Part III: Chapter IX.

Drinking Culture and Class Conflict, 1920—1940

In the 1920s, colliery managers as well as social reformers declared drinking to be a major social-evil in the mines. Managers, though, expressed no anguish over the evidence of undernourishment and unbalanced nature of workers’ diets, their disease, the lack of education, the absence of recreational facilities, or their crippling indebtedness, and their relation with workers’ efficiency! For a period in the 1930s, miners apparently spent a significantly increased proportion of their income on consumption of liquor. To understand the phenomena I intend to investigate the new discourse on drinking, the extent of its effect on the drinking culture, and the place of drinking among the colliers.

One set of literature regards drinking as a social predicament and suggests that its ubiquitous prevalence in the urban-industrial context was an outcome of the impact of industrialization—estrangement, the squalid and miserable life environs, breakdown of family life and social control on the labouring masses (Mukherjee (1948), Banerjee (1981), Simeon (1995)). The other set of literature considers drinking as a means of leisure or as part of the cultural production; they see the politics of drinking as an integral part of the dynamics of class relations and class struggle (Wrightson, 1981). My project is close to the second kind of investigation. I put forward the following contention: The consumption of ‘liquor’ was an essential part of the diet of the mining classes and one of the crucial means of recreation. The transcription of drinking practice as a menace by manager and reformer was intimately linked to new industrial effort at re-organising labour-process thereby resulting in demands for regular attendance and better attention to works and at responding to the new wage politics. While the moralist
reformer’s approach was guided by the new nationalist social and political organisation of life, wherein they pursue both ‘functional’ and ‘reforming’ approaches towards the subaltern classes. The latter approach was mediated by their patriarchal and bourgeois inclinations; the pressure from below for social transformation apparently precipitated this new attitude, however. The steep increase in liquor consumption of the mining community during 1934-36 was part of survival strategy: a mode of confronting their stressful, option-less and hopeless experience in the context of immiserisation and everyday humiliation. This was, of course, a special characteristic of drinking, as a mode of ‘dodging’ distress, fighting hopelessness and pathos; it was not just a mode of recreation and celebration.

**Liquor and the colliers**

Both the Royal Commission on Labour (1929-31) and the Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee (1938-41) repeatedly argued that the habit of drinking was widespread among the coalminers and that it adversely affected their efficiency and thereby their earning capacity and standard of living. ‘Drunkenness is also an important cause of the miner’s absenteeism or his irregularity in work’, was a general complain of the managers at practically all the collieries (RCL, 1931: 121; BLECR, 1941: 342,426; Seth, 1940: 247).

In contrast, in the early years of the coal industry, that is until the decade of the 1920s in particular, colliery employers attracted labourers by offering them liquor and setting up liquor shops (kalali) within or nearby their collieries. One observer, JE Copeland, noted in 1917 that there was only one major facility in the coalfield in Jharia and that was the easy availability of liquor for the miners. In contrast, the housing facility was highly inadequate and the sanitary conditions were insalubrious and repulsive. Colliery employers used to send paid jobbers, chaprasis or labour contractors to villages in the labour catchments areas both in the nearby and distant regions. These agents incurred all the necessary expenses to secure labour. They offered liquor to the villagers, and lozenges and biscuits to their children. A small donation was also given to the jobbers to enable them to perform their rituals and to procure a few goats for feasts in
the village. These strategies of seducing and eliciting ‘labour’ resembled the case of timber-contractors ‘eliciting the hard labour for long hours at the cheap rate’ merely by offering tempting bottles of liquor to the ‘peasant-tribal’ labouring people in the area of Daltongunge in the 1950s and 1960s. Colliery employers, sometimes though, talked about the need to regulate the consumption of liquor but not to contain the consumption of liquor as such. R. Purdey said:

A grog shop need not resemble a pig-sty and it would be better if the charges for grog were doubled, if the places were made respectable, the refreshment wholesome, and the hours of consumption regulated more in accordance with spare time. Advances and daily payment only pander to the thriftless; weekly payment should be made compulsory, Saturday afternoon should be pay-day, and Sunday play day, and all hats (markets or bazaar) within the mining settlement held only on that day.

(The italicised words are emphasised and the emphasis is mine).

The problem of inadequate and irregular supply of labour was the central concern of the managerial authority at this time. The latter, until the early years of the 1920s, usually complained against the practice of coalminers returning to their villages to fulfil their agricultural tasks. This was said to have adversely affected the supply of labour to the collieries, in the agricultural seasons in particular. That is why the investigators of the problems of the coal industry in this period were also preoccupied with ‘the situation of the inadequate and irregular supply of the labour due to the incessant intimate attachment of the peasant-miners with the land and agricultural activities’.

Apparently, the practice of liquor consumption was ‘widespread’ among the miners from the beginning in Jharia coalfield. Liquor was seen as one of the ingredients of food consumption of the mining people. Consumption of distillery liquor from distillery warehouses, apparently, fell from around 1924. From 71919 L.P. gallons it fell to 17756 L.P. gallons (fall by almost 3/4th) between 1923-24 and 1932-33 (Seth, 1940: 243). But, this decline did not reflect an actual reduction in the amount of consumption of liquor as such. The mining classes were now consuming less of expensive distillery liquor and more of the cheaper varieties of liquor such as, country liquor and rice-beer. This was seen in the increase of ‘illicit distillation’ [or household production] of country liquor. In Jharia alone, detected cases of illicit distillation rose from 38 in 1929-30 to 91
in 1930-31, and 90 in 1931-32. In the entire Dhanbad colliery area, there were around 480 cases in 1931-32 (Pol. Spl. 1930: 303).

