

Report dated the 25th July 2005 to the National Human Rights Commission, New Delhi on the Complaint of Shri M Shyam Prasad, Human Rights Council, Visakhapatnam in regard to Suicides in the coal belt of Singareni, Adilabad, Andhra Pradesh in Case No.903/1/2001-2002 (FC), NHRC (Law Division-IV).

In this case the National Human Rights Commission took cognizance of the above complaint which alleged that about 1, 300 men, women and children had committed suicide in the coal belt of Singareni in the Adilabad district of Andhra Pradesh due to hunger, poverty, diseases and lack of proper medical facilities. In response to a notice issued by the NHRC, reports were received by the Commission from various authorities of the Government of Andhra Pradesh including the Collector, Adilabad. Not satisfied with the report of the Collector, Adilabad the Commission sent the entire record to me to look into it with a further request to visit the site and give my report with regard to the state of things prevailing there.

REPORT.

2. I have carefully gone through the entire record, including the complaint and the response received by the Commission from the State Government based on the reports furnished to the State Government by the Managing Director of the Singareni Collieries Company Limited and the Collector and District Magistrate, Adilabad. To make a first hand study of the situation prevailing in the coal belt area of Adilabad District as desired by the Honourable Commission, I have visited the villages of Tekumatla, Ramakrishnapuram near Mandamarri and Pata Bellampally in the Mancherial Revenue Sub-Division (comprising the Police Sub-Divisions of Mancherial and Bellampally) on the 22nd July 2005. My visit to the field was preceded by a 3-hour review at Mancherial with the Joint Collector, Adilabad, the Revenue Divisional Officer, Mancherial, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, Mancherial and several Circle Inspectors of the Police Department of the Mancherial and Bellampally Police Sub-Divisions, on the 21st July 2005. My field visits were followed by a 3 hour review of the situation prevailing in the area in the Collector's Office, Adilabad on the 22nd July 2005 with the Joint Collector, Project Director, District Rural Development Agency, the District Medical and Health Officer and District heads of the Departments of Social Welfare, Labour, Education and Women and Child Development and of the Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes Finance Corporations.

3. I give below in the following paragraphs details of the information gathered by me at the village level through my personal interaction with the members of the families of the suicide victims of the coal belt area in general and wives and close relatives of the suicide victims in particular; my findings based on my field visits and interaction with the officers of all concerned Departments listed at paragraph 2 above; my conclusion about the situation prevailing in the area and my recommendations.

4. As may be seen from Annex-I, there have been 236 cases of suicides recorded by the Police in the Mancherial Revenue Division in 30 months, during the years 2003 and 2004 and up to now in 2005, according to the information furnished by the police authorities. I have obtained from the Sub-Divisional Police officers of Mancherial and Bellampally Police Sub-Division the names of all the suicide victims, their addresses and the reasons why the victims resorted to suicide. I enclose to my report these details, at Annex-II and III. An overwhelming majority of these cases of suicides are seen to be on account of domestic problems, financial (debts) problems and illnesses, - often stomach pain- and a few cases on account of crop failure and a few of sheer poverty. In-depth discussions with the Joint Collector and the Police officers revealed that alcoholism was at the bottom of most of these suicides of the men folk since addiction of the men folk to alcohol invariably led to neglect of the family and children, causing dissensions and therefore total damage to relationships within the family, leading eventually to suicides, mainly by men. This was true of almost all cases of suicides attributed to domestic and financial and illness-related problems, whether by the workers of the Singareni Collieries Company or the others in the rural population, though addiction to alcohol and the resultant consequences, and suicides, were pronouncedly more in the case of the workers of the Singareni Collieries Company. I may add here that the collieries workers committing suicides on account of these reasons in the lists furnished to me in this one Revenue Subdivision are 83 out of a total of about 230 cases (236 minus a few cases that are not conclusively shown as suicides). That, obviously, is a big ratio. Equipped with these details, I visited the villages of Tekumatla, Ramakrishnapuram near Mandamarri and Pata Bellampally and met the members of the families of these victims, hailing from these villages as well as neighbouring ones like Indaram and Akenapalli, and spoke to them in detail, enquiring into the circumstances and causes of these suicides. I spoke in great detail to as many as 24 families, mostly wives of the men who had committed suicide, to elicit the reasons for this situation. Half the number of these families was those of the collieries workers while the other half were

from other occupations, mostly agricultural labourers. By far, the **primary and the single most important cause for these suicides I found from my Inquiry are alcohol and the adverse consequences its excessive consumption breeds for family relations and the health of the addicts.** Thus, what I heard from the police authorities was fully confirmed by my field investigations.

