

The Dead Still Haunt Chasnalla!

By Chaitanya Kalbag in Chasnalla, Bihar

Photographs by Kamal Sahai

Four and a half years after it was struck by a terrible accident in which 375 miners died, the Chasnalla colliery is nowhere near being re-opened. Nor are the dead miners' families in sight of a lasting solution for their problems.

One of the Chasnalla widows, soon after the disaster, 1975

Satyen Sen



THE road to Chasnalla is not an easily forgettable experience. The geography is that of an overcrowded, dirty and noisy coal mining area. Badly pitted roads, slush and grime everywhere, every so often a grubby lean-to dispensing tea and cigarettes, earthmovers and coal-laden trucks sharing precarious roadspace with Trekkers that have passengers hanging from every rivet. Near Pathardih, to the left, a scrub-lined landscape ruptured here and there by vents giving off foggy smoke—signs of the vast underground fires that have been raging for four decades now beneath the Jharia coalfields. A curiously animate landscape, perched atop a giant brazier.

Chasnalla itself has been all too easily forgotten. At about 1 pm on 27 December 1975, Chasnalla was visited by a disaster that has few parallels: 375 miners were killed by a torrent of floodwater that sped in minutes through the mine's long, dank and

gloomy tunnels, a thousand feet below the surface.

Four and a half years have gone by since then. Chasnalla has been elbowed out of public memory by the unending displays of violence, death and human misery that Bihar seems forever wedded to. In Patna, Ranchi and Dhanbad, administrators, journalists and local inhabitants have all but forgotten the details of Chasnalla. People cannot believe that someone should be revisiting the spot. No one has bothered to follow up the case.

Chasnalla belongs to the Indian Iron and Steel Company (IISCO), a subsidiary of the public-sector Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL). IISCO has been plagued by equipment breakdowns and losses (it still employs antiquated Bessemer converters for steelmaking at its Burnpur, West Bengal, plant). When the accident occurred 66 miners were working in the mine's Horizon I (depth: 565 ft), and 309 in Horizon II (depth: 960 ft). All must have been killed almost instantaneously.

It took IISCO 19 months to de-water the mine's first horizon. It took two months for 361 bodies to be removed; of these, only 250 were identified—on the basis of the numbered belts worn by the miners.

Although we reached Chasnalla, 20 km from Dhanbad, on a Sunday in late June, we were nevertheless taken down into the mine by obliging officials who wanted us to see the havoc caused by the water on that far-away day.

Only two cursory 'maintenance' shifts are now working in the shafts of the deep mine; each has a complement of 30 men. A huge steel cage, which once had pneumatically-operated doors, took us down. There was little noise aside from the persistent *drip, drip* of the water that is constantly leaking into the shafts and the clanking of the elevator's chains.

SR Chaurasia, the area manager, accompanied us down. The bank of sophisticated electric consoles in Horizon I had been destroyed by the water, and so the only illumination came from safety lamps carried by each

Open-cast mining in progress at Chasnalla



man. "We had to spend Rs 36 lakhs in dewatering Horizon I," said Chaurasia. "The damming was completed in stages." Thick concrete walls constituted these 'dams'. The floor we were talking on was awash with mud and water. "The accident raised the floor level by five feet," said Chaurasia. "We are walking on packed debris and mud." At one place we could see the sharply sloping gallery that connected Horizon I to the still-submerged Horizon II. The walk into the bowels of the mine was oppressive. Claustrophobia seemed just an elbow-space away.

The torrent of water had torn apart the steel supports for the roof: it is now held up by temporary board-and-pillar supports which seem terrifyingly fragile. Also destroyed totally were an intricate underground rail system which used to transport coal to the shaft and thence to the pithead, and the pumps that used to routinely extract water that leaked into the mine.

"They brought out only skulls and bones," said a miner. "Half they gave to the Muslims, half to the Hindus. And they were hoping that there would be survivors!"