The culture of drinking was, however, neither uniform and homogeneous, nor did it develop in a linear fashion. Within the locality, there was a variety of liquors of different social values. These were the following: distillery liquor, country liquor, country beer of rice, toddy of palm and date-palm juice. Distillery liquor was made of the fermented juice of sugar and alcohol. It was costlier than all other varieties of liquors. For instances, the price for the year 1934 suggests that the price of distillery liquor was 4 to 6 times higher than a bottle of country liquor in Dhanbad colliery area. The former was 8 to 9 annas per bottle, while the country liquor was sold for 2 annas or one anna or even less (Seth, 1940: 244). Distillery liquor in particular, like salt until the initial years of the 20th century, seemed to have been a luxury for an overwhelming number of the labouring poor. It was definitely very expensive in relation to their earning, but also scarce and inaccessible to the rural folks. That is why its offer was so attractive. It remained so during the period of their lives spent in the coalfields. The consumption of distilled liquor was popularly seen as signifying a higher status and prestige. Country liquor came after distillery liquor in the social hierarchy. It was a fermented form of Mahua. The Handia (rice-beer) and Mahua, and toddy (made from palm and date-palm) were the most common intoxicating drinks among the people.

This (drinking culture) -- one may say the cultural branch of social production -- was multifunctional and had multiple meanings. We cannot see drinking only as a ‘social menace’, and be censorious about addiction. It not only existed as a form of recreation, liquor was also popularly thought of as having ‘anesthetic value’ [due to its narcotic element] and consumed for ‘mental and psychological relief’ from the pain of enervating mining-work. The workers resorted to regular and excessive drinking after hard work. They also preferred it for its supposedly nutritional and medicinal advantages. Some of the miners reported to the Prasad Committee that ‘its consumption kept their bowels free from coal dust, which they inhaled in the course of their daily work.’ Some others reported that ‘without liquor [on Sunday and Monday] they could not keep up their energies for the remaining four or five days in a week’ (BLEC, 1941,
Vol. II. Pt. A: 342, 426, 427). Keshav Rawani, a miner in the 1930s, informed me that 'the Mahua was considered a staple diet among the colliery workers. It was seen as having medicinal values, and was taken as a cure for cholera as well.' Liquor in general, and mahua in particular, was supposed to be beneficial in keeping the body warm and diluted hunger or appetite. In north India, the mahua is popularly known as the food of the poor, indeed. In dissimilitude, an empathetic social observer and scholar B.R. Seth, Chief Investigator of BLEC, however, considered the beliefs of mining classes in the nutritional and medical advantages of liquor consumption as a deluding act. 'The incessant drinking culture derives its importance from the ubiquity of drink as means of recreation in the situation of acute want of an alternative healthy and cheap means of recreation like provision of tea shops, periodical cinema shows, labour clubs etc', argued Seth (Seth, 1940: 426, 250).

The grog shops and liquor shops became the central institution and means of relief for the mining poor in Jharia coalfield. The colliery employers were characterised by their lack of concern for even a minimum level of living for the workers and they had no desire to invest in recreational facilities, excepting the liquor shops. The only basic human requirements on which the managements began to focus, though inadequately, from the late 1910s and the early years of the 1920s were housing and the supply of clean drinking water. These investments were seen as essential to check the flight of labour from a space that suffered frequent attacks of epidemics, and had an 'unstable and inadequate' supply of labour at this time. The intervention of the government of Bihar and Orissa, between 1917 and 1920, was important in this respect. It stipulated the need to provide housing benefits to the mining classes through the Bihar and Orissa Mining Settlement Act, 1920. In this situation characterised by the lack of other recreational facility, the grog shops and liquor shops increasingly became a central institution and means of relief for the mining poor. Here, the debilitating labour and the hazardous lives of a great number of miners were coupled with the loss of traditional agricultural, artisanal occupations and, the socio-cultural habitat. That is why, they tried hard to sustain their rural links not only for fulfilling the agricultural and familial obligations, but to recover physically and mentally within what was considered a more healthy and pleasant ambience. In the colliery settlements, drinking was supplemented by leisure
activities like ‘gambling’, cock fighting, roaming the weekly hats. The miners, though, started demanding, from the initial years of the 1920s, lower working hours and a day of weekly rest as well as some formal leave along with an increase in the wage rate. The newly formed labour trade union, the Indian Colliery Employees’ Association (ICEA, 1920) and All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in Jharia (1921) championed these causes. These political organizations, however, represented largely the clerical and lower rung of technical and supervisory employees of the collieries at this time (Chapter, ‘Reclaiming’).

The popular culture of drinking had a specific calendarical dimension, too. The popular liquor, *handia* and toddy were usually consumed throughout all seasons, and more frequently during spring and summer. These forms of liquor, it was believed, relieved the body from the exhausting heat and they had a mild narcotic effect. The mining workers usually turned to country liquor or distillery liquor, particularly during the winters. Country liquor was also preferred on the infrequent occurrences of special significance, both in times festivity and the sorrow, such as, the festivals of Sohrai, Arok-sim, Magh-sim, Baha, Holi, Tilsakarat, or the fairs and weekly hats, marriage and birth ceremonies; during pay-day, weekends and the weekly rest-day. The miners drank heavily on these occasions. The weekly paydays, usually on Sunday or Saturday, were celebratory occasions in their life process very much like the working classes in the textile industry in Bombay and in the tea plantations of Assam and Darjeeling. The mining Act, IMA, 1923, declared Sunday as a weekly rest-day. The mining community was in the later period chastised for drinking on Sunday and sometimes even on Monday because that was said to affect their attendance on Monday and sometimes even on Tuesday.

