

# The 'ratholes' of Ranigunj

Illegal mining thrives in the Ranigunj-Asansol coal belt in West Bengal, with the local mafia using the Santhal tribal people from Jharkhand as cheap labour.

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in Ranigunj and Asansol

**D**ABUR 10, an opencast mine in the Ranigunj-Asansol coal belt in West Bengal, was closed by the Eastern Coalfields Ltd (ECL) long ago, and extraction of coal from there was declared illegal. But mining operations still go on in full swing by courtesy of the coal mafia. The ECL authorities, though aware of the plunder, seem to have turned a blind eye to it, and there is no one else to challenge this illegal operation.

Along the boundaries of this mine are numerous 'ratholes', each not more than four feet deep, inside which men and women carve out channels to take out coal. There is no record of how many people go inside to work and how many come out at the end of the day. For sums ranging between Rs.20 and Rs.40 a day, these

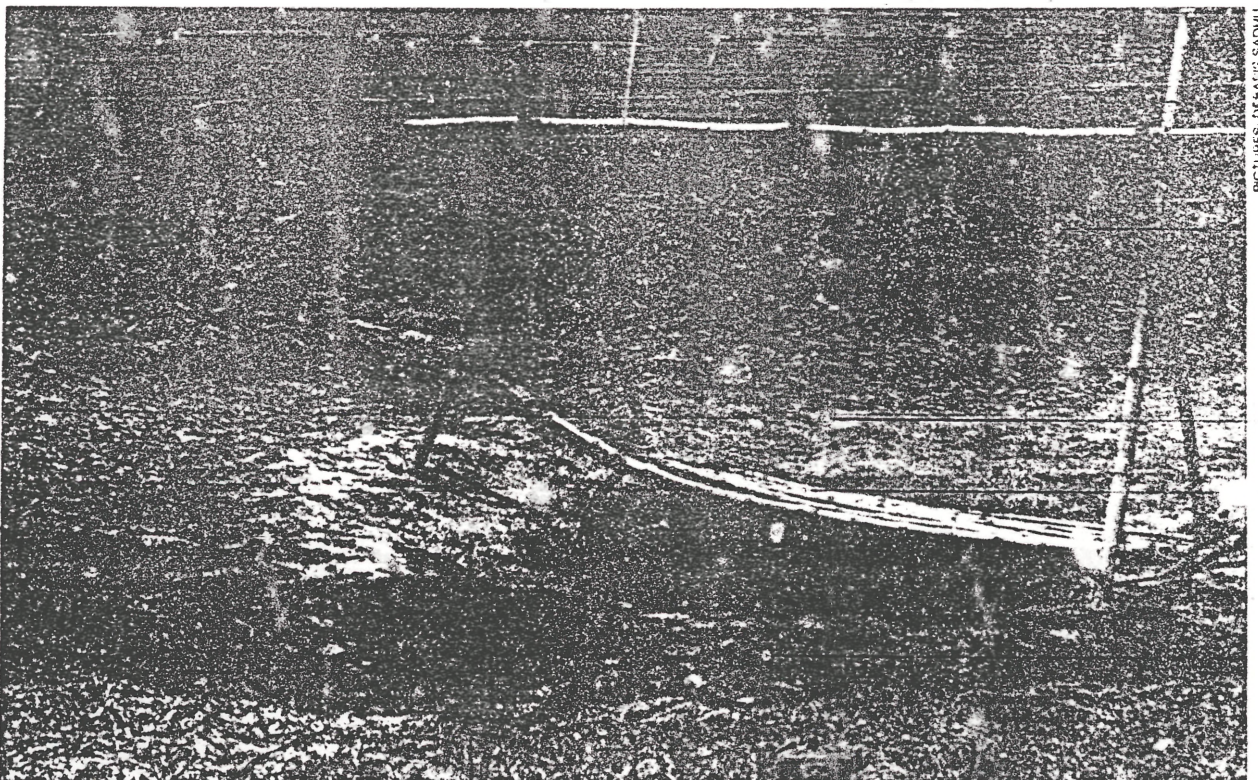
people, mostly belonging to the Santhal tribe, from neighbouring Jharkhand, risk their lives for the underworld coal traffickers. Accidents and deaths are common in these mines, and even claiming the body of a dead relative is fraught with danger because that would amount to exposing the illegal operations.

Dabur 10, which is divided into 10 areas, each under a different contractor, is not an isolated case. The entire 1,500 sq km of the Ranigunj-Asansol coal belt is in the control of coal mafia, which exploit the poor to advance their business in coal trafficking. While the helpless people fall victim to accidents that occur frequently and go unreported, agricultural land, residential areas in villages and collieries that operate legally around the illegal mines are becoming unsafe.

The labourers work under the constant fear of getting caught. At the sight

of a stranger they disappear into one of the innumerable ratholes. They fear not only the police but also the goons of rivals in the mafia. All 31 persons, including 10 women, working in one of the holes in Dabur 10 have been told not to talk to the press. They work for Phulmoni Kora, a woman who is allegedly as ruthless as her male counterparts. She has her own *bhatta* (a primitive fuel coke factory) 5 km from the mine.

