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Indian Coal Mines in Hundred Years Old Fiction and Now: A Geographical Analysis

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Abstract

This study attempts to construe the first-ever coalmine-oriented Bengali fiction from a social, historical, and geographic perspective. Sailjananda Mukhopadhyay wrote *Koylakuthi* (the coal miners' office) in 1922, representing Bengal's coal mines. This study aims to reconstruct the miners' society from the early 20th Century with narratives from this story and examine the societal challenges and changes a hundred years apart. A comparative study of the mining geo-cultural landscape of the 1920s Bengal and its contemporary counterpart is carried out. Changed geography, technology, and community are observed. And it reveals that areal expansion of the coalfields has increased production, and technological advancement has increased the safety and security of the miner class. However, the labour structure, class and caste hierarchy, and patriarchal mindset have hardly changed.

Keywords: Extractive Industry; Caste System; Bengali Literature; Colliery; India

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Introduction

Sometimes fiction writers express the facts of geography better than geographic professionals themselves (Wright, 1926). Albeit not historically accurate, fiction certainly gives a clearer idea of societies, cultures, and places, which are the prime concerns for social science and literature studies. That is why Nobel and Dhussa (1990) refer to fiction literature as the 'data bank' of geographical thought.

The field of literary geographies thrived from the collective endeavour of geographers and literary scholars. The tradition of literary geography can be traced back to the late 19th Century, but the idea flourished in real terms during the 1970s with its interdisciplinary approaches (Singh, 2003). Works of Pocock (1981), Lando (1996), Blair (1998), Hones (2008), and Saunders (2010) have shaped, reshaped, and extended the conception of literary geography since then. And presently, it is emerging as a branch of social science capable of bringing history, geography, and literature studies together. However, literary geography is still a lesser-known field of geography, and more effort is needed to fill the lacuna in interpreting text and space relationships (Saunders, 2010).

The central idea of geographic discourse is to understand the human-nature relationship. Literary geography, an emerging branch of human geography, extracts information from fiction writings to interpret such relationships (Dutt and Dhussa, 1981). This exercise probes the coalmines of Bengal; its temporal changes in the social, cultural, and technological arenas, using a coalmine fiction based on the same theme. The effort is made out of some compendium motives.

First, coal mining has become a driving force of the global economy since the industrial revolution. And at present, it shares almost one-third of the energy supply globally and will continue its status until new technologies are available (International Energy Agency, 2022).

Moreover, coal extraction requires massive mining land and modifies a region's physiographical setup. It changes people's lives in terms of livelihood, cultural practices, or social fabric. Clearly, the examination of coal mines comes under the scope of geographic studies.

In physical geography, the study of mines in connection with geological reserves, extraction, production, and environmental impact is typical. However, studying the mining landscape from people's perspectives is barely available in geography. Hence, more human-centric studies in the field of coal mining are required.

Literary works express socio-psychological behaviour perceived by the writers and create humanistic 'places' (Dutt and Dhussa, 1981). The current study, therefore, attempts to divulge these 'humanistic places' within Indian mines after selecting fiction, verifying them with geographic reality, and comparing them with their contemporary counterparts to point out the temporal changes.

For this study, the Bengali short story Koylakuthi by Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay is selected to understand the Indian mining scenario, as Bengal is the birthplace of commercial coal mining in India. The fiction represents Indian coal mines from the 1920s. It elucidates nuances of mines setup, local people, and the essence of their interaction.

The current work is configured in different sections. First, the history of Bengali literature is discussed briefly with special reference to Sailajananda as an author and Koylakuthi as a fiction, followed by the summary of the story. Then different aspects of coal mining in the 1920s Bengal, such as geographical locations, mining mechanism, community, class and caste hierarchy, are highlighted through the narratives from the story. Finally, the geographical, mechanical and societal changes that have occurred in the last one hundred years (between 1922 and 2021) are identified by comparing the fiction-driven information with contemporary data.

Research Methodology

A comparative methodological approach (Figure 1) is adopted for comparing temporal changes in Indian coal mines that occurred over a hundred years considering the year of *Koylakuthi*'s first publication, that is, 1922, as the base year. This approach is suitable for extracting information and cross-checking reality. *Koylakuthi* creates several scenarios of the mining landscape from the 1920s, representing mining know-how, miners' emotions, and social structure. Data regarding these entities are inferred from the short story to reconstruct the mining ambience of the 1920s. On the other hand, the present-day socio-spatial organisation of Indian coal mines is scrutinised using varied secondary data. Then, it is compared with the present-day scenario to understand the changes and similarities of the same landscape in a hundred-year gap.
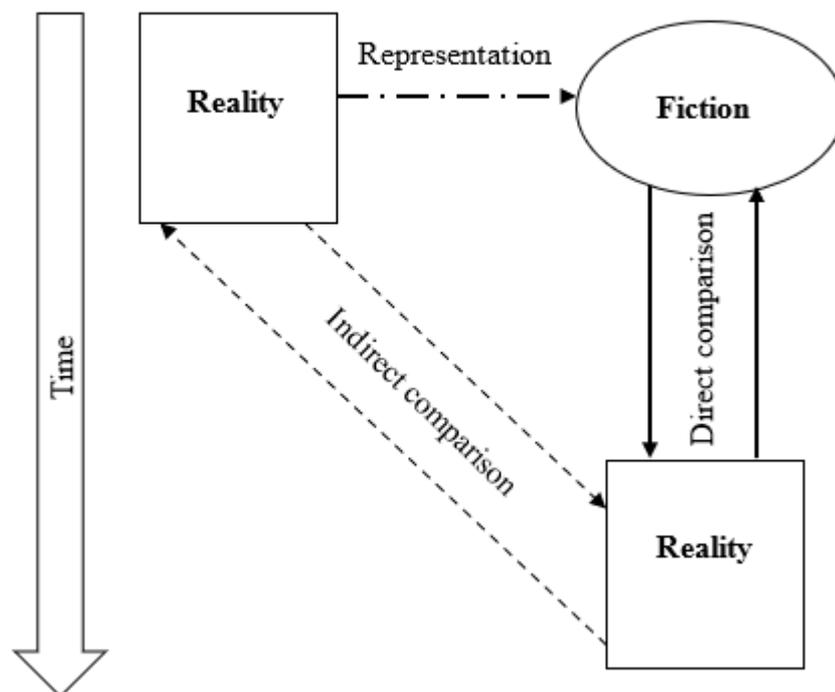

