

## **The Marginal Miners of Black Diamond in Colonial South-West Bengal : A Historical Discourse**

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**Abstract:** *The history of the coal industry in Bengal is very interesting as well as inconsistent. Coal was discovered in the undivided district of Burdwan in the year 1774. Even before the advent of the East-India Company in Bengal, extraction of coal was a very common phenomenon. The official initiative was accomplished by the colonizers to explore coal in the year 1774 and the enterprise became fruitful in 1816. Jessop & Company started digging coal in Damulia and Narayanpur from 1824 onwards. As a result of the Indigo Revolt, the Erskine & Company got engaged in the coal business and later 'Birbhum Coal Company' was established with their resources. The tribal people of the Santhal Parganas primarily started working as labourers in the various collieries in the south western part of Colonial Bengal. In spite of being a labour intensive sector, the condition of the workforce however remained marginal and deplorable. A goods train loaded with the black diamond started rolling from Raniganj to Howrah on 28th March, 1855. This also symbolized the importance of coal just before the mutiny and the transfer of power of the Company in 1858. The First World War had an impact on mines. Besides this, the Great Depression of 1929 also had some significant negative impacts on the coal industry. From 1930 onwards, the coal industry gradually regained its old glory. This paper aims to bring out the evolution of the coal industry along with the involvement of labour force in the mining sector. Coal mines of Asansol – Raniganj region provided an important impetus for the establishment of railway track between Asansol and Howrah. This paper will also try to bring out the condition of the labour force, which was considered as one of the most important components of the coal sector of colonial Bengal.*

**Keywords:** Indigo Revolt, tribal people, coal industry, labour force

The evolution of the coal industry in Bengal has a checkered history of its own. Coal was discovered in enormous quantity in the district of Burdwan in 1774.<sup>1</sup> The coal mine area of Burdwan district was the extended part of Asansol and

Durgapur region of the district of Burdwan, the Dhanbad district of Bihar, a few provinces of Santal Parganas of modern Purulia, Bankura, and the south Damodar region of West Bengal and the basin province of Ajoy River situated in the southern part of Birbhum. This coal belt was outstretched from Mogma to Durgapur. The coal industry had its ramifications on the socio-economic history of colonial Bengal.

To begin with from medieval times, in Irfan Habib's Map of Mughal Empire, confirmation is evident of the existence of mines in Asansol- Durgapur region and the neighbouring areas of Dhanbad- Hazaribag.<sup>2</sup> The manager (training) of Coal India Limited Amalendu Banerjee accounted that, before the coming of East India Company in India the event of lifting and selling of coal was a common phenomenon even in 1600.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Banerjee accounted that 'The Bengal economy started to collapse with the Plassey Revolution (1757)'.<sup>4</sup> Both Indian industries and the coal sector were dragged towards a wretched condition then. Geographically coal became very much evident in Kalipahari, Disergarh and Barakar region from the second half of the eighteenth century.

In 1774, a serious effort was given Raniganj area to traverse coal with the help of some accomplished government employees of the East Indian Company.<sup>5</sup> The effort however became fruitful in 1816. Initially, East India Company was happy with the land revenue which was good enough to suffuse their exchequer. Thus, the necessity of coal was limited and was met up by charcoal and imported coal from England. In 1808 the managing committee of East India Company instructed the governor of Bengal to accelerate the search for coal. With the initiation of East India Company, a machine man named Rupert Jones was entrusted with the responsibility to do the exploration for coal in Bengal. In 1800, Mr. Jones came to Calcutta as the machine man of John Company. He was also very fluent in Bengali and he was known as 'Guru Jones' by the natives of Howrah. For the survey, 99 (ninety-nine) bighas of land were taken as a lease from queen Kamal Kumari (wife of king Tejchandra) of Burdwan. In 1816, he presented a report where he mentioned that "*I was introduced to search coal from Chinakuri and Mudgeah area ... I made my query at these two areas.*"<sup>6</sup> Finally, he concluded that the quality of coal in both the areas i.e. this area and that of England were almost the same.<sup>7</sup> Later Oldham wrote about the coal of Raniganj that "*The coal of Raniganj field, like most Indian coals, was a non-coking bituminous coal, composed of distinct laminae of bright jitte coal and of a deal more earthly rock. The average amount of ash was from 14 to 15 percent, varying from 8 to 25 percent.*"<sup>8</sup> Guru Jones had started the work with two terms and ninety-eight labours in each term. Jones was unable to convince the menials to work in the mines at night since they dreaded the presence of fearful animals like tiger and bear which were fairly common in the adjacent jungles.<sup>9</sup> Mr. Jones performed his responsibility with skill and honesty, but he lacked a business bent of mind. Though his effort was to some extent fruitful he was engulfed in debt and had to quit.<sup>10</sup>