Sitting hunched in the four-feet deep hole with a small shovel in his hand, one of them, after much persuasion and assurance, told *Frontline*: "We get Rs.35 a day. This enclave is nearly exhausted. After this we will go to another enclave that may belong to Phulmoni or somebody else." The enclave had collapsed on October 5, and one person is missing and is in all probability dead. A wide crack runs into the mine, indicating the pres-



PICTURES: DEBASIS SADIH

An illegal mining well in Ranigunj.

arious state of the whole structure. Asked why, despite the danger, they still worked there, one woman worker crouching beside a wicker basket full of coal, said: "What else can we do?"

The situation is no better in the other enclaves in Dabur 10. The men cut the coal and the women collect them in baskets and dump them outside at a particular place. From there the coal is ferried in cycle-carts to the *bhattas*. Each cycle-cart carries around 140 kg of coal. All this happens despite the presence of security personnel of two private security agencies hired by ECL. "They take Rs.20 a cart-load of coal," said a worker.

Most of the illegal mining is done in closed or abandoned mines. Sometimes it is done in operational collieries of ECL and even on private property, where workers are commissioned to dig until they hit coal. There are around 1,380 abandoned pits and inclines of ECL in the region.

Often the entire process of illegal mining, starting from employing workers to transporting processed coal from *bhattas*, is controlled by a group of people, each one involved in a particular activity. For example, a labour contractor employs men and women to work in a particular mine-pit controlled by another person, who in turn sells the coal to the owner of a *bhatta*. Sometimes one person controls all the operations.

IT is practically a parallel industry, the only difference being that nobody is responsible for anybody else. Most of the accidents and deaths go unreported and are quickly covered up. Even in the cases that attract media attention – the latest being the subsidence in Dabur 10 on October 5 and in Lalbandh on October 10 – there is no concrete evidence of anybody being trapped inside, though all other evidence suggests that people were working in those mines at the time of the accident.

Most of the illegal operations are done in underground mines; it does not take more than a couple of days to have them opened. In opencast mines, the miners resort to what is known as rathole mining. They make holes on the sides of the mines and burrow their way in. Another type is locally called *kuon* or well mining, in which the workers dig something similar to a well and then chip away at the sides and go in.



One of the rathole-mines at Dabur 10.

The Santhal workers are hired by the coal mafia primarily because they are hardy and come cheap. The mafia fully exploit their poverty. Labour contractors approach a sardar, or the leader of a group of Santhal workers, and have him bring a team of workers to an abandoned mine. In the case of accidents the compensation paid to the Santhal workers is far less than what local workers would have claimed. "If a local man dies in an accident, his family would have to be paid at least Rs.75,000 because of pressure from the local residents and politicians," said a former labour contractor. "In the case of a Santhal the matter can be settled for Rs.10,000 and the body can be disposed of. For a small payment, even the sardar will deny any knowledge of the

decease (being part of his team.)"

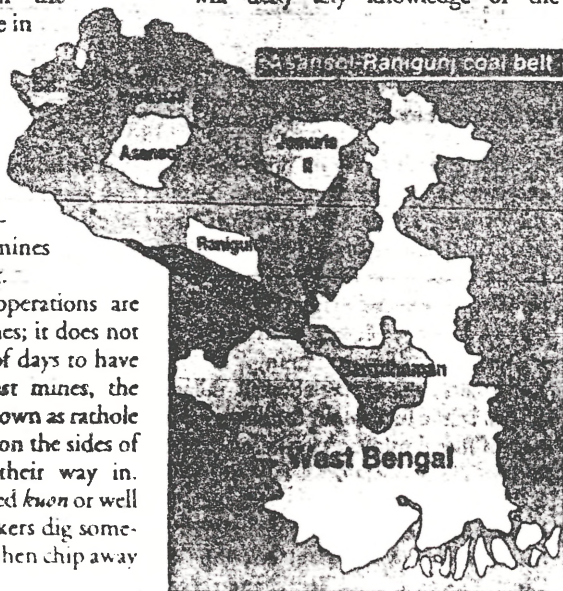
Illegal mining is most rampant in Salanpur, Barabani and Jamuria. A 10-km stretch in Salanpur has 20 *bhattas* processing and selling coal, while Barabani has 23. Anjan Mukhopadhyay, Director (Technical), ECL, told *Frontline* that the *bhattas* were not customers of ECL.

