At four in the morning we rise, in the middle of winter
To cross the river, to reach the quarry
Seven miles we have to walk each day
Returning home exhausted before we eat

Sleeping without a proper bed, relieved to have reached home at last.
But we have to leave in the middle of the night,
Leaving our children sleeping,
We have to hurry,
For we are late, we will not get work.

If we are just a few minutes late, the Haziri Babu harasses us,
Go away, he orders, or see me later!
If we miss work one day, he orders
Go back today, or demands, bring me a chicken tomorrow.
The sahib, the sirdar, the Munshi and the haziri Babu all make us weep,

At work sometimes our digging stick gets broken,
Whilst we cut the earth or break the rocks,
The Lohar Babu of char number basteel repairs them charging us two rupees as week.

At four in the evening our shift is over,
Then the leader Babu calls us to his house,
We carry coal for him; we carry bricks and lime to build his house,
He gives us some food but we have to wash his dishes and do his marketing.

He tells us, stay overnight, where will you go at this late hour?

How will you go home, why trouble yourself so much?

Again in the morning you will have to return,
And if you are late you will lose your job.

How will you get your job back?
What will you eat then? ¹

This chapter will explore the politics of work-time time in the Jharia coalfields. The statements of employers make us believe that miners spent long hours in the workplace on their own accord, and worked in an irregular manner. Any attempt to regulate their work habits, employers argued, led to workers simply deserting the mines. This image of work behaviour of colliery workers appears contrary to the one described in the life story of kamins expressed in the above folktale. To grasp the meaning of such a contrast I set out to enquire into the way workers time was regulated, and the way mining people adapted to this regime of control.

Employers and their representatives approached the issue as a problem of the labour supply, agriculturist pre-industrial habits of miners, and work discipline.² Such arguments are decidedly concerned with the problem faced by capital, not with how miners conceived and experienced the work regime. Such arguments recur in histories of industrialization. In his study of the early industrialization in England, Voth (2000) has suggested that the long work-year performed by workers became possible due to increased labour supply and declining real wage against the increased pressure to work more in order to meet the increased expenses of household necessaries. However, the initial period of industrialization saw a reverse combination of factors and concomitant work practice. Voth affirms in many ways the calculations of capital, especially to the initial period. In contrast, other persuasive arguments have highlighted how workers continued to retain their ‘preindustrial’ work belief and behaviour (‘task oriented’ sense of time), hence they worked in a manner characterised by long work-spells with ‘characteristics irregularity’ (Thompson, 1967; Gutman, 1976; Thrift, 1990). One of the targets of this argument was Marxian analysis that explained the tenacity of preindustrial
work habit in terms of the 'handicraft-type' labour process adopted in the phase of 'manufacturing' (the early industrialisation) as opposed to the subsequent phase of 'modern industrial' labour process (Marx, 1867/1977; Steadman Jones, 1987). Other scholars have analyzed the work practice of the industrial people in terms of the struggles against tortuous, monotonous, alienating conditions of work and life (Upadhyay, 2004; Gurvitch, 1990; Nyland, 1990; Ray, 1990). This chapter will concentrate on the notion of tasks, and the particular manner in which miners came to grips with the industrial discipline. The social relationship in the labour process would be the subject of enquiry with a view to explain the manner of adaptation undertaken by the miners.

**Customs, wages and workloads**

Workers in the Jharia coalfields came from diverse backgrounds. There were small holders, landless labourers, herders, bonded labourers, and craftspeople. Most of them were from neighbouring *bastees* in Manbhum district and other nearby districts of Hazaribagh, Bankura, Burdwan and Santhal Pargana. A few of them had worked in the coalfields of Raniganj, Giridih and Rewa. Some miners were service tenants of mine-owning zamindars. After the trade boom in 1906—1908, collieries also recruited an increasing number of workers from the distant areas, such as the districts of Gaya, Monghyr, Patna, Sahabud, Mednipore, Gorakhpur, Mirzapur, Pratapgarh, Allahabad, Naurangi, Raipur and Bilaspur (Central Provinces). Some came from more distant regions like Punjab and Madras. By the 1940s, the distant migrants, in fact, outnumbered those from adjacent areas. A number of second-generation colliers entered the mines from the 1930s and the 1940s. The supervisory and managerial staff was often educated Bengali *bhadralok*, popularly known as *babus* or *Sarkar*, alongside other European managers and overmen.

We can classify miners into four broad categories based on their spatial and temporal engagement with the colliery. (1) Settled family *majdoors*, who settled down in the coalfields, living either in company-*dhowrahs*, or in rented rooms provided by contractors or in huts of mud and thatch they themselves set up. In the vocabulary
common in the mining area they were known as ‘family majdoors’. (2) ‘Regular urban commuters’ from adjoining bastees. (3) ‘Regular single males’ from adjacent and distant areas. 4. ‘Seasonal rural-urban majdoors’ from neighbouring and distant areas. They were different from those majdoors who returned to their villages occasionally.

Over sixty percent of the workforce worked underground as coal-cutters, loaders, trammers, packers of trolley line, carpenters, timber-mistris, line-mistris, blacksmiths, fitters, pump-khalasis, engine-drivers, and other khalasis in inclines and shaft mines, popularly known as shirmuhan and khadan. The mines underground were pitch dark, lit only by kupbattis (dhibri) until the 1920s, by lanterns and a few safety lamps in the later decades, and by cap-lamps of miners (along with a few electric bulbs) from the 1960s. The rest of the workers sweated at surface mines and in quarries, as wagon loaders, sale-pickers, earth-cutters, boilers, gin (chanuk)-drivers, construction workers, electricians, coke-woven workers, munshis, clerks, overman, surveyor and other managerial staffs.

The collieries were of different sizes and under different managements. Some employed a few dozen miners while others employed thousands. The number of collieries in operation fluctuated. The number increased between 1896 and 1923, fell in the years of slump and depression (1925—1936), went up again during WWII, and dipped in the subsequent two decades. From 200 in 1910, the number went up to 335 in 1919, fell to 206 in 1935, increased to 424 in 1945, and fell to 279 in 1969. The size of establishment, and the pattern of ownership, as we will see below, had significant bearing on how work-time was organized.

The collieries were under private owners, many of whom employed managing agencies to take care of the actual operation of business. The managing-contractor, along with the recruiting sirdar, was responsible for employing and making the miners work. Work routines varied in different establishments and, frequently, in different jobs within the same colliery. The routine varied significantly between the big and small mines, especially during the rainy season and different conditions of trade.

Collieries worked usually with a labor-intensive labour process. One feature of the work routine was a notable difference between its ostensible and effective forms. Ostensibly the work-routine was ‘flexible and discretionary’. The worker could go to work when s/he wished in the morning, and could leave at any time. Colliery operators
argued vociferously in favour of such work routine and persistently suggested that Indian miners were free and worked according to their will. Any disturbance with this custom – for instance, through the proposed regulation of mining hours – the operators suggested, would only be to the detriment of the miners (Deptt. Rev. and Agri. 1900: 07). The Indian Mining Act, 1901, did set out safety guidelines; however, unlike the Factory Act, it conceded to the demand of the industrialists to refrain from interfering with the existing labour-management relationships. Hence working hours were not regulated. In 1920, John Kirk, Chief Mining Engineers of Kilburn and Co. at the Jamadoba and Kustore collieries, defended, once again, the logic of flexibility. It would ensure, he said, political placidity: ‘the reason for the absence of strikes and other labour trouble in our mines is because miners and their families are allowed to work when they please, and to come up and down as they chose (Evidence to the Foley Report, 1920: 97).

The piece-rate colliers -- the coal-cutters, loaders, trammers, underground tram line-mistris and wagon-loaders -- who formed a large proportion of the miners, worked primarily within this form of flexible time schedule. Like in rural areas and the early factory, the usual workday in most mines was the entire day. Even in 1925 electricity was available in no more than 50 per cent of the collieries; so operators were keen to make the miners work through the sunlight-hours. Gradually underground work was extended into the night as well, particularly during the trade boom driven by the coal-consuming World War I and in the years after. The extension of work time took place largely in the big collieries like Kustore, Lodna, Bhowra, Jealgora, Jamadoba, Sijua and Badroochak (Katras), which increased their production. Others continued to work either with the steam-power – these began to set up in the wake of the trade boom of 1906-1908 – or with manual labour. W.C. Banerjee of Messers. Banerjee & Company, one of the largest native operators, reported in 1920:

I am doubtful about the greater practicability of working mines by regular shifts with the present labour conditions of the country, than by the usual two shifts we have now, viz., miners working alternatively according to their will during day and or night. We can keep a timekeeper to record the hour of a miner going down and coming out of the mine. It will be difficult problem to make him
work 6 hours according to the labour hours fixed by the Washington Conference (1919). A miner goes to work at his sweet will at any hour of the day (Evidence to Foley committee, 1920: 61).

This rhetoric of the ‘sweet will of miner’ allowed Banerjee, like many others like him, to oppose any public interference with the relationship of management and workers.

How did the colliers experience the system? There can be no doubt that the language of ‘flexible production schedule’ went along with an ‘enforced’ structure of work routine and a variety of coercive controls. Mining work slowed down in the rainy season, and employers sought to maximize the appropriation of labour time in the other seasons. Like tea plantations in the Assam valley until the early years of the twentieth century, employers deployed both coercive and economic machineries to achieve their end. The lower rung of the supervisory command under both sarkari (directly organised) and the thekadari (contract) systems, ensured that kamgars (worker) worked for the whole day.

That coercion was more prevalent in the thekadari system was noted by the Foley Committee in 1920, the Whitely Commission in 1930, and the Deshpande Committee in 1945-46. The thekadars recruited the labouring poor, charging a commission of around 3 to 4 annas or 8 to 14 percent on every tub of coal extracted by his recruits (Foley, 1920: 126.). The labour sirdars and mining sirdar of the gang usually drove colliers from the dhowrahs (labour lines) into coalmines. The mining sirdar, unlike the labour contractor, worked underground side by side his gang men, and received, besides his wage, a certain commission per tub of coal (about three paisa) raised by his gang of ‘coolies’. Operators deployed private guards, popularly known as lathaiths or pehalwans, to police work and property, and to help control the movement of miners recruited on commission and service tenancy. Some of the collieries made a pact for this purpose with the local zamindar, like the zamindar of Mohalbuni and Tetulia who provided labouring persons to the Bhowra colliery. The use of coercion became even more intensive when big collieries came up in the 1910s and when the pits went deeper and deeper. Most majdoors were reluctant to go deep underground even when paid a wage rate higher than what they received for the work they liked to undertake on the surface. W.C. Banerjee was categorical about the functional need for coercion:
Practically we drove our miners from a certain settled area lived in by the miners and colliers mentioned before. Now we get lots of difficulties in even getting miners to come out of their huts to work within our colliery limits at a certain hours of day and night. I do not think that these people will come of their own accord, like other labourers in a workman’s train at a certain hour (Evidence to Foley, 1920: 62).