In different contemporary newspapers and periodicals, the existence of coal was prominently cited at that time when R. Jones had searched for coal in Raniganj area. The period also coincided with the coming of young French nature- scientist Victor Tacome who came from Bombay to Calcutta in search of Geological elements. He reached Raniganj in December 1829 and his description, there was an example of the coal mine at Raniganj, whose owner was Mr. Alexandar.<sup>11</sup>

Mr. Jones took rupees forty thousand in advance from the government and initiated the search of fresh mines. He was supposed to pay an interest of 6 percent. Unable to pay back the interest money, Mr. Jones was forced to resign from his post. He was replaced by Messrs Alexander & Company who took over the charge. They repaid the dues of Mr. Jones and acquired the right to the extraction of coal. The profit of this agency house was rupees seventy thousand per annum. But in this period the Indian agency houses faced a huge loss in commerce. At this juncture, Alexander & company decided to sell out their coal asset and Prince Dwarakanath Tagore agreed to purchase this property. He purchased this property in return for rupees seventy thousand in the year 1836. The extraction of coal was done by the collaborative concern of Carr & Tagore Company. Dwarakanath Tagore became so passionate about black diamond that he set out for England in 1842 only to have first-hand knowledge of the coal business. He returned in the year 1843 and The Bengal Coal Company took birth with the assimilation of Carr & Tagore Company and Gilmore Homfray and Company. The initial capital of Bengal Coal Company was rupees eleven lakhs, which was considered a considerable good amount to take off.

From the documents, it became evident that the development of the coal industry was not only limited to the Raniganj region in the 1870s. The other important sites of mining were Egara, Raghunathchawk, Nimcha, Jamari, Satgram, Saddalpur, Jorjonaki, Bansra, Charanpur, Choukidanga, Dosur, Kosturia, Bobisol, Nigha, Damulia, Baraboni, Raghunathbati, Chinakuri, Damodarkunda, etc. Till then the initiation of coal extraction was not started at Ruchipur, Niyamatpur, Disergarh, Sitarampur, or Saktoria but the possibility of coal excavation was very much evident in these areas as these regions were full of resources.

The coal mines in Bengal were situated in remote jungle areas that were mostly inhabited by native and semi-native tribes. These people supplied a copious number of the mining labour force.<sup>12</sup> The authorities of the mines naturally tried their best to win considerable human resources in the form of working hands from these native tribal groups. Cheap labour was the need of the hour. A low-class section of Hindu Society like the Santal along with the *Bauris* did mining jobs never refused the prospect of working underground. Throughout the nineteenth century, the mining extraction hands were preponderantly composed of these two groups.<sup>13</sup> In the Raniganj areas, the

local *Bauris* were the foremost to work as the coal mine labour force.<sup>14</sup> They were comparatively of a lower class as well as caste in the stratified society of the Hindus. From the point of morality, they were much more backward than the Santals, but as far as the matter of intelligence was concerned, they were relatively progressive. They developed their skills in engine driving, pumptmanship, etc.<sup>15</sup> and they never showed any unwillingness to perform collaborative work with other hired hands of different castes and areas. They were not that much attracted towards their families like Santal and Kol tribes. The *Bauris* were slum dwellers and the Santals were habituated with group life, so they made their exclusive slums in the areas surrounding the mines. Later the loading of railway wagon by the black diamond at the railway sidings was managed by the Santal women.

Mainly the tribal society of Santal Parganas supplied the majority of the human resources from the age-old times of the coal mining industry. Even though there was a significant expansion of the coal industry, the techniques prevalent in the mining sector remained essentially indigenous. Humphrey wrote "Not only was the coal cut by hand with pick, wedge, hammer and crowbar and carried to the foot of the shaft on the head of women – but it was also raised by human muscle. The steam engine was scarce and was adequate for the pumping work too."<sup>16</sup> The people of Majhi, Hansda, Marandi, Tudu, Soren, Kisku, Hembram, Murmu and Besra tribes left their society in their quest for work and struggle for existence. The low caste people of nearby Bihar, like Kahar, Bhunia, Bhuri, Kurmi, Nunia, Dosan, Kora were also there along with the tribes who formed the workforce in the coal mining sector. The Muslims work hands referred to as *Mia* who arrived from the district of Hazaribagh in Bihar specialized themselves as a fireman in boilers used mainly in the hydraulic machines.<sup>17</sup>