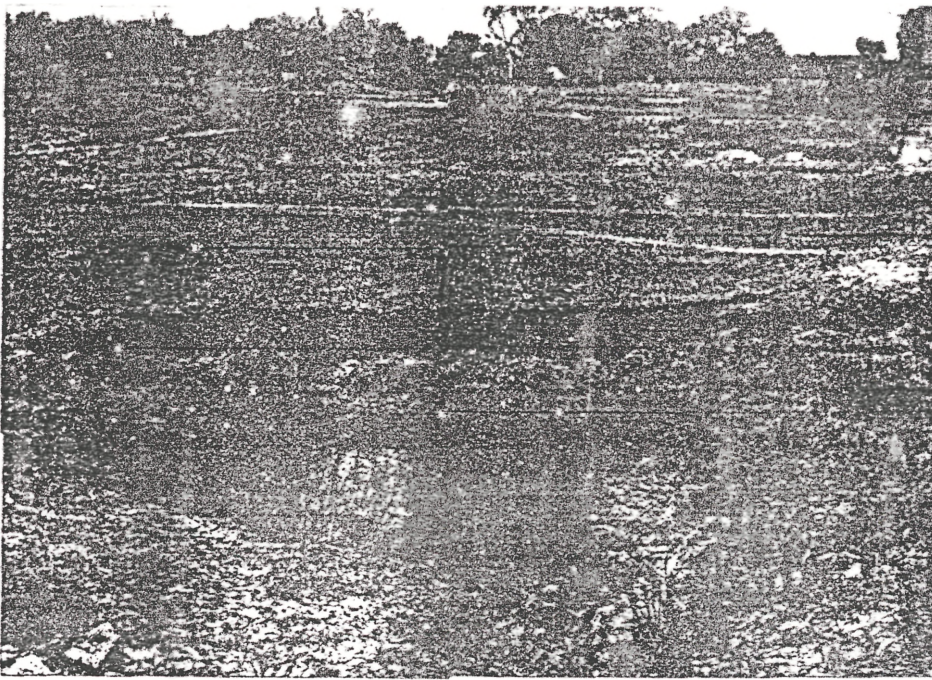
Apart from the ragged cycle-cart pullers toiling under the loads of coal, there is another familiar sight outside the abandoned mines – that of young men dressed in smart clothes and driving cars or flashy motorbikes giving instructions on cellular phones to transporters and labour contractors inside.

The law prescribes certain safety standards for coal mining. It specifies, among other things, the depths for different kinds of mining activity, the length of the pillars, the manner of coal extraction and the protection against gas and other volatile substances in the mines. But illegal mining is unplanned and the workers are unskilled. This has rendered unsafe other mines in the area.

The Left Front government of West Bengal is fully aware of the seriousness of the threat. Industry Minister Nirupam Sen told *Frontline*. "Most of the illegal mining in the region is taking place in the abandoned and closed mines of ECL. What ECL should do is properly seal off these mines so that no one can enter them."

Samdi village adjacent to the ECL's Sangramgarh colliery stands on precarious ground. Even though Sangramgarh is an operational mine, the mafia have





Illegal mining on private land in Salanpur.



Various ways are used to transport the illegally mined coal from Ranigunj.

been simultaneously extracting coal from its upper levels. Three years ago a portion of the mine caved in, destroying a few shops in the area. "The place is getting more dangerous as the days go by, but despite our best efforts the people refuse to be rehabilitated elsewhere," said Anjan Mukhopadhyay. Illegal mining has brought in a lot of economic activity and the people do not want to lose out. "At least here people have some means of livelihood, and that is generating income for the likes of me," said Ranjan Pal, a shopowner. The number of shops in this remote region is quite surprising, and all the shopkeepers echo Ranjan Pal's sentiments.

But the situation is not the same everywhere. In Pahargora village, next to the Pahargora mines, the residents have been complaining since 1997. "Nobody listens to us. Now the earth under us is slowly caving in and the walls of our houses have developed cracks," said Saikat Ali, a resident. Illegal mining in the Kalipahari region has affected railway tracks. In the Rasoonpur forests, another hub of illegal mining, tree-felling by the various illegal operators is rampant.

In the Ranigunj area, the case is slightly different. Raw coal, instead of being taken to a *bhatta*, is sent to places like Varanasi, Kolkata and even

Bangladesh. For this purpose, fake ECL pads are printed in Andal and Punjabi More in the Ranigunj region.

The police claim that they know some of the mafia operators but find their hands tied because of various kinds of pressure, including political. According to the police, despite all the pressures, around 2,000 tonnes of illegally mined coal is seized every month. Haradhan Roy, former member of Parliament and now general secretary of the Colliery Majdoor Sabha of India (CMSI), told *Frontline*: "ECL's coal production in this region is 37,579 tonnes a day. According to our calculation, illegal mines produce more than 30,000 tonnes a day." And all the illegal mining takes place during the day.

The State government says it has instructed the local police to take stern measures against the coal traffickers and warned them against complacency. It has also created a DIG's post specially for industrial maintenance. However, ECL and the local administration keep shifting the blame to each other, and the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) seems unable to deal with the situation. Nirupam Sen said the local administration and the CISF had to share the blame for the situation getting out of hand. "The ECL authorities

have met us a number of times, and we are working out a course of action to tackle the situation. We recently met representatives of CIL and discussed the issue with them," he said.

But a CISF officer said that illegal mining would stop only if the *bhattas* are destroyed. "And that is the responsibility of the State administration," he told *Frontline*. The ECL has a strong force of 1,000 armed CISF personnel apart from personnel from private security agencies. Unless the local administration and the ECL work out a joint action plan, the situation could get worse. As Haradhan Roy put it, "a major disaster is at hand". ■