

# The Accident & Its Aftermath

“Chasnall was unique,” said a civil servant in Patna. “The government moved very fast in rehabilitating the victims’ families. There were few delays, little red tape.” Had the government set up a cell to monitor rehabilitation, to take follow-up action? “No,” said the civil servant, crestfallen.

In Ranchi we met the legendary KB Saxena at the Tribal Research Institute at Morabadi. Saxena, who was Deputy Commissioner of Dhanbad district in 1974 and was later deputed specially from Patna to oversee the Chasnalla rehabilitation programme, could not provide many details, either. “I’ve been out of touch,” he said apologetically.

Everywhere—including the Chasnalla mine office and the Deputy Commissioner’s office at Dhanbad—no copy of the report of the one-man Chasnalla enquiry commission was available. At the DC’s office, Deputy Collector SN Pathak volunteered some information. “At about 3.50 pm on the day of the disaster,” he said “the then DC, Laxman Shukla, was informed about the accident. He asked SK Das and me to go to Chasnalla at once, with the Superintendent of Police. We stayed on there to summon the civil surgeon and a medical team.” Pathak and Das were the first outsiders to reach the mine.

Immediately after the accident, the rest of Chasnalla’s miners gheraoed the manager’s office, which was badly damaged. There was a lot of commotion, and armed police had to be brought in to control the enraged crowd. For three or four hours, nobody was aware of the magnitude of the calamity. The Directorate-General of Mine Safety (DGMS) and Mines Department people arrived shortly thereafter. Seven hours after the accident, the DGMS team tried to enter the mine, but found it was full of water.

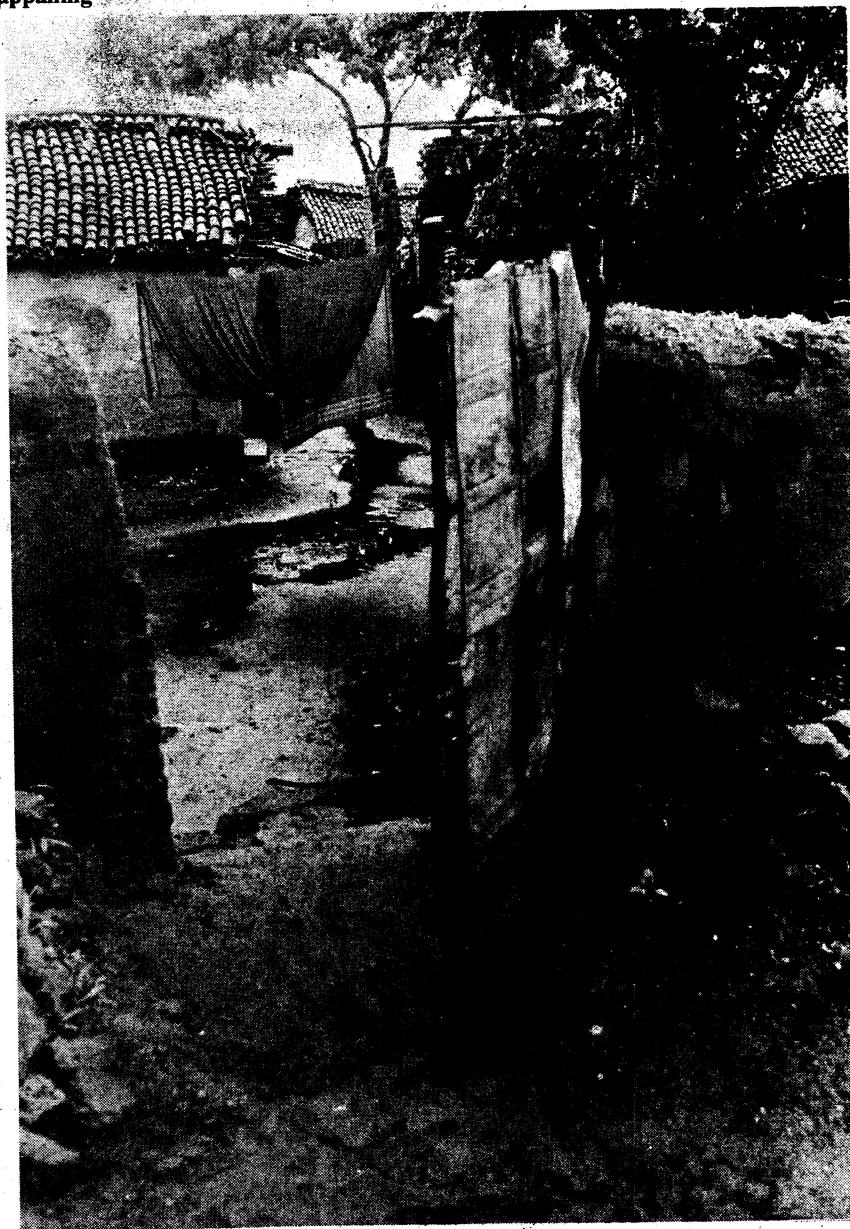
Wild rumours raged through the area about the number of miners trapped below ground. The clerk who was in charge of the attendance register for the first shift fled in panic after hiding it; it took the police quite some time to locate the register. It was only then that the names of the miners who had gone down in the first shift were announced.

