INTRODUCTION

The coal mines in Bihar were situated in formerly jungle areas largely inhabited by aboriginal and semi-aboriginal tribes. These tribals or *adivasis* practised a crude and rudimentary type of shifting agriculture. The soil of the region was not very fertile so they had to depend upon the gathering of jungle products. It were these tribals, semi-tribals, along with low castes Hindus of adjoining areas that provided the earliest labour forces for the coal mines in Bihar. They continued to dominate the workforce throughout the colonial period. This study tries to trace the early history of the coal mines in Bihar, study various stages of emergence and growth of workforces and stimulating factors impacting various stages of development of the coal mine industry of the area.

The first attempt to study the problem of labour was made by Margaret Read when she published her classic *The Indian Peasant Uprooted: A Study of the Human Machine*, 1931. This book was based on the Royal Commission on Labour, 1931. The author had opined that the modern social-economic world industrial commissions and surveys were like a seismograph and their findings recorded the changes that were taking place. It was a very comprehensive study of the transformation of peasants to industrial labour force, the invisible forces drawn to the industrial sector, the effect of upheaval due to modern industry on the individuals who had swapped the village for the slums and the plough for the pick. The working condition in mines, the effect
on women and children, wages and spending of the working class were of paramount interest for her.

This was followed by B.R. Seth, *Labour in Indian Coal Industry*, 1940. It was another significant work on coal mine labour in India. It proved very informative work on colliery labour, and provided a vivid description on labour and its problem of the time. It dealt with the recruitment of labour, source of supply of labour, the wages of the mine workers and explored the reasons for the low wage of the mine workers and other factors which contribute to the low earnings of the workers. He described the poor housing conditions of the workers, the extent of overcrowding and the affect on the health and moral condition of the labour the standard of living of the workers their expenditure pattern on various necessities of live, their drinking habits and its baneful effect on their material condition of their life and indebtedness. The wide arrays of tables and data provided by him help in the understanding the discussed text. But the distinguishing aspect of the book was noted for author’s personal investigation of the condition of the workers. To gain the confidence of the workers he stayed with them in their dhowrah and interacted with subordinate supervisory officials and sardars and labour leader to gauge their exact moral and material conditions. At best it also serves as one of the contemporary sources.

R.K. Mukherjee’s *The Indian Working Class*, 1951, was another classical work dealing with the formation of Indian working class. He dealt
with the agricultural background of the Indian working class, the factors that pushed them to the industrial centres of the country. He provided an excellent account of recruitment in various plantation and factories, the role of the Jobbers or Sardars in the recruitment of the workers and discussed the need to regulate them to overcome the glaring abuses related with the prevailing mode of recruitment. He had also dealt with the question of employment of women and children in factories and mines and deals with the economic consequences of exclusion of women from underground working in mines. He had discussed wages of the workers in various mines, factories and in plantation, their standard of living and housing conditions provided to the workers etc. But his advocacy for evolving a national minimum wages policy was appreciated.

Next important work was done by Dilip Simeon in his book *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism: workers, Union and the state in Chotanagpur 1928-39*, 1995. This has been an excellent work on the workers movements in the Chotanagpur region. This work dealt primarily with the workers movement in Tata Iron and Steel Company and the Jharia coalfield region. The keen contest between the workers, the management, the bureaucratic intervention to bail out the capitalist and the political intervention to garner the support of the workers in phases for the national movement have been appreciated as the salient features of the book. The author had used wide range of sources to highlight every aspect of movement and the clash of personality of 'outsider' and its effect on the movement.
Biswa Mohan Prasad, *Second World War and Indian Industry 1939-1945: A Case of Coal Industry in Bengal and Bihar*, 1992, tries to study the effect of the impetus provided to the coal industry by the Second World War. The increased demand for coal to feed the war industry and efforts to increase the output, without any consideration for safety or preservation and the condition of the workers and their set of problems during the period, and their trade union movement against the exploitative system have been dealt by him.

The above glossed works, unique and significant as they are however do not deal with the issues of labour in coal mines in the manner in which they could be termed as exclusive on the theme. They are either touching upon certain aspects of labour in coal mines as a part of a larger narrative or deal with the theme for certain limited number of years. In our present thesis, an attempt has been made to deal exclusively with the problems related to labour in the coal mines till the overthrow of the colonial regime. However our attempts is confined to the coal mines located in the province of Bihar and its adjoining areas.