When the big collieries went in for a three-shift or two-shift system to speed up work during the WWI, they immediately faced problems. Miners were reluctant to work and it was difficult to ensure regularity of production (Adams, CIMAR, 1918: 1-2). We do not know how an operator commanded workers in the underground workplace, given the recurrent complains put forward by the Inspector of Mines concerning insufficient supervisors employed in the colliery. Nevertheless, we can make inferences related to the length of a desired production schedule and the way it was measured. An overman and a mining sirdar ensured that a pair of coal-cutter and loader cut and loaded a minimum of two to three tubs in a colliery of hard coal-seam and four to five tubs in a colliery of soft coal-seam. This entailed literally ‘driving’ colliers for twelve to sixteen hours a day (Adams, 1918: 4-12).

Mining capital sought to control wages to determine the productivity of labour. This took two forms: control over the level of payment and the form of paying. The modes of control were reminiscent of the mercantilist capitalist labour regimes of seventeenth and eighteenth century England. Operators incessantly complained of the implication of increasing wage payments: ‘the only effect of an increase in wages is a decrease in output, as he (the worker) can obtain the amount which he needs, by working fewer days in a week’. Operators fixed a ‘depressed’ wage rate in order to exert pecuniary pressure to enforce an increase in labour input. (Chapter ‘Wages...’). This was the case in the period 1900—1923 when the coal industry was expanding and employers continuously complained of an inadequate supply of labourers. Some collieries used credit mechanism to tie peasants into a system of debt-labour. The mode of payment also reflected capitalist efforts to minimize wage bills. Operators employed most workers on the piece rate system, which allowed them to extend the work time. Given the low wage rates for piecework, miners tended to prolong work to secure the necessary income. Only a small proportion of the workforce, mainly the supervisory and
clerical staffs and some daily kamgars (the blacksmiths, carpenters, and the masonmen), worked on the time-rate system.

By the 1920s, a few big collieries began to improve the condition of living at collieries to attract labourers and induce them to work harder. Observers like Wilson (CIM, 1909), Holland (1918), Rees (1919), and Noyce (1925) repeatedly suggested that the best way to increase labour effort from working people was to improve conditions of living and work, and to invest in machinery. They were convinced that this will discipline workers into a new regime of work: their rural habits would give way to a new ethic of regular and steady labour. The big collieries began to build brick structures, organize water supply, and look into issues of sanitation. John Kirk, the Chief Mining Engineer of Jamadoba Colliery (TISCO.) and H.T. Thompson of Kustore Colliery (Ranigunjee Coal Co.) claimed in 1920: ‘We have improved housing conditions lately, and I think this would have increased the output but for our excessive stocks. ... Our improved houses are very popular and labourers appreciate a good and sufficient water supply’ (Foley, 1920: 97-98, 131). Some collieries, like Kustore and Bhowra, allotted small plots of rent-free cultivable land to some miners in an effort to settle them permanently. In return, the miners worked for a specified number of days in a year in the collieries (Foley, 1920: 101, 131). These facilities however remained inadequate. This was admitted by investigators like J.E. Copeland in 1917 and T. Rees in 1919. Even in 1930 the Whitely Commission pointed to limits of these measures.25 Many managers and employers, in fact, saw such demands for ‘improvement’ of living conditions of workers as utopian. When asked about welfare schemes, W. Burt, the Manager of Central Kirkend Colliery in Jharia in 1920, stated:

From a moral standpoint, I would agree to this, but my sympathies end there. The whole fabric of the mining industry in India rests on a very frail foundation, and I cannot see where many companies will find [sic] the money for such Utopian schemes. The margin between working costs and selling price is so little that, however much we may be inclined to do all that lies in our power to ameliorate the lot of the native, we have to throw all the philanthropic ideas aside as we cannot afford them. ...Further, large sums of money have already been spent on housing and sanitation.26
Even in the Bhowra colliery, which was considered to have been 'progressive' on this front, only around half the total workforce in 1930 lived in accommodation provided by the management. (Chapter 'Industrial Space...'). Yet, these initiatives were important. In mines where accommodation and land was provided, a sizeable number of colliers continued to work through agriculture seasons. Uninterrupted work cycles enabled such mines to increase output. Even in months of sowing and harvesting their output was often as high as 50 percent of the peak output in February. 27

The industry began installing mechanical tools for mining in the aftermath of the trade boom of 1906—1908. Collieries dug deep and the gallery moved away from the pit mouth or incline mouth, creating a number of new difficulties. Stream power, electricity, shafts, haulage engines, tramlines, water pumps, ventilators were used to overcome these problems. Use of coal-cutting and drilling machines and explosives allowed the industry to raise labour productivity in the wake of the trade boom associated with WWI. These mechanical tools helped reduce the cost of production at a time wage bills rose because of the wage revision approved in 1920-21 and the new welfare expenditure under the Jharia Mines Board of Health (1915) and the Jharia Water Board (1916). 28 Three aspects of mechanization are important for our discussion. One, only the big colliery proprietors invested in these mechanical tools. Small and medium establishments, responsible for about one-third of the total output and employment, continued to operate with manual labour. In other words, the extent to which machineries were installed varied between the collieries and within a colliery. 29

Second, manual mining continued to have its attraction, since it was seen as cheap and did not involve large capital outlays. Use of electricity and ventilators had a direct impact on the quality of manual work. Ventilators could reduce heat and humidity within the mines. Describing the unbearable conditions within the mines Deshpande observed in 1946:

In the development of phases where gallery driving was going on working conditions were often tiring because, until the gallery has been driven and connected with ventilation passages there is no free circulation of air. Moreover, it was noticed in one case that the heat out by the seams was so excessive that the working condition was almost unbearable. The workers were seen to be perspiring profusely and the only means of keeping themselves dry they could think of was to rub their bodies
with dhotis. In many mines the air was so saturated with moisture and here blasting operation had taken place the air was full of fumes (Deshpande, 1946: 41-44).

Ventilation thus was of two kinds. Unlike small and medium collieries, the big mines—responsible for about two third output and employment—now enjoyed advantages accrued out of investment in the improved ventilation; however, the coal-cutters and loaders emplaced at the developing phases and working faces faced truly uneven advantage of the investment.

Third, unlike the experience in factory industries, mechanization did not lead to a general degradation of manual work. Workers employed on new mechanical devices came to be seen as skilled labour. While it is true these new notions of skill meant that pick-miners gradually lost their status as skilled labour after the introduction of explosives, coal-cutting and drilling machines. Nevertheless, mechanization did not seem to impose the demand of synchronization on miners, unlike in the case of factory worker. Yes, a miner employed on drilling machine for instance, as June Nash (1979) has captured in case of the Bolivian Tin mining, bore the challenge of hard labour. In contrast, the trammers saw lessened strain on the muscle with the introduction of haulage machines and extended tramlines upto the working face. The operator realised this advantage offered to the trammers. In a reply, he kept the size of trammers relatively constant against enhanced output, therefore an increased workload of handling of a greater number of tubs on them. The mechanisation caused an increase in ordeal of underground miners in a secular way on two fronts. One, most of mechanical tools, except the ventilators and safety lamps, helped add on to the coaldust, sound, heat, and the injury received in the colliery. Second, electricity enabled colliery operators to move to the system of two or three-shifts. Mechanisation was thus a substitute, to an extent, of labour intensive mining, and, yet definitely, not a representative of any lessened arduous working condition. Meanwhile, the ‘driving’ remained a significant tool, besides the piece rate wage system, applied by operators to exact the higher labour effort from colliers. The demands for a check on the abuses and maltreatment dealt to miners, job security and an increased unionisation of miners, we will see later, expressed their deep resentment against the widespread practice of ‘driving’.

32
Work spells and 'time making'

The time regime that evolved in the mines was as much an imposition by employers as it was the product of adaptive strategies of the mining classes. The working classes were not inert; they had a constitutive role in the formation of work culture, as suggested by Joshi (2003) in relation to the making of work culture in the Kanpur textile factories. At one level, workers in the mines submitted to the demands and discipline of capital, at another, they defined limits to its operation. They often devised their own work rhythm. The piece-rated miners, like those in the Raniganj Coalfield, worked for long hours, but also wanted regular intermissions (Foley, 1920: 13; Whitely, 1931, vol. 1: 117, 124). A large number of them worked regularly for 12 to 16 hours in a day for a spell of 4 to 7 days and thereafter returned to the bastees to rest and spend time with their rural families for a few days. W.H. Pickering, Chief Inspector of Mines, noted in 1904:

Even in normal time, the Dehatis (the local-miners from the nearby bastees) would not work regularly. Some of them worked for six or seven days at a stretch and then returned to their home for a week and rest. And others who came from nearby village stayed for a day in which they spent eighteen hours working underground (CIMAR, 1905: 2-12). (The words in barracked are mine)

Similarly, R. Purdey, President of Association of Colliery Managers in India reported on the question of reduction of work hours: 'I consider 8 hours underground sufficient for any hard working employees; in the case of a coal-hewer, this would mean 7 hours at a face. Our present day Indian miner prefers a long easy shift; the shift commences and ends at his own (sic) inclination. He occupies a face twice as long as is necessary.' (Evidence to Foley, 1920: 111) Miners from adjacent bastees, who were two third of the total work-force till 1910-11, were used to this kind of work rhythm. They regularly commuted from their rural homes to the urban area, and the flow increased during the slack months of the rural calendar. At times rural migrants came to the colliery for short periods to earn some amount of cash to meet their cash needs, and did not return until they were once again desperate for cash. This pattern of mobility was not characteristic of Jharia mines alone. Thomson (1967) noted a similar pattern of work
and mobility in seventeenth and eighteenth-century England. We see the same working pattern on the tea plantations of Assam and Sri Lanka where local labourers commuted from nearby paddy fields.

Frequently, settled miners also abstained from work on weekly payday, rested, and enjoyed their free time. Many of them, particularly the coal-cutters and loaders, who were critical for the production process and formed about two-fifth of total workforce, extended this free time, staying away from work for one or two days following the payday. Hence, we hear a regular complaint that on an average the Indian miner did not work for more than four and half days in a week.\(^{34}\) The majdoors on time-rated system also showed a tendency to follow such working pattern i.e. a spell of workdays when they worked for long hours followed by days when they took a break from work. This resembled the work rhythm of the Bombay textile workers and local labourers in Calcutta Jute Mills (Morris, 1963; DasGupta, 1994).