The practice of liquor consumption was socially varied. Miners from social groups like the Santhals, the Bauris, the Dusadhs, the Pasis, the Chamars (from United Province), the Beldars and the Bhuiyans frequently consumed liquor in their day-to-day lives. They consumed it in the market (*hats*) with their families, including women and children (BLECR, 1941: Vol. II. A: 366, 375; Banerjee, 1981: 119). The grog shops were not exclusively male dominated spaces unlike the alehouse of sixteenth century
rural England. However, the workers from some other social groups like the Goalas, the Mahatos, the Punjabis, the Peshawari-Pathans, the Rajputs, the Bhumihars and the Brahmins also liked the consumption of liquor. The women of self-proclaimed ‘respectable’ social groups generally displayed ‘ostensible abstention’. The up-country labourers considered drinking amongst women an ‘immoral act’ and they looked down all those people who permitted their women to drink. The miners from the Muslim community and the Bilaspuris (Ravidasis) largely avoided heavy drinking; they were known to be addicted to tobacco and ganja. ‘Both the males and the females’, BLEC observed, ‘were addicted to smoking. Even the children in the age period of 6 -12 years can be seen smoking.’ These findings confound attempts to homogenize the practice of drinking and intoxication.¹¹ The social groups like the Santhals, the Bauris, the Beldars, the Bhuiyans and the Dusadhs on both formal and the less formal occasions usually consumed liquor collectively. Generally, after the day’s work and on the week-ends in particular, they congregated in the respective caste-community dhowrahs for drinking, playing the drums and singing. It might have helped to oil the wheels of social intercourse, and re/establish mutual relationships in a society where the miners were immigrants. For those in an alien milieu sociability and good neighbourliness were critically important.¹² Through the social ritual of drinking collectivities were both forged and reaffirmed.

The prohibition

During the late 1920s and the 1930s a group of employers, social reformers and the political authority began to bemoan the culture of drinking as they did in late sixteenth and seventeenth century rural England. The employers complained of the existence and opening of liquor shops in the vicinity of their collieries,¹³ and many recommended the complete prohibition on the sale of liquor in the colliery settlements. And, in the end, the Bihar government led by the National Congress introduced a prohibition on the sale of liquor in the colliery subdivision of Manbhum district in the year 1939.¹⁴

Why was there such a change in the attitude of the employers towards culture of drinking? One explanation is that the drinking habit adversely affected the working
rhythm. It resulted in a phenomenon of an increase in the irregularity in work and absenteeism. The Royal Commission on Labour (1929-31) and the Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee (1938-41) both repeatedly complained that there was a widespread habit of drinking among the coalminers and it adversely affected their efficiency and thereby their earning capacity and standard of living. A general complaint of managers at practically all the collieries was that: ‘Drunkenness is also an important cause of the miner’s absenteeism or his irregularity in work’ (RCL, 1931: 121; BLECR, 1941: 342, 426). The social reformers linked drinking to the ‘increasing moral-degeneration and social-disorganisation’ (like prostitution and promiscuity, social brawls, idleness, etc.). This general moral disintegration, they believed, adversely affected productive capacity of the miners and accounted for the low standard of living of the mining community. The increase in the amount of consumption further aggravated the problem. The discourse of social reformers seemed to echo the critiques of the puritanical reformers in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in the rural England, and the Methodists and the Evangelicals in eighteenth and nineteenth century urban England.

There are certain empirical and analytical problems with the above-said arguments. For instances, why did the issue of regularity of work all of a sudden become so critical? A considerable number of workers used to rest one or two consecutive days after the weekly payday in the early 1920s. Colliery employers, usually, argued that the mining classes, of inclination of low level of comfort, get satisfied with the earning from the works only for 3 to 4 days. The productive capacity and efficiency of the mining classes and regularity towards work were also intimately connected with their health and economy, which was characterised by under-nourishment and unbalance diets, the enervating working and living conditions and the low level of training. More than one investigator within a period of two decades repeatedly substantiated these claims. For example, the Rees Committee in 1919; Foley Committee in 1920; Noyce Committee in 1925; Whitely-Royal commission on labour in 1929-31; and Bihar labour enquiry committee in 1941. But, these issues did not attract the attention of employers at this time. They continued to link the productive capacity of miners to the consumption of liquor.
Why did the issues of public and social order become so yearningly important at this time? Ordinary brawls of drunken workers were also noted in the earlier periods. One observer Chief inspector of Mines reported in 1913, ‘the Beldars were very prone to drinking and fighting even among themselves.’ He also added that ‘some of the up-country workers are apt to quarrel with the down-country races.’ In the 1920s, the reformers emphasised a connection between ostensible ‘social vices’ like promiscuity, prostitution, infidelity, adultery, drinking and the practice of employment of woman workers in underground works in particular. And, they demanded that women be removed from the underground (Seth, 1940: 146-154).

Was there any dramatic increase in the expenditure on drinking from the late 1920s? Available evidences do not suggest any such trend. For instance, an average expenditure of miner on drink and drugs amounted to about 12.5 percent of his weekly income (that is 6 annas a week out of an earning Rs. 3 a week on an average) in 1929, and around 8 percent (that is 4.25 annas a week) was only on the liquor, calculated the RCL (1931: 120). The average expenditure would have been lower if the total family income is considered. The BLEC report for 1938 suggests that the expenditure on liquor was around Rs. 1/ 0/6 per month per family, which amounted to 7.5 percent of an average earning Rs. 17/ 11 annas / 2 paisa a month (BLECR, 1941, Vol. A: 352, 365-366, 441). Thus, it suggests the overall a little reduction, rather than an increase in the expenditure between the late 1920s and the late 1930s. Furthermore, the available statistics also do not confirm the managerial view of increasing irregularity and absenteeism after the pay-day in particular. The figures of the BLEC clearly suggests that on Monday the level of production of the 5 collieries out of the sample of 6 collieries remained between 40 percent to 66 percent or 80 percent of their full capacity (Chapter, Short Day...”).

I suggest that this new attitude of employers towards the working rhythm and drinking practice was largely linked to the changing organisation of production. The coal industry underwent a degree of mechanisation in the wake of the boom during the coal consuming war (1914-1918). The employers, who invested in technology, moved to a regular and intensive utilisation of those machines. In the 1920s and the 1930s, the coal
industry also increasingly strove to reduce the cost of production and increase the level of productivity. They competed with the relatively cost effective South Indian coal in East Asian markets, and they attempted to survive the slump in coal trade after the war. A number of coalmines, especially of smaller sizes, gradually, stopped working. The big mines attempted to sustain production level by cutting the sale price, reducing the work force and lowering costs and thus maintaining the level of overall profit amidst the slump. This business strategy was fine-tuned in the first half of the 1930s when the industry faced a depression in a coal trade and the coal prices. Consequently, the colliery employers, of big mines in particular, emphasised the importance of greater regularity of and attention to work (Chapters, ‘Time…”).