The matter was complicated because it is routine in coal mines for the attendance clerk to be bribed so that he allows a worker to sign and go off without working. Many miners who play truant also send in substitutes. Sixty men who were supposed to be on the first shift on that fateful day had taken leave. The manager, SK Banerjee, came out of the mine barely five minutes before the disaster.

How had the accident occurred? To understand this, we must go back into Chasnalla’s history. Chasnalla’s seam

of coking-grade coal is about 90 feet thick. But it is inclined at angles ranging between 38 and 45 degrees—making extraction very difficult. The seam extends at least 1,950 feet below ground. At Chasnalla, extraction was carried out by the ‘horizon’ method—two horizons or levels were opened up at depths of 565 ft and 960 ft respectively. Horizons I and II were connected to the surface by vertical shafts that were used to transport miners in and out of the workings and to bring the coal out.

**The squalor and unhygienic conditions in which Chasnalla’s miners live are appalling**





**Giant dumpers parked beside the two deep-mine shafts**

In the late 1940s, a mining engineer called SK Nag sank all his savings into a company to work Chasnalla; Nag died in penury later on. In 1965, the mine was purchased by Sir Biren Mookherjee, who also owned the Indian Iron and Steel Company (IISCO) steelworks at Burnpur and Kulti in West Bengal. IISCO's coal mines—aside from Chasnalla it also owns the Ramnagore and Jitpore mines—did not come under the purview of the nationalisation of the coal industry in 1973. In 1973, IISCO was taken over by the government.

Prior to nationalisation, mine records were very shoddily maintained by private owners. Clear maps of underground galleries, shafts, and abandoned workings did not exist. Even elementary safety measures like the 'stowing' of disused galleries with sand—in order to prevent fires—were rarely carried out.

One such abandoned gallery was responsible for the Chasnalla disaster. Unmarked on maps of the mine, it extended in a 175-ft long shaft downward from the mine's 'K' level (which was itself about 400 ft below the surface). Over the years, this gallery filled with water that seeped into it from the surrounding earth, a seepage that was compounded by the proximity of the Damodar river.

Less than 60 feet of coal separated this abandoned gallery from a new

shaft that was being blasted upwards from the mine's Horizon I. On 27 December 1975, a drilling blast 'punctured' this buffer. Millions of gallons of water at once tore through the mine's underground shafts and galleries. The 375 miners who had gone down on the first shift that day had no warning at all. (Safety measures dictated that when underground blasting was done to bore new shafts no miners were to be in the near area).

Hopes were nursed for some time that some miners might survive in 'air pockets'. The Navy tried to send its divers down, but they were thwarted by the muddy water. The then Union Steel and Mines minister, Chandrajit Yadav, rushed to Chasnalla to supervise 'rescue' and rehabilitation.

Yadav was followed by Union Labour minister Raghunatha Reddy. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was in Chandigarh then for an AICC session, appealed for international aid for the rescue. Heavy-duty pumps were flown in by the United States, the Soviet Union and Poland. Ultimately, only the USSR's three huge pumps could be used—the others could not be worked by Chasnalla's particular electricity voltage. Complete dewatering up to Horizon I was completed only in July 1977.

### Rehabilitation

Chasnalla presented the government with unprecedented problems in rehabilitation. A rehabilitation committee consisting of Chandrajit Yadav, Raghunatha Reddy, Mrs Ram Dulari Sinha (the then Labour Minister in Bihar), BC Bhagwati, Chairman of the INTUC, and SN Acharya, joint secretary in the ministry of steel and mines, was set up. KB Saxena, IAS, was specially deputed from Patna to help coordinate relief work. He was helped by SC Sankaran, who is now the chief secretary to the government of Tripura.