Figure 1. Methodological Framework
Source: Author

Producing geographic notes from Bengali literature was not widespread among scholars until recently. Although the earliest work dealing with geographic connotations in Bengali literature is by Dutt and Dhussa (1981), a significant number of studies were published only in the last few years. While researching Sarat Chanda's idea of the 'home region', Dutt and Dhussa (1981) appreciate literature as a base for regional reconstruction and as "subjective insight into human values and feelings" (p. 42). They demarcated a geographical region, represented in Sarat Chandra's writings, that has a unique blend of nature and society and is distinguishable from other regions.

In the work of Sengupta (2015), fiction pertaining Bengal partition of 1947 is portrayed. Study of fiction works representing nostalgia of past residents and sojourn, religious-political struggle constructs the frame of her book the partition of Bengal: fragile borders and new identities. The author further digs into the historical and geopolitical truth to showcase the influence of changing boundaries on demographic characteristics and city landscapes across borders.

Appreciation of rivers in stream-studded Bengal is widespread. Numerous river-based novels and

short stories are available in Bengali. Gope (2020) inspects the most famous river-centric novel in Bengali, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Hansuli Banker Upakatha.* Gope's (2020) work suggests that geographers should take notes of how Tarashanker illustrated the weaker sections of the Bengali society, their adjustment to the environment, and 'survival strategy', to ultimately understand the reality.

Another work on the same novel is conducted by Bhattacharya (2021), where he paid attention to rural ecologies, social hierarchy and their changes under the influence of industrialisation and modernisation depicted in the *Hansuli Banker Upakatha.* He advocates the Gandhian concept of ruralism as a catalyst for an increased number of regional literary works in India during the post-colonial period. He also brings forth the ideas such as eco-materialism and highlights their successful application by the novel's narrator.

Novels dealing percolation of capitalism in Bengal and its transition during the post-colonial era also greatly influence literary researchers. Just like Bhattacharya (2021), a recent publication by Banerjee (2022) also focuses on Bengal's transformation towards capitalistic modernity. Banerjee (2022) considered Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamatha* and Tagore's *Gora* and concluded that despite having contrasting political tones, these novels are windows through which one may peep into the socio-political dynamics of Bengal.

The study of fiction literature is now gaining popularity in the academic arena of Bengali literature studies. And most significant features that make the notion of Bengal are brought into consideration. Rivers within Bengali landscapes, political and ideological shifting of Bengal, the Bengal partition of 1947 and their aftermath in shaping and reshaping socio-geographic spaces are recent concerns in Bengali-literary geography.

However, there is probably no literary geographic work focusing on Bengali literature representing mines. The main reason is the comparatively less representation of mines and

miners' society in Bengali, even though coal mining started early in Bengal.

The first coal mines of Bengal and India were established in 1774 in a town called Raniganj in the western part of Bengal. Raniganj and adjoining area emerged as a full-fledged mining belt during the 19th Century when demand for coal increased significantly due to the increasing use of steam engines. Unlike most of the lusty green plains of Bengal, this belt was dry and infertile, where agriculture was not convenient. Hence, the people quickly adopted mining as an occupation and formed a society of miners consisting of local Bauris and Santhals, as well as migrants from different backward parts of the country. Thus, this land became a piece of Bengal, but not perceived as proper Bengal, as it drastically differs physiographically and culturally from the so-called Bengal's *Bhadrasamaj* (Gentlemen's society).

In Bengali literature, the colliery lives and struggles were neglected until 1922. Then, Sailajannanda Mukhopadhyay was the first-ever writer to present the dusty dark faces of coal-workers to the tables of Bengali *Bhadralok* (Gentlemen) through his story of *Koylakuthi* (The Coal Miners' Office, 1922). And the story was so fascinating to the reader that it marked a new path in Bengali regional literature (Acharya, 2004) (Figure 2).

The story equally emphasises humanistic approaches as it provides insight into physicality (Porteous, 1985). It is a successful example of Pocock's (1988) three 'P's— place, people, and the plot essential for the literary geographic study. The place, that is, the mining-scape of Raniganj; the people, the marginalised section of the society— Santhals and Bauris; and the plot, that is, the depiction of human emotions under the light of social hierarchy, is the vital essence of the story.

Therefore, for interpreting the text, a more humanistic approach is taken into consideration to appraise the literary texts and extract personal information on human cognition rather than sticking only to the validation of the physical landscapes (Lando,1996).

As Dutt and Dhussa (1981) suggest and backed by existing literature, the hitherto trend of literary geography is to explore and reclaim physical and cognitive spaces expressed by the narrators. However, these explorations are mainly limited to a particular time frame. The novelty of this study lies in the fact that it felt the urge to cross the temporal boundary of fiction. Hence, it proceeds not only to identify and reconstruct spaces as depicted in the fiction but also throws light on the temporal changes within the same geographic organisation. Mining regions are highly dynamic and changed drastically due to physiographic alteration, socio-political turmoil, increased labour mobility, and the introduction of humanitarian laws. Therefore, it is not only justified but necessary to study the temporal differences.