Most observers who looked into the operation of mines emphasized that subsistence needs of miners defined both the necessity as well as the limits to work. They worked only to earn what they needed at a particular time, and had little desire for continuity of service once the immediate need was met. J.R.R. Wilson, Chief Inspector of Mines, noted in 1908:

> Apparently, the Indian miner has not yet reached that stage of ambition when he wishes to increase his earnings. As by filling one tub per day he can obtain quite sufficient to meet all his needs, it does not dawn upon him that by filling three he might be steadily placing himself beyond the risk of want. Unfortunately, the output per person is kept very low by the man who fills most working the least days. The Indian miner is not an economist, either political or domestic; and his logic is of the simplest – that his labour should be regulated only by the eating and drinking capacity of himself and family. Some day he may become educated and aspire to bear things, even to the point of placing a higher value upon his labour. In the meantime, there is room for missionary effort. Some mine managers have discovered the hidden possibilities of the miner; and, under their guidance, he has learned to work better and to show that he can appreciate the difference between a squalid hut and a clean and comfortable dwelling (CIMAR, 1909: 2). (The italicized words are highlighted)

The labour productivity of miners went up in the subsequent years along with a marginal improvement in real wages, though mining officials continued to replay the stereotype of
the miner who ‘works according to his own sweet will’. H.T. Thompson, Chief Mining Engineer in Kustore colliery opposed the proposal of a shift system. He believed ‘This shift system would be one of the most difficult changes to adopt at the collieries, as a miner works by piece work and, when he has cut his 3 tubs of coal, he stops; as the money earned thereby he considers sufficient to meet his wants (Evidence to Foley, 1920: 131).’ Similarly, W.C. Banerjee of Messrs. Banerjee & Co. declared: ‘It is quite impossible even to force a miner to come out of a mine at a certain hour. A miner will not come out of a mine unless and until he cuts a certain number of tubs, which in his opinion is his proper earning for the day (Evidence to Foley, 1920: 61).’ As late as 1930, the Royal Commission on Labour observed:

In earlier days it was miners’ custom to come with his family from his village and to go underground for a period which might extend to one, two or more days returning to surface and to village when he had earned as much as he desired at the moment. The manner of working hours has largely disappeared, though survived in some degree up to the introduction of a daily limit of hours in 1929 (Whitely Report, 1931, vol. 1: 117).

From official reports it appears that different communities had different attitudes to work. Some – like the Santhals, Bauris, Rajwars, Ghatwals, Beldars, Mushahars – were interested only in earning a minimum subsistence. This was also true of service tenants from the neighbouring hastees. About such dehati coolies, W.H. Pickering (CIM) noted in 1906: ‘he can earn good wages, but for them, money is not everything. He is sensible enough to consider comfort and this is one reason, which always draws him back to his old home, where he can take ease, in congenial surroundings (CIMAR, 1907: 2-12).

This does not seem to have been the case with the Bilashpuri family labour, or the upcountry men known as the Paschimas, and the non-aboriginal workers. They attempted to raise as many tubs as they physically could within the given working condition. In terms of commitment, employers considered them to be the similar to the ‘English Miners’. ‘They are more assiduous and regular workers...They approximate more nearly to the perennial factory workers and may properly be regarded as miners dependent on mining for their livelihood (RCL, 1931, vol.1: 115).’ Their numbers gradually rose since 1906 and particularly in the boom period (1916- 1923). They
largely worked as regular ‘seasonal majdoors’. The big collieries recruited them. We are told that these workers preferred mechanical works, coal extraction with the application of explosives, and did not like loading. So they came to be employed as explosive carriers, shot-firers, drillers, coal cutting machine-men, enginemen, engine-khalasis, pump-men, pump-khalasis, fitters, blacksmiths, carpenters, timber-mistries, line-mistries, certificated mining sirdars, and the tub distributing and checking clerks. The mechanical, clerical, and supervisory jobs were on time-rates; however, the explosive carriers and coal cutting machine-men were generally on piece rate like other pick miners and loaders.¹⁵

These descriptions cannot be all dismissed as constructs of colonial minds: communities working within a particular work regime, operating with certain cultural attitudes, may take time to readjust to a new rhythm of work. But if we hear the voices of colliers we get a richer sense of the innumerable things that defined the volume of work they could do, and the number of tubs they could raise. Gauri Shankar was a coal loader in the Bengal Coal Co. and Messrs. Andrew and Yule Co. Appearing in front of the Whitely Commission in 1930 with three other loaders of Bara Demo Colliery, he explained in detail what defined the limits of their work:

Out difficulty is that when there is coal, we cannot get tubs for it. What we want is that more tubs should be provided and more coal. Yesterday as it was known that the Commission was coming we were taken out of the pit by 8 o’clock at night. Ordinarily if we go in at 8 o’clock in the morning, we may have to stay in till 3 or 4 o’clock. When it gets very late sometimes, we want to get away even if we have not finished our work. But in that case we are sometimes prevented from leaving; the contractor’s baboos stop us. A baboo whose name is Ram Lal, is one of those who prevented us from speaking to you. For the last three years, we have been paid the same rate of wages. If we only stay 12 hours, we only get about 5 annas. It is only by staying beyond that time that we get an adequate wage for the day. I have no land here, but I have land in Bilashur. I got into debt for a wedding and, also, in order to get plough buffaloes (Evidence to Whitely Commission, 1931, IV, B: 106).

When wages were miserably low, work time had to be stretched to earn what the workers saw as essential to survive. But short supply of tubs restricted the volume of coal they could raise. This was an argument many other colliers made. Barjumain
Mushalman, Jiwan Majhi, Parbhu Majhi and three other miners of Loyabad Colliery (Jharia-Katras Coal Co. and Messrs. Bird & Co.) talked of the injustice of deductions for inadequate work when tubs were in short supply:

Two of us cut two tubs a day and get 14 annas, 7 annas to the coal-cutter and 7 annas to the loader. If there is any stony coal in the tub, deductions are made. One of us had one tub deducted last week out of 7 tubs. The supply of tub is not sufficient, and so we only fill two tubs in a day. When we get the tubs at 6 o’clock in the evening how can we fill three tubs? We go down the mine at 6 in the evening and we are just now coming up (it was 10.10 A.M.). Those who go down at 6 in the morning come up from 7 to 10 o’clock. The two shifts do not stay in the mines together. So long as our work is not finished, we wait in the mines until the other shift comes down. The night shifts have to wait until we have finished filling two tubs (Evidence to Whitely, 1931: 122).

Statements such as these surprised the Whitely Commission. The Amendment to Indian Mines Act in 1923 had fixed a limit to the maximum number of hours colliers could be made to work: sixty hours a week for surface workers and fifty-fours for underground miners. An Amendment in 1929 restricted the length of workday to a maximum of twelve hours. Clearly these stipulations were respected in their infringement.

Coal was extracted by gangs known as the Dangals. Each dangal usually constituted of 6 to 12 colliers. It included malcuttas (coal-cutters), loaders, trammers, mining sirdars, etc. In the 1920s, dangals of malcuttas and loaders were predominantly ‘family-gangs’ – that is gangs that included male, female, and children. The collieries employed women and children predominantly in loading coal alongside the malcuttas. Usually the male members cut coal, while the kamins and the children, both girls and boys, gathered the cut coal into a basket usually of 80 lb (80 pound=36 kg). The kamins then carried the baskets and put the coal either into tubs (36cft to 40cft = one ton coal to 1.20 ton) kept at some distance from the working faces, or onto bullock carts. Sometimes in the case of incline and quarry mines, the coal was carried directly to the surface. A pair of malcutta and loader in normal conditions cut and loaded two to three tubs in a day. But often due to the kind of problems that Gauri Shankar was referring to, a collier could not secure a single tub of coal even when he worked through the day. A pair of coal-cutter and loader together was expected to extract at least two full tubs of coal. If the tub was not judged as full, or the number of tubs raised was less than the task
specified, the collier's work was not recognized, and deductions were made. Deductions
were imposed as a disciplinary tool to sustain output targets and work commitment.

The workday of workers on time rate and of service tenants was seemingly
predicated on nature's time, i.e., two shifts of whole day and whole night. The
introduction of a three-shift system had definite impact on their work schedule
dependent on the colliery clock, known as siren. They were mainly overmen, clerks,
pump-men, pump-khalasis, enginemen, engine-khalasis, fitters, blacksmiths, carpenters,
timber-mistries, line-mistries, and some of them were engaged in water bailing, earth
cutting, shale picking and coke making. The time-rated workers on the surface were
largely women labourers and children. The service tenants were involved in both time
and piece rated works.

Within their long workday colliers sought to create their own spaces of social
interaction. Frequent breaks and intervals were an integral part of the long workday.
These were times of relaxation when workers recouped their energy, exchanged news,
and reaffirmed community bonds. During night work, most miners tried to sleep for a
few moments within mines. R. R. Simpson, Chief Instructor of Mines, reported in 1921
'At the present time it is not unusual for coalminers to work for some hours, eat and then
sleep, usually on the surface, and then to return for another spell of work. ...the practice
of sleeping underground in a mine is only too common, although it is usually forbidden
(CIMAR, 1922: 12).'</n>

Almost a decade later one Engineer sneered at the working practices of miners in these words: 'they work a little, sing a little, smoke a little and joke a little (RCL, 1931, Vol. I).'

In the course of coal cutting, loading, and tramping, they conversed, joked, hummed, sang and played the pipe. L. Barnes in her fieldwork noted, 'The women workers often narrated with joy the work they did below ground, the people they worked with, and the members of their gangs and how they used to sing and work (Barnes, 1989: 138). A folktale states, 'Young miners used to take in their flute below ground and there they played music, and women would stop work, and sing and dance, so no work was done. Hence, bosses stopped the women from going down the mine.'

The IMA, 1935, stipulated a one-hour break for surface workers but no such provision was made for underground workers. The argument was that they in any case
frequently enjoyed breaks during breakage of machinery, waiting for tubs and before and after the blasting of explosives. A break during workday was of course necessary for miner to overcome exhaustion and fatigue. Through moments of singing, joking, smoking colliers seemed to imbue their onerous long workday with a certain sense of liveliness. The IMA in 1929 prohibited women from underground mines and one Amendment in 1938 prevented workers from smoking and carrying matchboxes underground. Mining authorities succeeded in imposing some of these restrictions but were unable to check smoking.

Employers were firmly of the opinion that a majority of the Indian miners, in contrast to the British miners, worked on an average no more than six hours a day though they spent a long working shift underground. They assumed that miners had the habit of idling, they were thriftless and excitable, and were used to a low standard of comfort. How did workers see their work? This is difficult to explore. But some of the mining lores give us entry into the minds of colliers. Here is a song by Ghuga Mahto composed in 1930:

We sad coal-cutters,
Our hands, hard and callused,
Our insides dark with dust,
Oh! This is what I think.

