Ghost Towns of Bengal
FIELD REPORT

Submitted by
Shatabdi Das
Researcher,
Calcutta Research Group

Introduction

The Asansol-Durgapur urban agglomeration grew to become the second largest urban agglomeration of West Bengal, after Kolkata, by the late twentieth century, renowned for coal production, iron and steel manufacturing, with roadways and one of the busiest railway sections connecting Kolkata to the northern part of India. By the beginning of twenty-first century, this region saw the gradual decline of industrial production, abandonment of a number of coal mines, and the switch of coal mining method from underground mining to the open cast mining method. While railway operations continued to play an important role in the urban and infrastructural development of the study area, it witnessed a shift of economic dependence from allied industries of coal mining, and ancillaries of iron and steel manufacturing plants, to the service sector.

The fieldwork in July-August 2024 in the study area aligning the Asansol-Durgapur urban agglomeration in the Paschim Barddhaman district of West Bengal, has been significant for taking ahead the work in further details and understanding the current scenario of urban growth, economic condition and infrastructure development in the coal mining region of the state. Growth of urban population in 1991-2011[1] resulted into the development of a number of Census Towns in this region, most of them sprawling near coal mines with the major cause of dependency being economic prosperity from coal mining, heavy manufacturing industries and their allied industries in proximity. After the initial high growth period, decreasing returns to agglomeration with expansion of urban built-up area set into the region. With growth of urban settlements near the coal mines also the damages of ecosystems and environmental degradation as a result of economic activities and human interventions increased to a point where liveability of these same prosperous towns became questionable; the dominant cause being the rapidly accelerating number of environmental hazards and lack of assurance of safety and future sustainability. A similar grim scenario also shadowed sustenance of the industrial townships. Technological redundance, switching to modern usage tools, along with economic losses and changes in political regimes, competition from other manufacturing enterprises and policy planning, left a number of heavy manufacturing units and their townships in ruins. These sites

can now be easily demarcated as the ghost towns or vanishing towns in the region. Some of the former employees of these shut down industries remain hopeful that one day the departments of the industries may resume operations and they will be pulled back into the workforce and their regular duties, while others regret that the land, industrial sites, premises of the townships could have been planned and resigned for use in other commercial, social or economic purposes that may have led the path for local people and migrant workers in the area engaging with regular jobs. The field work helped to develop a comprehensive account of the emergence of new settlements in the region, as well as outline in detail the struggles of some of the industrial townships and mining towns in economic sustenance, cultural restoration, urban planning and facilitation of civic amenities, while some of these towns are being shoved towards oblivion, yet others being abandoned.

Urban Development in Asansol-Durgapur Region

The coalfield of Raniganj spanning across the Asansol-Durgapur Urban Area in the Paschim Barddhaman district of West Bengal, provides impetus for emergence and growth of Census Towns in the study area, owing to the agglomeration of economies and livelihood options available at the allied and ancillary industries of not only the iron and steel plants, but also the small and medium scale industries located in the vicinity of the coal mines. Though Census Towns have grown in number in the region in the last two census years (2001 and 2011), the population size in a few have decreased[2] and a number of abandoned settlements in industrial zones and colliery areas have appeared due to the closure of industrial production and mining operations. Literature review, media archives and primary and secondary data helped obtain an in-depth understanding of the complex geographical, economic and social processes that operate in the region and the interrelated patterns of infrastructural and transport network expansion and urban growth that lay the foundation for city-making and its unmaking in the region.

In 2011, several collieries in Jamuria, Barabani, Ondal Community Development Blocks (CD Blocks) expanding across the Raniganj Coalfield had been battered by land subsidence, with many nearly escaping life losses. Often marked by ground subsidence, sinking floors and cracks in walls, people are battling life risks in the coal mine areas, with little to no options for resettling elsewhere due to lack of stable employment options.

