

Labour Politics and Coalfield Workers in Jharia : Party Policies and Human Rights Enforcement

PRIYA KUMARI

Research Scholar , University Department of Political Science, Binod Bihari Mahto Koyalanchal University , Dhanbad.

Introduction

The Jharia coalfield in Jharkhand stands as a paradoxical landscape of national economic necessity and localized human suffering. While it remains one of India's most vital mining regions, it is simultaneously defined by hazardous working conditions and systemic environmental degradation (Singh et al.2022). The central tension in Jharia lies in the disconnect between the legal protections afforded to the workforce and the lived reality of those workers. Despite robust constitutional guarantees and an extensive framework of labour legislation, coalfield workers remain profoundly vulnerable to exploitation and health risks (Saha, 2022; Noy, 2022).

The primary challenge is not a lack of policy, but a failure of enforcement. While political parties frequently incorporate labour welfare into their formal manifestos, the actual implementation of human rights standards is often subverted by entrenched political-economic interests and institutional limitations. This creates a "governance gap" where the rhetoric of worker empowerment serves as a mask for continued marginalization (Saha,2022; Leonard,2024; Banerjee,2018).

This paper seeks to critically examine the intersection of labour politics, party policies, and human rights enforcement within the Jharia region. By analyzing the gap between policy intent and enforcement outcomes, the study aims to: Evaluate how political party manifestos address (or overlook) the specific rights of mining labour. Analyze the institutional barriers that prevent the effective application of human rights in resource-extractive zones. Propose a framework for participatory governance to strengthen accountability in coalfield areas (Emerson et al, 2011).

By focusing on the Jharia coalfield, this research contributes to the broader academic discourse on "resource-extractive regions" and the unique pressures they place on democratic governance and human rights. It moves the conversation from theoretical rights to the practical, often neglected, enforcement mechanisms required to protect those on the front lines of industrial production (Mancini & Sala, 2018 ; Mwanza & Browman 2021).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Jharia coalfield serves as a critical case study for understanding the complexities of labour politics within resource-extractive economies. This section synthesizes existing scholarship to establish a theoretical foundation for the gap between policy rhetoric and enforcement

The Political Economy of Extractive Industries

Scholarship on mining regions often highlights the "resource curse" or the "paradox of plenty," where regions rich in natural resources experience poor development outcomes and weak institutional governance (Idemudia et al, 2020). In Jharia, this paradox is intensified by the historical legacy of nationalization and the subsequent shift toward contractualization in mining

operations (Noy, 2022b). Academic literature suggests that when the state is both the owner of the resource and the regulator of labour, a conflict of interest arises, often resulting in the prioritization of production targets over the human rights of the workforce (Lgbayiloye & Bradlow, 2021).

Labour Politics and Party Manifestos

Research into Indian labour politics indicates a significant shift from "class-based" mobilization to "identity or interest-based" politics (Neethi, 2019). While political parties formally endorse labour welfare in their manifestos to secure the electoral support of the working class, these promises often remain superficial. Scholars argue that the "policy rhetoric" identified in your abstract is a tool for political legitimacy rather than a blueprint for substantive reform (Gamut & Soendergaard, 2023). The marginalization of workers' voices is frequently attributed to the decline of traditional trade unions and the rise of precarious, informal employment in the coal sector (Noy, 2022).

Theoretical Framework: The Enforcement Gap

This study utilizes the Enforcement Gap Theory as its primary analytical lens. This framework posits that in developing economies, the failure of human rights is not necessarily due to an absence of law, but rather a "decoupling" of formal rules from actual organizational practice (Lgbayiloye & Bradlow, 2021).

Institutional Limitations: Weak regulatory bodies and underfunded oversight mechanisms hinder the application of existing labour laws. (Werner, et al, 2023)

Political-Economic Interests: The nexus between political elites and mining corporations often incentivizes the bypass of environmental and safety regulations (Gamut & Soendergaard, 2023 ; Spiegel, 2017).

Human Rights Enforcement: Despite international and constitutional mandates, the enforcement of rights in Jharia is hindered by the lack of participatory governance and the physical hazards inherent in the region (Sahoo & Rout, 2023)

Human Rights in Resource-Extractive Zones

Human rights scholarship increasingly focuses on the "right to a safe environment" and "occupational health" as fundamental rights for mining labour (Sahoo & Rout, 2023). In Jharia, the persistent fires and land subsidence represent a dual violation (Jalaluddin, 2018): the right to life and the right to a healthy workplace. Existing literature suggests that without strengthening accountability and participatory governance, coalfield workers will remain vulnerable despite the proliferation of labour legislation (Simon & Macklin, 2014).