Once in the lift-cage,
I shivered,
What if the rope snaps?
Oh! This I think;

The cage goes down,
My father, my mother - so far away
Shall I ever see them again?
Oh! This I think

If a chunk of coal falls,
My head will be smashed,
God knows what is due
Oh! This I think

Ghuga Mahto tells you this story
The warm Damodar flows on,
Oh! The heat, the heat,
Tortures me on and on

Employers were quick to disown responsibility about the terrible conditions of work within the mines. The Foley Committee reported, 'Whatever amenities may be provided, a labourer will readily desert a well appointed colliery, where the coal is hard, the lead from the tubs to the face long and the galleries wet; for a badly appointed one where the coal is soft, the lead short and the galleries dry.' The logic was simple: the lazy worker valued ease more than modern amenities.

Colliers enjoyed some control on the decision-making regarding the pace and the direction of work especially in the underground. At the work site, the gang headman/gang-sirdar worked out a plan, direction, and pace of mining in combination with his gang members. He supervised the work process and worked alongside other miners. He was usually from the same social groups – kith, caste, tribe, and community – as other gang miners. He was responsible for recruiting workers, then training and controlling them. W.C. Banerjee, a big colliery proprietor, manager and agent of many collieries explained how the system worked:

We have recruiters and under them certain miner sirdars. We send these men into the districts. .... They know certain people as miners and coolies and bring them. We do not bring all the coolies and teach them coal cutting. These sirdars bring with them their relatives, acquaintances and co-villagers, and employ them in surface or underground work according to their abilities. ...they teach and turn out as coal cutter, they will be paid a certain sum of money in addition to what we pay them, namely, certain wages and certain commission per tub of coal raised by their gang of coolies (Foley, 1920: 61-62).
Workers depended on the recruiter and frequently the entire gang of workers moved from one particular colliery to another along with their sirdar, whenever some irresoluble conflict arose (Rees, 1919: 40). The kamins and the children, as loaders, were relatively untied, and worked as long they wished in the family gangs. They carried their sucking babies underground, and carved out a space to take care of them. Children worked as loaders alongside their parents. In 1923 the IMA prohibited children (below the age group of thirteen) from the mines. The kamins played with the regulation. They left the older children in the dhowrahs with some retired collier or a member of a different shift, and carried the babies underground, opiated and drugged so that officials could hear no screams. (Chapter ‘Re-claiming…’). Apart from the mining sirdar, there were also some impersonal supervisors like the tub distributor, the checker munshis and the overman. But these supervisory staffs were in inadequate numbers, particularly underground, noted Simpson (CIM) in 1921. Employers did not interfere with the working of family gangs, and were keen on sustaining the personalized bonds between workers and supervisors. R. Barrowman, Manager of Standard Coal Co. for 18 years, stated the official policy: ‘it is essential that all labour should be settled on the colliery and as near their own shaft or incline as possible. By this means the mining staffs get in personal touch with the labourers, and are in a position to assist them in difficulties; they also understand one another better if they were housed anywhere of the colliery.’ The mining community developed a tacit understanding with the mining staff and labour contractors to ensure the functioning of family gangs. When this relationship of ‘despotic patronage’ broke down, the majdoors moved to some other colliery. That is why we see a high rate of the mobility of miners from one colliery to another, and often back to the village.

This way of carrying on everyday work at the mines with task-orientated sense of time also defined the stretch of days that miners worked. I have already discussed how they designed spells of work that stretched on an average from 4 to 7 days, followed by a break. Colliers also designed the length of workday in relation to the spell of workdays that they planned to work in the colliery. Usually they received payment on the weekends, i.e., Sundays, and went to the bazzar. It was a multipurpose visit. They
purchased essential household items, enjoyed socializing with others, and fraternized with those they could not otherwise easily meet since they worked in different shifts, in different faces and collieries. It was a day of 'indulgence', drinking, leisure and merriment. At times merrymaking would extend to Mondays. Workers came to believe that these breaks were critical for recovering their vigour, their capacity to labour. How could they continuously work in conditions that sapped their energies and enervated them? This is an argument that many colliers emphatically made to the Prasad (BLEC) Committee in 1938. The Committee reluctantly accepted that the miners' claims were not unjustified:

In some collieries, even those workers who are not addicted to drink or drink moderately and can attend work on Monday, are not given work as the employers prefer to keep the mines closed even on Monday because the majority of workers are not expected to come to work. ...many workers, who do not touch liquor or take it with moderation, absent themselves from work either on Monday or Tuesday on the pretext that the work is exhausting and they simply cannot keep up the strain for 6 days. The belief of theirs is not without any foundation. For instance in Bhadroochak colliery, where some workers were reported to be badly beaten by the managers or his agents for staying in dhourahs and not attending work on all the six days of the week, some parts of the underground workings were found to be as hot as coke ovens. And the few persons who were working in those parts reported that they could not work all the eight hours of the day. After every one-hour's work, they had to sit for half an hour or so in some water pit. But at the same time I have also come across some persons who had worked only 4 or 5 days in a week and did not think it worthwhile to tire themselves on the fifth or sixth day. The workers who were indulging in hard drink deluded themselves in the belief that without liquor they could not keep up their energies for the remaining 4 or 5 days in a week. Some also believed that the consumption of liquor was essential to keep their bowels free from coal dust, which they inhaled in course of their daily work (Prasad Report, 1941, Vol. II, A: 342).

Seasonality defined the rhythms of a sizeable workforce. They returned to their villages at the time of sowing, transplantation, and harvesting, to work on their small parcels of land. The honorary secretary of Indian Mines Federation observed:

There are two varieties of labourers, one settled at the colliery and paid a certain sardari commission, the other not resident at the colliery. The latter comes to work in January, leaves for home by the end of May for agricultural work, returns to the collieries about 3 months later by the end of August or
beginning of September, and again leaves for home in the beginning of November, and stays away for about 2 months. ... Some of them sometimes change their colliery.50

The work rhythm of such seasonal workers was defined by crop-patterns in the rural areas from which they migrate, the condition of monsoon, as well as food-grain availability. Rees noted in 1919: 'The supply (labourers) is always more or less inadequate, and apparently can only be recruited from certain classes of the population living more or less in proximity to the coalfields. A favourable monsoon seriously depletes the coalfields of labourer, as the labourer does not return to mining until he has exhausted his resources from cultivation.'51 Employers and investigators, such as Rees and Foley, bemoaned this tie with the agricultural season, and characterized the miner as essentially agriculturists and migratory. This mobility resembled the case of the Sri Lankan tea garden labourers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, local labourers in Assam tea gardens and Bombay and Calcutta textile mills in the latter nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Contrary to the colliery proprietor's view, the seasonal movement of colliers was not a feckless exercise. They visited their bastees not only to carry out the agricultural tasks, but also to physically recuperate their energy and, to reunite with their family members.52 All official reports admitted that in the mines, workers had neither the time nor the necessary facility to recover from their tiring work routine.53 They also escaped the seasonal epidemic attacks of cholera, malaria, and smallpox in the Coalfields in the rainy season.54 Colliery employers usually overlooked these reasons, and took recourse to the idea of an imagined favourable rise in wage rate in agricultural season in the countryside. This idea of determining economic rationale does not help to explicate the acts of miners, their social and spatio-environmental logic of leaving a mine even when it paid them a relatively higher wage rate. S.N. Simpson, Manager of Jealgora colliery, for instance, reported:

A miner and his family actually cut and load on an average 3 tubs a day. We pay annas 8 a tub owing to the long lead and the mining being wet. The usual rate is annas 6 for cutting coal. ... In Jharia, we lose our labour during the cultivating seasons in any case.55
The seasonal reversion to *bastees* was not easy for service tenants and settled miners. The proprietor was sometimes also a zamindar, and he wanted the service-tenant to become substitute workers in the mines. The latter were mainly from the landless people, often from social groups like the Santhals, the Bauris, the Ghatwals, the Rajwars, and Mushahars. Collieries attracted them by the offer of grants of small plots for residences and cultivation. But in return the collieries wanted them to work for half a day in mines during the agricultural seasons (Foley, 1920: 103). One of the ways they operated was to distribute their family labour between the colliery tasks and agricultural tasks. The mining temporality greatly conditioned the arrangement of work-time of the settled colliers; hence, only a few of them visited their *bastees* between June and August as they had to support output targets in the absence of other seasonal commuters. A majority of them visited their rural homes in the months of March, April, and May, which were periods of the festivals and other familial occasions, such as marriage. Some of them like the miners of the Bauri community considered mining work as their caste occupation.

Workers, *kamgars*, toured their Gaon (villages) for some socio-cultural reasons. Santhals went to their *bustees* during festivals, such as the Sohrai (in January or *Magh* month), for a whole month; the Rajwars, the Turis, the Ghatwals and the Mahtos of adjacent areas returned to their villages on the occasion of Tilsakarat, popularly known as Makarsakrant/ Jal/ Nadi/ Machhali Puja. The Up-country single men returned to their *bastees* to celebrate Holi (usually for a whole month) and Dashahra. Those who stayed in the coalfield, on the other hand, celebrated festivals, such as the Kali-Puja, Durga-Puja, Cake-Puja, Dewali, Ganesh-Puja, and the Holi. The *kamins* returned to their *bastees* when they were pregnant, stayed on for child birth and the early years of child rearing. This period could span six months to a year for those women who had extended families in the *bastees*. In contrast, the settled *kamin* women continued to work at the colliery till the very last week of their pregnancy. This was responsible for a comparatively high infant mortality found in the colliery settlement. Thus the family-colliers and *kamins* combined production and reproduction tasks, but not always according to their ‘own rhythm’ or in a ‘task-oriented’ manner. The very notion of task and its temporality as conceived by workers underwent a great transfiguration here. Half
a dozen big collieries gradually offered their time-rated staff fourteen days earned leave if they had regular attendance of 265 days in a year, while other settled colliers who were regular were assured four weeks of maternity leave and one week of sickness leave with *khoraki* (recovery subsistence income). (Foley, 1920: 111; Deshpande, 1946: 47-50).