For obtaining a comprehensive profile of the iron and steel townships, industrial towns, planned satellite townships, Census Towns, mining towns, in the study area–this field study

was beneficial. The fieldwork helped to develop an overview of the changes in industrial and mine production over the years, the related ecological hazards and the current economic and social scenario. Faltering motors, conveyor belts, and breakdowns of lifts due to electric faults, are factors that raise the risks of accidents and fatalities–at times also caused by the lack of alertness. Shortcomings in machine operations and maintenance, many a times cause accidents and life losses at the coal mines, that are risky places to work and live in. Similar accidents and casualties keep occurring, at times prevented, and other times inviting ill-fate, in a number of collieries in the mine areas of the Raniganj coalfield. Thus, susceptibility to disasters, risks of mining and occupational hazards in the collieries and industrial sites, production and market controls, intermediations by trade unions, are some of the factors that influence sustained operations of industries in the region, with consequent implications on the industrial townships dependent and flourishing with such production units.

Environmental Vulnerability and Ghost Towns in the Study Area

In the industrial townships, the Municipal and Census Towns, and collieries, it is important to draw out the parameters that affect people's daily living, damage to residences, property, infrastructure and civic amenities, and health risks. Land subsidence, mine fires, air pollution from coal seams burning, and other risks of accidents, life loss, and house damages in the coal towns and villages located close to the underground and open cast coal pits, lurk around every settlement and road posing problems for work, daily wage labourers as well as residential areas, inciting social changes in the settlements. Another visual that kept coming up during the field study, was that, several localities close to the coal mines in Paschim Barddhaman district, were marked by similar ill-fate. Owing to the lack of substantive sand filling after coal extraction and abandonment of coal beds, percolation of water inside the gaps left unfilled (after mineral extraction) became one of the reasons for triggering land subsidence, more so, in areas adjacent to Open Cast Pits (OCPs), causing walls and ground to collapse in abandoned mining settlements.[3]

This field study in Chinakuri colliery on the banks of River Damodar, very close to its confluence with the Barakar River helped to get glimpses of vulnerability that rise from the geographical location. The location on a river bank brings with it economic opportunities and use of the riparian area for domestic purposes like washing, bathing, social rituals, observing festivals, fishing, collection of fuelwoods from the vegetal cover along the river bank, in addition to industrial water usage and outfalls into the river. These resources and accessibilities for a number of human activities not only endanger the river ecology but also raise the level of

risks that come with susceptibility to river flood, rising water level in the rainy season, especially rivers overflowing when the dams nearby open their flood gates. Hazard proneness is amplified by the bouts of incessant rain over 24 hours due to atmospheric low pressure systems accompanied by thunderstorms like the extreme climate event that ensued on 2 August 2024, with West Bengal receiving heavy to very heavy rainfall between 7-20 cm.[4] Such sudden, unexpected changes and extreme weather conditions not only inundate extensive coal pits affecting mine operations but also result in accidents, broken roads, waterlogging and either complete stoppage or interruptions in daily work and services; with greater magnitude of damages in municipal residences in the vicinity of coal mines.

In case of the Kajora coal mine area, the Harishpur Census Town is gradually beginning to be transformed into a ghost town with a part of the settlement silent, vacant, broken, while wilderness overgrows the dilapidated houses. The onset of this abandonment came with the blasting operations at the open cast mine of the Madhabpur Open Cast Pit (OCP) aligning the settlement in 2020.[5] Land subsidence, cracks on house walls, collapse of house walls, ceilings and imminent danger of the entire building falling down, pushed people out of their homes to move away to settlements that are further away from the mines, on apparently safer land. Families that continue to live in Harishpur in vulnerable houses with large cracks and leaning walls keep repairing their property at intervals to survive and safeguard themselves from becoming homeless. In the absence of compensation and rehabilitation schemes from the mining company and with limited alternatives or options of work or economic earnings these vanishing settlements remain partly inhabited with sparse population and inhabitants who have little option but to continue their struggles of living with the threatening coal hazards.[6]

