

**Mine Workers:
Working and Living Conditions**

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Mine Workers: Working and Living Conditions

Ahmad Salim

Abstract

The paper discusses in detail the plight of the mineworkers and the working conditions in the mines in Pakistan. Explains how fatal accidents take place in mines due to insufficient safety measures; and how miners develop various diseases. It also elaborates the wage and the cruel contract systems in mines, which force miners to work, even in sub human conditions. The study says if a mineworker escapes death in a mine accident, he ends up losing his limbs. Sometimes, the dust contaminated with noxious elements that he inhales takes its toll. The mineworker contracts asthma, tuberculosis and other diseases and loses his eyesight. Hundreds of miles away from home and family, he is forced to live in a wretched and often shameful life. The study answers the questions such as why are such deplorable conditions prevailing and what may be the solution?

Fatal accidents in mines are a routine affair in Pakistan. Every year a large number of miners fall victim either to a collapsing mine or discharge of poisonous gases. The working conditions in mines are so precarious that such deaths fast becoming a norm rather than accidents. The working conditions reduce the miners to walking zombies within four to five years. If a worker escapes death in a mine accident, he ends up losing his limbs and is forced to live on charity. If he is lucky to evade accidents, the dust contaminated with noxious elements that he inhales, takes its toll. Having given five or six best years of his life, he contracts asthma, Tuberculosis (TB) or some other such diseases. Starting with a recurrent headache, he loses his eyesight. If he survives all these hazards -- the chances of which are very rare -- the problems of bread and butter, shelter and clothing are always there to make his life a living misery. The sub human conditions, he works in, is not the whole story. Hundreds of miles away from home and deprived the comforts of a married life, he is forced to live in wretched and often shameful life.

The question arises, why are such deplorable conditions prevailing and what may be the solution? The life is tough for every industrial worker in Pakistan irrespective of the field of activity. But in mining sector it is hellish. The improvement in the condition of mine workers is linked to the improvement in the mining industry itself. But it is not so simple. Contrary to the fact that the conditions are not 'better' for the mining industry, the mine owners and the contractors are making millions of rupees and have no intention to give up what they claim the "profitless profession".

In early 1980s, a seminar was held in Peshawar for promotion of the mining industry. A representative of mine owners, himself an important figure of the industry, was anxious only to push his one point agenda, i.e., increase in production of coal, rebate in taxes and doing away with customs duty on the machinery imported for mining. No doubt, with the increase in production through these measures, the wealth of mine owners would certainly register an appreciable increase. True that these concessions would accelerate mining activity. It is also true that improvement in the working conditions of the miners is dependent on the betterment of the mining industry as a whole. Granted that a crash programme is imperative to bring about a positive change in the industry. But we understand that the pitiable plight of the mineworkers is an inevitable product of the dismal state of the mining industry itself. On top of it, the government has not come up with a clear mining policy. The upshot is that, in mining, about 16-17 agencies of public sector are

busy doing the same thing and the poor miners have to pay heavily for their negligence in this field at the national level.

Before we analyse working environs, accidents, diseases and living conditions of the miners, it would be better to take into account the overall system which perpetuates the miseries of the miners, and also impedes the progress of the mining industry itself. Take the coalmines of Dandot for instance. In most of the cases, there is no direct contact between the worker and the mine owner after the mining lease is secured. The following three conditions are possible:

1. Mine owner himself is involved in mining
2. He gives a mine to a raising contractor who charges from him a certain amount per ton of coal. The contractor is responsible for all arrangements including dealings with the workers.
3. The owner sub-contracts the mine to a petty contractor for per ton commission. Now the petty contractor has the right to excavate from the mine as much coal as he can.

The last arrangement is the worst. In this case, the petty contractor gets the selling rights of the coal excavated. He resorts to a senseless excavating frenzy in order to sell as much coal as he can. In this mad race, even the barest safety measures are ignored. In the privately owned mines, petty contracting is the major cause of accidents. The contractor mints money in two ways. He extracts maximum work from the workers at the lowest possible wages. Secondly, he is shown on papers as a raising contractor instead of a petty contractor to evade income tax. For instance, he claims that he is charging Rs. 300 per ton for raising and paying Rs. 275 to the workers. This way his declared income is only Rs. 25 per ton. In reality, he only gives a fixed amount per ton to the owner and pockets the entire sale. Because, officially, he is only a raising contractor and not a petty contractor, he escapes the tax net. Millions of rupees in tax are evaded this way.