In attempting such a study our pursuit has particularly benefitted from the fresh as well as re-examination of the following major sources, some of these have been possible for the first time.

Mark Fryar's, *Report on the Coal Mining in the Raneegunge* (Raniganj), 1868 dealt with the prevalent mode of extraction of coal (the pillar and stall method), the primitive methods of raising coals (gins), and the use of steam
engines for pumping and winding and the manual loading of coal in the coal mines. It deals with the early history of mining methods prevalent during the period. For safe working and to avoid future complications, he recommended keeping proper plans of the mine, the use of machinery, and also a system of proper ventilation of mines and also recommended appointment of supervisors to check and correct dangerous error and recklessness in the operation of mining.

Labour Enquiry Commission, 1896 and Foley and Fremantle Report on Labour in Bengal and United Provinces, 1906: both deal with the problem of shortage in labour supply in coal mining industry which was aggravated by exponential growth in number of mines in Jharia during the period under consideration. Both pointed out that caste of labour played significant role in their employment. They indicated the district from which the future work force could be drawn. Besides the castes composition, population density, agricultural production and propensity of the population to migrate were also taken into account. They also recommended for the formation of central recruitment agency for streamlining constant supply of labour to the mining industry.

Trehane Rees Report of 1919. It had noticed the deficiency of the coal mines and recommended measures to install the coal mining industry on sound scientific methods for the better economy of extraction of coal. It examined methods of extraction of coal which were causing huge loss of coal, issue of
inadequacy of generation and use of power in coal mining industry and the extravagant method of coke making. The principal recommendations were the appointment of an inspecting and controlling authority for the supervision of the term of lease, more efficient method of coal extraction, hydraulic stowage and more general use of electricity for the mining industry.

The next important source was the Coal Committee Report of 1920, submitted by B. Foley. It studied the recommendations of Rees Report. It was constituted to recommend measures to be adopted to expedite the possible implementation of the feasible recommendations and to suggest legislative remedial measure.

The other major source consulted was the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931, the first comprehensive study of the condition of labour in India. The volumes IV (A) and IV (B) dealing exclusively with the coal mining industry were of special interest for us. This was the first comprehensive study on all aspects of labour in the mining industry of the country. The volume IV (A) contained written evidences received by the Commission from every possible interest group related to the mining industry. The volume IV (B) dealt with the oral evidence gathered by the Commission from every factor of the mining industry. Apart from the top echelons of the industry the interviews with the trade union leaders and the labourers proved extremely rewarding. It helped in understanding the web of exploitation of the miners by various section of the managements. It also enlighten us on the issue
of housing condition, extent of overcrowding and other welfare activity carried by some individual colliery for their workers.

The Bihar Labour Enquiry Commission, 1940 is another repository of information for our work. It was a very exhaustive enquiry into socio-economic base of the coal labour, their cause for the migration, their mode of recruitment, the character of labour force, wages, various modes of exploitations and victimization, the trade union movement in Industrial sector, leaderships etc. It suggested ways of creating a content labour force completely dependent on the industrial enterprise for their livelihood. It also handled issues dealing with the routine topics like, hours of work, housing conditions, standard of living etc.

Report of the Indian Coalfield Committee of 1945 (better known as Mahindra Committee Report of 1945): It is an elaborate report on the coalmine workers. It dealt with issues relating to mechanization of mines electrification, use of coal cutting machinery in coal mines, use of safety lamps loading and screening of coals. It utility lies also in the fact that it also provides summaries of previous recommendation of preceding committees and action taken on them.

The Annual Reports of the Chief Inspector of Mine were also consulted to seek information regarding the number of mines under operation during the year, the figures of productions of different collieries, prevailing wage rates, total number of workers in coal industry in different fields, number of workers
working underground and over ground, gender breakup of the labour force, details of accidents in mines and general heath condition of mining areas.

Transactions of the Mining and Geological Institute of India and Memoirs of the Geological Survey of India were also gleaned during the period as these contained some very important information provided by writers who are themselves involved in the industry holding some important post so we get contemporary information regarding the state of the industry, the labour problems, about the conflicts of interests between various machinery of the governments and the problems arising thereof.