The change in the respective labour policy of employers accompanied and was also preceded and precipitated by the intervention of ‘transformatory’ politics of working classes and the reforming intervention of the state. As I have discussed in other chapters from the early years of the 1920s one group of workers started demanding a reduction in working hours, a streamlining of the time of work, weekly rest and annual holidays. The ICEA and AITUC championed these demands in the Jharia coalfield. On the other hand, the Rees and Foley Committees recommended an improvement of working and living conditions of the mining people in order to secure a contented and permanently settled labour force. This, they hoped, would help remedy some of the problems created by unsafe methods of mining. A large number of colliery employers, except a few big and so-called ‘progressive’ ones, were opposed to the intervention of the government in this respect. Nevertheless, the government of India stipulated a series of Mines Acts, 1923, 1929 and 1935, which reduced the workday and introduced weekly rest day. An increasing number of mines, pressured by a constellation of social forces, moved towards the legislated working time. A few of them began to work in 3 shifts and some others worked in two shifts by the late 1920s. While working hours was limited, labour exploitation was intensified. This was manifest in terms of the increasing demand for work regularity and a stricter control over workers at the workplace (Chapter, ‘Time…”). As the disciplinary control over labour time was tightened, the culture of drinking came under attack. The colliery authority now perceived it as a social menace, a practice that disrupted the functioning of the production regime, and not as an integral
aspect of the system of production in its totality, of its specific stage, and as a cultural branch of social production.

The employers' policy of intensive exploitation of working time in the 1930s accompanied their efforts to cut wage costs. Employers believed that the working classes in India were used to a low level of comfort and that is why increase in the wage rates would result in the greater absenteeism from works. This argument helped to legitimise the effort to reduce costs of production, and counter workers demand for higher wages (Chapter, ‘Wage Politics...’). Some of them undertook some amount of ‘welfare initiative’, which although remained insufficient, socially discriminatory in favour of the ‘better off’ colliery employees and, was grossly limited (Chapter, ‘Re-claiming...’). On the other hand, the colliery employers strategised to establish a linkage between the alleged ‘irregularity, absenteeism’, a low productive capacity and low standard of living of the mining classes, and the popular culture of drinking. This making of liquor consumption as an evil scapegoat helped to justify the prevalence of low wage rates, and to de-legitimise the demand of the mining classes for an improvement of wages and/or restoration of wage cuts.¹⁸ The strategy resembled the stands of the rural big landlords, bureaucracy and the state in the 16thc and the early 17thc in rural England and, British colonial state and planters in Assam in the 19thc.

This deceitfulness of management on this issue of liquor consumption was manifest in their policy related to recreation and liquor. They were not opposed to the sale of liquor and its consumption as such by miners. They wanted the existence of liquor shops in the coalfields, though not at their own colliery but at others located at a distance. R.R. Simpson, the Chief Inspector of Mines while speaking about the grog shops before the RCL informed, ‘initially mine owners were pleased to have them, and it attracted labour. Now they are quite ready to have a grog shops, but they would like to have it on someone else’s colliery.’ This was also reflected in the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Labour seeking a cap on the hours of sale, and the amount of liquor sold to each miner. They argued that if the facility of liquor is withdrawn workers might move away from the coalfield (R CL, 1931: 222, 1931). But, they did not see the need to provide alternative cheap and healthy recreational means, noted BLEC and Seth.
Indeed, the colliery employers continued to use the tempting bottles of liquor to beguile and debilitate the articulate, and ‘Influential’ labour representatives, as shown by Illyas Ahamad Gaddi through the career of Kallu Bauri and others in his novel *Fire Area*.19

The new attitude of political and social reformers towards liquor culture, the ‘deteriorating social-health order, and public-order’ was linked to tumultuous social and political organisation of life in the 1920s and 1930s. This entailed on their part to empathetically respond to the transformatory politics of working classes that urged them. Furthermore, they also aimed to achieve and/or repair the social control on the subaltern classes. The political and social reformers like Swami Biswanand, IB Sen, KN SenGupta, Pandit Chunilal, Pandit Ram Kumar Misra, Daulatram, Radha Krishna Ram, Shib Kali Bose, PC Bose and JC Gupta were active in coalfield. They were largely of a professional middle class background, like barrister, advocates, colliery clerks and employees, and shopkeepers. They were involved in the political movement of the Congress along with labour politics. They championed under the banner of ICEA and AITUC the demands for the improvement in the wretched working and living conditions of working classes including the actual mining classes in Jharia coalfield (Pol. Spl. 248/1920). But, they adopted only a functional approach rather than an organic one. For instances, in the first meeting of ICEA I. B. Sen, a barrister of Calcutta high court, ‘urged the need of instilling self respect in the minds of the coolies. ...or then only could the Europeans be prevented from treating them harshly.’ He also urged free intercourse between the babus (clerks) and the masses, thereby reducing the social distances between them. President of the meeting K. N. SenGupta, a pleader of Dhanbad focused on ‘the non-representative and non-democratic character of the Association with references to the involvement of different community of work forces that is the Muslim, Punjabis, Santhal, Bauris, Bhuiyans, etc. who constituted the bulk of workforce at that time’. Thus, the functional approach was accompanied by an approach of ‘social, economic and political reformation’ among the labouring masses. The Congress and AITUC working in Jharia coalfield from the beginning of the 1920s focussed on the need for social and moral transformation for the making of nationalists. S. Bir Raghhab Acharia, a congress leader in Manbhum district urged:
In a country under foreign rule thieves, burglars, murderers, etc. are safe. But...i.e. a sedition problem...charge of sedition, repression...lack of freedom of speeches, developments, spending on education, industry, employment, agriculture and poverty, while, heavy taxation, high price (rice 4 seers a rupee)...on famine, drain of wealth through trade and dumping British goods and servicemen. ...But, this fact can not be realized by the educated men of the town specially those who are rich. If you want to understand the real condition of the country go out for a few days to the villages or go to the places in the heart of the town where the poor labourers live and find out the state of thing there. ...famine, ruin of villages. Government has opened grog shops; ignorant people drink cheap wine and ruin themselves. ...litigation ...cultivators without food...tax but not welfare, (police commit) abardastion (sic) us...or...Let your grog shops remain yours, ...we shall bring back our spinning wheels again ...Let us all unite together, ...Let every member of a household become a member of the Congress (Pol.Spl. 154/1929). The bold words are emphasised and the emphasis is mine.