Mainly the *Rajoars* came from Patna and Gaya district. At the coal mines, they were working as labours and sardars. Apart from the cutting of coals they were also interested in other works of the mines. Mostly they were engaged in daily wage. They used to work with the workforce from other caste and creed. The *Bhunias* came from Hazaribag. The *Koras* belonged to the same race as Kols and Santals. They were efficient and skilled in mining. The *Doms* came from Deoghar and the *Lodhas* came from Uttar Pradesh. Many of these hands became permanent inhabitants in the coal belt, whereas others returned to their homeland after working for a short tenure and earning some quick money. They enjoyed working with people of their caste and frequently tussled with fellow workers who migrated from different regions. They were also skilled and hardworking like the coal miners of England. The *Pasis* came from Uttar Pradesh. They were more aggressive and were interested in jobber and coal cutting. The *Kurmis* also migrated came from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The *Beldars* also formed a considerable number of work hands who relocated themselves from Munger and Gaya and interestingly they were vagabonds

like in nature. They were essentially proficient in cutting coal. According to the evidence given to the Enquiry Commission, many of the mines started working recently but "a stream of migration seems to have set in."<sup>18</sup>

In 1896, the Labour Commission expressed their opinion that in the coal mines of Bengal, the Kols and Gond labourers from Jabbalpur and Rewah state were very much existent. The skilled workforce was mostly collected from Ayodhya and North- West Province. The commission had their logic that the mineworkers had started at Umaria. After the production decreased there, the labourers were unable to find work there and thus immigrated to the Raniganj area from Unao and other districts in expectation of getting some sort of jobs. As per the caste categories the *Pasis, Lodha, Kurmi, Ahir, Koar* and *Jamar* were the majority in numbers who got involved in mines. On the other hand, the Beldar, Nunias came from Benaras, Gorakhpur and Ayodhya. There is an area called Dipopara at Asansol which was transformed as a settlement of migrant coal miners. The labours were carried by train and settled near the railway station and then accordingly they were recruited in different mines. It can be taken in to account that the farming field area of Raniganj was more than that of Dhanbad so that the big coal industries (Bengal Equitable) had to make suitable arrangement for the permanent living of the work hands by taking a lease of the surface area of those fields. In every big coal industry, there was 'Labour- Talook' and there was the arrangement of living of those labours.<sup>19</sup>

The labourers were mostly forced to live in very wretched conditions where they were even deprived of the basic amenities of life. The first Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines for the year 1902 perfectly described the standard of living of the miners in Raniganj and Jharia coalfields at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> In many of the Bengal collieries, housing facilities were pathetic. Often, the employers supplied material for roofing. The miners were encouraged to build their own houses. However, in some of the native-owned collieries, the living condition of the workforce was extremely deplorable. Some of the shelters were just like war bunkers where the miners were unable to stand upright.<sup>21</sup> Thus the domestic life of the work hands was extended mostly in the outdoors except in the rainy season and severe winters.<sup>22</sup> The majority of the workers lived in what is known as lines or *dhowrahs* which was a long building divided into compartments by cross walls. Before the New Regulation of 1944, the miners lived in cylindrical *dhowrahs* i.e. the front portion of each room was arch-shaped with an adjacent verandah. The sanitary habits of the labourers were extremely unsatisfactory as well as miserable. There was nothing but sanitary infrastructure prevalent in their quarters and the authority was totally reluctant about considering the gravity of the issue. The proprietors were only concerned about maximization of profit, which seemed to be their sole objective.

The tribal people who came to work in mines carried with them the

majority of their cultural traditions. Those who came from the Manbhum region, during their leisure expressed their emotions through their traditional songs like *Tusu* and *Bhadu*. The unmarried girls in the villages usually sang the *Bhadu* songs in the Bengali month of *Bhadra*. The songs were sung in front of the idol of *Bhadu*. Tribal music happened to be the regular leisure of the Santhal men, who were good at playing traditional instruments like the flute and *dhamasa madal* (giant drums). The labourers were addicted to liquor after rigorous work throughout the day.<sup>23</sup> Thus, a typical colliery culture that was composite developed in these regions of southwest Bengal in the colonial period.

