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From Conciliation to Nationalization: The Evolution of Coal Miner Wages in India, 1947–1977

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ABSTRACT

The period between 1947 and 1977 reveals a profound tension between progressive labour policy and the entrenched realities of a privately-dominated coal industry. During this period, the Government attempted to establish a uniform, need-based minimum wage through the Conciliation Board (1947), the All India Industrial Tribunal (1955), the Labour Appellate Tribunal (1957), and the Central Wage Board (1962). Although these institutions established frameworks for a minimum and living wage, the core issue remained the non-implementation of these awards. The average daily wage rates of women workers were invariably lower than their male counterparts. The tribunal's award used a gender-based family model to determine wages, ultimately leading to unequal pay for men and women in the same roles. The primary reason for the non-implementation of wage recommendations was the Government's lack of control over the coal mines. The Indian National Trade Union Congress, the All India Trade Union Congress, and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha initiated movements demanding the nationalization of the coal industry. The failure to implement fair wages, compounded by the Government's policy of industrial peace and the promotion of heavy industry, led to increased political mobilization of workers. The decisive solution was nationalization in the early 1970s. By bringing the industry

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under state control, the Government finally gained the necessary leverage to enforce a uniform wage structure, leading to a steep climb in money wage rates from ₹60.40 in 1972 to ₹117.34 in 1975. Thus, the period highlights that structural control was a prerequisite for achieving the economic stability and equity that policy pronouncements alone could never deliver.

Introduction:

The period from 1947 to 1977 captures the contentious evolution of coal miners' wages in India, from early conciliation boards to eventual nationalisation. This era saw the state attempt to establish a uniform, need-based minimum wage through bodies such as the Conciliation Board (1947) and, later, Tribunals and Wage Boards. However, these official policies were largely undermined by a significant implementation gap: private owners resisted the higher wages, exploiting the lack of effective government control. A key struggle was the persistence of gender wage disparity, where even official awards codified unequal pay, often setting women's wages at only 75% of men's based on the "family wage" concept. Ultimately, the failure of judicial and statutory mechanisms to enforce a fair wage led to increased labour unrest. The decisive action was the nationalization of the coal industry in the early 1970s. This move provided the structural control necessary for the Government to finally implement and enforce a uniform, substantially increased wage structure, resolving the chronic wage conflict of the pre-nationalization decades.

Materials and Methods: Government and private data have been used as primary sources. Census, district gazetteers, and coal-mining-related government reports have been used as official sources. Historical books and newspaper articles have been given special importance as secondary sources. Based on these data sources, an attempt has been made to reconstruct the crisis of women workers in coal mines by analysing the history of the bottom floor.

Result:

The study reveals that the period between 1947 and 1977 witnessed several government interventions to establish a uniform wage structure in the Indian coal mining industry through the Conciliation Board, Industrial Tribunals, Labour Appellate Tribunal, and Central Wage Board. However, the recommendations of these institutions were not effectively implemented in most privately owned coal mines because of the lack of government control and resistance from mine owners. The study also highlights the persistent gender-based wage disparity, as women workers (Kamins) received considerably lower wages than their

male counterparts, with their wages often fixed at 75% of men's wages based on the family wage concept. The failure to implement prescribed wages, coupled with weaknesses in labour organisations and the Government's policy of industrial peace, increased labour unrest and strengthened demands for nationalisation. The implementation of the Wage Board recommendations in 1967 contributed to an increase in money wages. However, the most significant improvement occurred after nationalization in the early 1970s, when the average money wage increased from ₹60.40 in 1972 to ₹117.34 in 1975. Thus, the study demonstrates that nationalization provided the necessary government control to implement a more uniform wage structure and improve the economic conditions of coal mine workers.

Discussion:

Wages not only affect workers' standard of living but also serve as an indicator of their socioeconomic status. In the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, women workers were preferred to men solely because they were perceived as economical, as they were willing to work at lower wages than men. In fact, because of high pressure on land, women were willing to work wage-paid jobs in the industry for whatever they could get to supplement the family's meagre income. However, with the growing consciousness of women's rights in society, the principle of equal pay for equal work gained momentum (Ministry of Labour, 1978).