The consumption of liquor, thus, was found inimical to the politics of making a healthy national liberation movement.

In contrast to their project of relatively forward looking change in economic condition, on the social and moral fronts the nationalists labour leaders, by their social and ideological orientation, concerned themselves with preserving the ‘conservative’, moral and public order ridden with hierarchy, patriarchy and ‘bourgeois-monogamy’ among the labouring poor as well. They condemned the ‘ostensible incidences of the promiscuity, prostitution’, [habitual drinking and social brawls] in the 1920s and linked these to the practice of allowing woman workers in the underground works and, want of family/ home lives due to the allocation of work to the female-folks (B.R. Seth, 1940: 146-165). On that basis they demanded and endorsed the Act withdrawing the Kamins from underground works from 1929.

They, thus, did not hold singularly the culture of drinking responsible for the social and material distress in the life of the labouring poor. They, however, led the picketing and boycott movements against the licensed distillery liquor warehouses during the civil disobedience movement in Jharia coalfield between 1930 and 1932. Additionally, they argued for the right of the people to produce liquor themselves in their houses (Pol. Spl. 303/1930; 62/1931; 219/1931; 55/1932). Consequently, the sites of
ostensible illicit distillation or the home distillation of liquor (as the people considered that) swelled from around 91 in 1929 to around 482 in 1932 in Dhanbad subdivision. Thus, at this time the concerns of the social reformers had not taken hold over the political imagination in the colliery settlement areas. Here, their movement between 1930-32 stood in contrast to the temperance and ‘purification’ movement that was endorsed as well as led by the Congress and its leaders like Ram Prakash Lal, Krishna Ballabh Sahay and Banga Manji in the immediate neighbouring areas of Hazaribagh, Gomia, Bermo, Giridih, and Ranchi from the year 1929 itself, that was even before launching the Civil Disobedience Movement. In the latter areas they urged the people of the social groups, like the Santhals, the Kurmis and the Oraons to give up completely the consumption of liquor, meat of fowl and goat [and, wear Khaddar and sacred thread and use charkas] (Pol. Spl. 238/1929).

By the second half of the 1930s the reformers (including the Congress leaders) argued that the popular culture of liquor consumption was an evil and a sign of a degeneration of culture, and an obstacle to the project of improving their standard of living as well as the productivity of the coal industry. The Congress under the leadership of Rajendra Prasad advocated an anti-liquor movement among the mining community in Jharia coalfield since 1936/37. This became the central element of the mass contact programme of the Congress aiming to make inroads among the population in this part. The government of Bihar, led by the Congress from 1937 prohibited the sale of alcohol in the coal district of Manbhum (mining settlement areas) from 1939. This was a shift in its political-social stand on this subject as far as Jharia coalfield was concerned. And this incorporated the social purification and construction politics envisaged by Gandhi for the congress. Gandhi and his followers considered the consumption of liquor as a degenerate habit and socially degrading, and not a means of recreation. The temperance and purification movements were, however, also part of the Tana Bhagat Movement, Kherwar Movement and Hari Baba Movement in the Chhotanagpur in the 1920s and 1930s. Any way, the growing involvement 20 and influence of the ‘big leaders of the Congress at the provincial level,’ like Rajendra Prasad, K.B. Shahay and Abdul Bari from the mid 1930s precipitated this shift in Congress approach. K B Shahay along with leaders like Banga Manjhi had already initiated this kind of reformation movement in
Hazaribagh district that was next to Jharia coalfields, since 1929 (Pol. Spl. 121/1929). This shift in approach was expressed in the request to BLEC of Mukut Dhari Singh, a leading trade union leader and social reformer of the Congress, and a representative of Rajendra Prasad and the provincial govt. in Jharia coalfield:

Akin to the problem of illiteracy is the problem of drinks and drugs. We have no hesitation in saying that liquor is the greatest blame upon our Government, and as one moves about the streets on Sundays and Mondays one can not but feel ashamed of a Government which tolerates such wilful (sic) destruction of a whole race. Even without making any increment in the wages of the workers the sale of liquor is stopped, workers’ lot will be tolerably good and they will feel as if they are changed creatures. This disease is eating into the very vitals of our body politic. The workers have become so much a slave to these evils that they can tolerate their children starving but can never restrain themselves from drinking wine. We are definitely of opinion that if the sale of wine is not altogether stopped in the coalfields, no matter what increment in the wages of the workers is made; their condition will remain almost the same. The worst part of it is the outstill system which has made wine so cheap. It is essential that the sale of wine be totally stopped and pending that the outstill system be abolished without delay.21

Notably, the reformation policy of the Provincial Congress was in conformity with its overall patriarchal capitalist approach towards the labourers. It declined to respond to the repeated and desperate demands of the working classes in the course of the starving struggle during 1938-40 for better social wages or benefits from the coal industry.22 While, it was so intimately allied with colliery proprietors, and provided them all sorts of administrative aids in the name of survival of property and industry. Even one of the prominent Congress leaders and deputy speaker of the Bihar legislative assembly, Dr. Abdul Bari criticised the pro-employer attitude, and indifferent attitude towards labourers, of the Congress government during 1938-39 (Pol. Spl. 379/1938). In this situation the prohibition of sale of liquor was also an easy route to make a self-acclaimed improvement in the condition of life of mining community. The tension in their approach was reflected in their policy: one the one hand prohibiting the sale of liquor in the colliery settlements, but not providing some alternative means of recreation (Seth, 1940: 251). The temperance movement remained from above in the Jharia coalfield, and the local reformers did not agitate for a practical change. For some of them
like, H. Khan, A. Bari, and M. D. Singh the social wage policy of employers remained the prime target against which they fought.