**Colliery, social times and social domination**

We can see from our above discussion some characteristic elements of work-time practice. It was a combination of *overlong* workday and regular intermission. Long workdays exhausted workers who looked for breaks and long weekends. The puzzle is about the way workers adjusted to these conditions. For instance, when offered wage rates and living arrangements that were better than normal, many colliers preferred to settle down even when the conditions of work were demanding and work hours were long. This happened in many big collieries like Chasnala (Indian Iron & Steel Co.), Bhadroochack (Burrakar Coal Co.: Bird & Co.), and Jamadoba. Some of these mines had sharp incline of coal seams; the problem of water seepage; high emission of heat, coal-dust, and concomitant humidity; demanding production tasks. These were also mines that enforced regularity and steadiness in work. For these reasons the local commuters avoided these collieries. In contrast, the settled miners worked within these mines, adapting to the new time regime, accepting the demands of regularity, even as they continued to demand higher wages and better conditions of living. TISCO, for instance, adopted in 1941—1942 the policy of the payment of a Monday rate (at one anna per tub on raisings on Monday), and profit sharing bonus (payable at attendance of 190 days a year). Deshpande Committee believed that the ‘Monday rate did not result in improved attendance on Mondays’; at the same time, ‘only one-fourth of miners and loaders qualified for profit sharing bonus based on attendance in 1943-44’. In contrast, a scheme of production bonus, introduced in 1945, received an enthusiastic response. The average production per miner went up from 1.5 tons to 2.9 tons per day (Deshpande, 1946: 54-55).
Thompson (1967) and Gutman (1973/1976) have suggested that task orientation and pre-industrial work behaviour were defining features of work time of industrial workers in the nineteenth century. What I am emphasizing is this: in looking at task behaviour or continuity of pre-industrial work attitudes we should not under estimate the changes that come about within the new industrial milieu. Thrift (1990, 1996) has pointed out how the activity of ‘time making’ by the worker in the everyday production schedule complicates the thesis of task orientation, as workers combined multilayered tasks and resistance to the workday in the sphere of production as well. My study shows that there were, on the one hand, the miners’ efforts to inscribe work time with their own rhythm, i.e., unifying different segments of social times in a particular manner, and on the other, industrialists’ efforts to exact a commitment to long work hours in the shift system. Relations of social domination, subordination and resistance, mediated these negotiations over ‘particular’ and ‘abstract-general’ values of time. There were public as well as ‘subterranean’ contestations over flexible working rhythm, and the length of the workday. However, absences from mines were not always voluntary. Interruptions were often due to technical and mechanical problems in the production process: mine accidents, breakdown of the miners’ health, and the closure of collieries. These factors inhibited the overall course of the normal working and led to a lengthening of the workday.

Up until the 1920s, there were no formal provisions for any rest day, paid-leave, maternity leave, sick leave or intervals during work. Only a dozen big collieries followed an informal practice of ‘giving a suitable bakasheesh for celebration of pujahs, births, weddings, and travelling expenses to and from their country at stated periods. ...and make their working condition elastic...’ Thus, they recognized the significance of some particular moments or social times in miner’s life located beyond the reach of commodity production. For instance, they granted leaves for Cake Pujahs (Christmas), Holi, Dashehra and Kali-pujahs, and the Ganesh-pujahs for which the local population and the Bilashpuris, respectively, absented. They approved the breaks required by the kamins to go back to the dhowrahs, prepare food, and carry it back to other members of the family engaged with work. However, the same was not true about the desired length of breaks necessary for the child bearing and rearing (Deshpande, 1946: 47-50). Morris
(1963) has discussed such practices as ‘informal regularity’ within the practice of ‘formal irregularity’ at work of textile mills workers in Bombay. 64

The specific work rhythm of colliers—flexible working day with intermissions—had a twofold ramification for the industry. At one level, it allowed employers to argue against any shortening of the workday. The long workday proved favourable to the day-to-day logic of capital. At another level, the employer persistently criticised workers for being unsteady, irregular, careless and un-ambitious. He repeatedly complained about the difficulty of securing miners on the day that wages paid, when the latter went to bazaar after receiving wages, and a couple of days afterwards when miners remained in merrymaking. Anxious about work commitment, and keen on ensuring regularity of work, the president of the colliery managers in India, suggested:

A grog shop need not resemble a pig-style 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 payday, and Sunday play day, and all hats within the mining settlement held only on that day. 65

Notwithstanding this grumbling against the grog shop, the industrialist declined to do away with it. They needed it to attract majdoors to the colliery and tie them up (Chapter, ‘Drinking…’). Colliery proprietor took the help of local zamindars and his own pehalwans to ensure attendance of majdoors, particularly in periods of great demand of coal. The distant immigrant and the service tenant were at most vulnerable to that ‘mafiaist’ capitalist appropriation machinery. 66 In fact, in some cases, the colonial administration remarked critically on the ‘mafiaist’ form of the functioning of mining employers, whereas the latter and the labour contractor defended the activities of their lathaiiths. 67

When the relationship of ‘despotic patronage’ with the labour contractor and the mining sirdar broke down, the kamgars moved to other colliery. The coalfields witnessed a high rate of mobility of miners from one colliery to another. 68 This was one of the ways of adjustment of the Bombay textile workers, too (Upadhyay, 2004). Colliery proprietor continuously complained of this mobility of workers as unstable and
migratory characteristics of Indian miners. He did not look into the irresolvable tension of labour regime confronted with by miners. The latter left mines, when they experienced the condition of work physically taxing, as Foley Committee observed:

a labourer will readily desert a well appointed colliery, where the coal is hard, the lead from the tubs to the face long and the galleries wet; for a badly appointed one, where the coal is soft, the lead short and the galleries dry (Foley, 1920: 14).

Similarly, they left the mines that paid a lower wage rate. R. Barrowman, Manager of Standard Coal Co. reported ‘One man after training gives about 44 tons a month, his outturn being about double the ordinary miner. In 1918 many of these miners left me and got Rs, 5 a day at a neighbouring colliery (Evidence to Foley, 1920: 70).’ Notably, the arduous working condition and a lower wage rate had intimate links with the length of work. Both conditions of work pushed them to lengthen the work-time at the cost of their health and physical existence. When a few mines shifted to the shift system and attempted to impose a strict shift system in the late 1910s, a large number of colliers declined to work and they moved away en mass to other collieries. Rees made following observation in this respect:

They have also no fixed hours of work, but enter and leave when they inclined. No discipline or control can be exercised at any individual colliery in this respect as the workers at once leave, and can readily find work in neighbouring mines where there are no restriction of hours (Rees, 1919: Para 46).

The mining classes coped with the situation in two varied ways. The settled and regular majdoors of the distant areas moved to the big colliery; especially those that were Europeans owned. The latter was known to paying better wage rate than the smaller and medium size mines owned by the native entrepreneurs. In contrast, the local and daily commuting majdoors from the neighbouring areas preferred working in the Pokharia (quarries) and Shirmuhan (inclines). They moved away from a mine that began working nightshift, or went deeper. They did so, even though they received a lower wage rate at the small and medium size mines. The latter allowed them the flexible production schedule to adjust. In large number, they moved to new quarries during 1915-23. Proprietors of big collieries sought the intervention of the colonial government to
check such tendency of miners. The government stipulated in 1917 a provision that it would buy coal only from big collieries. Thus, against proclamation of policy of the ‘laissez faire’, the government, at times, actively intervened to regulate both wages and the time regime that operated in the mines.70

Short hour, holidays, and republican labour process

By 1919—1921, the industry saw miners agitating for laws to shorten the working hours, formalize regular leaves, and evolve some methods to assert their demands. The political advocates and publicists of working classes formed the Indian Colliery Employees Association (ICEA) in July 1920. By October that year the All Indian Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was established. These associations asked for an 8-hour (or if possible less) workday, weekly rest-day, sickness and privilege leaves, improved payment and other conditions of living.

The movement of miners was against the entire labour-management relationship as practiced in the industry, and aimed at laying out a republican control on the labour process. It all began with an opposition to abusive, intimidating and racist treatment of Indian staff and other workers. In the early months of 1920, Mr. Case, Manager (Mining Engineer) of the Standard Coal Co. Ltd. abused and slapped one of his Indian subordinate Bengali-speaking babus. The latter retorted and punched the Manager. He was dismissed but his action became a sign of a new time, a demand for dignified and just treatment. Since this was a time of nationalist upsurges, the miners hoped for public support of their cause. In the wake of the formation of ICEA and the impending strike action of the employees, white officials themselves demanded caution, and sensitivity to demands of social positions. E.S. Hoernle (ADC, Dhanbad) regretted that ‘so many Europeans do not know how to treat the Indians and cannot differentiate between the treatment which may reasonably be accorded to a coolie and that to a Babu (Pol. Spl. 1920: 248).’ Amongst workers, the demand for dignity became widespread. Coal-cutters, loaders and trammers began to voice their grievances against abusive and racist treatment. The miners employed in the Central Kerkend Colliery told some members of
the Swarajist party with a sense of humiliation how they were not paid wages for Dewali and were called ‘damned fools’ by Sahibs and abused (Pol. Spl. 1920: 353).

The abusive behaviour of superordinates, including the native clerks and supervisors, was notorious. They treated the workers with contempt, and regularly abused workers while driving them from dhowrahs to collieries and in the workplace. The relationship between the management and workers deteriorated when the collieries tried to speed up production from the mid-1910s.

As the conflict between colliers and managers intensified the areas of contention widened. Every aspect of work became a site of struggle: the tasks/workload, work hours, rest time, leaves, payment, spheres of responsibility and the social relationship (Pol. Spl. 1920: 248). Mining workers asked for the ratification of the ILO conventions concerning work hours, rest days, working and living conditions, rights of the working people to association, collective bargaining and representation, and other service rules. The Washington and Geneva Conventions of the ILO in 1919–1920 recommended bringing down the working day to 8 hours and workweek to 6 days, offering weekly rest-days, and sickness and other leaves. It recommended a 6-hour working day for miners since their work was hazardous and demanding. This development in international politics of the working class had an impact on trade unionisation in India as well. On the one hand, the British colonial government was a part of the Convention; though, it ratified only a part of the suggestions, that too with certain reservation. On the other hand, the convention stimulated a debate within trade unionists and provided a point of reference for the formalisation of demands. The ILO convention was neither more than a reference point nor the whole plot, nonetheless. Worker publicists, like Shapurji Saklatwala (1920), Organiser of the Workers Welfare League of India (London) and founding members of the AITUC, subjected the Washington Convention of ILO, accusing it of metropolis prejudice. The latter relaxed the norms for the colonial government regarding the eight-hour day and the age barrier for child labour. The worker publicists argued that the subjugation of labourers to an ‘overlong’ and ‘gruelling’ work time was a denial of ‘natural human needs’. The colliery workers offered a stunning response to the second session of the AITUC held in Jharia between
November 31 and December 6, 1921, which asked government and the operators to approve their demands. For a week during the session work in the collieries stopped (Pol. Spl., 1923: 115). Nominated labour representatives in the legislative assembly, N.M. Joshi and Jadu Nath Majumdar moved the proposal for a legislation to reduce workdays, grant weekly rest-days and other leaves in the organised industry. They highlighted four reasons to press for the short-hour proposal. (a) The conditions of mines in India do not allow any long duration of work without seriously affecting the health. (b) The short-hour of work was necessary to avoid the adverse affect of fatigue on workers and concomitant negligence against safe mining. (c) The work time should leave a margin of 'leisure' based on 'international decision'. (d) The miners, for instance, took only six to seven hours to complete the task of cutting and loading two to three tubs of coal in a pair, provided easy supplies of tubs were ensured, hence there was no point in grinding them for long hours. Shorter work hours will induce them to work with greater regularity and efficiency.