At that time, the standard compensation paid to the family of each deceased miner was Rs 10,000. Chasnalla marked a dramatic improvement in the compensation amount. The rehabilitation work, which began on 16 January 1976, was almost completed by April that year. "This was due in large measure to the personal interest taken in the case by ministers Yadav and Reddy," says Saxena.

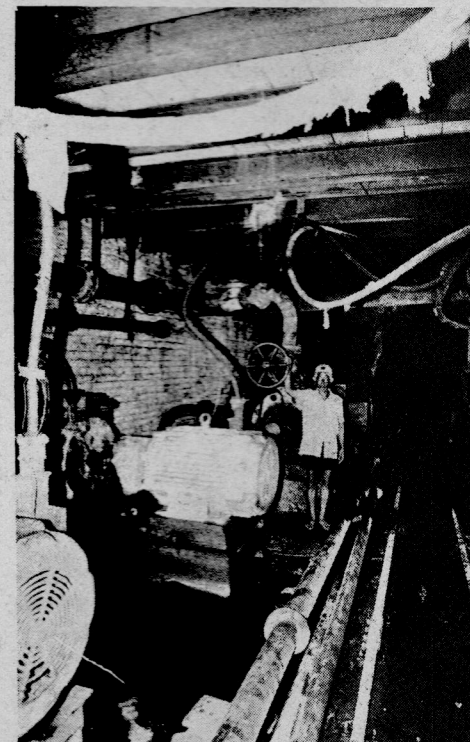
On 1 April 1976 Parliament approved the Workmen's Compensation Amendment Bill, which raised the wage limit for coverage by the Workmen's Compensation Act (1923)

from Rs 500 to Rs 1,000. This meant that 270 of Chasnalla's dead miners who earned more than Rs 500 a month were now covered by the Act and entitled to the newly-enhanced compensation—which was raised from a maximum of Rs 10,000 to a maximum of Rs 30,000.

Each dead miner's family at Chasnalla was allotted a plot of land by the government of Bihar. The minimum compensation each family received consisted of Rs 5,000 for house construction; Rs 1,000 as immediate ex-gratia payment from IISCO; Rs 500 and Rs 250 as ex-gratia payments from the Bihar government and the Coal Mines Labour Welfare Organisation (CMLWO) respectively; Rs 21,000 from the government of India under the Workmen's Compensation Act; a maximum of Rs 5,000 from the Chasnalla Emergency Relief Fund for unmarried daughters and dependent sons; and finally, the salaries for December 1975 and January 1976. All this amounted, at a minimum, to a grand total of Rs 33,500 per family.

The disbursement of this money presented unforeseen problems. As a rule, the miners' widows were given first priority in monetary compensation; they were also offered jobs by IISCO. Only if they refused to take up employment was it offered alternately to a male relative nominated by the widow. In addition, the compensatory money was

**Giant pumps at Horizon I that take out the constantly intruding water**





distributed according to relative need among the various dependents of the dead miners. Most of this money was deposited in the State Bank of India's newly-opened branch at nearby Sindri in fixed-deposit accounts, with the stipulation that withdrawal could only be allowed with the permission of IISCO's welfare officers.

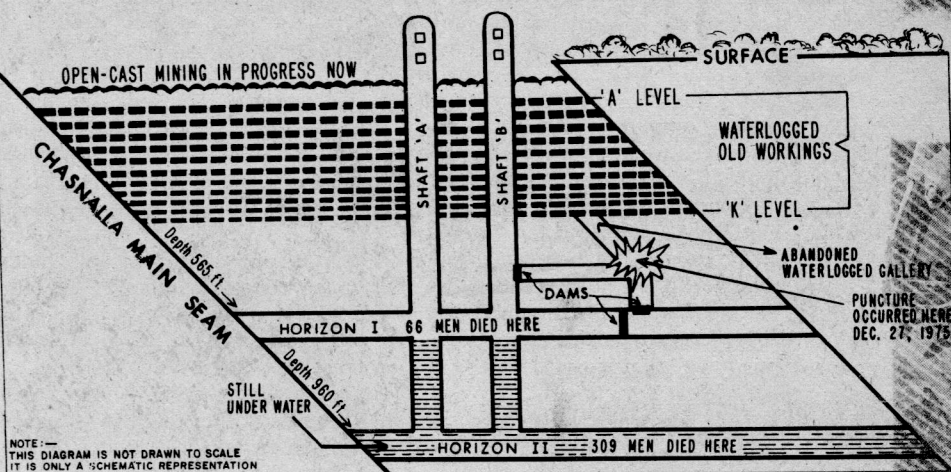
In addition to these disbursements, the CMLWO sanctioned a monthly pension of Rs 75 for five years to each dead miner's family under the Fatal Accident Benefit Scheme. The safeguard clause in this stipulated that if a widow remarried within five years she would be no longer entitled to the pension. A monthly scholarship of Rs 15 per schoolgoing child for a period of 15 years was also sanctioned. Finally, the Coal Mines Provident Fund Commissioner sanctioned a monthly pension of Rs 60 per family.

