My association with the coal industry began in 1978, when I joined the Industrial Relations Division of the Ministry of Labour. The size of the industry and its importance in the national energy framework are well known. What has not received adequate attention is the position of the industry in the field of industrial relations. Nearly 40 per cent of the disputes in the central sphere of industrial relations come from the coal industry. It has been losing about 12 to 16 million mandays a year. Twenty per cent of its enormous workforce of about 0.7 million is absent on any single day. Why should this happen in an industry owned by Government who is expected to be an ideal employer?

Improvement of labour relations and working conditions was an important reason for nationalisation of the coal industry. Here we are, a decade after nationalisation, in a position where poor labour relations threaten to undermine the very foundation of energy programmes of the country. There was, therefore more than enough justification for an intensive investigation into all aspects which go to make industrial relations in the coal industry. The enormity of the task, however, was a challenge as well as a
deterrent. That I finally took it up was largely due to the support I received from my colleagues, friends in the industry and in trade unions.

Having decided to investigate into the poor shape of industrial relations in coal, the next step was to determine the scope of the study. Which particular aspect should be covered? Should it be the internal grievance management or should it be conciliation by the industrial relations machinery of the Government? Should it be a study of the role of trade unions or should it be an investigation into adjudication by tribunals? After considerable discussion with the various interests involved in the industry, I came to the conclusion that the scope of the study should be determined primarily by its utility. Would a study of internal grievance management or conciliation or adjudication by itself be as useful as a comprehensive investigation of all factors involved in industrial relations? The answer of course was in the negative. One other factor influenced me in arriving at this decision. The library of the Ministry of Labour is perhaps the most
important repository in the country of material on industrial relations. A scrutiny in the Library showed the extreme dearth of publications on industrial relations in coal in recent years. In any case, a comprehensive study of industrial relations since nationalisation was not available. The paucity of investigative work in this field was an important reason for going into a comprehensive study.

The next point to be decided was the nature of the study. Should it be historical or should it be of the current problems faced by the industry? Here again, utility of the end product was the deciding factor. The coal industry scenario has changed vastly since nationalisation and a study of industrial relations of the period prior to nationalisation would only be of historical interest. On the other hand, the industry is plagued with labour problems which require in-depth study to determine their causes. For this reason, the thrust of this investigation is mainly on the period after nationalisation. Once this decision was made, I began collecting material for the study and then it
began clear why there was paucity of research on industrial relations in coal industry. Sufficient published material was just not available. There was, therefore, no alternative but to approach the industry and all those who are associated with it including trade union leaders, the Chief Labour Commissioners Organisation, the Labour Bureau, Simla and my colleagues in the Ministry of Labour. A comprehensive questionnaire was prepared and circulated to the Coal India, its subsidiary companies, the Singareni Collieries, trade unions in the coal industry, Regional Labour Commissioners and Conciliation Officers and Presiding Officers of Industrial Tribunals. A rather disturbing aspect which came to light when the questionnaire was sent out, was the paucity of statistical data on vital aspects of industrial relations. Regional Offices of Labour Commissioners in the coal producing areas of Dhanbad and Asansol had not been maintaining comprehensive data on industrial disputes. Statistics had to be collected through special efforts from the Labour Bureau Simla, the Chief Labour Commissioner and the Ministry of Labour. These have gone into
the making of as many as twenty seven tables and for the first time, a wealth of data on various aspects of industrial relations in coal has become available.

In industrial relations, labour and management tend to adopt opposing postures. As the study progressed, it became clear that its utility would be limited unless direct contacts were established with Managers of coal companies, trade union leaders and Conciliation Officers. This was done on a fairly wide scale. Discussions were held with managers of coal companies at various levels. Similarly there were interesting and often down to earth discussions with trade union leaders of all hues. At times, joint discussions were held with managements and trade unions. Detailed discussions were also held with Conciliation Officers and Presiding Officers of Tribunals. As a result, this project became a live investigative analysis of all important aspects of industrial relations in the coal industry. The names of organisations and persons with whom discussions were held have been given in the annexures.
The first Chapter has been devoted to describing the state of industrial relations in the coal industry. The Chapter contains a brief description of the Organisation of the coal industry from the corporate level down to the mines. It also describes the size of the industry in terms of production and employment which is very essential for understanding the enormity of the problems. The position of wages in the industry which undoubtedly is the most important factor for all workmen, is explained in some detail. The Chapter also contains a cause-wise analysis of industrial disputes in the coal industry. Compiling the data in table VII took a lot of effort. Information was not available in this form and it was possible to obtain it due to special efforts at the Ministry of Labour. The data in this table is most important because it reveals the malaise in the industry and sets the tenor for the approach in the following chapters.

