their skill had developed, now they had multifolded rights. Their trade union was all-powerful having backing of state and central statesman. Now pattern of strike had changed. Gherao etc was the story of past days.

So there has been marked shift in quality of industrial relation from the earlier to later phases. Earlier quality of IR was feudal type- strained where the mine owners were all in all and workers had no right to establish their reasonable demand. After independence the IR got changed where there was almost balance of power between the workforces. But still there was room for improvement in IR. Still true democracy was not established in IR aspect. Only after nationalization of coal mines the system of participatory management gradually emerged as a controller of industrial relation. The problems were sought to be solved by mutual negotiation since the government itself controlled the industry.

The western part of west Bengal had witnessed the industrialization before independence. Durgapur steel plants with other allied industries had history of planned growth. Having large percentage of literacy they maintain a good industrial relation but unlike these industries coal industry as a compact industry practically came into existence only after its nationalization where illiteracy was still a curse. So the pattern of industrial relation was different from the other industries of West Bengal. Coal industry was good paymaster. As such it had influenced the consuming capacity of the masses particularly in Asansol, Durgapur urban area. Still its workers have not been able to rise to occasion like their counterpart in other industries. They failed to play a progressive role in industrial relation culture in their own industry.

Now in IR aspect management is providing training matching with its technology and environment irrespective of cadre. The management is analyzing the project requirement. Personnel in skilled and non-skilled categories are being trained for optimum utilization of capital, technology and HR input. Suitable inputs are being given to all the new entrants to the critical skilled areas and the basic courses, while immediate action have been taken to conduct refresher courses for those who are occupying skilled position.

Thus changes in the production and productivity have taken place with the change in technology and industrial relation. Through basic and technical training programmes industrial relation is gradually improving in coal mining society in West Bengal.

In ECL we can understand the present aspect of IR culture adopted by the employer's side. These are promoting and developing congenial labour management relations. They are enhancing the economic status of the worker by improving wages, benefits and by helping the worker in evolving sound budget and regulating the production by minimizing industrial conflicts through state control. The management has given effort to socialize the industry by providing an opportunity to the workers to have a say in the management and decision-making. The management is also keen to improve upon workers skill with a view to solve their problems through mutual negotiations and consultation thereby maintaining industrial democracy.

In West Bengal employers' organizations are desirous of associating themselves with different government agencies taking into consideration the general, social, public and economic issues affecting employers and workers relations. In West Bengal Eastern Coal

Fields Ltd has taken part in developing many rural projects in the surrounding villages such as community development in the form of constructing community well, clubs, hospitals, schools, rural roads and play grounds. The ECL management has extended facilities of electrification in many villages. A good percentage of coal mines workers reside in the surrounding villages of the mines who continuously share their views with the masses of coal mining society. All these happened for very good industrial relation.

CONCLUSION

Right from its beginning, the commercial coal mining in modern times in India has been dictated by the needs of the domestic consumption. On account of the growing needs of the steel industry, a thrust had to be given on systematic exploitation of coal reserves in Raniganj Coalfield. Adequate capital investment to meet the burgeoning energy needs of the country was not forthcoming from the private coal mine owners. Unscientific mining practices adopted by some of them and poor working conditions of labour in some of the private coal mines became matters of concern for the Government. On account of these reasons, the Central Government took a decision to nationalize the private coal mines. And with the nationalization undoubtedly the industrial relation index in West Bengal, coal mines in particular has moved towards positive direction from its earlier stage. Through a zigzag path of evolution it has come to its present democratic form which can match itself with other sophisticated industries of West Bengal. Coal mining society can well expect a bright industrial environment in the days which are not far of. Industrial peace will bring about total prosperity which will influence not only the coal mining society but social life of West Bengal as a whole.

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