Bengali Literature and Sailajananda

Bengali language, the lingua franca of Bangladesh and the West Bengal state of India, belongs to the Indo-Aryan family and is currently the fifth most spoken language globally (Eberhard et al., 2019). This language originated from *Pali,* a dialect of the later Sanskrit language around the 8th to 10th Centuries (Higgins, 2006)). The history of Bengali literature is roughly divided into three parts— early (800-1200), medieval (1200-1800), and modern (1800-present) (Sen,1991).

Charjapada/ Charyapada (circa. 10th Century), songs written by the Buddhist monks on various lifestyle-related subjects, is the earliest written work and the only sample from the early period, discovered much later in 1907 from the royal court library of Nepal (Sen, 1960). The Turkic invasion in the 12th Century marks the commencement of the medieval period in Bengali literature. The invaders destroyed libraries and universities, so scholars with literary manuscripts started to take refuge in Nepal. Referred to as the dark age of Bengali literature, the only significant work of this time is the *Srikrishnakirtana* drama based on the love story of *Radha* and *Krishna* in verse (Sen, 1991).

The middle period is generally divided into two phases: the Pre-Chaitanya era and the Chaitanya era after Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534),

the Vaishnava saint and a prominent figure of *Bhakti Andolan* (religious movement). *Padabali Sahitya,* or the verses depicting *Radha* and *Krisha*'s love story was still a prominent feature of Bengali literature in this period, however, significant changes in the nature of *Padabali Sahitya* are noticed between the Pre-Chaitanya and Chaitanya eras. Before Chaitanya the subject matters of the *Padabali Sahitya* were more humanistic. Later the followers of Chaitanya, who considered him an avatar or incarnation of Lord *Krishna,* postulated different religious theories. Based on these theories many verses were composed where love was portrayed more divinely (Acharya, 2004; Gupta, 2012). Chaitanya's influence on Bengali literature should also be acknowledged because the first ever biographies were written on him when Vrindavana Das Thakur wrote *Sri-Chaitanya-Bhagavata* (c.1548) and Krishna Das Kaviraja composed *Sri-Chaitanya-Charitamrita* (c. 1557). That set the trend of biographical literature in Bengali language (Sen, 1991).

In the medieval period, Bengali literature was rejuvenated by translating great works of mainly Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian works. *Mangalakabyas* are the distinguishing features of the Pre-Chaitanya era through which the inclusion of Gods and Goddesses of the marginalised Hindu castes in the mainstream practice is expressed. Significant work during the Chaitanya era is the Vaishnava Sahitya when numerous verses are written to describe the romantic love affair of *Krishna* and *Radha*. The most notable poets of this era are Chandidas, Govindadas Gyandas, Lochandas and Balaramdas. A substantial stream of Islamic *Sahitya* also flourished parallel to this.

The modern era of Bengali literature is marked by the inclusion of Bengal under British rule, the initiation of the Bengal printing press, and the establishment of Fort William College, which was established in 1800. From this time, prose writing started in Bengali (Sen, 1960). Translations of Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, and English, were the salient feature of the early modern period, mainly out of administrative, political, and social reformation motives. William Carey, Ram Mohan Roy, Michael Madhusudan

Dutt, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar were some notable writers of this period. Apart from translations, original writings were also found but comparatively fewer in number. The first Bengali novel was written around the 1850s, but the trend was well-established by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay during the 1860s, when he wrote several novels like *Durgeshnandini* (1865), *Kapalkundala* (1866) and *Mrinalini* (1869). The trend was carried forward by other eminent writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (Gupta, 2012). Rabindranath wrote novels like *Nastanir* (1901), *Chokher Bali* (1903), *Noukadubi* (1906), *Gora* (1910), *Ghore Baire* (1916) and Sarat Chandra's novels include *Badadidi* (1907), *Parinita* (1914), *Devdas* (1917), *Pother Dabi* (1926).

Rabindranath Tagore, the first Indian Nobel Laureate, is the most renowned name in the history of Bengali literature; he has contributed to every literary form, be it novel, poetry, play, or song. He is also credited for composing the national anthems of two countries: for India, *Jana Gana Mana Adhinayaka* (Thou art the ruler of the minds of all people) in 1911, and for Bangladesh, *Amar Shonar Bangla* (My Golden Bengal) in 1905. He also sets the trend of short stories during the 1890s (Sen, 1960). The aura of Rabindranath was so great that his contemporary writers were primarily influenced. But after the 1910s, an adversary group of writers surfaced who openly challenged Tagore's idea of eternal truth and universal prosperity and started including more earthly subjects like the life struggle of the working class and the outrage of wars. These writers, known as *Kallol* (stormy current) after a literary magazine, were driven by worldwide socio-political scenarios. Chatterjee and Ferdous (1996, p.55) have written:

> The decade between the two world wars especially saw in Bengali Literature the rise of an awareness of trends in the world literature, coupled with a committed socio-political consciousness among writers in the wake of the first surge of the non-cooperation movement and the disillusionment that came after World War I (p.55).

Along with Kazi Nazrul Islam and Premendra Mitra, Sailajananda belonged to the *Kallol* generation. Sailajananda is said to be the introducer of regionalism in Bengali literature, and the legacy was successfully carried forward by the Bandopadhyay trio— Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay and Manik Bandopadhyay (Acharya, 2004). For the first time in the history of Bengali literature, the life struggle of coal miners is depicted in *Koylakuthi* (1922). Chatterjee and Ferdous (1996) further reinforce this in the following quote:

> Mukhopadhyay's (Sailajananda) fame rests mainly on his sympathetic depiction of the life of the coal miners in his home district of Burdwan (Beng. Bardhaman), whom he had observed very closely from childhood. His treatment is often realistic, and the stories are tragic. His best-remembered works include(s)... *Koylakuthi*... (p.58).

Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay (1901-1976) was brought up in the colliery atmosphere and worked for a few years in the same Jorjanaki colliery, where the story of *Koylakuthi* is based (Ghosh, 2004) before moving to Kolkata. Despite having a great start in his story-writing career, Sailajananda shifted to screenplay writing and movie making and returned to story and novel writing much later. *Koylakuthi* was his first publication at the age of 21 in *Mashik Basumati's Kartik* issue (1922). The subject of his story was so unique that it quickly caught the eyes of the stalwarts of the literature. Tagore praised him for keeping the story simple, non-fabricating, and true to life (Tagore, 1927). Premendra Mitra, a contemporary of Sailajananda, wrote that he (Sailajananda) had successfully extended the geography of Bengali literature and set the trend of regional literature in Bengali (Mitra, 1975). In his writings, the famous linguist Sukumar Sen credited him for keeping the culture's 'local colour' intact (Sen,1991). There is ample evidence in the story that *Koylakuthi's unique thematic taste and writing style* were unprecedented and sensational to both the readers and writers.
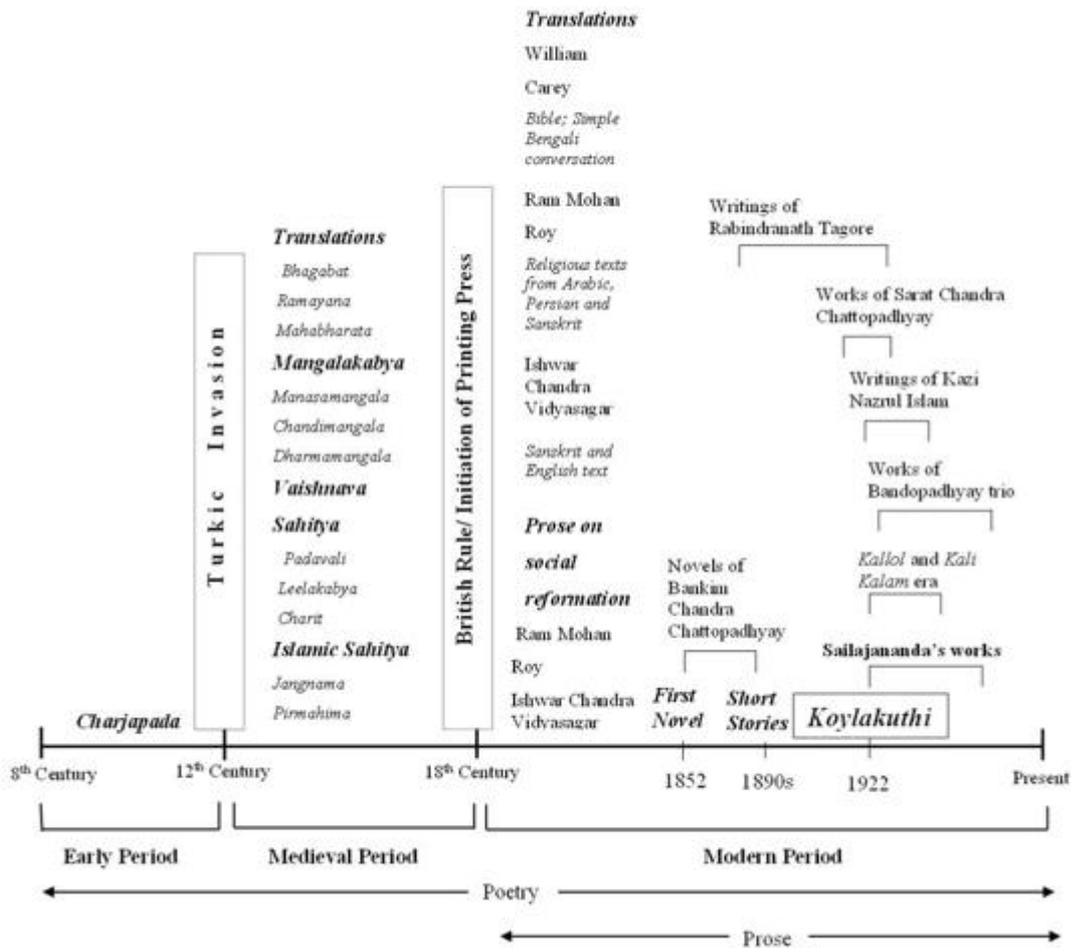
Figure 2: Place of Koylakuthi in the timeline of Bengali literature.
Source: Compiled by the Author from Various Sources

Summary of *Koylakuthi:* The Story

The story begins at the Jorjanaki colliery premise. The protagonist, Bilashi, a cheerful woman from the socially marginal Bauri community, is happily married to Nanku, a Santhal tribal man who works at the mine, until the latter engages in an extra-marital affair with Mainu, another mine girl. The relationship between Bilashi and Nanku revolves around promises, betrayals, love, and jealousy and ends at the point when Nanku elopes with Mainu on a festive day. Bilashi is heartbroken at first but starts living with Ramna Khalasi, a relatively wealthy man attracted to Bilashi's physical beauty. Though she was compelled to do so because of her devasted economic condition, she finds satisfaction when she considers her

action as a revenge for Nanku's betrayal. Eventually, Mainu dies, and Nanku returns and starts working again in the mine without Bilashi's knowledge. Bilashi knows about Nanku's return only when the latter dies in a mining accident. Bilashi lies to Ramna and forces him to let her go inside the mining pit secretly at night, where she finds Nanku's dead body and commits suicide by inducing a roof fall.

Representation of Indian Mines

Koylakuthi represents the Raniganj and Jharia coalfields of eastern India in landscape, culture, and society. These coalfields are based on the Raniganj series of the Gondwana coal formed during the Permian age (Krishnan, 1956). Located at the eastern end of the Chhota Nagpur

plateau with a slightly undulating landscape and was densely forested before mining began. The entire area comes under the Paschim Bardhaman district of West Bengal and the Dhanbad district of Jharkhand. Although the site is now part of two different states of the Indian union, it was an undivided part of the Bengal province of British India until 1912 (McPherson, 1931), which was just ten years before *Koylakuthi* was written.