Having discovered that problems relating to personnel constitute the bulk of industrial disputes in coal, the second chapter tries to examine the
position regarding internal grievance management. The position of grievance management arrangements has been discussed in considerable detail. If grievances are settled through mutual discussions by management and labour as and when they arise, they will not escalate into industrial disputes and there will be peace in the industry. The finding is that while there is a broad frame of a grievance system, the spirit is missing. Both management and trade unions have not paid adequate attention to evolving an effective grievance management arrangement. As a live investigation, this chapter includes case studies of disputes which demonstrate the lack of communication between management and workers. It also contains an analysis of the quality of material in the personnel department of the Coal India and its subsidiaries.

From grievance management to standing orders is a natural move. This is the subject matter of the third chapter. Standing Orders state the conditions of employment of workers. The management formulates them but the workers also have a say in their making.
If the standing orders are clear and just, if they are known to workers and management and implemented in the right spirit, industrial disputes are bound to be few. Multiplicity of standing orders in different establishments of the same industry, can create unnecessary friction. The chapter contains a detailed analysis of the position of standing orders in the coal industry. There is no uniformity in standing orders. Some of the orders suffer from practical defects and require to be more comprehensive.

The role of trade unions in maintaining industrial peace and improving the lot of workers, can never be overestimated. At the same time multiplicity of unions and inter union rivalries can create problems and the workers interest can suffer. The next chapter examines in detail the position of trade unions in the coal industry, the quality of their leadership and the role they are expected to play in ensuring a fair deal to the worker and peace and progress in the industry. The bipartite system on which trade unions can play a dominant role for
improving industrial relations and lot of the workmen has been in existence in the industry for a decade. Unfortunately little use has been made of this system both by trade unions and the management. The reasons for this have been analysed in this Chapter. The performance of trade unions on joint committees at all levels has to improve if workers are to benefit and industrial peace established.

However efficient be the internal grievance management system, in a vast industry like coal there will be a sizeable number of disputes coming up for conciliation. The nature of such disputes and the quality and capacity of the industrial relations machinery which deals with them have been analysed in detail in chapter V. Discussions were held with Conciliation Officers and with their help it was possible to conduct a few case studies to analyse the quality of conciliation. Four such studies included in this chapter make it very much alive while providing a qualitative analysis of conciliation work. The overall burden on the conciliation machinery and their ability to handle the work has been examined in depth.
Adjudication which follows failure of conciliation is the subject matter of the next chapter. The various difficulties encountered in the Ministry of Labour in dealing with failure of conciliation reports received from the coal industry, the delays attributed to the Department of Coal and the problems caused by belated representations from the trade unions have been discussed in this chapter. Studies of cases showing causes for delay, have been included at the appropriate places. The functioning of the Industrial Tribunals in Dhanbad which deal with disputes in the coal industry has been analysed in depth. In this, I was helped by the Presiding Officers of the Tribunals who took a lot of pains to explain in detail the causes for delay at different stages of disposal of cases. The workload of these tribunals has also been assessed in this chapter.

The last chapter deals with conclusions and recommendations. The findings in the various chapters have been summarised and definite recommendations have been made. As the study is investigative and analytical and deals in detail with current problems, it has been possible to make practical suggestions on important
live issues. Although these suggestions are mine, it would be pretentious on my part not to acknowledge the contribution of the various interests involved in the industry like labour, management,conciliation officers and tribunals with whom it was my privilege to associate in the course of this study. I shall be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge my debt to my esteemed guide Dr. A. K. Sarma. But for his help and advice at each crucial stage of this work, the completion of this thesis would not have been possible.

Gauhati,  
1st October, 1983

H. PAIS