In 1900, the wages for workers in the Raniganj coal mining area were one anna and one paisa per tub [of coal]. A skilled worker could mine three tubs of coal a day if they worked well. Between 1900 and 1912, the wages in Raniganj were increased to three annas per tub. The main reason for the coal workers' wages decreasing after the First World War was the global economic depression. The absence of a strong labour union also played a contributing role in this wage reduction (Seth, 1940). Men cut the coal and women carry it to the containers or tubs; the proportion of men to women underground is roughly three to two. Workers are paid by the number of tubs filled, and a woman's share of the pay for the day's work was from 8to12 annas (Curjel, 1923). In 1944, however, a new era was brought when control of prices was introduced, along with distribution control. This measure was introduced to stabilize production, which was heretofore governed by the normal forces of supply and demand, under which prices fluctuated widely, and the interaction of prices and production led sometimes to overproduction and slaughtering, and at others to acute scarcity of coal. Didn't the years 1942 to 1945 see a "coal famine of unparalleled proportions ". This happened at a time when production made the most possible use of coal so that, on the one hand, boosting production was necessary, as was also control over prices in order to keep economic stability in the industry (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, 1968).

Simultaneously, it was also felt necessary to attract Labour to the industry, as the warhead provided them with more attractive and profitable employment elsewhere. Hence, certain welfare measures for colliery workers were introduced, such as Mines Maternity Benefits Rules, Coal Mines Labour Welfare Fund, Coal Mines Pitched Bath Rules, and Coal Mines Crèche Rules. In 1945, the Government of India asked Sri S. R. Deshpande, Director, and Cost of Living Index Scheme, to undertake an investigation of the condition of Labour in the coalfields. He was also asked to conduct a Census of colliery labour. He presented a comprehensive report in 1946 dealing with various facets of the labour situation in the Coal Mines, including wages and earnings, housing, health and medical relief, welfare work, workers' unions, Industrial Relations and legislation governing workers' conditions of work(Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, 1968). The Indian Coalfields Committee, in 1946, though it was not primarily appointed to deal with labour problems, had necessarily to go into some important aspects of Labour, as these were intimately related to ensuring conservation of coal and rationalization of the coal industry. This committee led considerable efforts on improving the working and living conditions of coal miners and providing them better wages and amenities in order to secure for the industry a settled mining force(Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, 1968).

The levels prevalent in the minds during the pre-independence period reflect that the average daily wage rates of women workers were invariably lower than their male counterparts. The fact-finding committee set up by the Government of India in 1946 to go into the issue of granting monetary benefits and concessions to the colliery workers in the central provinces and where are and Orissa recommended that women workers should be brought up to 75% of the male counterparts (Ministry of Labour, 1978) .Following this Report, a board of conciliation was set up, which gave its award on May 12 1947. This award which was mainly applicable in Bengal and Bihar coalfields settled several disputes and helped in the establishing industrial peace separate Awards on similar line followed in other coalfields in the outling areas including Assam (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, 1968).

During the war, due to the acute shortage of labour women were also employed underground and speed higher wages in December 1945 women working underground in coal mines were earning on an average rupees 0-13-6 per day at jharia and 0-13-6 per day in Raniganj with the end of the war in 1945 employment of women underground was again banned (Government of India, 1953).

This Board was of immense importance for three reasons. Firstly, it was the first major trade dispute resolution body. Secondly, Bengal and Bihar at that time produced 80% of the country's coal and employed 80% of the coal workers. Thirdly, it established a framework for the wage structure. After extensive

investigation into 17 key demands and negotiations with the coal companies, a wage structure was determined. These demands included wages, allowances, bonuses, provident funds, annual paid leave, compensation for mandatory idle days, free supply of explosives, substitution appointments, provisions for shoes, caps, etc., railway passes, travel fare, medical facilities, water supply, education, rations, working hours, and the consistency of coal tubs (Singh, 2014).In the year preceding the attainment of Independence, a Conciliation Board was formed under the leadership of the British Government in India with the aim of increasing coal production and improving the living standards of coal mine workers (Deshpande, 1946) .This Board fixed the wages for coal mine workers in Bengal and Bihar, setting the minimum monthly wage at 19 rupees and 6 annas. While the Government accepted the recommendations, the Conciliation Board's recommendations were not universally applied. Wages were paid at the determined rate to workers in only a few nominal companies like Bengal Coal Company and Equitable Coal Company. (Sengupta, 1996) Furthermore, the wages of female workers (Kamin) lagged far behind those of male coolies. The exploitation of these unorganized and uneducated female workers continued as before. As a result, different wage systems remained in effect in various mines. The women workers were the most deprived.

Both dearness allowances and the bonus are linked to basic wages; statistics of Weekly cash earnings of men and women workers in December 1951 are furnished in the statement below –

Table-1

Average weekly cash earnings (basic wages, dearness allowance and other cash payment)of men and women workers in various coalfields during December,1951.