The area is characterised by an unfertile, subsidence-prone land surface demarcated by river Ajay in the north, river Barakar in the west, and river Damodar in the south. Most of the population is engaged in mining and heavy industries like iron and steel, hydroelectric power plants, etc. As an important industrial hub of India, this region attracts people from all over the country, which results in multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-religious demography (Chattopadhyay, 2013).

Though the evidence of mining in the Indian subcontinent dates back to the Vedic period, coal extraction commercially started in 1774 by the East India Company in Raniganj coalfield (Central Mine Planning and Design Institute, 1984), the same area where the story of *Koylakuthi* is based. Despite having an early start, commercial mining struggled to thrive for about a century until steam locomotives increased the demand for coal and made mining widespread in India. And by the time *Koylakuthi* was written, Indian coal mines were producing around 18 million tonnes annually (Ministry of Coal, 2022).

Geographical Location

Koylakuthi is a realistic representation of Bengal mines, where Sailajananda portrayed real places and made his characters roam in between. Table 1 highlights the present status and the location of the colliery towns and villages mentioned in the story (Table 1.).

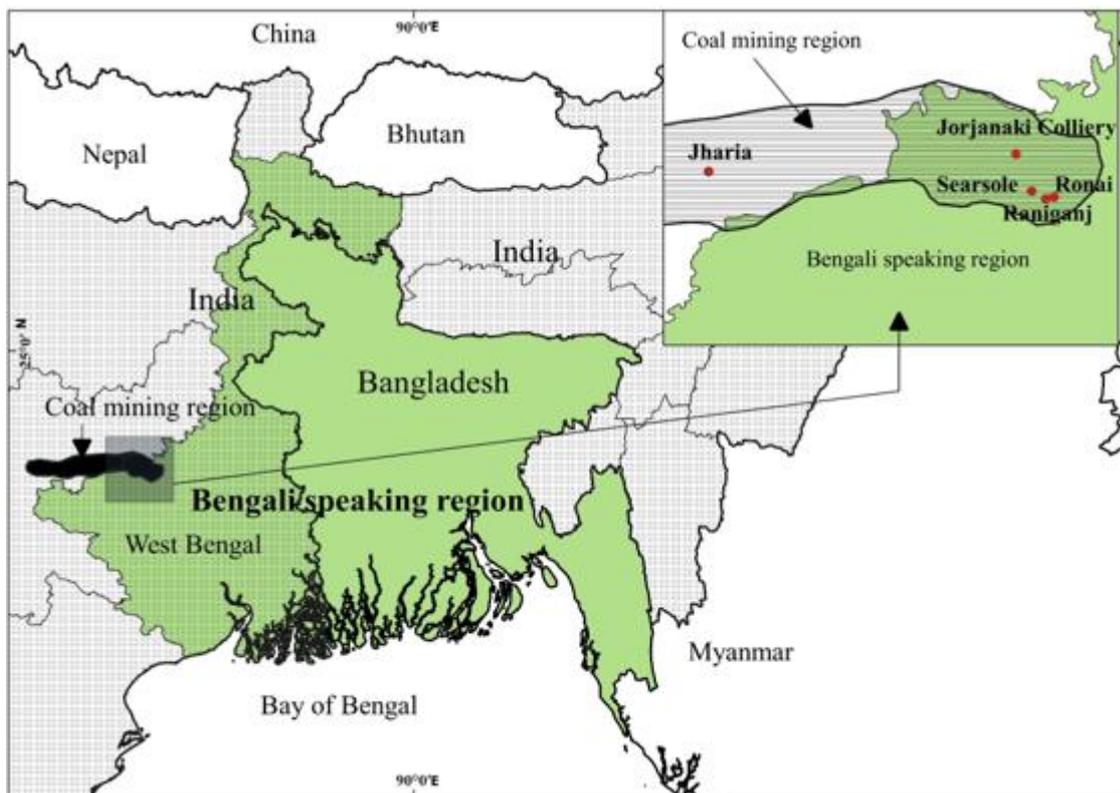| Table 1: Places Mentioned in *Koylakuthi*			
Location	**Context**	**Narratives from the story**	**Present-day scenario**
Jorjanaki	The colliery and adjoining village where protagonists worked and lived. The author of the story, Sailajananda himself, also worked in this colliery.	"Bilashi, along with *Nanku* came to Jorjanaki for work" (*Koylakuthi*, p.1).	Present-day Jote Janaki. A village about 8kms away from Raniganj town connected by the National Highway 60. No colliery is functioning in this village at present.
Raniganj	Mining town where the characters previously lived. Sailajananda finished his schooling here.	"…Let's go to Raniganj, we have lots of money today!" (*Koylakuthi*, p.5).	The oldest coal mine in India. Functions as an essential coal producer in India. Presently, it is governed by the municipal corporation of the Asansol metropolitan region.
Jharia	Mining town where the characters previously lived.	"Four years ago, Nanku and Bilashi came to Raniganj from Jharia" (*Koylakuthi*, p.3).	It is a mining town in Jharkhand state, located 86km west of Raniganj. It holds the largest coal reserve in India.
Searsole	The village where Bilashi and Nanku planned to visit and take part in a fair.	"Nanku! Let's go to the Chariot Festival of Searsole— Let's go at once!" (*Koylakuthi*, p.4).	Located near Raniganj town. Famous for the *Malia Rajbari* (Palace of Malia Rajas) and the Brass Chariot. The Searsole's *Rather Mela* (a fair to celebrate the Hindu Chariot festival) mentioned in the story still occurs.
Ronai	*Nanku* elopes with *Mainu* from here.	"You go with them Bilashi, I will come after drinking country liquor (*Tari*) at Ronai" (*Koylakuthi*, p.4).	A Muslim-dominated town, famous for Pir Baba Mazar (shrine). It is located close to Raniganj town.
Source: Author			