After the outbreak of the First World War, a number of instances of labour unrest were reported even in the government reports. In his letter to Adams (Chief Inspector of Mines in India) on 5th June 1917, Mr. D. K. C. wrote:

“I have to acknowledge that unrest among the labour in the coalfields has appeared. The position is that it was recently reported in a general way that – labour – particularly Sonthali labour- was being recruited by the military authorities for work in labour crops of India, and that this recruitment was being carried on to some extent in districts to which the collieries usually look for their labour supply. There was some uneasiness as to the possible effect, on the output of coal, of recruitment in these areas and because of the importance to the country at present of the maximum possible output of coal being maintained the committee thought well to bring the matter to the notice of Government of Bihar and Orissa and Bengal. The Government of Bengal have replied that no such recruitment is being carried on by them in the coal areas of the province; but that they understand that recruiting officers have been deputed by the Government of Bihar and Orissa to recruit Sonthal labour in part of the district of Birbhum and that they are therefore communicating with them on the subject. Meantime the committees are instituting inquiries among members of the Association intending to ascertain whether any definite cases of labour being affected have come to notice.”<sup>24</sup>

On 3rd February, 1855, the passenger train from Howrah to Raniganj started rolling in the track. On 28th March, 1855, a goods train loaded with coal with 26 wagons was flagged off from Raniganj to Howrah. This was considered a memorable incident in the history of communication and especially for the Raniganj sub-division. The extension of the railway track was interrupted temporarily due to the disturbance of the Santal Rebellion and the Sepoy Mutiny. Again, on 21st July 1863, the development of railway track from Raniganj to Serasol was completed. In 1885, this was further extended to Barakar. On 12th June 1889, the addition of the Bengal- Nagpur railway with Asansol was connected and East India Railway transformed Asansol into a prominent junction.<sup>25</sup>

In the following period, after the wave of Sepoy Mutiny got over there was havoc production in the coal mines of the southwest Bengal. The numbers of steamboats were increased to ply the army in the waterway for the absence of a railway. Some new industries emerged and thus the demand for coal was also skyrocketed. In 1839 the production of coal was ten lakhs mounds and it was increased to 78,08,566 mounds during the year 1858-1860.<sup>26</sup> The production area for extraction of coal was about five hundred square miles than in the Raniganj area. Fifty coal mines were active in this period. The Bengal Coal Company introduced the railway track of seven hundred twenty-five feet to transport the extracted deep ground coal. The numbers of mine workforce were increased by 25 percent in number. The production of coal by the Bengal Coal Company in 1859 amounted to 1,30,000 mounds.<sup>27</sup>

The Raniganj coalfield region was of tremendous economic importance from 1870 to 1875. An American institution Apcar & Co. started extraction in the Sitarampur area. Birbhum Coal Company started extraction in Belori. The Belorikhatriya came forward in this work in the Lacchipur area. Equitable Coal Company started excavation in Kumardhubi, Niyamatpur and Dishergarh. Madhu Roy and Prasanna Dutta started this work in the Bamundiha area. Bengal Coal Company extended their extraction in the areas like Sodepur, Sakhtoriya, Damodarkunda and Luchibad. This mining works proceeded towards Asansol from Raniganj at a low spread. The administrative change took shape in this connection. The sub-division headquarter was shifted from Raniganj to Asansol. Thus, eventually, Asansol became the epicenter of administration for these coal tycoons.

In the next phase, the Bengal Coal Company extended their coal commerce from Raniganj to Palaumu of Bihar. In 1909, Andrew Yule took the charge of managing agent and it continued up to the nationalization of coal mines.<sup>28</sup> Up to 1900, Bengal Coal Company, Equitable Coal Company, New Birbhum Coal Company and Raniganj Coal Association played a pivotal role in coal commerce. A little later Morrison and Bird Company took control of the coal mining works in these areas. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Upendranath Mondal of Sanktoria village started the individual coal commerce. He transformed himself from a mere employee of the coal company to owner of a number of coal mines in the long run.<sup>29</sup> After the beginning of the First World War, very few collieries were trying to extract coal from the deepest part of the mines. Collieries shifted to underground mining once the demand for coal was very high. Thanks to the demand of the railways, the mines opted for more extraction, thus the price of coal reached its zenith. The bi-products of coke plants were also opened at Kulti near Asansol.