5. The reason for excessive consumption of alcohol itself is the belief among all the workers – whether those working in the coalmines or agricultural labourers – that drinking relieves them of the stress and strain of hard physical labour. This belief governs practically every coalmine worker and a very large part of the coal worker's earnings is therefore spent on alcohol. Not only does the worker spend almost all of his earnings on liquor but he also, in addition, borrows heavily to buy alcohol. All this is the cause and reinforcement at once of addiction to alcohol. This addiction, which involves expending all his earnings and reckless borrowings, has many disastrous consequences such as: (i) running up of huge debts at exorbitant rates of interest with no prospect of his repaying it while he is alive (ii) enormous tensions in the family between husband and wife including involving of violence on the one hand and quarrels between father and children on the other, because of absence of economic support to the family (iii) sense of neglect and estrangement on the part of the wife and children resulting in disruption of family life (iv) fear of ever rising indebtedness and (v) emergence of severe illnesses caused by alcoholism for the worker, affecting his internal organs like the liver, kidneys, etc. usually manifesting as “stomach ache”. All these cumulatively lead to a late realization of the domestic situation having gone completely and irretrievably out of control for the worker, which in turn drives him to desperation and ultimately suicide. While the family is thus ruined, the chief beneficiary apart from the liquor vendor is the moneylender because he collects his interest and principal from the family whether the man is alive or dead. This is particularly true of the workers of the Singareni Collieries Company because the company pays the family at the death or retirement of the worker the benefits due to him, which are quite considerable, amounting to a few lakh rupees. Thus, the money lender who had provided loans at exorbitant rates of interest to the worker for his alcohol and thus has been responsible, in a manner of speaking, to the ruination of the worker and his family, collects all his dues, at the death of the worker, from the family, which has been paid by the Company by way of the benefits due to the worker.

6. A typical, unskilled worker in the mines in the Singareni Collieries Company Limited gets wages of the order of Rs.6, 000-7,000 a month. This, however, is not an assured wage in the sense that wages for such a worker are dependent on his actual out turn of work or productivity. In fact a very hard-working person can make even up to Rs.10, 000 a month, though that would require great physical effort. Physical strength and stamina are the fundamental criteria for recruitment and also the continuing levels of earnings, based on outturn of work. With such rampant alcoholism prevailing among the collieries workers, their capacity to earn starts dwindling gradually as their health starts deteriorating. Dwindling wages means for an addict increased debts, as an addict would rather forego even his food than give up drinking. So, he borrows heavily at high rates of interest and drinks heavily till he ruins himself and his dependents as explained in paragraph 5 above. Such debts on account of drinking alone in some cases are of the order of Rs. 1.5 lakhs, as revealed in my Inquiry. The point that needs to be made here is that for the outside world the life of a worker in the Singareni Collieries Company Limited may look comfortable at a presumed average monthly earning of Rs.6, 000-7000, especially while compared with the earnings of the rural and agricultural labourers in the neighbourhood, who do not get even the minimum wages notified by the State Government and for whom in any case, employment is not available all round the year. This concept of “comfortable living” of the average worker of the collieries seems to be the belief of the management of the Singareni Collieries Company Limited as well as seen from the comments of the Managing Director in his letter addressed to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Andhra Pradesh dated 3.5.2003 and forwarded to the Honourable Commission by the State Government in its letter No.7888/HRC/2002-7 dated 14.8.2003. However, what is happening actually on ground is what I have explained in paragraph 5 and in this paragraph. Therefore, the essential point that needs to be understood and made is that a wage level of Rs.6000-7000 is itself no argument against the substance of the points made in the Complaint submitted to the Honourable Commission in the reference 1st cited, namely, that suicides are taking place in the Singareni coal belt area because of prevailing economic distress and diseases. A wage level of Rs.6000-7000 to a worker is no guarantee for an economically viable or a socially stable life either for him or his family, if his personal habits attributable to his perceived professional handicaps such as physical strain and stress and the environment in which he lives are inimical to a proper, responsible family life. In today’s corporate world it is not acceptable to say that these are not the concern of the corporate employer on the ground that, after all, the company is