Coalfields	Open working				Surface			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
	Rs.	as. ps.	Rs.	as. ps.	Rs.	as. ps.	Rs.	as. ps.
Assam	12	03 10	8	13 8	11	6 0	8	2 3
Raniganj	09	1	9	11	11	12	7	4

	6		1		2		0	
Jharia	9 9	12	7 8	10	11 10	1	6 8	11
Madhya Predesh	5 5	9	4 11	12	9 1	5	4 6	10
Orissa	--------		--------		8 6	4	3 5	7
Hyderabad	--------		--------		13 4	3	7 3	1
bikaner	--------		--------		8 8	12	4 6	1
All fields	8 2	15	7 6	11	11 10	3	6 4	11

N.B. The rate given for men is exclusive of miners and loaders.

Source: Monthly Coal Bulletin of the Chief Inspector of Mines.

It will be seen that in all the coalfields the cash earnings of women workers are less than those of men. One reason for this is that a majority of women workers are on a 5-day basis, and it is not always possible for them to get regular full-time work throughout a week. In fact, life history interviews with a number of women workers reveal that many of them usually work for 5 days in a week; several of them have indicated strong dissatisfaction with the system of piece-rate payment as it does not give them stability of income (Government of India, 1953).

To implement a uniform pay scale everywhere, the All India Industrial Tribunal was formed in 1955 under the leadership of J.N. Majumdar. This tribunal discussed wage parity for male and female coal mine workers (Shrivastava, 1970). According to the tribunal's calculations, a worker's monthly expenses and determined monthly wage are presented below:

* Expenses: Food, clothing, house rent, education, health, and other costs.

* Income: Basic pay, Dearness Allowance (DA), bonus, total daily earnings, and monthly income.

These costs were based on a family of three adults for a mine worker. The Second Pay Commission created a food list for mine workers that provided approximately 2600 calories. The items included: Rice, flour, pulses, leafy vegetables, other vegetables, fats and oils, and starches. The problem was that most families had more than three members, so everyone had to share the food and clothing. Additionally, the post-war ration system provided by the Board of Conciliation was discontinued. The basic pay was determined by classifying work based on its importance. The earnings from lifting and carrying loads were added to the basic pay. Female workers received 75% of a male worker's wage. If a company was unable to provide work for any reason, a layoff system was implemented.

To prevent workers from having a low attendance rate, the minimum number of days for attendance was set at 66 days per quarter (March, June, September, and December were considered three-month quarters). A bonus equal to one-third of the basic pay was given based on this attendance. If the attendance was less than 66 days, the bonus was not qualified. The payment had to be made within one month and 28 days of the end of the quarter. For leave, workers who worked inside the mine received full pay if they had 190 days of attendance per year, and those who worked above ground received it with 240 days of attendance (Singh, 2014).

However, female workers were the most deprived by the wages set by the Majumdar Tribunal. There was no wage parity between male porters (coolies) and female porters (kamins). While the daily wage for a coolie was set at 2 rupees, 5 annas, and 6 paise, the daily wage for a kamin was set at 1 rupee, 12 annas, and 2 paise. The Indian Mining Association refused to accept the tribunal's set wages, claiming they were too high (Government of India, 1955) .Labour organizations strongly protested the wage inequality and minimum wages. Deben Sen of the Hind Mazdoor Sabha formed organizations in Bengal Coal Company's Sheetlapur, Chinakuri, and other large collieries. Meanwhile, Kalyan Shankar Roy of AITUC started a movement against the Majumdar Tribunal Award.

In 1954, an All India Industrial Tribunal established a wage structure for the Indian coal mining industry. (Government of India, 1956) It used the Committee on Fair Wages' recommendations to set the minimum wage for unskilled manual labourers. For piece-rated work (paid by output), the tribunal decided that both men and women would receive the same minimum wage. However, for time-rated work (paid by the hour), a woman's minimum wage was set at 75% of a man's wage (Government of India, 1956). This was based on the assumption that a woman had a smaller family to support, even if her output was equal to a man's.

The tribunal's wage structure was based on the concept of consumption units per earner. The minimum wage for male workers (both piece-rated and time-rated) was based on three consumption units for one

earner, while the minimum wage for time-rated female workers was based on 2.25 consumption units (75% of the male unit). (Government of India, 1956)This meant that the tribunal's award used a gender-based family model to determine wages, ultimately leading to unequal pay for men and women in the same roles(Government of India, 1956).