Role of state functionaries

The law requires that a manager and mining ‘Sardar’ be appointed in every mine. Both are responsible for safety of the workers. The mine Sardar is a person who has qualified the ‘Sardary’ exam from the Inspectorate of Mines but is on the payroll of the petty contractor. In most of the cases, he is a man of the petty contractor. Even if he is not, he cannot be very assertive in safety matters for the fear of losing his job. The majority of mining Sardars are merely ‘yes men’ and have no option but to give an ‘OK’ report after each checking. We have seen several inspection boxes in different mines. Not a single report mentioned anything having been faulty or substandard in the mines.

To become a supervisor or a manager over a few mine Sardars, the engineers have to work under the mine Sardars for one year. After this training, they also have to pass the Sardari exam to become managers. If a mine engineer gives a negative report on safety matters, he is admonished by the owner and told that since he is not the manager yet, it is not his legal obligation to write reports. As a result, almost all the mine engineers of private mines are forced on compromise. Their passive role is also a cause of mine accidents.

Both in public and private sectors, miners are recruited through ‘Mates’. Most of the workers are brought from Swat. In some cases, the Mate kidnaps people and subjects them to forced labour. In Balochistan, the Mate is called ‘Jorisar’. The Mate is responsible for dual exploitation of the workers.

The tyranny of the contractor

This mining structure, from contract to inspection, is operative in almost all the mines of Pakistan. In Chaghi region on the Afghan border, the contract system is the main cause of the devastating exploitation of miners in onyx mines. To escape responsibilities, the administration contracts away the mines. This satisfies the urge to get too much in exchange for too little, leaving the workers at the mercy of the contractor. The conditions in marble mines near Noshki are the worst. Not only the workers are very low paid here, they are also subjected to forced labour. The entire labour in Sore Range and Degari is brought from Swat. The mine owners in collaboration with the “Jorisar” and government officers sort out all the matters. The labour here is of the following two types:

1. Regulars who have fixed wages.
2. Temporaries who are brought by the Jorisar on contract.

The Jorisar gets a certain amount from the owner for per ton excavation. The workers don't get even half of this amount. The civil servants without whose connivance this exploitative business cannot continue take about 20% away. Despite the fact that the activities of the Jorisar have been banned in Sore Range, the cruel practice continues unabated. In the mines of Muchch, the mining structure consists of leased owner, petty contractor, “Jamadar”, “Jorisar” and labour. According to the 1985-86 rates, a Jamadar recruits labour for several mines and charges one rupee per bag from every worker. The Jorisar charges Rs 0.50 from each worker. The Jamadar is so rich that sometimes he provides capital to the petty contractor. According to a mine owner of Muchch, who himself had been a mineworker, the Jamadari Sytem started when labour was surplus and work scant. He used to charge two rupees per bag from the worker and from Rs. 0.50 to Rs 2:00 commission per bag from the mine owner. Under this system, the manager has to protect the rights of the mine owner or petty contractor. Inspector of mines is either not in a position to protect the rights of the worker or is not willing to do so. As a result, the worker is all alone in dealing with the hazards of this dangerous trade.

In NWFP, the situation is different from Balochistan. In the emerald mines (Mangora), where mining is used to be done on contract basis, the contractors employ the labour and, to some extent, look after their affairs. It was also prudent from a psychological point of view to satisfy the worker digging out emerald for the contractor. After the government ‘took over’ mines, the labour management started. Now there are two types of labour; regular and temporary. A regular worker is the employee of Gem Corporation of Pakistan. These are the same workers, who were working at time the of the government take-over.

The temporary workers are discharged after the work. They don't enjoy facilities (yearly leave etc) available to the regular workers and their wages are very low.