IISCO has been particularly unlucky with its coal mines. In 1973 Chasnalla was preceded by another disaster at Jitpore, where 47 miners died in an underground explosion. Ten IISCO officials were sacked for the accident. After Chasnalla, the government set up the one-man, Ujjal Narayan Sinha commission to investigate the cause for the accident. Sinha, a retired Chief Justice of Bihar, submitted a report that was tabled in Parliament on 23 June 1977. He found that four mine officials were guilty of negligence and of ignoring repeated warnings from the Directorate-General of Mine Safety (DGMS). Four months after the accident that claimed 375 lives, five more miners died at Chasnalla. The officials implicated by Justice Sinha were JN Ohri, the colliery's chief executive, SK Bannerjee, the area manager, Deepak Sarkar, the planning and group safety officer, and Ramanuj Bhattacharjee, manager. Sarkar was blamed for the second accident too. All four were dismissed in late 1977.

There are 3 lakh coal miners in Bihar—the largest such concentration in the country. Most of them are working in the Jharia coalfields. Out of India's total coal reserves of 80,124 million tonnes (MT), Bihar alone possesses 35,230 MT. Chasnalla's proven reserves of high-grade coking coal (which is an important input in steel plants) amount to at least 1,000 MT.

Added to the fact that Chasnalla has a very thick seam of coal inclined at a steep angle is the fact that it is classified a Degree III Gassy Mine—which, in the DGMS's lexicon, means an extremely dangerous mine permeated by invisible methane gas that can explode if there is the slightest carelessness. Also, coal seams, if left dry, tend to self-ignite, and so Chasnalla's coal walls have to be constantly wetted.

'Best forgotten'

Four and a half years after the Chasnalla disaster, the mine's deep shafts are still lying unworked. "Such a thick seam had never before been worked," says RK Prasad, chief of the mine's planning and development department. But a thicker seam (502 ft thick, against Chasnalla's 90-ft-thick seam) was discovered in January 1976 at Jhinguda, in the Central Coalfields. The Chasnalla officials are very sensitive about criticism. "The government was very unfair in its investigations," they say. "Our officers, who had put in so much, were sacked without being given a chance to present their side of the story. Why, when there was a major accident at the Bharat Coking Coal Limited's Sudamdih mine on October 4 1976 and 43 miners died, were no officials there sacked? Because Sudamdih is a public sector mine."

Chasnalla's officers are also quick to point out that in the West, deep mining of coal has also been fraught with risks. "Hundreds of miners have died abroad," they say. But nobody is willing to discuss how the Chasnalla accident occurred. "It is best forgotten," they say.

The inevitable conclusion one reaches after examining the Chasnalla story is that IISCO had ventured into deep-shaft mining without adequate

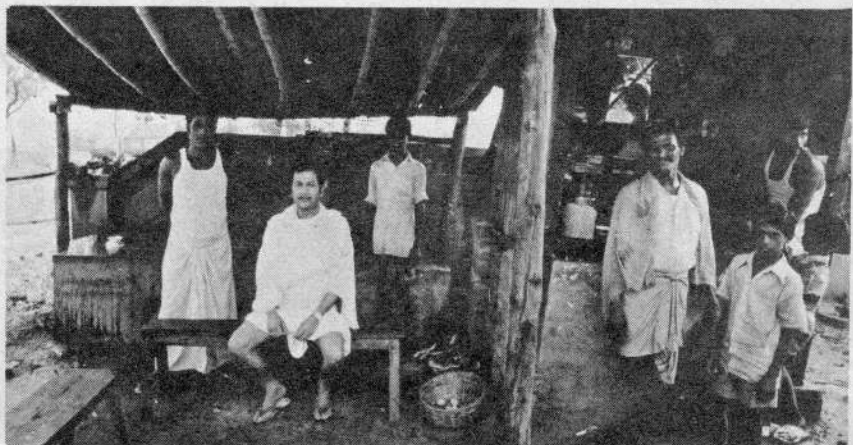
preparation in terms of safety or equipment. Significantly, there is no institution to train mining officials.