The British tradesman's presence in Eastern India was indeed staggering before the outbreak of the First World War. 86 percent of 849 tea plantations were managed by the Britons.<sup>30</sup> The European Managing Agencies also controlled all the fifty jute mills. Like the tea plantations and jute industries,

the major collieries were also joint-stock firms, 89 percent of these were controlled by the Europeans mostly the British Managing Agencies.<sup>31</sup>

Though there was British prominence, Indian access to the Coal industry was not unusual. The Marwaris and the Gujaratis tried their hand in coal. They were interested in carrying coal from the pit head to the internal business hub. Some Bengali firms were also significant in this regard. A Bengali businessman named Nibaran Chandra Sircar owned and controlled seven Collieries that accounted for more than 3 million rupees in paid-up capital. Moreover, the Bengalis like R.N. Baghchi, S.B. Raha, K.B. Seal, etc. assumed an inferior position vis- a- vis to the European agencies. One-fifth of the pit outputs were still accounted for by British companies like Andrew Yule, Birds & Company and others.<sup>32</sup>

When the prices of coal averaging Rs. 4 to Rs. 5 per ton at the pit head rose in 1919 the coal industry reached its climax with a boom.<sup>33</sup> But 1924 onwards coal industry saw a nasty downswing that went on till the depression of 1929. Railway budgets were curtailed and the demand fell sharply leading to reduced prices. The industry also lost its export markets. The barrier caused by the government of India by enforcing an embargo on the export of coal causes rapid decline. Indian government behind that the internal market should get priority in the prevailing shortage of wagons. In 1924 a coal committee was formed to investigate the recovery of the foreign market by the government.

The depression spelled doom for many Indian-owned collieries. By 1928, 300 small mines and leased collieries in the Raniganj and Jharia belt were forced to shut down never to open again.<sup>34</sup> Between 1918- 1924 uprising of shares made 30 out of 45 new joint-stock companies floated in by Europeans and Indians had to be paid off.<sup>35</sup> The most important example of this situation was of N.C. Sircar, who was the largest of the Indian coal barons made huge losses and transferred all his assets to Messer's H.V. Low and company then after spends the rest of his life as a repentant mendicant in Banaras. To raise the output many colliery owners indulged in the exploitation of the best seams of coal. Thus, overall production continued to rise in the coal mines in British India despite the economic depression. Although the economic image of the coal industry was not that good, new collieries were however set up by the Marwari's and Gujarati's. By 1925 there were at least 30 such proprietors in the Raniganj and Jharia belt. The combined output amounted though 400,000 tons per year.<sup>36</sup> One of the significant tycoons of black diamond was the Agarwalla Brothers, the pioneering Marwari family who owned a number of coal mines in the Jharia region.

Again, in the 1930s the industry revitalized its position after overcoming the shock of the global depression. Both internal and external demand for coal increased from 1936 till the beginning of the Second World War. Fast developing markets were built up in the Far-east along with the rebuilding



of markets in Ceylon. Thus, the export of coal to Ceylon was also resumed. With the outbreak of the Second World War demand for coal once again jumped up. The limited number of the workforce and wagons could not keep with the pace of extensive production. Thus the government of India intervened and was forced to take some constructive steps to maintain the colliery labour supply which was the need of the hour. Thus, Coalfield Recruitment Organization was set up in February 1945.<sup>37</sup> The government too gave some financial inducements to the workers. All these initiatives lead to the augmentation of production. In 1945, the production reached a record of 29 million pound mark. In between 1942 and 1945 the production of European-controlled coal companies however fell by 24 percent. Birds and company, some units of Andrew Yule and Mc Neill and Berry survived and fought off Indian trespass in between 1930s and 1940s. Until the middle of 1960s they continuously exalted even after the independence.

The evolution and growth of the coal industry in Bengal thus stabilized through several phases. The mines gained their official mould from the second half of the nineteenth century. The resources of black diamond were predominantly exploited by the European entrepreneurs and enterprises till 1912. Thereafter, in the Indian capital, most of the native zamindars were pumped in this thriving sector resulting in a great boom in the coal business. Thanks to the two world wars which inflated the demand for indigenous coal. From the very initial days, this industry was dominated by indigenous business magnates who cared only for the maximization of profit. Thus, the labour forces of the industry were left in the lurch and their conditions became immensely deplorable. They were often subjected to unhygienic living as well as detrimental working conditions resulting in numerous pulmonary diseases which most often turned to be fatal for these marginalized classes.

In fine, it can be proclaimed that the coal industry in Bengal which took off in the last quarter of the eighteenth century consistently underwent several changes. The price of coal fluctuated widely in the pre-Independence period, but in the post-Independence period, it increased almost steadily. The workforce had an intimate relationship with the mines. These marginal men can thus be considered as key factors for the development of the labour-intensive black diamond industry even though their state of affairs was always compromised by the mine owners. This essay thus is an earnest effort to compile the entire process of evolution as well as the ups and downs of the industry within the structured system with special reference to the vast number of demeaned workers who indeed endured the exploitation.

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