Figure 3: Bengali-speaking regions and the location of places as mentioned in *Koylakuthi* (1922). Source: Author

Mining Activities

The story is predominantly knitted around mines and mining; Sailajananda emphasises the psychology and societal phenomenon that revolve around the miners' lives. Nevertheless, colliery, coal processing, and mining represent a unique position in framing *Koylakuthi*. Figure 3 illustrates the Bengali-speaking region and the location of places as mentioned in *Koylakuthi* . The story begins with the visuals of Jorjanaki colliery— "the narrow tram-line that carries coal-loaded small tubs pop out from the mouth of the mine, mingled through the mango orchard and ended at the coal depot." (*Koylakuthi*, p.1). It continues with the verbal description of different acts of loading, carrying, and siding coal on a rainy afternoon. "Santhal and Bauri coolies are pushing up the coal-loaded tubs along the narrow rail tracks…. Coolie women are filling up the huge wagons at the siding" (*Koylakuthi*, p.1). The story ends too, with a compelling climax depicting mining activities such as cage movement in the shaft mining— "Ramna starts the engine in the engine room. And the *dooly*

(mine cage) slowly starts to shank into the darkness of the mine" (*Koylakuthi*, p.13). Bilashi dies inside the mine, stamped under the huge coal blocks, and Ramna Khalashi waits for her eagerly in the engine room. The story starts with workers coming out of the mine and ends with Bilashi going inside. Perhaps the author intended to illustrate the circle of life and the continued sufferings of the mine dwellers.

Communities

The so-called lower sections of the Bengali Hindu society are portrayed in *Koylakuthi* through the instances of the Santhal and Bauri communities. "Be aware! If you talk to Ramna, do you think being a son of Santhal I will stand idle? I will chop you into pieces and scatter in the river Singaron!" (*Koylakuthi*, p.2). The Santhali pride reflects in the words of Nanku. Santhals belong to the Proto-Australoid racing group and are the third-largest tribal community of India found predominantly in the Chhota Nagpur plateau and the adjoining region of eastern India (Ahmad, 1999). They are also found in other parts of the Indian states, Jharkhand, Orissa,

West Bengal, and some portions of Bangladesh and Nepal. Their traditional occupation is hunting-gathering and agriculture, and their traditional religion is Satanism, where they worship spirits called *Bonga* in the Santhali language (Ghosh, 2020).

In sharp contrast to Nanku's pride, Bilashi feels inferior to being a Bauri and wants to achieve a higher social status by unlearning her communal rituals and customs; as she says, "[d]espite being a Bauri, I do not wish to marry for a second time, Ramna, I beg you, never ask me for it again." (*Koylakuthi*, p.8). Perhaps this sense of inferiority germinates in Bilashi because of the fact that Bauris are the so-called untouchable or *Dalit* community, listed as a scheduled castes (SC) in the Constitution of India. The people of Bauri community are concentrated in West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Tripura, and some parts of Bangladesh. Fishing and agriculture are among the major traditional occupations of Bauries. This community worship the snake goddess *Manasa*. Although they are primarily engaged in cultivation and fishing, but as the saying suggests, they do not hesitate to do any kind of physical work which get them earnings, and that is why Bauris were among the first to engage in the coal excavation when mines started in Raniganj (Chattopadhyay, 2013). During the 1920s, the lion's share of the working force in Indian coal mines, especially the coal cutters, coolies, carriers, and loaders, belonged to Santhal and Bauri communities (Simeon, 1996), which has been supported by the observations by Knotter (2015).Our story *Koylakuthi* too, justifies his claim that in India, 'the mining workforce, male and female working together in family teams, was mainly "low caste" and "tribal" (so-called *Adivasi*, or "aboriginals"); "upper caste" was to be found only in the supervisory grades' (p.15).

Caste and Class Hierarchy

As mentioned in James M. Freeman's *Untouchable: An Indian Life History* (1979), it was common for the lower castes to get abused by others. And the story of *Koylakuthi* also projects such incidences that occur recurrently. For instances, a man throws coal dust at Bilashi for fun at the beginning of the story (*Koylakuthi* p.1). Throughout the story there are numerous depictions of upper caste people including the senior officer of the mine, ridiculing Bilashi (*Koylakuthi*, p.1). To emphasise the fact of abuse of lower castes by upper castes, the author put the dialogue in the mouth of Bilashi — "who cares about the sorrow and pain of lower-caste people like hers" (*Koylakuthi,* p.8). The lives of the workers in the coal mines, especially the manual labourers from lower castes during those days were so arduous and miserable that Ghosh (2004) compared it with the prisoners' life in Hitler's concentration camp.

Sailajananda showed the reality of miners' society through the depiction of the hell and heaven difference in the lifestyle of the upper caste administrators and lower caste working classes, for instance, Bilashi lived in a "one-room-thatched house,". In contrast, Banerjee Babu (upper-caste Brahmin) had a "paved road leading to his bungalow." The day-to-day hardship, struggle, and poverty among the working class were so intense that they drained their morality, ethics, and soft emotions and bound their lives to the vicious cycle of eating and mating.

This story portrays inter-caste marriage, elopement, live-in relationships, public display of affection, drinking country liquor, and smoking local cigarettes and weeds by both men and women. These were not standard practices in the mainstream Bengali community. That is why the mainstream people always distanced themselves from the lower-class miners' community. Although the workers at mine also wanted the lavish life of the superior ones, the inferiors never achieved the goals. Hence, the question of Bilashi "Can't you be rich like the *Babus* are, Nanku? So that we can drink foreign liquor day and night" (*Koylakuthi* p.4), echoes the trivial desires and lament of the struggling castes and classes.