Worse still, almost all vital safety equipment is still being imported. **Indigenous** substitution has been either lackadaisical or poor in quality. Such safety equipment includes *methanometers* that detect gas presence (such methanometers have to have sensors attached from the pitheads); *self-rescuers*, which can be worn by every miner going down into a gassy mine and can sustain him for up to an hour in an atmosphere filled with poisonous carbon monoxide; *flameproof motors* that drive mining equipment deep down in the earth; *safety lamps*; and *auto-recording velocity meters* that constantly measure the velocity of air being circulated through the mine for ventilation (if there is a sudden let-up in ventilation all machinery is automatically halted).

Research and development work in regard to mine safety at the Central Mine Research Station, Dhanbad, has been far from satisfactory. Chasnalla itself contributed Rs 1 lakh two years back to the CMRS in order to facilitate development of methanometers. Nothing has come of it to date. "At least the CMRS can be subsidised by the coal industry," says Prasad.

Even more shocking is the fact that the Directorate-General of Mine Safety (DGMS) has far too few officers on its staff. DGMS officers are expected to visit mines routinely and inspect safety conditions, and DGMS approval is required for all extensions of existing workings. In actual fact, DGMS inspectors are known to be extremely superficial in their work. "Many of them just sit down at the mine offices, drink tea, and go off to write their reports," says a disgusted mine official. The DGMS's Central Zone, which covers the Jharia and Ranchi coal mines, has for instance

Omkar Prasad Singh (seated on bench), Chasnalla trade union leader





Part of the open-cast quarry. At right background are the two deep-mine shafts

only 18 officers who cover as many as 90 coal mines in the Dhanbad area; understaffing leads to cursory 'sample checks'.

In 1975 when the accident occurred, Chasnalla was producing an annual average of 1.46 lakh tonnes of coal; by 1980 its production was expected to reach 1.09 million tonnes. The accident set everything back. Last year the mine turned out only 4.73 lakh tonnes of coal. Almost all of this was from open-cast mining, which means that the top of the Chasnalla seam has been scooped out by shovels and dumpers. So far the open-cast mining has reached a depth of 100 feet; IISCO plans to continue it until 200 feet, after which it will have to bring in 'skips' in order to transport coal.

Actually the open-cast mining was supposed to take place in the end—after the deep mines had been worked. Reversing the plans has led to another danger—an increasingly alarming amount of water is seeping into the deep-mine shafts from the open-cast quarry. "At least the open-cast mining is keeping most of our 3,000 workers occupied," say the mine's officials. "But they are not gainfully employed."

Only 30 per cent of Chasnalla's

miners are given accommodation by the mine (the industry average is 40 per cent). The rest stay in two nearby villages—Chasnalla and Kandra, in often squalid conditions. Even the mine's quarters are far from clean and airy. Medical attention is at best woefully inadequate; the nearest 'hospital' is run by the Central Mines Welfare Organisation (CMWO) at Dhanbani. Coal miners are prone to contract the dreaded lung disease called pneumoconiosis, which is caused by inhalation of coal dust. There is also a high rate of tuberculosis and leprosy in the Chasnalla area. The dichotomy between facilities for the workers and the officers—there are 60 of the latter at Chasnalla—is borne out by the fact that 1,200 electric bulbs are requisitioned every month for the officers colony.

Disillusionment

Chasnalla's officers are very bitter about the law and order situation in the mine. "The police here are so corrupt that they first ask how much money they will be paid before coming to our aid," they complain. "The law and order situation is worsened by the

goondaism indulged in by the trade unions and by the merciless moneylenders."

One officer interrupts to say that a quarter-century back it was common for ex-convicts to work in coal mines. "At our Jitpore mine even today there are some ex-dacoits working under assumed names," he says.