The defiance

Colliery worker did not accept the logic of mercantile capitalist employers and sanskritik reformers of uncritically declaring one of their predominant cultural practices as an evil, in the specific historical context of coalfield. It remained so even in the period of the late 1930s and thereafter. The workers refused to conform to the Act prohibiting the sale of alcohol in mining settlements. Seth reported in 1939: 'the prohibition seems to be reducing instead of improving their capacity to work. The workers are being compelled to resort to 'illicit distillation', as in the absence of any other means of diversion they can not help drinking' (Seth, 1940: 251).

All these do not suggest that the pattern of liquor consumption did remain uniform and steady. The years 1933 to 1936 were a turbulent period, when workers did spend an increasing proportion of their income on liquor. In 1934—35, the total consumption of country liquor in colliery areas amounted to 3.76 lac gallons against 1.95 lac gallons in 1933—34 and 31 thousand gallons in 1931—32. In addition, there was some amount of home or 'illicit' distillation even in 1933-34. In spite of a fall in the price of liquor in these years [from 1933], an average miner spent on liquor a greater proportion of his/her income than before (Seth, 1940: 243). The Royal Commission of Labour calculated that it was around 6 annas or 12.5 percent of his/her total weekly income (Rs. 3) in the year 1929 (RCL, 1931: 121). According to the family budgets collected in 1934, miners spent 7 to 17 percent (3 annas to 6 annas) a week of their total income on country liquor alone. The enquiry (during winter season in 1934—35) of J. E. Copeland suggested that around 20 percent of the income was spent by the miner on liquor alone in the year 1934. As he emphasised 'The percentage will be still higher if miner's expenditure on intoxicants other than country liquor is taken into account. In fact, it is possible that the social base of the culture of drinking broadened in these years. We are told: 'One who formerly took hardly one or two bottles of drink now
consumed four to five bottles a week... Many who abstained from drink before now became regular drunkards. The worst feature of this increased drunkenness is that women and children took to drink more than before.’ ‘Children of five or six years were observed sharing liquor with their parents, and girls yet in their teens were found selling their chastity for one or two bottles of liquor’, observed Seth in 1934 (Seth, 1940: 245, 248). Mr. J. Mackie, a manager of the Bhowra colliery wrote in 1934:

It has always been the custom for a certain of the workers to indulge in strong drink on Sundays and Mondays, but recently the numbers who visit the grog shops have increased while heavy drinking is continued until Tuesday and in a less degree all during the week, and the state continues in spite of the reduced earnings of the workers.25

Similarly, Mr. Rev. Morton Chaplain informed: ‘that on the four miles road between Dhanbad and Kusunda, twenty drunken and disorderly men were about the average number to be seen on every Sunday night. This was not so before the outstill system (1932-33, mine).’26 J Mackie and W Morton were certain that this (drinking) had increased along with malnutrition among women and children, and rickets, promiscuity and venereal diseases, and the number of minor accidents, lowering of the efficiency of workers.

What accounts for this?27 There is more than one explanation provided by the different people. The habitual-list explanation that the colliery management used linked the consumption of liquor with the ‘innate habit of Indian miners’. Thus, it personalised and biologicalised behaviour, and overlooked its structural-social dimension and its intimate connection with the organisation of production and reproduction of the immediate life of two characters: the production of the means of subsistence and the production of the human lives themselves. Moreover, it did not address the specificity of the ‘turbulent phase’ that is under-consideration.

This primordial cultural line of reasoning has argued further that the cheapening of liquor induced the increased consumption of liquor at this time.28 This cheapening of liquor in Dhanbad colliery area was due to the change in the excise system, which was introduced by the Bihar and Orissa government in 1932-33. The old distillery system
controlled the number of distillery warehouses in a locality as well as the price and the strength or the method of manufacture of liquor. It kept the price of liquor relatively high. But, the government moved to the auction system of settling shops from 1932—33 in order to arrest its declining amount of revenue from the Dhanbad colliery area. The revenue from license fee and duty from Dhanbad colliery area fell from Rs. 8, 19,215 in 1923—24 to Rs. 3, 61,283 in 1931—32. Thus decline was caused by the shift in liquor consumption pattern of mining classes from around 1924 onwards. The workers moved away from the consumption of expensive distillery liquor to the cheaper home or ‘illicitly’ produced country liquor, handia and toddy. The immediate result of the change in excise system was to cheapen the price of liquor in the areas where outstills had been established. A bottle of liquor which formerly cost 8 or 9 annas now sold for 2 annas or 1 anna or even less. This was possible because the outstills sold mainly country liquor instead of distillery liquor. Additionally, the liquor shops were made more accessible by an increase in their number. In 1933—34 there were 121 liquor shops in Dhanbad colliery area alone against 39 in 1932—33, 22 in 1931—32 and 20 in 1929—30. Furthermore, under the new auction system the drink sellers worked to encourage drinking and to stimulate their sales to earn higher profits. In 1934 and 1938 every big colliery or a group of 3 to 4 smaller ones had at least one liquor shop in the neighbourhood and these shops were permitted to be opened in the teeth of opposition from the managers or the colliery proprietors (Seth, 1940: 244-245). Nevertheless, this explanatory approach does not help answer the subsequent questions: why did the proportion of spending on liquor increase along with the amount of consumption despite a fall in the overall earning of the miners and the cheapening of liquor? And, why did it fall from around the year 1937? What did the increase mean for the miners? And, how was this shift linked to the nature of the system of production and reproduction of immediate human life?