The family wage concept acknowledged the essential value of domestic Labour, viewing wages as compensation for both productive (market) labour and reproductive (domestic) labour. It was based on the idea that the worker's earnings should be great enough to support not only the individual labourer but also those family members at home whose work, such as housekeeping and childcare, "reproduced" and "replenished" the worker (Cobble, 2011). By implicitly recognizing and compensating for this essential domestic work, the family wage offered a powerful structural alternative to wage systems that were based solely on an individual's productivity in their job (Cobble, 2011).Dorothy Sue Cobble (2011) notes that during the 19th and early 20th centuries, workers advocating for higher pay often used the argument that an individual's wages should be sufficient to support a family. They employed this reasoning because it was considered the most persuasive and culturally accepted justification for increasing pay.

When both the employers and labour organizations started to oppose the All India Industrial Tribunal, the Government of India formed the Labour Appellate Tribunal under the leadership of F. Jijiyer in 1957 to review the tribunal's recommendations. After discussions with both parties, the tribunal set a minimum monthly wage of 78 rupees and 12 annas for both male and female workers(Indian Industrial and Commercial Service, 1965).

The employers, however, disagreed with this increased wage. To review this situation, the Government assigned a member of the Labour Appellate Tribunal, A. Dasgupta, to investigate the matter. Mr Dasgupta submitted his Report on December 30, 1959, and the Government accepted it. The wage for both male and female workers in service was then set at 78 rupees, 12 annas, and 86 paisa. Despite this new ruling, the wage was not implemented in most coal mines. A report from January 1962 showed that the wage for surface miners in Raniganj was only 21 rupees and 2 paisa during that month(Srivastava, 1970).

In an unprecedented move, labour unions directly participated in the wage-setting process for the first time. Representing the unions were Kanti Mehta and Deben Sen, while management was represented by Mr Ora and Mr Lal. The Government recognized the significant influence of trade union leaders on the workforce regarding this matter. To ensure that the wages determined by the tribunal were accepted by the workers, the Government took steps to secure representation for trade union leaders on the wage board. The Indian National Trade Union Congress, the All India Trade Union Congress, and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha initiated

a month-long continuous strike in the coal industry, demanding its nationalization.The non-implementation of proposals from the Labour Appellate Tribunal and the Dasgupta Commission led to an increase in the influence of political parties over the workers. (Singh, 2014)The failure to implement the recommendations of the Labour Appellate Tribunal and the Dasgupta Commission increased the influence of political parties over workers. Subsequently, a separate Central Wage Board was set up in 1962 for working out a wage structure in the coal mining industry on the principle laid down in the Report of the Committee on Fair Wages (Ministry of Labour, 1978) .The Wage Board, in its effort to set a fair wage, considered the principles of a living wage and a minimum wage, and calculated a worker's monthly expenses at 144 rupees. Keeping this in mind, the Central Board set the daily wage for workers at 5 rupees 50 paise. Based on a 26-day work month, this translates to a monthly wage of 143 rupees. However, this rate was not applied universally across all the country's mines. In the majority of coal mines, a significant number of workers, both male and female, did not receive this prescribed wage.

Although the work of the Pay Commission started in August 1962, its Report was published in 1966. The recommendations of this commission became effective from February 1967. The maximum and minimum daily wage, increment, and attendance conditions for each person, divided into six categories, were determined and are mentioned in the table below:

Table-2

category	minimum daily wage	increment	maximum daily wage	Attendance%
A	5.00	0.10	6.00	10
B	5.35	0.12	6.35	10
C	5.90	0.15	7.40	10
D	6.30	0.20	8.90	10
E	7.95	0.28	10.75	10
F	10.90	0.10	14.90	10

Source: S. Upadhyay, Growth of Industries in India, Kolkata, 1973,

The following are the recommendations of the Central Wage Board in regard to leave provisions: 1. Privilege leave or annual leave with wage 2. Casual leave 3.Sick leave 4. Paid festival holidays 5. Leave without pay.

The employers' representative on the study group observed that they adhered to the view on his subject they had advanced before the Board and did not agree to the extended facilities under items I, II, III and IV as finally recommended by the wage board. On the other hand, the workers' representatives on the study group have pressed for the above facilities with regard to leave and holidays. It is understood that the Government have accepted some of the above recommendations of the wage board. The workers' party was of the view that the rest of the recommendations should also be accepted by the Government and implemented; the employers' representative expressed their opposition to this (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, 1968).

We now trace out the nature of the movement of wage rate. The average weekly money wage rate, which was Rs 13.67 in 1948, declined at a rate of 0.84% per year during the period 1948 to 1956. An appreciable increase in money wage occurred first in 1957, when the award of the All-India Industrial Tribunal (Colliery Disputes), 1956, as amended by the decision of the Labour Appellate Tribunal in 1957, became effective(Subramanian, 1977).In that year, the money wage rate jumped up by 33.69% over the previous year. As can be seen from Table 12, the weekly money wage rate, which stood at Rs 19.88 in 1957, rose by 4.63% per year during the period 1957 to 1963. Even during a period of declining activity of the energy-consuming industries (1964 to l972), the money wage rose by 10.35% per year. During this period, the workers were sanctioned some increases in dearness allowance. The implementation of the recommendations of the Wage Board for this industry in 1967 was also an important factor behind this sharp increase in money wage during this period (Indian Mining Federation, 1965).