The miners' lives revolve around the coal miners' office and continue to sink into the darkness of the shaft. *Koylakuthi* starts with the workers pushing the coal tub out on the track and ends inside the colliery's darkness, symbolising their

never-ending bond with the coal mines and associated sufferings.

The story writer's charisma lies in his simplicity, which reflects through the characters and language. Though the story itself is written in the pure form of Bengali language (*Sadhu Bhasha),* the writer has used several Santali words while writing the dialogues between the characters to make those more accurate and fleshier. Throughout the story, Sailjananda never becomes opinionated; he simply paints the truth with a pen.

Indian Mines, after 100 years of *Koylakuthi*

Geographical Expansion

The scenario of Indian mines has vastly changed a century after *Koylakuthi.* Coal mining in India has been a nationalised industry since 1975 and operates mainly under the control of Coal India Limited (CIL) company. Based on geographical zones, it is divided into eight subsidiary companies (Coal India Limited, 2022). Raniganj and Jharia coalfields are presently operated under the control of Eastern Coalfields Limited (ECL) and Bharat Coking Coal Limited (BCCL) companies. More than a hundred mines in this region produce coal daily. And the industry has expanded remarkably in production and geographical expansion within a hundred years. In 2020-2021, India produced 716.08 million tonnes of coal, almost fortyfold more than the production recorded in the 1920s (Ministry of Coal, 2022).

Technological advancement

Similarly, the use of advanced technology and the application of several safety regulations gradually lower the number of fatalities and work hazards in the coal mines of India. In its early decades till the 1950s, the extractive industry in India required no or minimum technologies and is known as artisan mining. As Nite (2019) describes:

> *Simple tools and implements, like hews, pickaxes, baskets, mug-lights (Kuppîbatees), lanterns, manually hauled tubs, and wooden props, oxen power and bare-footed and half-clothed wo/men,*

were early productive forces in the colliery (Nite, 2019 p. 95).

Contrary to that, present-day mining is done through the combined work of complex machinery and equipment. Heavy Earth Moving Machinery (HEMM) such as dumpers, loaders, dozers, blast hole drills, and draglines are commonly used for surface mining, whereas longwall machines, roof bolters, ventilation fans, and rock dusters are used for underground coal mines (Hustrulid and Bullock, 2001).

Keeping in mind the safety of the workers, Coal India Limited (CIL) has adopted high-tech equipment for underground and open-cast mines (Economic Times, 11 March 2016) and announced to spend up to INR 70,000 million in 2019 (Economic Times, 7 February 2019).

Safety

After Indian independence in 1947, safety issues seemed to be taken seriously by the authority. At least they tried to imply laws and regulations and form committees, boards, and organisations (Table 2). These actions are pretty effective in reducing mining accidents, and there is a trend of a sharp decline in the number of casualties after the nationalisation of coal in 1975. Figure 4 demonstrates the trend of five-yearly average fatalities in CIL since 1975.

However, the authority slightly exaggerates when it claims that "all operations, systems, and processes of CIL are meticulously planned and designed with due regard to safety, conservation, sustainable development, and clean environment" (Ministry of Coal, 2020 p.102). In fact, fatalities and injuries are common especially in illegal mining, and perhaps there are many cases that went unrecorded (Lahiri-Dutt and Williams, 2005). On top of that, numerous health and environmental hazards directly affect the miners' life, such as dust-related diseases, noise-induced hearing loss, vibration hazards, sudden death at work, musculoskeletal disorder, etc. (Sishodiya and Guha, 2013).

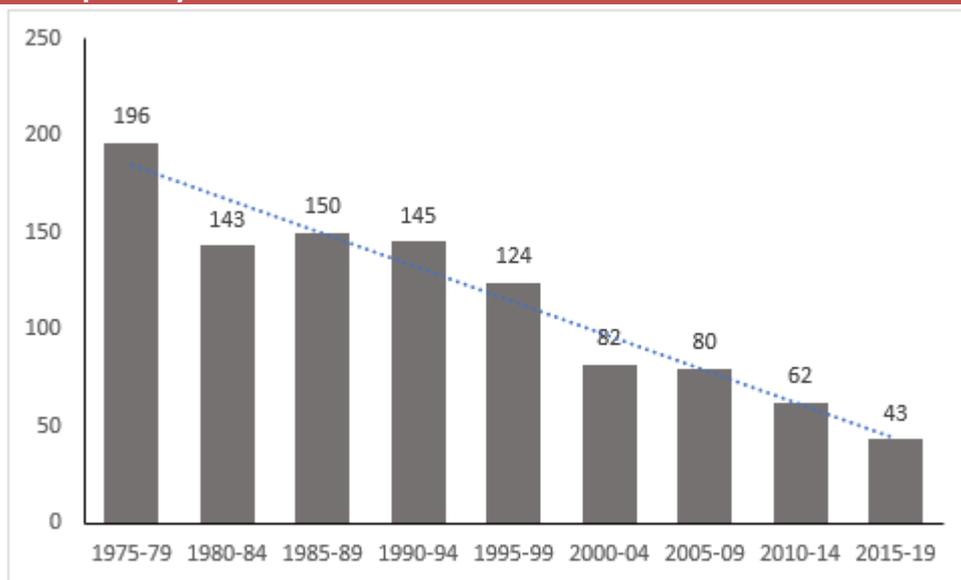| Table 2: Important Statutes Related to Coal Mine Safety in India	
Year	Statutes
1952	The Mines Act
1955	The Mines Rules
1985	The Mines Rescue Rules
2008	The Explosive Rules
2017	The Coal Mines Regulations
2021	The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act
Source: Compiled by the Author from Various Sources	