The situation in the salt mines of Punjab (Khewora) is entirely different. These are public sector mines and the contracts are hereditary. The miners inherit the ‘right of work’. The British started the system in 1862. Every miner is registered. Their families are allotted separate areas to mine salt and are paid on per ton basis of the salt excavated. When a certain reservoir is exhausted, the miner is allotted an equivalent area elsewhere. The son inherits the right after the father and this right has a legal cover. After the provincial government took over these mines, it is trying to privatise mining in this area. The ICI obtains 50% of its salt from here. If it is allotted new leases, the salt production of Khewora mines will be halved. It would mean a 50% loss of income to the workers who are already underpaid. The union of hereditary workers is resisting this move. But it seems that the government is poised to dispose off these mines at throwaway prices. Such a move was also initiated during the tenure of Z.A. Bhutto, but he flatly turned it down.

In Sindh, Meting and Lakhra mines are also in the clutches of contract system. The contractors hire labour through their agents and mercilessly exploit them using every available trick. The mine worker is exploited by the mine owner and contractor through offering them low wages, lack of protective measures during the mining work and threats to jobs in connivance with the labour union which in reality, consists of hand picked men of the owners, as is the case in Meting and Lakhra.

Wages

In almost all mines of Pakistan, the system of piecemeal work is prevalent. The labour is hired from Swat, Kohat and Punch. The miners come to Dandot through Mate who decides their wages. His own commission is also settled at this stage. During the digging of mine, the payment is made on per square foot basis and, later, at per ton basis when excavation of salt begins. The Labour, basically, is seasonal. The Pakistan Mineral Development Corporation (PMDC) has two mines in Dandot where haulages have been installed to bring coal out. These mines are 7 x 8 feet. In 5 x 4 feet mines, the miners have to move like a cattle with a pack of coal on the back.

During the 1980s, the PMDC offered relatively better wages to the workers. The rate for one foot of coal excavated was Rs. 180. In case of rainwater getting in the mine, mud allowance at the rate of Rs. 30 per foot was also given. In case of exceptionally hot summer days, Rs. 20 per foot was given as an additional allowance. During dead work, the rates varied greatly. At the beginning it was Rs. 20 per foot. As digging proceeds, the wages increased by 10 to 15 rupees per 50 feet of progress.

It is worth mentioning that the wages are given to the Mate and not directly to the worker himself. What the Mate gives to the worker is another story. According to the people of Dandot, the Mate also subjects the people to forced labour and pockets their wages.

A few miles from Dandot, the conditions in the salt mines of Khewora due to its hereditary system are worse than Dandot. After a day's work, the worker and his helper together get Rs. 30. They have to carry their heavy digging tools from and to their homes after ending their work.

The story of piecemeal work in Balochistan is also not very heartening. The formula is the same. More work, more money. But rates, compared to the nature of work, are very low. Digging of the mine is paid at per foot, while excavation of coal is at per ton. The income of the worker depends on how much coal he can dig out. The joblessness in the off season needs to be considered as in such a situation, the worker can not go elsewhere to find a job or live on the same income for rest of the year. Since the Jamadar also slices off a sizeable chunk of his income, the wage received is further reduced.

The wage system at the onyx mines of Chaghi is the most exploitative. This belt of mines runs along the Afghan border and enters Iran after passing through Pakistan. The miners are mostly local. Earlier, the miners were used to work on a daily wage basis. The mine owners replaced that system with the so-called 'more work-more income' basis. The condition of 'quality product' was also appended with it. If the excavated stuff is not of standard quality, the wage for that day is confiscated. How can a worker know, before hand, the quality of a material without digging it out? It takes three people a whole day to dig out a 3x3 feet block. If the stuff is not acceptable to the owner, the entire effort of three workers is wasted. Nabi Bakhsh Zahri (Marble Industries) and prince Karim Agha Khan enjoy the monopoly here. Some Sardars also have small companies. The mines of Nabi Bakhsh Zahri are the most mechanized, though the mechanization has not been carried out scientifically. Some of his mines are being run in an old

traditional manner. The wages are also determined accordingly through the Jamadar. The average rate per head per day in 1985 was never more than Rs. 60/-. On top of that is the tough condition that the block should come out in perfect condition. This is called the *Gulla* System. The miners make small holes at close intervals, maintaining at the same time the required dimension. In coalmines, the size and shape of the coal excavated is irrelevant. But in onyx mining, the size of the block has to be of the prescribed dimensions. The size and quality is determined by the administration, which is under the control of the owners.