"The situation is deteriorating day by day," says RK Prasad. "You will find the trade union leaders in Chasnalla moving about in brand new cars. There is a tremendous amount of illicit distillation of liquor going on in our colony. At least eight Trekkers (an all-purpose passenger vehicle) move about the colony. If there is the slightest accident the mine's officials are attacked by a huge mob. That is why they are the first to flee if there is any accident."

Prasad is bitter about another thing. The findings of the Chasnalla enquiry commission, he seems to feel, were politically motivated. "None of our officers were guilty." The result, he says, is that no bright young man is willing to join IISCO's coal mining division. "We only get rejects from the engineering field. The better youngsters say frankly, 'Why should we

get our bones broken?"

There are five trade unions operating among Chasnalla's workers: the Janata Mazdoor Sangh (affiliated to the Hind Mazdoor Sabha), the Chasnalla unit of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the Mine Mazdoor Union (MMU), the Coalfield Labour Union (CLU), and the dreaded Bihar Colliery Kamgar Union (BCKU) which is affiliated to AK Roy's Marxist Coordination unit.

Roy, who is an independent Lok Sabha MP, is unpopular among both the management and the other trade unions. We met Omkar Prasad Singh, leader of the Janata Mazdoor Sangh union at Chasnalla. Singh, whose father was a peon at the mine, is a quarter supervisor. A plump man in his

early thirties, clad in spotless white dhoti and vest, wearing a gold-strap watch, he was only too willing to talk.

Singh claims that his union is the biggest in the mine—it has, according to him, 1,900 members. He held forth from the midst of a circle of admiring lieutenants. "Only two of the five union leaders at Chasnalla—I am one of the two—work," he said. "The others are just here to terrorise the workers."

Why are there so many rackets in attendance in the mine? Singh denies that union leaders fake attendance registers. "Attendance troubles *sub management ke kamjori ke karan hi hote hain*," he says. "Now AK Roy's people are raising the slogan that only people from the Jharkhand region

ought to be given employment in this area's mines," he says. "What will then happen to people who come from other parts of Bihar?" Singh comes from Monghyr district. "*Is sub ke karan bahut aatank phail gaya hai* (anarchy has spread because of this)," he intones. But AK Roy's hold over the region seems very strong. Roy, who is regarded as a hero by many exploited miners, has men affiliated to his party occupying five of the eight Assembly seats in the Dhanbad area.

Meanwhile, what is to happen to Chasnalla's two deep shafts? IISCO has drawn up a Rs 10-crore re-investment plan. It had invited global tenders from foreign agencies who could reopen the mine. The tenders have only recently been sorted out, and this month a team of IISCO engineers will go abroad to meet the four 'finalists' among the tenderers—two from West Germany, one from France, and one from Poland. But the French consultants apparently have already won the contract. "This trip will be only to clinch the deal," say Chasnalla's officials.

Even if work on reopening the mine were to begin at once, it would take at least seven years for output from the deep shafts to reach the 1975 level! A lot of work has to be done—Horizon II (at 960 feet) has to be dewatered, all the destroyed roof supports have to be replaced, fresh rails for transporting men and coal have to be laid underground, flameproof motors have to be installed to work both machinery and water pumps, and an accurate map has to be drawn up of old and abandoned workings and existing ones, in order to avoid a disaster of the kind that struck in 1975.

But some things will not change for the better. Safety measures are unlikely to improve dramatically. The management-labour relationship is not going to turn cordial overnight. The miners themselves, exposed constantly to terrible risks, are unlikely to be better equipped or looked after. Chasnalla, like other coal mines in the region, will continue to rub shoulders with accidents, death, and lawlessness. Too much valuable time has been lost in recrimination and bitterness, in post-mortems of the accident and in fault-finding. In human terms, Chasnalla was the largest-over mining disaster in India. In real terms, an important mine containing a lot of valuable coking coal that could perhaps help turn out much more steel has been allowed to lie submerged in a moras of controversy for far too long. Chasnalla held many important lessons. None of them appears to have been learnt. ●

The 'cage' that takes miners down to Horizon I (565 ft)