ensuring a “handsome” wage of Rs. 8, 000 to its workers. I am of the view that the corporate responsibility of the Singareni Collieries Company Limited demands that the company take note of the ground realities relating to the health and social habits of its workers, the indebtedness levels of the workers and the environment in which its workers are living such as rampant availability of alcohol including *hooch* in its area of operations and the untrammelled operations of money lenders, and initiate an appropriate aggressive social education campaign for its workers in concepts like moderation, living within one’s own means and accountability to one’s family needs. An absence of this realization on the part of the management can only lead to morbidity and anti-social behaviour of its work force manifested, to begin with, at the family level as we now see in the coal belt area. The consequences of this go beyond the family as, for example, the adolescent girls from these families are victims of eve teasing and worse when they come out of their homes, including for going to school, as the perception of the anti-social elements with regard to them in the area is that these girls have no paternal protection. I understand from the Police officers working in the area that this unfortunate situation prevails in the coal belt area. Also, a family situation of this kind cannot lead to optimum worker productivity for the Company on which depends the Company’s own bottom line. The health of the worker and his company are closely related to each other.

7. CONCLUSION: The State Government has forwarded a report sent by the Managing Director of the Singareni Colliers Company Limited for the Honourable Commission’s consideration and decision. This report of the Managing Director characterizes the complaint as one with out any basis. **My investigation in the coal belt area based on reports compiled by the State Government’s police authorities and my personal interaction with the family members and wives of the workers of the Singareni Collieries clearly establishes that the claim made in the Complaint to the Honourable Commission that there are suicides among the workers of the Singareni Collieries Limited is borne out by facts.** That the “handsome salaries” they are getting, to which the Collieries management refers, has been no proof against many problems that the collieries workers get into has been discussed by me in paragraphs 5 and 6 above. The Management has claimed that “the Company has taken steps to educate them on health awareness” but that is not the impression I got during my enquiries at the village level, including with a Panchayat Raj elective having responsibility for several villages in the coal belt area. In any event, there is great need for such health awareness action among the workers of the

Collieries. **The Company may have a network of hospitals or dispensaries, to which the Management has referred in its report. The point that is of relevance, however, is rather the preventive aspect of medicine and health in the workers' context, especially in regard to wide spread alcoholism in the coal belt area. In its own interest, the Company should address this issue because it has a decisive implication for workers' health and their productivity, not to speak of associated issues like absenteeism (affecting production) that alcohol induces.**

There is a dismissive reference in the Management's report to "the jurisdiction of the National Human Resource Commission being invoked by wayfarers or officious meddlesome interferers acting without interest". This is an extremely unfortunate remark coming from the management of a Public Sector Undertaking. The management of the Singareni Collieries Company Limited is obviously unaware of the powers and responsibilities of the National Human Rights Commission to take cognizance of the information placed before it. The Company needs to be sensitized in regard to this and it is a matter of surprise that the Government of Andhra Pradesh should have forwarded a note of this kind from the Management to the Commission. I must refer in this connection to the modern concepts of public interest activism where human rights are concerned and point out that it is now 23 years since a mere letter addressed to Mr. Justice Bhagwati led to the Honourable Supreme Court of India treating it as a Writ Petition. Also, the law in this country is that the Government and the public sector undertakings should be "model employers". Viewed against these concepts, the remarks of the Management in response to the NHRC's notice to the State Government show a lack of awareness and are singularly misplaced and sadly out of step with modern corporate responsibilities.

The stand of the Management that the articles of the Constitution cited by the complainant have no application to the facts of the case is incorrect. There is little doubt that the conditions prevalent in the coal belt area of Adilabad District in regard to the alcoholism-induced health status of the people and collieries workers violate the spirit of Article 47 of the Constitution and when workers commit suicide on account of its consequences, Article 21 comes into reckoning. However, these are larger issues that call for attention not only from the Singareni Collieries Company but also from the State Government in terms of its socio-economic policies.