Another cruel aspect of the cunning arrangement is that the worker cannot dig out the entire block all by himself. Nor is he able to pay others. He has to bring in his son and other family members. And this way, the entire family is turned into a family of mine workers. And this is not all. The worker also has to prepare the gunpowder in his home for rock blasting. No gunpowder, no job. This is the state of affairs in Nokandi. In Noshki, the Zahri family has made foolproof arrangements to starve the workers to death. The work here is on the surface of mountains. But there aren't any mechanised implements. The workers have to break rocks with their pickaxes. They cannot make more than Rs. 20 each in the whole day.

In NWFP, wages differed from mine to mine. Piecemeal work is the basis of payment. In the emerald mines of Mangora (Swat) temporary worker gets Rs. 12 to 18 rupees per day. It was less than the lowest 'dehari' or daily wage rate of Rs. 20 - 35.

Apparently, the state of affairs looks different in various mines of Pakistan. But the principal of fixing the wage is the same, i.e. piecemeal work. The salt, which is sold at Rs. 40 per maund in the market, is excavated at only Rs. 0.50 per mound. The underlying process is very cruel, especially in the prevalent working conditions.

Working conditions

The prevalent state of affairs in the mines of Pakistan produces the following three results.

1. Death due to sickness
2. Death due to accidents
3. Slow death after accident or disease

The Mines, whether of black stone or red salt, of emerald or Soloman Stone, cause death as frequently as they yield minerals. The mines of emerald in Mangora (Swat) are also not free from accidents and diseases. Though the rocks here are soft and there is no such problem of dangerous gases, the mines are vulnerable to collapse during rains. The micro dust, resulting from drillings, causes breathing problems and asthma. As a precautionary measure, the workers should leave the area for a short while, after blasting, or water should be sprinkled to settle the dust. But even these simple precautions are not observed. For regular workers, there is a qualified medical officer in Mangora. But the temporary labour is not covered medically. Even they are not given first aid or emergency treatment.

In the coalmines of other areas of NWFP, the conditions are worse than Swat. Here, not only the dust affects vision, but also causes chest problems and poisonous gases like methane and carbon mono oxide are a potential life threat.

The violations of Mines Act are yet another serious irregularity. Safety equipment considered essential in the 1923 Act is still denied to the miners of NWFP. Even the equipment to guard against poisonous gases is

not available. And this criminal negligence is going on for years both in private and public sector mines, posing serious life threat to the miners. The provincial department of Inspectorate of Mines is also not fully functional. The training programmes it started did not prove to be effective.

In Dondot, two levels of digging are started simultaneously at the place where the mountain is broken. This low level and high level ventilation is effective only up to a certain depth and distance, beyond which, artificial ventilation is used. There are three parameters to monitor the ventilation.

1. Proportion of oxygen,
2. Temperature,
3. Amount of dust and the pressure and speed of air to sweep away dust.

But in practice, least attention is paid to these factors. Artificial ventilation is used when the workers refuse to go into the death trap of a mine. And they do so only when there is a real danger to their lives.

In addition to accidents, the level of diseases is also very high. The Inspector of Mines Punjab has identified more than half a dozen diseases caused by conditions in mines, which plague the workers. One such disease is caused by micro dust that settles on the lungs and gradually renders them ineffective. Any worker exposed to such conditions for five to seven years, at a stretch, runs a serious risk of contracting this disease. A disturbing aspect of this problem is that most of the time the disease remains undetected till it is too late. There is no practice of regular medical check-up of the workers.

Gases cause the diseases of eyes, especially by carbon mono oxide. In the Punjab mines, combustible gases that may cause explosions are lacking. It permits the use of naked flame light, which produces carbon mono oxide and carbon dioxide. The former affects eyes and causes headache. The miner has no way of knowing that one day this headache would claim his eyesight. Although the dispensaries exist in Chowa Saidu Shah, Dandot and Khoshab, doctors are a rarity there. Even when there is some one in a dispensary, he fleeces from the labour. The worker who cannot afford to pay, goes untreated. Another affliction is that a doctor barely stays from 12 to 18 months in these areas and can rarely detect if a worker is suffering from such a disease. The ailments of **anthricose** and **silicose** are common in these mines, but often go undetected.

The working conditions obtaining in the ancient mines of Khewora are also about century-old. Most of the workers here suffer from TB and asthma. There is no arrangement for medical treatment. Even first aid kits are not available in the mines and the injured are sent to Rawalpindi in case of a mishap. Sometimes they die on the spot and sometime in Chowa Saidu Shah. They rarely make it to Rawalpindi.