Research Methodology

To effectively bridge the divide between theoretical human rights and the empirical realities of the Jharia coalfields, this study employs a rigorous qualitative, secondary data-based research design. This approach allows for a longitudinal and critical analysis of institutional trends and political shifts that primary field surveys might overlook due to the vast temporal scope of mining policy in India

Data Sources and Selection

The study systematically analyzes a multi-layered dataset to triangulate findings across political, legal, and social dimensions : **Political Party Manifestos:** Analysis of the formal commitments made by major national and regional parties regarding labour welfare and resource management. **Legislative and Judicial Documents:** Examination of existing labour laws, landmark judicial decisions concerning coal mining safety, and the enforcement of the Mines

Act. Government and NGO Reports: Review of data from the Directorate General of Mines Safety (DGMS), National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) reports, and environmental impact assessments Academic Literature: Synthesis of peer-reviewed journals and historical accounts of Jharia's socio-economic evolution.

Analytical Approach: Critical Content Analysis

The methodology moves beyond descriptive summary by applying Critical Content Analysis (CCA). This involves : Coding Rhetoric: Identifying specific keywords and promises related to "worker safety," "rehabilitation," and "rights" in political documents. Mapping Enforcement Outcomes: Comparing these promises against recorded human rights violations and environmental degradation statistics in Jharia. Synthesis: Identifying the "gap" where institutional limitations and political-economic interests subvert the formal legal framework.

Scope and Limitations

While the qualitative nature of this study provides deep contextual insights into Jharia, it acknowledges the limitations inherent in secondary data, such as potential under-reporting in official government statistics regarding informal or contractual labour casualties. However, by cross-referencing government data with human rights reports, the study ensures a balanced and critical perspective.

Analysis of Labour Politics and Party Policies

The political landscape surrounding Jharia is characterized by a "rhetoric-reality" trap. While the coal industry is central to India's energy security, the workers who power it are often caught between the populist promises of political parties and the rigid demands of industrial productivity (Oskarsson, Lahiri-Dutt & Kindo, 2024).

Macro-Level Policy Rhetoric vs. Micro-Level Implementation

An analysis of political party manifestos reveals a consistent pattern of formal endorsement for labour welfare. Parties across the ideological spectrum emphasize "social security," "safety standards," and "rights-based governance". However, these commitments often lack specific timelines or budgetary allocations for the Jharia region (Sinha, at al, 2023).

Populist Appeals: During election cycles, political actors leverage the "coal-belt" vote bank by promising land rights and permanent employment (Chacko, 2018).

Policy Dilution: Once in power, the imperative to meet coal production targets often leads to the dilution of safety audits and the overlook of environmental clearances.

The Political Economy of "Contractualization"

A significant barrier to human rights enforcement in Jharia is the increasing shift toward the "contractualization" of mining labour (Talluri at al, 2024). Fragmentation of Responsibility: By outsourcing mining activities to private contractors, state-owned enterprises effectively distance themselves from direct liability for worker safety (Biswas, 2024 ; Parwez & Meena 2021). Union Weakening: This fragmentation has weakened the bargaining power of traditional trade unions, as contract workers often lack the legal standing to demand the same rights as permanent staff (Talluri at al, 2024).

Institutional Limitations and Political Interests

The enforcement mechanisms - such as the Directorate General of Mines Safety (DGMS) - are frequently hampered by institutional limitations. The Nexus of Interest: There exists a complex nexus between local political elites, mining contractors, and regulatory bodies. This political-economic interest often prioritizes the "ease of doing business" over the stringent enforcement of human rights (Chacko, 2018). Marginalization of Voices: Because workers in

Jharia are often socio-economically marginalized, their ability to navigate judicial or administrative systems for redressal is severely limited (Karanam et al, 2021).

Human Rights as a Secondary Priority

In the hierarchy of party policies, human rights are often treated as secondary to economic output (Oskarsson et al 2025). The persistent underground fires and land subsidence in Jharia serve as a physical manifestation of this policy failure (Chakraborty et al 2025 ; Karanam et al, 2021). While parties acknowledge these hazards in theory, the lack of a comprehensive, participatory rehabilitation policy highlights the gap between rhetoric and the actual enforcement of the "right to life" and "right to a safe environment"(Chakraborty et al 2025).

Human Rights Enforcement and Challenges

In Jharia, human rights enforcement is not merely a legal concern but a matter of physical survival. The region's status as a "resource-extractive zone" has created a unique set of challenges where the right to life, health, and a safe environment is frequently superseded by the state's drive for energy self-sufficiency (Dey & Singh, 2021).