The townships of the heavy manufacturing industries that are not in production process anymore and are now closed, such as the Hindustan Cables Town in Rupnarayanpur, the Burnpur Wagon Factory township, the MAMC and Hindustan Fertiliser Company townships in Durgapur, also depict a similar landscape with ghost towns comprising abandoned residential quarters, streets and lanes of planned industrial towns shrunk with unkempt vegetation; yet one finds such towns in decay with former employees continuing to make homes out of the crumbling buildings in want of refurbishment and maintenance.[7] The bigger question that comes up at this juncture is not how such residents will continue to live in these vanishing towns, but what does future hold for them once the land is allocated for other use or economic output or new industrial investments.

Concluding Observations

Weighing up the processes that operate in the region and the interrelated patterns of infrastructural and transport network expansion, and urban growth, help to understand the foundation for 'city-making' in the region, as well as the imperceptible attributes that lead the fate of a 'vanishing town'. This field visit to the industrial townships, the Municipal and Census Towns and collieries, along with visit to the offices of the Eastern Coalfields Limited (ECL), Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL), Asansol Durgapur Development Authority (ADDA) in Asansol, facilitated the study of a number of geographical factors, economic and social attributes that trigger environmental vulnerability and make this industrial-urban corridor extremely prone to coal hazards and industrial pollution. Though the industrial towns in the region were planned as self-sustaining with facilities like schools, hospitals, recreation centres, community centres, local market complexes, water and electricity supply, their future sustenance largely depend on the profits that the specific industrial production processes make, along with assurance of demand and market reliance for the products. The urban agglomeration of Asansol-Durgapur appears as a node for the development of prosperous metropolitan cities for migrant workers, residents and business investments. However, given the growing number of weather anomalies and climate disasters catching the population off guard in most instances, the initiatives and planning approaches to safeguard this mineral encrusted landscape bordered by forest land from larger environmental disasters and calamities call for urgent attention.

Photographs from the field

Photo 1: The closed mine at Harishpur, Kajora Area, Raniganj.

Photo 2: The overgrown overburden dump of Madhabpur OCP, Kajora Area, Raniganj.

Photo 3: The abandoned coal town of Harishpur.

Photo 4: Houses in Harishpur abandoned after land subsidence and cracks in walls and roads.

References

[1]Government of West Bengal, *District Census Handbook: Barddhaman* (Kolkata: Directorate of Census Operations, 1991); Government of West Bengal, *District Census Handbook: Barddhaman* (Kolkata: Directorate of Census Operations, 2001); Government of West Bengal, *District Census Handbook: Barddhaman*, Village and Town Directory (Kolkata: Directorate of Census Operations, 2011).

[2]Government of West Bengal, *District Census Handbook: Barddhaman* (Kolkata: Directorate of Census Operations, 2001); Government of West Bengal, *District Census Handbook: Barddhaman*, Village and Town Directory (Kolkata: Directorate of Census Operations, 2011).

[3]Field Survey in cities and mine areas of the Paschim Barddhaman district, February to August 2024.

[4]Government of India, Ministry of Earth Sciences. "Enhanced rainfall activities over the districts of West Bengal." *India Meteorological Department,* Special Bulletin-4, No. W-00102/IX/, Dated August 7, 2024. Kolkata: Eastern Region Regional Meteorological Centre, 2024; Government of India, Ministry of Earth Sciences. "Current weather status & outlook for next two weeks (09th August to 22nd August, 2024)." *India Meteorological Department.* Dated August 8, 2024. Kolkata: Regional Meteorological Centre, 2024. https://mausam.imd.gov.in/kolkata/mcdata/extended.pdf

[5]Field Survey in Harishpur, Madhabpur in the Kajora Mine Area, August 2024.

[6]Field Survey, 2024.

[7]Field Survey in Hindustan Cables Township, Burnpur, and Durgapur, February to August 2024.