The colonial government ratified the Washington and Geneva Conventions of ILO in 1922 and, accordingly, legislated provisions specifying sixty hours of work a week for industrial labourers employed in factories and mines; fifty-fours for underground workers employed in mines. Weekly rest-days were also made compulsory. Employers endorsed these provisions as they felt that this would improve regularity and efficiency of the kamagars, and help in establishing industrial harmony. Colliery operators had an additional assurance: there was to be no regulation about the length of a shift. The big establishments, moreover, had already moved to a three-shift workday, which was effectively an eight-hour work for individuals (Deptt. of Industries, 1923: L-1028 (1): M-665).

The revision in the IMA, 1923, disappointed the miners over the question of work hours. The Bengal Trade Union Federation, representing both the mill and colliery workers, asked for a modification in the Act so that work hours per week were no more than 48 hours. 'My Committee feels that the conditions of mines in India do not allow any further duration of work ... without seriously affecting the health of the underground workers (Deptt. of Industries, 1923: M-665).' Interestingly there was no recognition of the fact that the demand for sickness leave, other privileged leaves and insurance had
been ignored in the new legislations. Joshi and Chaman Lal now called for the institution of an enquiry into conditions of work and living of industrial workers; and emphasized that workers should have representatives in the committee (Deptt. of Inds. and Lab., 1924: L-1162; 1925: L-1174 (4)).

Colliers now began protesting against the attempt by operators to make them work on Sundays, treating it as part of the work week. Colliers saw Sundays as their *apna din* (personal day), a day they had come to see as legally their own; and resented the claims capital sought to make over this leisure time. The colliers association, ICEA, continued to emphasize in its annual meetings that the general practice ought to be an eight-hour workday and holiday on Sundays. From 1928, they began to celebrate the May Day as an occasion for collective voicing of voice grievances. (Deptt. of Inds. and Lab. 1929: L-882 (13)). When in the wake of the impending amendment to the government of India Act and the growing militancy of industrial workers, the Royal Commission on Labour was set up in 1929, the representatives of the colliers protested against the Commission’s recommendation for a 10-hour work shift for underground miners and an 11-hour shift for surface miners. Subsequently in 1935 the IMA was amended, and the twelve-hour shift was declared illegal, but the demand of the representatives of colliers for a much shorter work-day was ignored.

We can identify a few features of the short-hour movement. We do not come across any easy answer to why and how an eight-hour work day came to be accepted as the norm in the long term, rather than, for instance, a six-hour shift! However, for a long time to come, the movement of the miners did not lead to any legislative intervention for an eight-hour day. In fact, after the IMA (Amendment), 1935, we do not come across any reference to such a demand in the innumerable charters of miners’ associations and agitations. One decade later, Deshpande (Investigator of the Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in the Coal Mining Industry in India) observed:

Where only one shift is worked the work generally starts at 9 a.m. and ends at 6 p.m. Where two shifts or relays are worked, the hours of work generally are from 9 or 10 a.m. to six or seven p.m. and 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. In the case of mines working three shifts the first shift starts at seven a.m. and finished at three p.m., the second shift is from three p.m. to eleven p.m., and third shift from eleven p.m. to 7
a.m. Usually, one shift or relay is worked on the surface. The hours of work being 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. with an interval of two hours. In quarries, it is from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. with an interval of two hours from 12 noon to 2 p.m. In most of the mines the general impression gathered was that there were no rules and regularity as to when underground workers should go down and come up except in the case of Haziri worker. Nor was any system noticed of sounding a warning such as a bell or siren to notify the change of shifts. In the case of underground miners, there are no regular intervals and the men rest as and when they like (Deshpande Report, 1946a: 48).

Despite the movement for shorter hours, 10- to 12-hour shifts remained common. Why was this possible? Or, how did this become possible?

The short-hour movement, especially for an eight-hour production schedule was formally timid. The petitions and resolutions passed in annual meetings of the labour associations did not always end in marches, processions, or strikes, as happened during the Swaraj campaigns, or when Gandhi was arrested in January, 1932 (Pol. Spl. 1932: 29). Moreover, the politics of petition and resolutions in the mines primarily involved workers who worked as supervisory staff (like, the clerk-babus, overmen, munshis and the mining sirdars), and the mechanical and technical staffs (like those involved in haulage, pumping, or coal-cutting). With mechanisation -- as coal cutting machines, haulage engines, water pumps and steam and electric power began to be increasingly used -- this class of 'better off' workers was slowly increasing in size. They formed about fifteen to twenty percent of the total workforce employed in different collieries in 1920-21. This group of workers was largely employed on time-rate, except in the C.P. miners. Typically they worked for long hours and operated within a regime that was un-systematized. That is why they demanded that the work routine in the coalfield ought to be made uniform, and that it should approximate that of the employees in the government services. This was also a segment of the working classes, which had some school education; and was familiar with clocks and the modern notions of linear clock time. They were in touch with those active in the national movement, and were in the vanguard of political struggles in the coalfields. Systematic, standardised and legally defined service rules appeared to them as essential for dignified existence; only through such rules, they felt, could there be checks on the arbitrary, authoritarian gestures of the super-ordinates.
Many of these political activists incurred risks to undertake political advocacy and agitations for labour rights, improvement and Swaraj. In 1921, S.K Bose, a time-keeping clerk in the Bhowra Colliery (Eastern Indian Coal Co.: Messrs. Mackenzie & Co.), was dismissed for his keen involvement in the affair of ICEA. He joined the Jamadoba Colliery (TISCO: Mess Kilburn & Co.) but was dismissed once again in 1922 for his political activities. In 1925-26, Satya Bimal Sen, a payment clerk, lost his job in the Jealgora Colliery (East India Coal Co.: Jardine & Skinner Co.), joined the Jamadoba Colliery but was thrown out once again for his keen interest to address problem of compensation claims to miners. We can count at best three strike actions in which they participated. Two of these were occasions of the sessions of the AITUC, held in Jharia in 1921 and 1928. The third one was a strike in three collieries owned by the Standard Coal Co. on the question of wage revision in December 1920. Notwithstanding this, the colliery establishment increasingly took into cognizance the suggestion made by E.S. Hoernle to offer a fair and respectful treatment to the babus. For supervisors, clerks and mechanical men (including the enginemen, fire-men, pump-men, banks-men and the on-setters) a three-shift system of eight-hour each was introduced in most of the collieries by 1920. Hence two separate kinds of work time came to operate in the mines, one for those who were seen as skilled, and the other for ‘unskilled miners’.78

It was, thus, the great majority of the direct-producers, primarily employed on the piece-rate system, who continued to drudge for long workdays. They were not as active in the movement for short hours as the ‘better off’ (the colliery staffs) workers. They improvised their own ways to work within the system of long hours, taking breaks, interrupting work, stretching time, and smoking bidis.79 We have pointed out that the very structure of tasks underwent a great transmutation, for instance, in the case of family labourers and kamins. The pre-industrial work culture, especially the notion of tasks, gave way to the pressure of industrial work routine, where everyday time, the task of child bearing and rearing seem to disturb the new regime of time. On the other hand, the discipline of new time had to adapt to the everyday ‘time making’ at the work place, strategies that were essential for workers to survive long work hours and severe work routines. Did the practice of long workdays and regular intermissions express a mediation of the pre-industrial labour practice including task orientation? How did
miners selectively adapt, integrate and transform elements of custom within the structures of mining work?

Hobsbawm (1964: 351) has suggested that the failure to learn or unwillingness to apply ‘the rules of the game’ often forced the workers to work harder and for less money than they need theoretically have done. However, the pre-industrial custom of workers, contrary to Hobsbawm’s belief, did not solely inform the new work practice in modern industrial centres. The economic and technical bases of industrial work had a great role to play. We have demonstrated how the ‘depressed’ piece rate and the practice of ‘deduction’ shaped the nature of work, as did the limits of technology and the adequacy of equipments and resources at the mines. The kamgars association regularly asked for the arrangement of adequate number of tubs and other support material, since shortages impeded smooth operation of the mines. It also objected to employers’ policy of overstaffing in working faces, which impeded work as gangs of coal-cutters and loaders competed with each other to secure access to coal seams and tubs.

Their customary notions of a fair day’s work and wage now included a new notion of a fair day’s work length. We need to only remember the reporting of the miners to Whitely Commission about the way baboos used to prevent them from leaving work without finishing their tasks even when technical impediments disrupted the work process.

The demands of the colliers, their fight for improved conditions, reveal how they accepted a new regime of time, the new rules of the game. Their demands were, in fact, framed through the language of ‘these terms: they asked for better economic and technical conditions of work, competitive labour effort, and a new notion of a fair days work. Equipped with the ‘new rules of the game’, miners began to demand that the intermissions and breaks be officially recognized; they demanded legal payment for holidays, so that time did not have to be snatched from work. They began to ask for maternity benefits, paid rest-days, festival holidays, paid leaves, casual leaves, and the allowance for bastee visits. We will see in the next chapter how they made huge political and ideological investment in those demands from the latter 1930s. The miners enjoyed a modicum of control over the labour process as long as the work regime was associated
with a ‘communitarian’ sirdari system and ‘communitarian’ character of the labour process. Such control over the labour process helped miners to live up to the aforesaid practice of work time. The absence of any such control in the metal plants like those in Jamshedpur explains why workers fought pitched battles there, in the 1920s on, to gain labour rights of short days, rest days, and leaves, so as to claim a semblance of control on the labour process (Deptt. of Ind. and Lab. 1929: L—882 (17); L—882 (13)).

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4 Coupland, 1911 (the section on the mining industry).
5 The Bhowra (Eastern India Coal Company), the Jealgora (East India Coal Company), and the Kustore (Raniganj Coal Company) collieries employed a good of proportion of the labourers as service tenants. Nonetheless, this form of labour was not as great in number in the Jharia fields as in the Raniganj and Giridih Coalfields. In the latter coalfields around sixty percent of the total workforce was service tenants. See Whitely Report, 1931, Vol. I: 118-119.
6 Banerjee (1981: 91). The trade boom in 1906—1908 and the reluctance of the local population to adopt the mining occupation greatly contributed to the colliery’s dependence on the distant immigrants. However, the colliery also employed these immigrants for mechanical and supervisory tasks. See Coupland (1911). A large number of miners joined collieries only in the wake of WWI boom and the aftermath in 1915-1921. Two-thirds of the total workforce continued to come from the neighbouring districts of Manbhum (36.54%), Hazaribagh (18.9%), Santhal Pargana, Bankura and Burdwan districts (10.1%), in 1921. Others belonged to the districts of Monghyr (15.9%), Gaya (9.21%), Central Province (7.6%), and the U.P. (1.5%). See Census Report of Bihar and Orissa (hereafter CRBO), 1921: Vol. VII, Pt. I.
7 Following the Indian Mines Act 1901, the recruitment of managers having qualification certificates became mandatory. In 1923, the Amendment brought to the Act of 1901 extended such rules of training and educational qualification to overmen, surveyors (responsible for safety-survey of mines) and mining sirdars.
8 Reports of the Chief Inspector of Mines in India (CIMAR) for the years of 1907, 1918, 1921; Foley, 1920: 44 and 200.
9 The Bhowra colliery alone (having four inclines) employed around 1600 persons in 1920-21. The figure would be 5000 workers if it was to include Amlabad colliery owned by the same owner. Similarly, the Jamadoba colliery (of TISCO and managed by Kilburn and Co.) employed 2600 workers in the same period. The landscape of employment resembled the situation of textile workers employed in the mills and plantations in Calcutta, Bombay, Kanpur and in Assam, where workers were employed in a large number of scattered workplaces in a number of factories and gardens.
10 A considerable number of coal proprietors acquired colliery land on lease from local zamindars. Most of the big proprietors, in the early period, were British alongside a few Indian business houses like the Tata
Iron and Steel & Co., at Jamadoba, Maikera and Sijua groups of colliery. The miners were yet not fully bereft of control over their means of labour. They possessed or owned, in most of the cases, the tools of labour, like hews, digging-stick, explosives, baskets and Kuppis and lanterns. The industry supplied them kerosene oil and an extra rate for applying explosives.