The letter of the Collector, Adilabad to the Commission dated 6.8.2004 is so sketchy as to show a complete lack of understanding of what is going on in his District. Without applying his mind to the grave issues involved, he has merely reported to the Commission what the Revenue Divisional Officer, Mancherial has informed him. This letter is written so carelessly that he has not taken the trouble of even mentioning the period to which the figures of suicide furnished by his Revenue Divisional Officer relate. There is a lack of seriousness in regard to issues relating to the people's lives in the coal belt area on the part of the District administration. **I must also record here that there is considerable hunger prevalent among the rural labour in the villages visited by me and surrounding areas as testified by a senior Panchayati Raj elective and the people to whom I spoke.**

The need for addressing all these issues relating to hunger, indebtedness, alcoholism and health and their implications for gender-related consequences, which together constitute poverty, were stressed by me in a meeting of the District officers at Adilabad late in the evening of the 22nd July 2005. The District officers and the Joint Collector, Adilabad have promised to initiate the action required to improve the situation in the District as part of the District's anti-poverty efforts.

I would like to bring to the kind notice of the Honourable Commission that I have brought to the personal attention of the Chief Secretary to the Government of Andhra Pradesh on telephone the state of things prevailing in Adilabad District in regard to the issues taken cognizance of by the National Human Rights Commission. He has taken note of the points made by me and promised to issue appropriate instructions to all concerned to take all required steps to improve the situation in the District.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

(a) Given the nature of the problems seen in the coal belt area, as also amongst the rural labour outside the mines, it is obvious that the District Administration has a very important and in fact a lead role to play in setting right the prevailing situation. The District Administration should organize a campaign under the leadership of the Medical and Health Department highlighting the evils of immoderate consumption of alcohol, associating all other Departments like Revenue, Education, Social Welfare, Labour and Women and Child Welfare, the Gram Panchayat and the teachers. The District Administration should also take up a drive against unauthorized

moneylenders under the relevant law, especially in the Singareni coal belt area, with focus on the social damage that money lending for consumption of alcohol is perpetrating. The District Administration should get the Women's Self Help Groups (SHG) to go into action against this scourge of immoderate consumption of alcohol and the resultant indebtedness and health problems. In fact the litmus test for the effectiveness of the SHGs should be what they have achieved in regard to reducing or eliminating consumption of alcohol. A key effort will be to organize the wives of the Singareni Collieries workers and other women members of the Collieries families, who are the worst victims of this situation to take up an empowerment campaign in regard to this issue of alcohol and the associated issue of thrift to strengthen the group solidarity of families and help cut down on wasteful habits of expenditure. There is need for initiating measures for establishing institutional infrastructure facilities for de-addiction of those workers who are already deep into the habit. To take forward these measures, the Singareni Collieries Company Limited should lend its active support to this campaign and involve itself whole-heartedly in it through the personnel of its Human Resource Development Division. In this work the Company should also involve its medical, health, and other workers' welfare infrastructure that it undoubtedly has, and also commit the required financial resources. An over-arching programme that embraces the Development and Welfare activities of the District Administration and the Singareni Collieries Company with a gender focus should be set in motion by the Government of Andhra Pradesh in the coal belt area of the District of Adilabad. Such an approach would make for greater industrial productivity and production, enhance the general welfare of the people of the area, eliminate the socio-psychological distress of the people and thus contribute to reducing the incidence of suicides in the area.

(b) A macro-level policy that is urgently needed in this context is for the Government of Andhra Pradesh to reconsider its entire approach to its Excise Policy. The State Government's role in regard to liquor should be a socially responsible one that regulates and moderates the consumption of alcohol rather than one, as at present, of encouraging consumption of alcohol in order to boost its own State revenues. What is happening in the coal belt area of Adilabad District should be an eye opener to the State Government as regards the damage that immoderate consumption of alcohol is doing to family values leading to the disruption of the

family as an institution. It is counter-productive for the State Government to strain every nerve to enhance its revenues through such socially dubious methods as promotion and consumption of alcohol and then face the socio-economic consequences of the kind being witnessed in the coal belt area of Adilabad district. I understand from authoritative sources that the State Government's excise revenues in the last year went up by 100% in the coal belt area compared to the previous year. This directly nullifies all poverty eradication efforts because the health of the poor, which is affected by alcohol leading to unaffordable medical expenditures and consequent debts, is an important indicator in the measurement of poverty. This sort of policy contradictions is antithetical to the Human Rights of the poor. The State Government should initiate policy action to limit its role to one of being a strict regulator of the liquor trade rather than be its advocate and promoter. Such an enlightened policy would enhance the health status of the people, promote family and social harmony, security and gender justice for women, enhance industrial and other productivity and quicken the pace of poverty eradication.