Scholars like, R.K. Mukherjee (1948), Ranjit DasGupta (1994) and D. Simeon (1995: 148) have proposed a behavioural explanation for this phenomenon of drinking. They have suggested the existence of an inversely proportional relation between the earning of labouring poor and the resultant anxiety, on the one hand, and the high degree
or frequency of liquor consumption, on the other. This was aggravated by the colliery context of inducing a regular consumption of liquor. Seth pointed out:

Some workers are, of course, habitual drunkards and they can be reformed only by education and propaganda work. But, the majority of the miners take to liquor and other drugs because of their poverty and the monotonous, strenuous, dirty, squalid, unnatural, dissocialised and unhumanised life that they are made to live in the coalfields. They drink because they want to forget their starving families and because they find no other means of relieving a fatigued and overworked mind in the absence of a good home, a playing club, or a free cinema show and other cheap means of recreation... There (kalali) they can procure with a little money the means of forgetting for the moment in drink and passion their drab existence (Seth, 1940: 250).

The wages of workers continued to decline rapidly in the early 1930s while women were displaced and mines were closed. The world depression also depressed the prices of agrarian products and repressed the overall earning of the small and marginal peasants and tenants during 1930—35 in particular, displacing the poor and forcing them to search for alternative employment. That is why coalfields witnessed in these days an influx of labour from the neighbouring and distant villages.

Reformist philanthropists, like Simeon and Seth have also argued that an absence of family/ home life was responsible for the regular visit of miners to the grog shops. In this period an increasing number of miners were forced to send their wives back to their villages because of their removal from underground works. Seth argued:

The colliery work is so onerous that when a man has finished his day’s work he is in desperate need of some kind of relaxation. Those who have their wives with them are also not assured of a good home because the wives also work in the mines. An uncomfortable and foodless home can never prevent them from going to the grog shops. The grog-shops and the house of prostitute are the only places where the male workers seek refuge in unwholesome recreation. These are the places where they find light and gaiety, where there are other topics of conversation than the perpetual heavy cares of life (Seth, 1940: 250, 260-67).

One can reformulate the above argument in the following way to make a structuralist argument. ‘It was the strenuous, monotonous, squalor, rank injustice and
alienating experiences in their everyday life under such humiliating and discriminatory capitalist relation of production that the miners sought to drown in long weekends of inebriation. It is not accidental that the period of declining earning coincided with increased drunkenness. Thus, the dynamics of material condition not only helped to reproduce the culture of drinking, but also heightened it. There are some silences in this explanation. Why did the miners drink rather than fight for a change in their conditions? Why did they adopt this path of escape only from 1933-34 and not before?

It was historically not the case that the mining persons adopted only one path of delusion and resignation at this time and during the early years (between 1930 and 1933-34) of wage deterioration in particular. A noticeable number of miners waged political and social battles during 1930—34 to arrest a course of deteriorating material and social existence. For instance, the miners of the colliery Chassnala held a strike for around four days seeking a wage increase in 1930 June. Around 430 miners of Amlabad colliery in 1930 held a strike for around 20 days for a demand of wage increase. Similarly around 4000 workers of Jamadoba colliery between June 1932 and early 1934 fought more than one time for the restoration of wage cuts and the reinstatement of the victimized fellows (Pol. Spl. 08(IV)/1933). Meanwhile, some of the female and the male miners adopted other collective measures for adjusting to the situation of growing material and social hardship. In 1930, a noticeable number of the mining families from social groups, like the Santhals, and the Bilaspuris left the collieries where their female-folks were removed from underground work and looked at alternative opportunity of working together. Around a thousand female and male miners remonstrated in 1934 at Jamadoba colliery against the withdrawal of their female-folks and sought their reinstatement. These struggles, by and large, did not yield any result other than create sheer 'strain, humiliation and the sense of hopelessness, frustration, despair'. The workers were victimised and dismissed during and after their agitations. For instance, there were around 150 miners dismissed in the wake of strike in June—July 1932 at Jamadoba. The provincial government declined to intervene. On the other hand, the bargaining power of the miners was eroded by the arrival of impoverished peasants. Management was ready to employ strike-breakers for a short while even at a relatively
higher wage rate. The deepening depression in the agrarian economy also blocked any possible employment in the countryside. Unemployed workers could not return to their villages even for seasonal agricultural works.

This depressing experience of the colliers was further deepened by the largely unfulfilled goals of Swaraj or Gandhiraj. A small proportion of them was actively engaged in this movement and in activities, including picketing and boycotting of liquor shops as well as stores of foreign goods, protesting against the arrest of the Swarajists-picketers, etc. (Pol. Spl. 303/1930; 62/1931; 344/1931; 29/1932). They boycotted more vigorously the consumption of liquor from the government licensed grog shops during 1930—32. Consequently, sales of liquor from the grog shops went down. Of course, a number of workers began consuming alternative ‘illicitly’ or home distilled country liquor. But one needs to keep in mind that in the Jharia coalfield the right to produce liquor at home was one of the predominant demands of the Civil Disobedience Movement (C D M) unlike the case of Purlia subdivision of the district Manbhum of which the Dhanbad and Jharia were also part. This marked distinction in the articulation of objective of the movement was conjured up because of the specific nature and inclination of the broad social base of the movement in Jharia coalfield. The leaders andorganiser of the Indian Colliery Employees Association like Shibakali Bose, Panchanan Chaudhari, Mani Kanongo, Surdas and S B Sen, etc. were members of the Satyagraha movement. They advocated the C D M in the colliery area through the association. In a meeting of ICEA held on 27th of July 1930, and attended by around 150 miners, S B Sen told ‘the miners to give up the work of the sahibs and then the torture and abuses of the sahibs would be stopped as they would die of starvation.’ But, these desires could not materialise, which disappointed the people.

