

Some Chasnalla Case Histories

Rehabilitating the Chasnalla victims' families has proved to be an on-going task. The Indian Iron and Steel Company's welfare officers at Chasnalla wear a perpetually harassed look. Every day their offices are mobbed by complainants: relatives who allege desertion by widows who allege cheating by their dead husbands' relatives; it is a noisy scene, fuelled by the fact that a lot of money is at stake. A few cases in particular are proving to be huge thorns in HSCO's flesh. Examples:

The Kashmiri Kaur case: When miner Ram Singh died in the Chasnalla accident on 27 December 1975, his compensation was claimed by his widow Kashmiri Kaur. At that time Ram Singh's mother Pal Kaur was staying with him. Almost a year after Ram Singh's death, however, another

month, I have appealed against Shakila Banu: the case is pending at the Dhanbad Civil Court.

The situation has been further complicated because Shakila is now living with a man called Santosh Singh in the IISCO quarters, while Kashmiri is reported to have 'married' a Nepali called Thapa who works in the washery. Both women are fighting tooth and claw for the remainder of the compensation money. Shakila says she wants to build a house on the plot given to her. Kashmiri lives in nearby Kandra village.

In the bargain, Ram Singh's old and blind mother Pal Kaur was ejected even by her real daughter-in-law. She is now living with her daughter Jaginder Kaur, whose husband Kundan works on the Chasnalla ropeway. Kashmiri alleges that her job is coveted by Jaginder's son. Shakila is a fiery woman; not only does she claim to be



Amna Khatun

deposited Rs 6,000 each in Anwari's and Akhtari's names in a bank, but Wakil Khan alleges that Amna Khatun is not contributing anything towards her step-daughters' upkeep. Affidavits and counter-affidavits, long and laborious letters of complaint are meanwhile piling up in the Amna Khatun file.

The Mohammed Swayeb case: Mohammed Swayeb is 65 years old. His son Mazahir Khan was a loader at Chasnalla. He has other children, but they are either daughters of marriageable age or sons who are working on his two and a half *bighas* of land in Monghyr district.

Swayeb was forced to come to Chasnalla and work in order to make ends meet. His son had been the major breadwinner for the family, but after his death his widow Shehru Khatun went off to her parents' place with her children. "I have not seen my three grandchildren for over five years now," says Swayeb.

Swayeb and his ailing wife were given Rs 500 each as compensation. The old man today works as an office peon at Chasnalla and earns Rs 450 a month. Shehru Khatun tried to deprive him of this job; she wanted it for her own brother. The Deputy Commissioner at Dhanbad, however, ruled that the old man should be given the job since he had to provide for his family. But Shehru went in appeal to the civil court, which ruled that Swayeb would have to send Rs 100 every month from his pay to his daughter-in-law. "What does that leave me with *sahib*?" asks Swayeb. "I'm living in a broken-down *jhopdi* outside the mine and I starve half the time. I also have to send money home. They are not even willing to give one of my other sons a job here. What will happen if I die?"



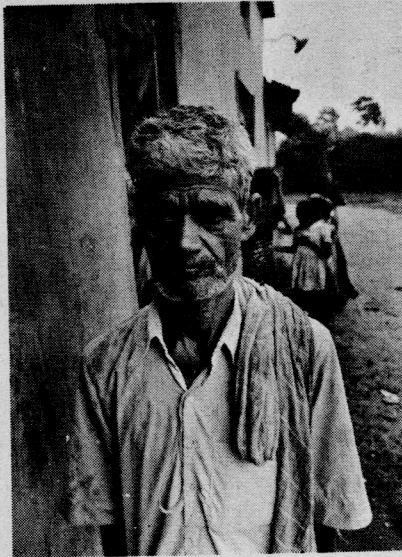
Shakila Banu, Kashmiri Kaur, and Pal Kaur and her daughter

Kashmiri Kaur arrived on the scene; it turned out that she was the real wife. The Kashmiri Kaur who initially claimed compensation turned out in reality to be Shakila Banu, a young Muslim woman from Purulia. After accusing Shakila of being her 'maid-servant', Pal Kaur moved in with the newly-arrived Kashmiri. IISCO had to provide employment for both Kashmiris. The real Kashmiri merely signs the attendance register and has no work to do, while the fake Kashmiri (Shakila) works in the mine's administrative block.