The Breakdown of Constitutional and Legal Protections

Despite the existence of the Mines Act (1952) and the Coal Mines Regulations, the enforcement of these statutes in Jharia is inconsistent. Coalfield workers remain highly vulnerable despite these constitutional guarantees and labour legislations (Dey & Singh, 2021;).
Occupational Hazards: Workers are routinely exposed to underground fires and land subsidence, which represent a direct violation of the right to a safe working environment (Kumari & Singh, 2025a).
Judicial Delay: While judicial decisions are part of the study's data set, the lag between the filing of human rights grievances and final adjudication often renders the remedy ineffective for the victimized worker(Kumari & Singh, 2025b).

Institutional Barriers to Enforcement

The study identifies that enforcement mechanisms remain weak due to a combination of political-economic interests and institutional limitations (Jalaluddin, 2018).
Regulatory Capture: Regulatory bodies often suffer from a lack of autonomy, as their oversight is frequently compromised by the economic pressure to maintain high coal output.
Information Asymmetry: Workers are often unaware of the specific human rights protections available to them, a gap exacerbated by the marginalization of their voices in the governance process.

Environmental Degradation as a Human Rights Violation

Environmental degradation in Jharia is not an isolated ecological issue but a systemic human rights concern. The Right to Health: Persistent smoke from coal fires leads to chronic respiratory issues among the local workforce and residents (Goswami,2015 ; Kumari & Singh, 2025a).

Forced Displacement: Land subsidence often forces workers and their families to evacuate their homes without adequate rehabilitation, highlighting the gap between policy rhetoric and actual enforcement outcomes (Areeparampil,1996; Kumari & Singh, 2025a).

The Role of Civil Society and International Standards

While international human rights standards emphasize corporate and state accountability, their application in Jharia is filtered through a local political lens. The marginalization of workers' voices indicates that current participatory governance models are either non-existent or purely performative(Kumari & Singh, 2025b).

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The Jharia coalfield serves as a poignant illustration of the gap between policy rhetoric and enforcement outcomes in resource-extractive regions. This study has demonstrated that while a robust framework of labour laws and constitutional guarantees exists, the material reality for workers is defined by hazardous conditions and systemic marginalization. The persistence of these issues suggests that the failure is not legislative, but structural—driven by a convergence of political-economic interests that prioritize extraction over human dignity.

Rhetorical Decoupling: Political parties formally endorse labour welfare in manifestos to gain electoral legitimacy, but these commitments are frequently decoupled from actual enforcement once in power. **Institutional Fragility:** Enforcement mechanisms remain weak due to institutional limitations and the fragmentation of responsibility caused by the increasing use of contract labour. **Human Rights Deficit:** Despite repeated political commitments, workers remain vulnerable to life-threatening risks, including underground fires and land subsidence

Policy Recommendations

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, the following measures are proposed:

- **Strengthening Independent Oversight:** Regulatory bodies such as the DGMS must be granted greater financial and administrative autonomy to ensure that safety audits are conducted without political or corporate interference.
- **Mandatory Participatory Governance:** Policy-making processes must transition from top-down directives to participatory models that include coalfield workers in the design of safety and rehabilitation protocols.
- **Formalizing Rights for Contractual Labour:** Legislation should be amended to ensure that principal employers (state or private) are held directly liable for the human rights and safety standards of all workers, regardless of their contractual status.
- **Integrated Rehabilitation and Environmental Restoration:** Human rights enforcement must include a time-bound, transparent plan for the rehabilitation of residents affected by mining hazards, moving beyond "crisis management" toward sustainable development

References

1. Aareparrampil, M. (1996). Displacement due to mining in Jharkhand. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31(24), 1524–1528.
2. Banerjee, S. B. (2018). Transnational power and translocal governance: The politics of corporate responsibility. *Human Relations*, 71(6), 796–821. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717726586>
3. Biswas, P. (2024). Impact of outsourcing on Indian coal industry's strategic decisions. *Innovations in Business and Strategic Management*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.61577/ibsm.2024.100007>
4. Chacko, P. (2018). The right turn in India: Authoritarianism, populism and neoliberalisation. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48(4), 541–565. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2018.1446546>
5. Chakraborty, T., & Ghosh, A. (2025). Need and prospect of R&R in Jharia coalfield. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.56975/ijrar.v12i2.315483>