9 Seth (1940: 64). The estimated proportion of miners on piece-rates was around 80 percent of the total work-force in 1934. In some of these works -- like the tramming and the line-mistry -- there was a conversion to the time-rate category.

10 The colliery began to install electricity from 1911—1912. The number of collieries raising coal by only electric power or mainly electric power was 8 out of a total of 335 mines in 1919 and 13 in 1920. See, Foley Report, 1920: 200.

11 Only 54 mines (around 14.66 percent) out of 335 registered mines that raised 5000 tons of coal and more per month, were in Jharia. They accounted for 58.98 percent of the total coal raisings in 1919. They employed the same proportion of total workforce, too (Foley Report, 1920: 200).

12 A large number of collieries, especially small and medium sizes were technologically (water pump, coal stock house, etc.) poorly equipped with to meet the difficulty of flooding of mines in rainy season. See, CIMAR, 1918; Rees observation in Foley Report, 1920: 42.

13 Ranjit Dasgupta (1994) has argued that planters did not found labour relationship merely on economic relation, but relied on the use of physical force. The penal contract system was the manifestation of this force.

14 Under both the systems the structure of authority was sustained by colliery proprietors and managers at the top, labour contractors, labour sirdars (recruiter) or jamadars, gang-headmen or mining-sirdars, munshis, overmen, hazari-babus and loading-babus. They were responsible for supervising the production process. Foley: 1920: 57, 62; RCL, 1931: 119-124; Deshpande Report, 1946: 47-49. At this time, the thekadari system was widespread. The European owners who owned the largest share in coal business usually preferred production by managing and raising contractors. They were responsible for seventy-five percent of the total raisings until 1930, estimated Mukherjee (1948). This form of production began to shrink since the late 1920s. In contrast, native colliery owners usually worked with sarkari and sirdari system i.e., they recruited and paid their labourers directly and with the help of labour sirdars. Their share in coal industry was low until the 1920s. See chapter ‘Working…’ Foley (1920: 61-67).

15 Foley: 62. The practice of paying them commission originated, most probably, in the boom period around 1906 and with the increased responsibilities sirdars had for safety measures.

16 Evidence of Mr. J Mackie, agent of Messrs. Mackenzie & Co. in Bhowra colliery given to Foley committee in 1920, pp.101-103.

17 The mercantilist capitalist approach to appropriation of labour time assumes that labour time and level of earnings of worker are inversely proportional. For the case of England, see Thompson (1967).

18 Noyce, 1925, vol. I: 35. Employers practised a similar labour policy in Britain in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries (Thompson 1967). It was the core argument of mercantilist economists since the seventeenth century (Hassard, 1990). The critical thinkers explained the depressed low wage in terms of a fall out of the capitalist production relation and the need of capitalists to expand profit-capital by maintaining low wages (Lebowitch, 2003).

19 Guha (1973) has suggested two factors responsible for the wage rates in this period: the comparative wage rate that prevailed in nearby collieries, and the fear of flights of labourers. He has overestimated, on one hand, the competitivenes in labour market, and the fear of unrestrained movement of labourers on the other. Additionally, the colonial state also acted in ways that depressed the wage rate. During 1917-1919, the government adopted a definite policy to purchase coal only from the big mines in order to discourage the opening of the small quarries and incline mines, which by attracting labourers from the big mines induced the wage rate to rise. See, IMF (1963: 32-42). Guha (1973) has also failed to look into the mercantile-capitalist nature of employers.

20 Evidence of Mr. R Heron of Messrs. H V Low & Co. in Jharia, to Foley committee, 1920: 88.


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30 Evidence of Mr. R Heron of Messrs. H V Low & Co. in Jharia, to Foley committee, 1920: 88.


32 Evidence of Burt to Foley Committee, 1920: 71. Notably, the coal industry worked in pre-war days at an overhead profit of Rs. 1.8-0 per ton. The average cost of first class coal did not increase since then by
more than 8 annas per ton, while the present rate of profit was in the neighbourhood of Rs. 3-4-0 after allowing for the extra cost, estimated Foley Committee in 1920 (Report: 34).

27 Hobbsawm (1964) has looked into the logic of a similar business principle of the early industrialists in England.

28 RCL, 1931, vol. I: 115. In the 1920s, the industry increased the use of coal-cutting machines; and explosives, and the extension of tramlines eased transport of coal. In the Bhowra colliery, the tramlines reached a distance within fifty meters from the working faces. Steam power and electricity based haulage engines and Chanuk (shaft) lifts proliferated. The use of the electricity increased from the 1920s onwards. These decades witnessed an increase in the use of electric safety lamps the flame safety lamps, and mechanical ventilators. The mines went deeper and the number of big mines rose. The industry saw some of the seams worked at depths of 200 to 400 feet (Barrows Report, 1937; Mahindra Report, 1946).

29 The big collieries, like Bhowra and Amlabad (under the Eastern Indian Coal Co.), Jealgora (East India Coal Co.), Jamadoba (Tata Iron and Steel Co.), Loda (New Standard Coal Co.; Turner and Morrison Co.) and the Bhadroochack (Burrakar Coal Co.) adopted coal-cutting machines and mechanical ventilations, etc. In contrast, others did not even manage to complete electrification and worked with the rudimentary forms of the technology. But, the big colliery, too, obtained the largest amount of coal through sweat labour. The miner who worked in different galleries and working faces could not benefit equally from the installation of mechanical ventilation.

30 The post of driller-cum-shot-firer was the true sign of mechanical mining. From 1938, the post was subject to mandatory certification through training since 1938, under the Amendment to IMA, 1923. Through promotions in the job, the driller-cum-shot-firer could become the gang headman.

31 Hobbsawm (1964, especially chapter 'Custom, Wages and Workload') has pointed out that the 'driving' of labour was widely prevalent in the phase of early industrialization. The movement of the industry towards mechanisation, production of relative surplus value, the result based wage system and industrial paternalism saw the substitution of 'driving' with incentive driven labour efforts.

32 The proportion of such workers from neighbouring areas fell to around 36 percent by 1921. In 1920, the Standard Coal Company (Lodna, Jharia Khas colliery) employed around 80 percent of the total workforce from the United Province (the area between the districts of Cawnpore and Bareilly). See Foley, 1920: 68.

33 Such type of miners was largely the local Santhals, the Kurmi-Mahtos, the Ghatwals, and the Rajjars (Coupland, 1911: 180-81).

34 Employers distributed the payment through gang headmen or mining sirdars (Foley, 1920: 73). By the 1930s, around 15 percent of the workforce was settled. It included the immigrant family majdoors from districts like Monghyr, Hazaribagh, Gaya, Shahabad, and a few colliers from the Dehatias, especially the Bauris, the Rajjars and the Ghatwals. Additionally, around 10 percent of total workforce was regular rural urban commuters from contiguous areas along with around seven percent service tenants. The proportion of the settled miners was significantly high, up to one-half to two-third, in the big collieries known for providing a better living arrangement (Whitely Commission 1931).

35 The proportion of mechanical workers was very low in Jharia coalfield till the late 1910s. The level of mechanization in mines was still very limited and confined to a few big establishments. Foley, 1920: 68, 98, 123, 200.

36 The Amendment to IMA in 1935 fixed the length of a shift to ten hours for underground and eleven hours for surface workers.

37 The members who came largely from the same bastees, or caste, or tribe preferred to form a gang. The malcuttas and loaders were the male, female, and children of the same kith & kin, or a 'family community'. When the upcountry labourers (as a single male worker) became malcuttas, they found it difficult to secure kamin loaders to work along their side. The kamin women working in the colliery did not like to work alongside 'unknown male malcuttas or of those from other social groups. Over time some of the kamins from the Bauri caste stepped in to work alongside such malcuttas. See Chapter 'Reclaiming... A family as an extended unit included the known members of the same caste, tribe, or bastees community. The workers from C.P, Monghyr, Hazaribagh, Gaya, Burdwan, Bankura and Santhal Pargana worked largely as family labour. In 1915-1916, woman workers constituted around 35 percent to 40 percent of the total workforce, and children (below age 12) were around 7 percent to 9 percent of the workforce.

There was no facility of drinking water in underground miners. Hence, miners disposed at empty places and used seepage water for drinking too. Whitely Report, 1931, vol. 1: 124-125.

Ram Lal Mahato reported to Barnes (1989: 134). However, one must be skeptical of the face value of this reporting. Unlike the second one, the statement made by the former woman workers does not show the contradiction between the work and singing.

Evidence of R Barrowman, Manager of Standard Coal Co. Ltd., Jharia to Foley, 1920: 70.

Evidence of Secretary to Foley, 1920: Report, p.68

This resembled the experience of workers in the textile mills in Bombay in the latter 19thc.

Perera (1998) has pointed out that the working life in pre-capitalist period was dominated by the 'natural climatic and socio-cultural obligations of human being.

Evidence of Secretary to Foley, 1920: 126. The seasonal rural visits varied between majdoors of different ecological regions. Those from Chhotanagpur area went only during rainy season for the kharif crop (rice) since the people here cultivated largely a single crop. Their seasonality differed from Central and Eastern Bihar and U.P or even Bengal.

Rees, 1919: Para.49. As late as 1930, Whitely Commission observed it, see RCL, 1931, vol.1: 117.

A retired worker of Monghyr district in Bhowra colliery told me this.

Rees, 1919: 40; Foley, 1920: 13-16. See chapter 'Industrial Space.'

Simpson, CIMAR, 1922: 19. In the decades of the 1900-1950, not a single year passed without epidemic attacks, most commonly cholera and smallpox.


Kali-puja was popular among Bengali speaking majdoors in.

It was the most popular festival among these people. They considered it to be a celebration of New Year, celebrated around the third week of January.