9. I request that these findings and recommendations may kindly be placed before the Honourable Commission for its information. I recommend that this Report be forwarded to the Government of Andhra Pradesh for appropriate action. The Government of Andhra Pradesh may also be requested to report to the Commission the action they propose to take in the light of the recommendations made herein.

K.R.VENUGOPAL.

Encl: As Above.

Letter addressed to the Collector, Adilabad in continuation of my investigation in to the suicides in the coal belt of Singareni dated the 25th July 2005.

25th July 2005.

Dear Shri Subba Rao,

Sub: Mandate of the Honourable Supreme Court of India in regard to the abolition of the Bonded Labour and Child Labour Practices in Andhra Pradesh – Suicides in the Coal Belt of Singareni, Adilabad, Andhra Pradesh and the gravity of the issues involved – Reg.

Ref:

1. Your letter No.D3/453/2004 dated 6.8.2004 to the NHRC, New Delhi.
2. Letter in Case No.903/1/2001-2002(FC), NHRC (Law Division-IV) dated 29.10.2004 addressed to me.
1. My DO Letter dated 24th July 2005 to Shri Dinkar Babu IAS, Joint Collector, Adilabad.

Kindly refer to the correspondence cited and find enclosed to this letter the reference 3rd cited.

2. My visit to Adilabad was necessitated in the context of the references 1st and 2nd cited about which I had spoken to you on phone earlier. I did not have the advantage of your presence in the District during my visit as you were attending the Collectors' Conference in Hyderabad. As may be seen from the reference cited, I got all the assistance required from the Joint Collector, Hyderabad for which I am grateful.

3. The Joint Collector would have briefed you about the details of my field visits in the Mancherial Revenue Division as also those of the comprehensive meeting I had with the senior District Officers on the evening of the 22nd July 2005 at Adilabad. Briefly put, there is a serious situation of severe social distress prevailing in the coal belt area visited by me as ascertained by me through my discussions with families of the coal workers and other rural labour and from the field level officers. Mainly, these issues relate to very high levels of alcoholism leading to disruption of family lives with serious gender implications for the women folk and the girl children; very high levels of indebtedness, a significant part of which is attributable to alcoholism among the workers; the untrammelled operations of exploitative money lenders in the context of addiction to alcohol of the workers; serious health problems flowing from addiction to alcohol and all these cumulatively adding to the economic and social distress of the workers and families of the workers of the area. All these call for concerted action in a convergent mode by all the Departments concerned like Revenue, Medical and Health, Education, Women and Child Welfare, Labour, Social Welfare, Development Corporations and the DRDA, under the Collector's leadership. The details of the action required were discussed in the meeting of the senior officers on the 22nd July 2005 in the context of the people's right to Food and Nutrition, Health, Education and Work, about which the Joint Collector would have briefed you. This Action Plan needs to be put on ground at once.

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4. Also reviewed in this meeting was the work relating to Bonded Labour and Child Labour in pursuance of the mandate of the Honourable Supreme Court of India about which the Principal Secretary, Social Welfare has been writing to you. There has been, however, little or no focus or effort in regard to this area of work for which the District Magistrate, other Executive Magistracy and the Department of Social Welfare are responsible at the District level. I request you kindly to bring back the focus and effort necessary to implement the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 properly so that there is no violation of the mandate of the Honourable Supreme Court of India issued in this regard to the State Government.

I shall be grateful if you could kindly acknowledge the receipt of this reference and intimate to me the initiation of all necessary action required in regard to the above points.

Yours sincerely,

K R VENUGOPAL

Shri Subba Rao IAS
Collector and District Magistrate
Adilabad District
Adilabad.