Mine workers, thus, faced a worsened situation: wage cuts, loss of jobs, mine closures, an overflowing labour market, on the one hand, and a seemingly hopeless future and an experience of frustration and humiliation, on the other. They seemed to have moved to drown their sorrows in long hours of heavy drinking. It seems that their practice was mediated by one of the ways in which they adjusted to grips of strain. This was reflected also in the naturalistic novel, Fire Area of Illyas Ahamad Gaddi, where
drinking intensifies in the phases of life the labouring poor – like Kallu Bauri, Madna Bhuiyan and Sahdev – experience as humiliating. This sense of humiliation and despair, this feeling of pathos and meaninglessness of life, created both the urge to rebel, protest, as well as the desire to transcend their existential condition through consumption of intoxicants. This was, of course, a special characteristic of drinking – a mode of ‘dodging’ distress, fighting hopelessness and pathos. It was a mode of recreation and celebration, a normal way of passing time, leisure, and socialization. But it was more than that.

The proportion of the total income spent on the consumption of liquor subsequently fell from the year 1937. In 1938, it was at a level that was not more than the figure for the year 1929, estimated BLEC. This was also almost the same for the years 1945—46, according to the Deshpande Enquiry Committee. It was not a coincidence that both these periods in the life process of the mining classes in the coalfield were the years of their relatively heightened political activities for resolving the predicaments of their lives.36

2 Mahasweta Devi (1993), one of the stories, ‘Sikar’.
3 Evidence of R Purdey, president of the Association of Colliery Manager in India, to the Foley Committee (Report, 1920: 111). The italicised sets of words are emphasised. And the emphases are mine.
4 See, Williams Report (1896); Foley Report (1906, 1920); Rees Report (1919); and Noyce Report (1925).
5 This was also one of the popular items of consumption in the countryside of the rural-folks who came to work in the coalfields. See, Premchand’s Kaphan (1935/2005).
8 Keshav Rawani, Interview: January 14, 2004. When I met him, he was in his age of early nineties (90s). He started working in Jharia coalfield in the aftermath of the WWI in the Bhowra colliery.
9 Similarly, the alehouse came to occupy central recreational or leisure institution in the life of labouring poor during the 16thc and the first half of the 17thc rural England.
10 Rees (1919); Foley (1920); BLECR, 1940: 313. Several quite old and retired workers revealed before me the similar kind of their orientation of ‘regular’ rural visits.
11 In the general description on this issue, scholars tend to depict the prevalence of this practice as socially uniform.
Wrightson (1981: 6) has argued that the good neighbourliness was a social virtue among the labouring poor in the rural England in the 16thc. Now, some mines moved to close down the grog shops run by them. But, under the new regime of excise department based on auction system competing owners came up. Mainly the labour contractors, moneylenders along with the agents of collieries, yet, owned the grog shops. I will discuss latter about the shift in excise system and its ramification.

What were the absolute measures that the groups adopted for putting a check on the ‘ramification of drinking culture?’ I will explore it at some other place.

Burrows coalfield committee in 1937 accused such business policy of colliery proprietors in relation to their neglect of essential basic measures for the safety of coal resources and human lives engaged with mining works Burrows Report (1937: 26-29).

Annual report of chief inspector of mines safety, 1913, quoted in Ghosh (1992: 76).

It was not the case at all collieries and particularly the medium and small size collieries, which curtailed the overall workdays during the depression.

The mining classes repeatedly asked for it against the policy of wage cut in this period and their deteriorating condition of living and plunging into debt cycle. See, Political special, 102/1928; 244/1928; 258/1930; 328/1930; 8(III)/1933; 08(IV)/1933; 108/1934; the Oral Evidences of Labour leaders submitted to the RCL and the BLEC.

Similarly, there were incidences such as in Chhaitabad in 1938 where the Bird and Company managing agency attempted to tempt the miners with bottles of liquor to break away from the strike and rejoin the work. See, Political Special File No.- 379/1938

This was accompanied by the decision of the Congress to ally the peasant class and the working classes with it aiming to make the organisation and the movement much more powerful and influential Vis a Vis the British colonial state. This was positively in contrast to the political stand of the Congress in general and of Gandhi in particular that was carried in the preceding years. In 1921 after his first experience with the Ahmedabad labour in 1920 M Gandhi declared ‘we must not tamper with the labour. It is dangerous to make political use of the factory proletariat.’ See, The Times, May 1921.

Memorandum of MD Singh to BLEC, 1941, Vol. III, Pt., C: 227.

I have discussed these issues in my earlier chapters.

Seth, 1940: 250. There were 91 such cases.

The Enquiry into the Outstill System in Bihar and Orissa’, by J E Copeland; quoted in Seth, 1940: 244.

The figure of Copeland might have been a little inflated because of his prejudice against the consumption of liquor by mining classes.

Mackie wrote in his annual report to the directors of his company, quoted by J E Copeland, 1935: 22-23; Seth, 1940: 247.


I have not come across the perception of the mining classes in this respect from the literary sources at my disposal. In course of my historical anthropological survey in December 2003—February 2004 I came across mainly 3 kinds of opinions. A small number of them regarded drinking as a non-desirable habit. But, they did amongst their companions. A large number of the workers felt that occasional liquor consumption is desirable and also good for health. A very small number of the miners now indulged in regular and heavy drinking. But, all of them complained against the incidences of heavy drinking that led to indebtedness. And, this state is defined in broadly two ways. One, the spending a large of the total income on the alcohol. The second, the high quantity of drinking that makes one to lose control of body and mind.

Mr. W Morton argued before the enquiry of Copeland

What was the relationship among sellers/ shopkeepers, moneylenders and contractors that usually run those shops, and the mining classes as consumers of those all? How did it impact on the financial condition of the mining classes? I will explore these issues at some other place.

See Arvind N Das (1983); the letter of commissioner of excise and salt department of Bihar and Orissa government to the chief secretary of state, 1/8/1930 in Pol. Spl. File no. 303/1930.


Ranjit Ghosh (1992: 118) made an inference that “in comparison with the cotton, jute, railway and steel workers’ politics of resistance of the coal workers was rather belated and week.

Political Special File, 258/1930, Confidential Diary, ASP, Dhanbad
34 Chief Inspector Of Mines Annual Report, 1931.
35 Political Special File no. 328/1930, reports submitted by the reporter-CID
36 See, Political Special File, No.- 379/1938, 70(II)/1940. Chapter, 'Wage Politics'.