The union at Khewora has demanded the following health and medical facilities:

1. Working conditions should be improved,
2. Air circulation systems should be installed,
3. Filth caused by the use of mules should be removed,
4. A surgeon should be appointed for the treatment of workers.

The mines of Sindh also have their share of diseases. They suffer mainly from the following two diseases:

1. Silicose; caused by silica,
2. The disease caused by inhaling smoke and carbon particles. There is no arrangement for the treatment of the sick, what to talk of precautionary measures. Nor is there any hospital or dispensary. The mine labour organisation Lakhra, has arranged for an ambulance, though it has enough funds to provide more facilities.

The tale of woes of the miners of Balochistan is as long as the mountain range of Sang-a-Suleman. Although it is not very dusty here, but the workers are not provided with glasses; and small particles constantly getting into their eyes eventually damaging them. Secondly, the perpetual vibration of the machinery severely affects the nervous system. Even the engineers and Inspectorate officials, who understand such things, don't pay any heed to such hazards. The workers are not provided with special steel lined shoes to protect feet from heavy objects, falling on them accidentally. There is no first aid box or stretcher.

In the mines of Muchch and Sore Range, death stalks its victims in guise of gases and accidents. In some mines, the equipment to detect poisonous gases is totally missing. Instead, caged birds are taken into mines. The bird dying or fainting signals the presence of poisonous gases. If a person faints of inhaling poisonous gas, "Sirka" is forced down his throat to revive his senses. There are neither medicines nor doctors. In case of serious accidents, the workers are sent to hospitals in Quetta. Many succumb to their injuries and damages reaching hospitals. Sometimes, during floods, the Bolan Stream blocks the passage and the victims of accidents cannot be transported to Quetta or anywhere. In the government owned mines of Sore Range and Dagari, the miners don't have masks and very small amount of oxygen is strapped to their backs.

Throughout the world, modern technology is applied to keep mines from collapsing. But, in Pakistan, the mines are held in place on wooden structures. The engineer, who is supposed to visit the mines daily to ensure safety, goes there only thrice a week. The miners work at their own risk. The train track is also substandard. Due to inadequate lighting, minor accidents happen all the time. The inexperienced engineers and mine Sardars have no idea how and why mines collapse or explode. As a result, the frequency of explosion accidents is the highest in Sore Range and Dagari. The arrangements to expel gas are substandard. When the engineer feels that the gas has reached dangerous proportions, he applies make shift arrangements to avert accidents. In case the engineer fails to check the gas level in time, tragedy strikes. In five to six gas explosions in a year in the Sore Range, 20 to 25 workers are killed at an average. At the same time, the miners contract chest diseases, asthma and eventually TB within five to six years. Sometimes they also lose their eyesight.

The gravity of these problems comes into sharp focus when we consider the working conditions in the mining industry of other countries. In Bihar (India) there are research institutes on mining subjects. There is a geologist in every mine of India. Radical changes were made there in the Mining Act of 1923. The trade unions are free. The workers are provided with proper gear to guard against accidents and diseases. Consequently, fatal mishaps are rare. Afghanistan is considered to be another example for comparison. It has neither a port nor other facilities. But it has vast mineral reserves. The best onyx of the world is found there. To exploit these resources to the full capacity, Afghanistan has planned accordingly. Mines are no longer a private property there. Mining is mechanised and working conditions are greatly improved thereby reducing the incidence of accidents to the barest minimum. The mining Industry of Iran is also mechanised. Turkey is so advanced in this field that it conducts training courses in mining for other countries. Sri Lanka has employed the incomes from mining more for the betterment of miners than for minting money. Even tiny Bhutan is revving up to organise its mining better than ours. They also have problems of dust and poisonous gases, but preventive measures are more organised and effective. This is the state of affairs in the developing countries like ours. Let us now have a look at the former socialist Block, the Soviet Union. Take ventilation for instance. Every relevant variable is measured and quantified.

1. Air velocity during cool cutting is specified and maintained as X-metre per second.
2. If a person uses 200 cubic feet oxygen per minute, the quantity of oxygen for the number of workers in the mine is determined and maintained.