An important fact to be noted is that since 1967, basic wages constituted the large bulk of total wages in the coal industry as a result of the implementation of the Wage Board recommendations. Since Independence, the increase in the wage rate has been most impressive after the nationalization of the industry. It was a steep climb up; it moved up to Rs 117.34 in 1975 from Rs 60.40 in 1972, registering an increase of 10.65% per year. However, it declined to some extent in the subsequent year. For the period as a whole (1948-76), the average annual rate of growth of money wage for the colliery workers had been 8.33%. As regards the relationship between employment and money wage rate, for the two sub-periods, i.e., from 1948-63 and 1973-76, there had been a positive relationship between the two. During the sub-period, 1964 to 1972, an

inverse relationship prevailed. Hence, no firm generalization is possible in regard to the relationship between these variables. During the first sixteen years after Independence (1948 to 1963), both employment and money wages rose by 3.03 and 5.29% per year, respectively. But during the subsequent nine years (1964 to 1972), employment decelerated by 3.58% annually, against a rise in money wages of 10.35%. In the post- nationalization years (1973 to 1976), both employment and money wages increased, the former by 1.89% and the latter by 10.22% per year (Chakrabarty, 1989).

It is necessary to discuss why the recommendations of the various Wage Boards could not be implemented. The primary reason behind this was the lack of government control over the coal mines. The mines were held by domestic and foreign capitalists. The Government lacked the infrastructure to monitor whether the labourers in the remote coal mines were receiving their correct wages. Out of fear of the mine owners' hired thugs, the workers would silently endure everything.

Although various labour organizations initiated movements for wage increases, the workers did not receive their due wages. Journalist Philip Spratt(1953) commented that the chief planner, P. C. Mahalanobis, had created a coterie of Western leftist and Soviet scholars around himself, who further reinforced his belief in total governmental control over all work. Spratt's (1953)voice was submerged in the widespread clamour supporting the model of establishing heavy industry, funded by the Government and run under Government management(Guha, 2012).The Government adopted a policy of Industrial Peace. The policy was to ensure continuous industrial production by setting aside all labour disputes to strengthen the nation's economic foundation (Chandra et al., 1999).Furthermore, the establishment of heavy industries was dependent on a regular supply of fuel, coal. Therefore, the Government's objective was to ensure that production in the coal mining industry was not hampered by worker protests. To achieve this goal, the National Congress, through its Government, formed the workers' organization Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) under its own control. The internal conflicts within the leftist labour organizations also weakened the workers' movement in the coal mines.

Conclusions:

The period between 1947 and 1977 reveals a profound tension between progressive labour policy and the entrenched realities of a privately-dominated industry. While successive government interventions, beginning with the Board of Conciliation (1947) and continuing through the Industrial Tribunals (1955) and the Central Wage Board (1962), successfully established frameworks for a minimum and living wage, the core issue remained the non-implementation of these awards. This failure was primarily rooted in the lack of government control over the private coal mines. Despite judicial rulings and the strong protest of labour

organizations, mine owners consistently disregarded the prescribed wages—a situation exemplified by the 1962 report showing surface miners in Raniganj receiving only ₹21.02 when the Labour Appellate Tribunal had mandated ₹78.86. This systemic non-compliance underscored the limitations of relying on conciliation and arbitration alone to secure economic justice.

Furthermore, the state-mandated wage structure itself was flawed by the institutionalization of gender-based disparity. The persistent use of the "family wage" concept by tribunals, which set time-rated wages for women at only 75% of men's based on assumed consumption units, ensured that female workers (Kamins) remained the most deprived and exploited segment of the workforce. Ultimately, the chronic failure to implement fair wages, compounded by the Government's dual policy of promoting Industrial Peace while supporting heavy industry, led to increased political mobilization of the workers. The decisive solution was nationalization in the early 1970s. By bringing the industry under state control, the Government finally gained the necessary leverage to enforce a uniform wage structure, leading to a steep climb in money wage rates (₹60.40 in 1972 to ₹117.34 in 1975). Thus, the era concluded with the realization that, for the Indian coal mining industry, structural control was prerequisite to achieving the economic stability and equity that policy pronouncements alone could never deliver.

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