Pol. Spl. 1930: 258; 1933: 08 (IV); 1938: 379.

RCL, vol.1: 132. The mining community frequently suffered from epidemics like cholera, malaria, and smallpox. Large numbers died in 1908, 1913-1915, and 1919. Miners started fleeing the mines in fear. Colliery employers and the state had to set up new sanitary authorities, the Jharia Board of Health in 1915 and the Board of Water in 1916 in order to attract the labourer back to the fields. See chapter 'Industrial Space...'

Evidence of Purdey to Foley Committee, 1920: 111.

Morris looked at the issue for understanding the nature of absenteeism, and not the act of adaptation of majdoors to the work routine.

Evidence of R Purdey (President of Association of Colliery Manager in India) to Foley Committee (1920: 111).

I see the relevance of developing this category. Feudal labour relation was apparently based on controlling the life process of actual producers, whereas the capitalist labour relation is supposedly based
on controlling the labour process. Additionally, the capitalist mode of regulation is supposed to use the existence of reserve labour army and employers tending to control the life process as well. In addition, it was not the existence of reserve labour army but the deployment of demonstrative violence and awesome physical force that ensured the command over labourers. In fact, even today the old and second-generation coal miners remember the nature of relationship during the ‘Company Raj’ in these terms. It is a popular political slogan: ‘Hinsatmak mafiashahi punjiwaad ko bhagao’. Planters in Assam were also known to frequently resort to physical force to drag ‘coolies’ to work from their paras. See Verma (2003).

Two such instances occurred in very noticeable ways: one in 1905 and the other in 1915; cited in Barnes (1989: 43-94).

Rees, 1919: Para 46; Foley, 1920: 13. Desertion or ‘escaping movement’ between mines was possibly the most heightened form of protest that the mining classes took recourse to.

Kinker Khora informed me about these forms of mobility of miners. Now a third-generation miner, he has been working in the in the Jharia coalfields since the WWII. He came from contemporary Purulia district.

Dept. of Commerce and Industries, 1917: October, F/no. 20; July, F/no. 3. I suggest the need to look at the role of state in terms of not only direct presence but also indirect and disguised presence. For instance, in the case of Assam Tea plantation labourers, Rana Bahl has showed that the planters successfully approached the state institution to raise land revenue, no less than 4 times. The object was to make it impossible for peasants to pay revenue so that they were forced to work at the plantation. Onselen (1976) has found similar practices in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in the first half of the 20th c.

71 Its subsequent conventions, additionally, set the standards of working and living conditions in order to improve the overall standard of life of working classes.


Pol. Spl. (1928: 102; Deptt. of Industries and Labour, 1929: L-882 (13). This was reported by Prasad Jee, interviewed in January 2004 at the Bhulanbararee bastee.

Industrial Standing Committee, a body of representatives of employer, worker and government of the republic of India, promised to harmonise the provisions of labour laws in India and ILO conventions, hence the stipulation of Mines Act, 1952 and the provisions such as eight-hour workday.

76 Those who studied schools in contemporary India were familiarised with this modern notion of time, suggested Sarkar (2002). This was the case with those who did clerical jobs in government offices, and private firms in Calcutta since the late 19th century. Notably, the clerical and supervisory staffs in collieries at this time were predominantly from Bengal province.

77 In the first meeting of ICEA, the chief speaker was I.B. Sen, a barrister of Calcutta high court. The meeting was presided over by K.N. Sengupta, a pleader of Dhanbad. Those like Swami Bishwanand and Pandit Ram Kumar Misra and Daulat Ram, who took active interest in organising the coal-miners in Jharia were primarily leaders of the Congress. Lajpat Rai, a prominent Congress leader visited Jharia and addressed a meeting on 19th of December 1920. There was a political upsurge amongst working classes in almost all industrial cities in contemporary India like in Bombay, Calcutta, and Jamshedpur. Their demands everywhere also focused on the need to reduce working hours and formalise holidays.

78 Whitely Report. 1931, IV, A: 254-55. The mining classes could not however secure all the demands. In the absence of an all-India working class agitation on the issue, the movement suffered severe limitations (Pol. Spl. 1928: 102; 1933: 8(III); 1928: 379). The Association soon lost support among workers. In its annual meeting only about five hundred labourers and clerks attended, while the daily-attending labourers, on an average, in collieries was more than 55000-60000. ‘ICEA has practically no influence in the coalfield...and only contributing to Congress funds’, observed the Assistant Superintendent of the police in his confidential diary on 2nd August 1930 during the Civil Disobedience Movement (Pol. Spl. 1930: 328). On the occasion of the Manbhum District Youth Association Conference and the Manbhum District
Conference in 1929, the speakers, J. M. SenGupta, D. C. Ghosh (Calcutta Youth Association), Mohini Debi (Calcutta), P.C. Mitra (Ranchi), Arun Chandra Guha, Rabati Mohan Chatterji (Dacca), Jimul Bahan Sen and Upendra DasGupta (Purulia) and Ram Narain Singh (M.L.A from Hazaribagh), emphasized: ‘the agitation should not be confined amongst the educated people but should be extended to the labourers and the peasants as well... work among the labourers and the peasants in such a way to prepare them for civil disobedience’ (Pol. Spl.1929: 126). In contrast, a considerable number of the better-off staffs also allied with the capitalist in the exploitation of the direct producers. In exchange they gained rewards in the form of a minimal wage cut and a different kind of work routine (Pol. Spl. 1933: 8(III)).

It was not the case that they were completely un-familiar with the modern system of timing. The distant up-country immigrant labourers from the districts such as, Gaya, Sahabad, Saran, and the areas of UP, Central Province, Orissa and Eastern Bengal largely used to communicate by railway which operated according to clock time. The mining classes split away from the ICEA and formed a new labour union, Indian Colliery Labour Union (ICLU), in 1932 and the Tata Colliery Workers’ Union (TCWU). They aimed to organise, protect and advance the concerns and demand of the workmen or colliers. In the second annual meeting of the union in 1933 the secretary of the ICLU Shibakali Bose emphasised ‘that the new constructed union is purely a union of the labourers and workmen of this hazardous industry. The new constitution has been so enacted that non other than an workmen as defined in the Indian Mines Act is eligible for membership, except a meagre percentage in the council who are genuine sympathisers of our cause who however have no right of voting in our meetings. It now therefore represents the true interests and cause of the workmen and the workmen alone, in all respects.’ (Pol. Spl. File no.-8(III)/1933). The union sought a reduction in the workday and formalisation of leaves. It pressed the demand for a work day which was ‘short enough to avoid fatigue and to leave a margin of leisure on the basis of international decisions...Hours of work are yet unduly long.’ It also demanded that ‘the govt. should ratify the convention on working hours in mines adopted in 1931 by the international labour conference, which prescribes that the hours of work should be limited to 7and ½ hours a day in underground coal-mines and 8 hours a day and 48 hours a week in open mines. In surface work, also the daily limit should be 8 hours and weekly 48 hours. With regard to underground work, it has been universally admitted that a longer working day for miners is a most dangerous practice. It not only affects the health and efficiency of the miners but also increases the number of accidents and seeming economical advantage derived from this practice is of no consequence to the mine-owners in India in a much as miners are paid here on piecework system. Eight hours a day for miners has been long and established throughout the world and there is a demand everywhere for 7 hours day now, but the Indian miners are still suffering from all the evil effects of a large working day. There is absolutely no justification therefore, for a larger working day in Indian mines.’ This coincided with a period of political upsurge of the masses, which aimed at changing the rule of laws through a transformation of the very institutions of the state and laws.

From the early 1920s, the industry introduced a number of annual classes, training programmes and special lectures on safe, scientific and efficient mining, to create a new body of trained mining sirdars. The latter, who helped disseminating this new knowledge among workers and in the dhowrahs, were not simply loyal agents of the authorities. Many of them were in the forefront of the politics of resistance too. The distant immigrant miners were somewhat familiar with modern time measurement thanks to the railways. Broadly speaking, the settled labourers and the distant immigrants responded more creatively to this knowledge. Interestingly enough, they were also the most active participants in the miners’ movement.

Workers gradually came to the understanding that on an average a pair of the malcutta and loader could cut and load two to three tubs of coal in a workday. This led the ICLU to argue that ‘For the want of the supply of a few more tubs and some working appliances they are to remain idle underground for a long while and they often have to wait underground more than 12 hours to complete the work which can easily be done by them in 5 to 6 hours. There is absolutely no justification therefore, for a large working day in Indian mines. The government should therefore ratify the convention on working hours in mines as adopted by the International labour conference in 1931.’ (Pol. Spl. 1933: 8(III)). This demand accompanied the other demand of miners for a better tub rate and minimum wages: ‘A minimum wage sufficient to maintain the workers and his family in reasonable comfort and to meet his other expenses necessary to maintain his position according to the standard of a civilised society, is the necessity.’ Thus, workers were insistent on seeing the piece-rate system graduating into the time-rate system.
However, the struggle led by ICLU, at least till mid 1930s, suffered from the lack of a broad social unity among the workers. Its politics in fact divided the workers. It kept itself concerned primarily with the settled labourers and insisted on their distinction from the so-called "migratory type of labourers", too. The secretary of the union, S. K. Bose, asked the colliery employers 'to give employment to those miners only, who will permanently reside on the colliery premises and to stop the inflow of surplus labour of the migratory type who only work in the mines in between the cultivations.' Commenting on the limited success of unionisation among the workmen, Bose said, 'Comrades, it is no use of blaming the employers alone when you are yourself wanting in swelling the membership of this union and thus organising for a concerted action whenever and wherever necessary. If you want to have your voice heard, come and come all, ye' workers of the coal industry and join en bloc. The workers of all other countries are forging ahead while we are still lagging behind.' As late as 1933, the union could still claim only 4357 members on its roll even though the number of the daily labourers used to be more than fifty thousands on an average. A noticeable number of the settled labourers along with the so-called migratory or the regular commuters, regular seasonal labourers remained either distanced from or indifferent to the union. The despotic attitude of colliery capitalists predictably prevented their mobilisation. It is evident from the request letter of ICLU to the colliery employers: 'We are very seriously handicapped so far not receiving the recognition of your esteemed body [IMA], which does not give us any facilities, rather debars us from moving in the collieries owned by firms, who are members of your Association and for which reason also the colliery managers and other officials are rather unsympathetic which has a great bearing on the employees. ...This union is of opinion that it would be mutual benefit therefore, if the recognition is granted to us as asked for, which will swell our memberships and at the same time prevent all sorts of strikes and lockouts which are always accompanied by dreadful results on both sides.' The labour organisation soon realised that the problem. These despotic employers were not only opposed to recognition of the union, seeing it as a parallel bargaining power centre, but they were also hostile to very moderate demands of the mining classes. This forced them to opt for long strikes as a method of struggle in the 1930s and the 1940s.