Problems immediately arose. Some miners had two wives; bigamy seemed a regular trait. Some left behind widows as well as disgruntled concubines. Some widows flouted the rule that employment offered to them would be withdrawn if they failed to look after other dependents by secretly ignoring the pleas of destitute and aged parents. Others secretly remarried in order to circumvent the ban on remarriage up to five years.

The problem related mainly to the money. Never before had so much compensation been paid to dead miners' widows. Naturally, many of those unfortunate women fell prey either to unscrupulous men eager to 'marry' them or to avaricious relatives of the dead miners who could not tolerate the widow getting the major share of the money.

"They were our miners," says senior overman SC Mondal bitterly. "They were also very young, and left behind young widows. Hundreds of 'eligible bachelors' suddenly descended on the scene. What is the point in finding out about the families now? Can those 375 men ever be replaced?" Mondal was due to go down himself that morning with the first shift, but had taken leave and gone to Burdwan. Mondal and 59 other miners on the first shift who were on leave that day escaped the disaster. Their grief and bitterness at having lost their fellow workmen is visible even today.

Coal miners are usually deeply in debt. They are ruthlessly exploited by moneylenders, many of them miners themselves. These debt-bondage relationships are pernicious—it is common for miners to have pay-packets snatched from them by the moneylenders' musclemen. At



Chasnalla, however, under Saxena's vigilant eye, the moneylanders were fended off, and many of them had to write off their loans, which were anyway given at exorbitant interest rates.

"The tragedy is that the miners' families were never so well off as when they got the compensation," says an IISCO welfare officer. "And money brought the vultures homing in."

Allocating jobs to the miners' widows presented another hurdle. At present, 116 widows are on IISCO's rolls at Chasnalla; 239 *malas* are also working in the mine in place of widows who did not want to work. Twelve troublesome cases are still pending decisions at the mine's welfare office. Nine widows have 'officially' remarried. "We don't know how many are living with 'unofficial' husbands," says R Paul, labour and welfare officer.

The management also could not provide productive employment for the widows. Many of them merely sign the attendance register in the morning and go off. Some are given simple tasks like making tea, taking files from one office to another, or cleaning offices. Miners' children were either given free tuition at the IISCO school at Chasnalla or were placed in orphanages in New Delhi, Calcutta, Jharia, and Bhiwani. "There is a creche at Jitpore," says a mine official, "but there is only one child there, and eight *ayahs* to look after it."

"We would be happy if the widows officially remarried and we would provide employment for their husbands in the mine," says Raj Kishore Prasad, chief of Chasnalla's planning and development

department. "But how can one keep track of the deceased miners' families by their widows? There are bound to be hundreds of unhappy people."

"The problem is that all relief decisions at Chasnalla were ad hoc," says KB Saxena. "I wanted to work out a formula for rehabilitation in case such disasters occurred again. But I have't been able to. At Chasnalla there were no rules; we also enjoyed direct access to the ministers in Delhi. But the smaller mines are frequently struck by accidents and there the situation is very grim. In many cases the miners don't even get provident fund contributions from their employers."

Saxena is unhappy about the fact that no organisation exists that can do the paperwork or the organisational work for victims' families. "A department like that could be set up as a wing of either the Labour or the Steel and Mines ministry."

Miners' widows who now work at Chasnalla get a daily wage of Rs 15. The minimum basic wage for coal miners today is Rs 512; in addition, in the organised mines, they are entitled to dearness allowance, provident fund, and other additions.

A tragedy of Chasnalla's magnitude cannot be quantified. As though poor safety standards and supervision were not enough, Chasnalla has not even led to the formulation of effective relief and follow-up measures that would come into force in the event of a major mining disaster. Sadder still, the outside world has forgotten Chasnalla, but the dead miners' ghosts still seem to haunt their families, the mine, and its officials.

—Chaitanya Kalbag