Figure 4: Trend of Five-Yearly Average Fatalities in CIL since 1975
Source: Ministry of Coal, 2020

Demographic Composition

The demographic scenario in the Indian collieries either changed in a regressive way, as in the case of women's employment or remained static, as in the case of the caste composition of the workers. That is probably because of India's rigid patriarchal and casteist social structure in the early days of colonial mines; women used to work with men as they did in plantations (Lahiri-Dutt, 2007). They mainly worked as the helpers of their male-counterparts, either fathers, brothers, or husbands, by carrying and loading the coal cut by the males (Simeon, 1996). In the 1920s, women created up to 38 per cent of the total workforce in Indian coal mines (Simeon, 1996; Alexander,2007), which dropped to 7 per cent in 2020 (Coal India Limited,2020). The sharp decline resulted from the Indian Mine Act in 1952, totally barring women from working underground and any surface mine between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m. Another cause of the decrease in women's participation was technological advancement, which discarded women as 'unskilled' hence, unfit to handle highly mechanised mining operations. Because of these facts, female workers were seen as less productive or even a burden to the collieries and less likely to get recruited in the formal mining sectors (Lahiri-Dutt, 2007).

Notwithstanding, in informal sectors like artisanry or illegal mining, women continue to work in low-wage, risky conditions without pursuing the benefits of mines' acts and laws. And only one per cent of the total women engaged in the mining industry are permanent or formal employees (Mundoli, 2010). Therefore,

women's contribution to the Indian extractive industries remains equally significant as it was a hundred years ago but has disappeared from the public eye. And today, their participation remains unacknowledged and their labours un-valued.

Similarly, the caste constitution of the workers in the Indian coal sector persists in the same image it had during the time of *Koylakuthi.* At the beginning of the coal extraction in the colonial period, the 'family system' of workers was the characteristic of Indian mines. Where all the family members—male and female worked together, this type of system prevailed mainly because of the unwillingness of the workers to work with other castes (Lahiri-Dutt, 2001). The caste system in India assigns 'caste Hindus' social duties and divides them into strata. And this division is so rigid that by no means one can enter a different stratum; one must die in the same strata in which it was born (Ambedkar,1920). The 'upper castes' are entitled to do the fancier work, while the 'lower castes' are engaged in the dirty, dangerous, and hard work. They serve the 'upper castes' for thousands of years and get humiliations in return. Indian mines were no exception. In the 1920s, the so-called 'lower castes'— the *Dalits* and the *Adivasis* made up 94 per cent of the coal cutters and coolies, whereas 78 per cent of the supervisory grade consisted of the 'upper castes' (Simeon, 1996). In 1950 the Constitution of India came into effect, giving equal rights to every citizen of India irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex, etc. (Article 15). It identifies the

bottom section of the society, especially the 'untouchables' as Scheduled Castes (SC) and the indigenous tribal population as Schedule Tribes (ST). The constitution further promotes special care for the educational and economic interests of the weaker section of the society, especially the SCs and STs (Articles 46 & 335).

The public services in India are categorised into four groups based on the nature of the jobs: Group A— Official and managerial positions; Group B— Gazetted and non-gazetted posts; Group C— Clerical jobs; and Group D— Maintenance and laborious works. And by virtue of Article 335, the SCs and STs should benefit from reservation equally in every sector. Although the representation of SCs and STs has increased gradually due to the reservation policy, the percentage is always concentrated in the low-ranked group C and D jobs (Ministry of Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises, 2016).

A similar picture also reflects the recent workers' composition of the CIL (Table 3). Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (CWSCST) in their report, clearly states that 'the overall percentage of SCs and STs in Group A and B posts is far below the required level in Coal India Limited and almost all its subsidiaries' (CWSCST, 2020 p.12). This shows that inequality and work division still exist where upper castes do the supervisory jobs and laborious jobs are reserved for the backward ones like Bauris and Santhals. And the similar demographic pattern that prevailed hundred years ago is still present in the Indian coal sector.

Table 3. Representation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Coal India Limited, 2019			
Group	**Level**	**Percentage of Scheduled Castes**	**Percentage of Scheduled Tribes**
A	**Official and Managerial Positions**	**13.91**	**5.20**
B	**Gazetted and Non-gazetted Posts**	**13.36**	**7.03**
C	**Clerical Jobs**	**18.27**	**15.20**
D	**Maintenance and Laborious Works**	**21.58**	**17.93**
Total		**18.91**	**15.09**
Source: CWSCST, 2020			

Conclusions

The question is, what changes have occurred in Indian coal mines after a hundred years of

Koylakuthi? The response is as follows: Area-wise—widespread; technologically— advanced; and safer; but demographically—almost

unchanged. This is because acquiring lands and adopting technology is easier but much harder to break social stigmas. Though it primarily seems to be a love-triangle story, complex societal expressions such as caste and class hierarchy within Indian society, and the normalisation of oppression of *Dalits* and *Adivasis* are dealt with in *Koylakuthi.* The consciousness of world geopolitics and acceptance of communist ideologies among the authors of this period led them to challenge the sophisticated all-beautiful ideology of the previous writers. They brought the mundane, everyday life struggle of proletariats as a subject matter of literature. And *Koylakuthi* is a successful result of that. The story writer, Sailajananda, neither tried to glorify nor criticised the lifestyle of the mining workers; he kept it as it was. Yet able to express the emotional and existential vulnerability of the working community. The geographical location, the characters, and the language of the characters are truth-based. And the author's success lies in presenting every detail in a way that stirs the readers' emotions and serves as a document full of shreds of evidence from the past to be compared with the present. Therefore, besides being a milestone in Bengali literature, it is a fantastic socio-cultural record essential for the literary geographic study of Indian mines.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest with any individual, organisation or entity regarding the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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