"I was away at the time of the accident," says Kashmiri. "When I lost my daughter in March 1972 I became *pagal*. My husband sent me off. He then began living with this Muslim woman. I was given Rs 9,000 plus this job which gives me about Rs 500 a

month. The real Kashmiri, she also claims to be Ram Singh's legally wedded wife. As the case drags on, acrimony is mounting among the involved women, and the Kashmiri Kaur dossier at IISCO's office gets thicker each month.

The Amna Khatun case: Amna Khatun's husband Mohammed Shafi was working in Horizon I the day the accident occurred. Today, Amna is working in IISCO's welfare office. Amna was Shafi's second wife; his first wife Saida Khatun had predeceased him. Now, Saida's brother Mohammed Wakil Khan, who lives in Asansol, is fighting to obtain some sort of maintenance grant from IISCO. He claims that he is looking after Saida's two daughters Anwari and Akhtari (her eldest daughter Sarwari is married and lives in Arrah district). IISCO has



Harihar Pandey and one of his daughters-in-law, Urmila Devi

The RK Pandey case: Rajendra Kumar Pandey was a mining sardar. He died very young, but left two wives, Urmila Devi and Lalita Devi behind. His father Harihar Pandey was given Rs 1,500 as compensation—the lion's share of the money was shared by the two wives of the dead man; they were also given jobs by IISCO. Six months after the accident Harihar's wife too died. Today, Harihar keeps travelling to Chasnalla to petition the mine's officials for aid. He is provided with sullen hospitality by his daughters-in-law, who live together. Harihar retired recently, but says he was cheated of his money by some unscrupulous relative.

It does not look as though he will get anything from his son's wives.

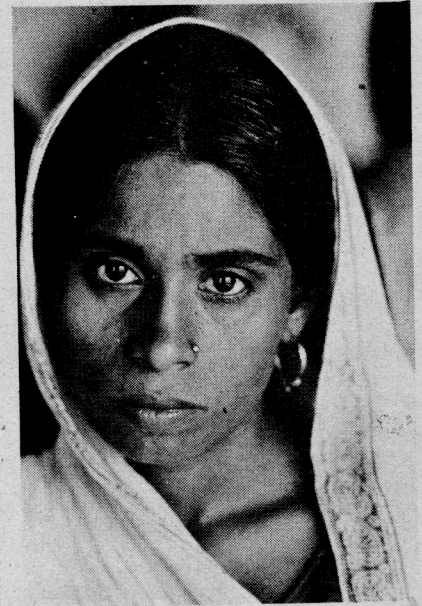
The YK Gupta case: YK Gupta was a senior overman at Chasnalla. His father Basudeb Gupta, who is 71 years old now, was once a freedom fighter who changed his name from Chaudhury to Gupta in order to escape an arrest warrant in the early '40s. YK Gupta's wife remarried six months after she lost her husband; she was working in the Coal Mines Provident Fund commissioner's office at Dhanbad and obtained a transfer to Ranchi, where her second husband works. In the event, she walked off with almost all the compensation that

Basudeb Gupta



was due to her husband's family. Basudeb Gupta has appealed to both the West Bengal and Central governments, but no action has been taken. All he gets is his freedom fighter's pension of Rs 200 a month. IISCO's however, has tried to make amends by giving YK Gupta's nephew Kalyan a job as clerk in its accounts department. Kalyan earns Rs 400 a month and stays with his aged grandparents. The only blessing has been that Basudeb has been allowed to keep the quarter that had been allotted to his son.

The Saraswati Devi case: Saraswati Devi's husband was an unskilled worker at Chasnalla. He died leaving



Saraswati Devi

her to look after an infant daughter. She got Rs 12,000 as compensation. IISCO also deposited Rs 2,000 in her father-in-law's name. The old man has recently died, and his three surviving sons are fighting amongst themselves for the money in the bank. Saraswati, who works in the Chasnalla office, is now trying to claim the money herself. She is involved in a case with her three brothers-in-law.

These are but a few of the dozens of thorny cases pending in the Chasnalla welfare office's files. Kashmira Kaur and Amna Khatun seem to be the most complicated ones. IISCO's welfare officers have developed a wry attitude towards them. They routinely forward fresh petitions to their bosses and patiently listen to the unending verbal complaints victims' relatives come with. "No number of rules or safeguards can solve these difficult cases," sighs welfare officer Mazhar Khan resignedly.

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