3. To minimise dust hazards, water is sprinkled. Still a certain proportion of very fine particles remains in the air. But this concentration is so low that, ordinarily, if it takes one year exposure to cause dust inflicted diseases, now it takes 10 years.
4. Every mine owns its own sanatorium, complete with top of the line medical and recreational facilities. Every miner is medically checked up before and after going in the mine. In case of suspected sickness, he undergoes treatment.

Trade unionism

The trade union activities are minimal in the mining industry. Wherever they exist, they are so feeble as they have no noticeable impact. This pertains only to state-owned mines. In the private mines, either there are no unions at all or they are instituted by the owners themselves to control them directly or indirectly.

The union of salt mines of Khewora has been in existence since 1928. Its present leadership is struggling to get better wages and working conditions. It is also fighting to avert attempts to change its public sector status. Its efforts to maintain the old status are laudable. If the right of hereditary allotment is forfeited, the workers will be left with no option but to join the army. The struggle of the union is not for the rights of workers only, it is also in the larger interest of the country. For instance, if the government of Punjab allows ICI and other private agencies to mine salt, they will start digging everywhere. It will not only be the wastage of salt reservoirs, but water will also be salinated at a large scale. It will further render the agricultural lands barren, which have already been affected. Until now, the mining is controlled. Privatisation would open the floodgates of senseless and unsustainable exploitation of resources. The loss to public revenue in the form of tax evasion would also be an additional affliction, as is happening in coalmines sector.

Two contractors manage the private coalmines union of Sindh. Both are men of the owners and they ignore bad working conditions and protests by the miners.

Unions also exist in Sore Range and Dagari. But they are totally ineffective. One reason could be that every mine has its own union, working in complete isolation. There is no federation of various unions. Such isolated unions cannot protect the rights of the miners. A few unions tried to play an active role, but their independent status was forcibly compromised. These unions were made to protect the interests of contractors and owners in the guise of miners' unions. The unions of Sore Range or Dagari work in cahoots with not only the contractor, the owner and Jorisar but also the manager and assistant manager. The state of affairs in Muchch is the same. Here also a so-called worker union is operating but a Jamadar owns this union. The workers are not allowed to become regular and they have to leave at the turn of the season. In the emerald mines of Swat, there is only one union of the regular workers and it is very ineffective.

The picture that emerges after this brief survey is that the trade union activities are minimal and ineffective in the mining industry for a number of reasons.

1. Work is not regular and the workers have to move from place to place.
2. Miners are not employed on a permanent basis.
3. There is no direct contact of the owners with the workers. The wage of workers is received by the contractor and distributed by him.

The situation in the state owned mines is relatively better and the trade unions there do protect the rights of labour to some extent.

Living conditions

The life of a miner is no less miserable outside the mine as well. The life he leads in slums can hardly be called a decent living. The sub-human conditions he works under, have pervaded his entire life. Balochistan, once again, tops the list in terms of the miseries of the miners. The dwellings of the miners they call their homes, are mud houses and huts worse than the dirtiest slums. Hundreds of miles away from the comforts, sights and sounds of family, he is trapped in rugged, barren and intimidating mountains. Lots of social evils (drugs, homosexuality etc.) assail him. In the onyx mines of Chaghi, the miners get burned in most horrifying manners. They have no proper places to escape from the harsh winters. Not that summers are any better. The same is the situation in the marble mines of Noshki. In Sore Range and Dagari, there is only one primary school in the entire mining area. As against this, the children of officers are provided with buses of the PMDC to go to schools in Quetta and back home. The same disparity is reflected in the accommodations of miners and officers. Three to four workers live in one room constructed on the pattern of jail barracks. Even this facility is not available to all the workers and a large number of them have to live in self-made huts. In Punjab (Dandot, KalaBagh), the miners are given cots and tents. Five to six workers are kept in a mudroom. Provision of family accommodation for workers is out of question and they have no semblance of a social life.

It thus follows that this important industry of the national economy is still groaning under the old exploitative control of capitalism. The disorganised mine labour, isolated from the rest of the labour force of the country, is an easy target of the exploiters. Only a concerted and unified worker body can help protect the rights of these workers and prepare them for the big battles ahead. The problems of miners are inextricably intertwined with the problems faced by the democratic forces of the country. Only a unified all out struggle holds some hope.