6. Dey, S., & Singh, R. (2021). Mapping precarious energy geographies: Exploring the lived experience of coal mining in Jharia, India. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 82, 102298. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102298>
7. Emerson, K., Nabatchi, T., & Balogh, S. (2012). An integrative framework for collaborative governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 22(1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mur011>
8. Gamu, J., & Soendergaard, N. (2023). Governance capture and socio-environmental conflict: A critical political economy of the global mining industry's prior consultation regime. *Review of International Political Economy*, 31(3), 880–904. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2023.2265976>
9. Goswami, S. (2015). Impact of coal mining on environment: A study of Raniganj and Jharia coal field in India. *IAFOR Journal of Arts & Humanities*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.22492/ijah.3.1.01>
10. Idemudia, U., Kwakyewah, C., & Muthuri, J. (2020). Mining, the environment, and human rights in Ghana: An area of limited statehood perspective. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 29(8), 2919–2926. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.2581>
11. Igbayiloye, O., & Bradlow, D. (2021). An assessment of the regulatory legal and institutional framework of the mining industry in South Africa and Kenya for effective human rights protection: Lessons for other countries. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.17159/1996-2096/2021/v21n1a16>
12. Jalaluddin, J. (2018). Coal mining and human rights: Initiating the right to a good and healthy environment as non-derogable right. In *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Law and Justice (ICLJ 2017)* (pp. 91–95). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/iclj-17.2018.20>
13. Karanam, V., Motagh, M., Garg, S., & Jain, K. (2021). Multi-sensor remote sensing analysis of coal fire induced land subsidence in Jharia Coalfields, Jharkhand, India. *International Journal of Applied Earth Observation and Geoinformation*, 102, 102439. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jag.2021.102439>
14. Kumari, P., & Singh, P. (2025a). Human rights violations in coal mining: A case study of Jharia coalfield. In *Justice and the margins* (pp. 177–185). New Academic Publishers.
15. Kumari, P., & Singh, P. (2025b). Coal industry and violation of human rights: An analytical study. *Bihar Ka Aarthik Paridrishya*, 17(1), 38–45.
16. Leonard, L. (2024). Socio-environmental impacts of mineral mining and conflicts in Southern and West Africa: Navigating reflexive governance for environmental justice. *Environmental Research Letters*, 19(9). <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ad7047>
17. Mancini, L., & Sala, S. (2018). Social impact assessment in the mining sector: Review and comparison of indicators frameworks. *Resources Policy*, 57, 98–111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2018.02.002>
18. Mnwana, S., & Bowman, A. (2021). Land, conflict and radical distributive claims in South Africa's rural mining frontier. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 8(4), 100972. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2021.100972>
19. Neethi, P. (2019). Review of the book *Undervalued Dissent: Informal Workers' Politics in India*, by Manjusha Nair. *Global Labour Journal*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.15173/glj.v10i2.3877>

20. Noy, I. (2022a). The politics of dispossession and compensation in the eastern Indian coal belt. *Critique of Anthropology*, 42(1), 56–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275x221074831>
21. Noy, I. (2022b). Unpicking precarity: Informal work in eastern India's coal mining tracts. *Development and Change*, 54(1), 3–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12739>
22. Oskarsson, P., Lahiri-Dutt, K., & Kindo, N. (2024). The micropolitics of coal in India: Understanding resource politics from the ground up through a materiality lens. *Local Environment*, 29(4), 524–539. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2024.2306302>
23. Oskarsson, P., Nayak, S., & Kindo, N. (2025). A just transition or a downward spiral? Land and livelihood transitions to and away from coal mining in India. *Journal of Agrarian Change*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.70003>
24. Parwez, S., & Meena, K. (2021). Worlds apart in India: Analysis of contractualization of labor and evidence from labor market discrimination. *Forum for Development Studies*, 48(3), 409–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2021.1927172>
25. Sahoo, P., & Rout, H. S. (2023). Health issues of mining workers: Provisions and challenges in social work perspectives. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 8, 288–301. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-023-00252-5>
26. Shah, A. (2022). Rethinking 'just transitions' from coal: The dynamics of land and labour in anti-coal struggles. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 50(6), 2145–2164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2022.2142568>
27. Simons, P., & Macklin, A. (2014). *The governance gap: Extractive industries, human rights, and the home state advantage*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203417256>
28. Singh, S., Singh, R. S., Singh, K., & Singh, S. (2022). Concentration, sources and health effects of silica in ambient respirable dust of Jharia Coalfields Region, India. *Environmental Sciences Europe*, 34(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-022-00651-x>
29. Spiegel, S. J. (2017). EIAs, power and political ecology: Situating resource struggles and the techno-politics of small-scale mining. *Geoforum*, 87, 95–107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.10.010>
30. Talluri, S., Balasubramanian, G., & Sarkar, S. (2024). Against the tide: A case of industrial relations transformation in the Indian coal sector. *Industrial Relations Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irj.12425>
31. Werner, T. T., Toumbourou, T., Maus, V., Lukas, M. C., Sonter, L. J., Muhdar, M., Runting, R. K., & Bebbington, A. (2023). Patterns of infringement, risk, and impact driven by coal mining permits in Indonesia. *Ambio*, 53, 242–256. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-023-01944-y>