

*** Need for immediate re-imposition of ban
on Employment of women
underground in Mines**

Mrs. Renuka Ray : Sir I move :

“That the demand under the head ‘Department of Labour’ be reduced by Rs. 100.”

Sir, since August 1943 and December of the same year, when the ban on women working in underground mines was first withdrawn, there has been a consistent and insistent protest throughout the country against this undersirable action. The Government of India are fully aware that they have not only violated an international pledge but that they have considerably shocked and offended world opinion.

A year ago, at the request of all-India Women’s Conference, I moved an adjournment motion asking that the ban be re-imposed immediately, and my Honourable friend, Mrs. Subbarayan, also spoke on a cut motion on labour during the Budget Session on the same subject, but the plea of the Honourable the Labour Member at that time was that this was a very temporary measure only to be carried on till the next harvesting season and not for the period of the war that arrangements were being made to remedy the labour shortage, and that once these arrangements went through the ban would be lifted. Sir, the attitude was that we were creating all this song and dance about nothing since the period was to be very short. A year has come and gone and today I think the attitude has become far more adamant. The Honourable the Labour Member has made it only to clear that he does not intend to reimpose that ban. The Honourable Members of this House are only too well aware of all the circumstances and realise fully, I am sure, that the arguments that have been put forward if they had come from a merciless type of capitalist employer, could have been understood.

* Legislative Assembly Debates (Central), Vol. II, 13th March 1945, pp. 1463-66.

[At this stage, Mr. President (The Honourable Sir Abdur Rahim) resumed the chair.]

But how they could have been ratified and even advanced by those who are primarily responsible for the protection and the well being of the common people it passes our comprehension.

Sir I should like to have the support of the House, of all Members— either on this side of the House or on the other,—of all Parties, including the Government, because this is a legitimate demand the infringing of which leads to the infringing of one of the most elementary canons of human decency.

Sir, I move.

Mr. President (The Honourable Sir Abdur Rahim): Cut motion moved:

“That the demand under the head “Department of Labour” be reduced by Rs. 100.”

Some Honourable Members : The question be now put.

The Honourable Dr. B. R. Ambedkar : With regard to this cut motion, it is difficult within the short time that is at my disposal to deal with it adequately. I would begin by saying that the last time when this question was debated on an adjournment motion, I made the statement that in taking the decision which the Government of India took I felt very unhappy about it. And I am still very unhappy about it. But the circumstances are such that it is impossible to take any other action than what we took. If the House will bear with me for a few minutes.....

Some Honourable Members : No, no.

The Honourable Dr. B. R. Ambedkar :.....I would tell the House the relevant circumstances which forced our hands in this matter.

I should like to begin by stating to the House what the position with regard to coal was? In the year 1941 the total raising were 29,381,000 tons. In 1942 they fell to 29,270,000 and in 1943, the critical year in which we were forced to lift this ban, the total production of coal had fallen to 23,753,000. The House will at once realise that within a year there was a fall of something like 6,628,000 tons. It is unnecessary for me to dilate on the fact that coal is one of the most important raw materials both for industry as well as for the war effort. It was

impossible for any Government to sit with folded hands and to watch with indifference what might be called a tremendous fall in the production of so important a material as coal.

The next thing to which I should like to draw the attention of the House is the number of collieries that were opened during these years. In 1941 the total number of collieries in operation was 440. In 1942 they had risen to 670 and in 1943 the number had gone up to 706. In the ordinary course of circumstances, this enormous increase in the number of collieries in 1943 should have given us a larger quantity of coal than we actually had, but we were faced with this most curious phenomenon, namely, that on the one hand we had an increase of 366 collieries while on the other we had a fall of 6,628,000 tons of coal.

Let us look now to the labour position. In the year 1941 the total number of workers employed in coal mines was 2,11,601. In 1942 the total employed was 2,08,742. In 1943 it was 2,05,822. Comparing them with the number of mines opened, it will be seen that here again we had a very strange phenomenon, namely, that although the mines had increased, the labour force had decreased considerably. In fact the total decrease was 4,879. But this does not complete the story. In fact many have not realised what exactly was the crucial fact. That will be realized if the House were to know the number of coal cutters that are employed was 55,691. In 1942 they fell to 51,438, and in 1943 they fell to 45,306, a drop of 10,385. It is unnecessary for me to tell the House that the coal cutter is a prime mover in the process of producing coal. It is no use having a very large labour force round about the coal mines if you have not got a sufficient number of coal cutters. Coal cutting is the basic primary activity. This is the crux of whole problem, namely, that this important class of workmen had dwindled by no less a figure than, 10,385.

The reasons why these coal cutters had dropped are, of course, well known to the House. There was in the area where the coal mines are situated tremendous possibilities opened up by the various industrial establishments, by various military works, alternative employments, where wages were considerably higher than they were in the coal industry. The alternative employment had also this advantage, namely, that it was work on surface, which, other things being equal is undoubtedly for more attractive than work underground. The third

reason why the coal cutters preferred to quit the mines in favour of the other employment on the surface was because the coal cutter could take his wife along with him and get her earnings added to his own and thus increase the family earnings. If he worked in the mines he could not benefit of her earnings because of the ban. This was probably the greatest inducement which the coal cutter had in order to quit the mine and seek alternative employments that were within his reach.

Now, I have no doubt that nothing else would have helped to bring back the coal cutter except to allow his wife the opportunity to work with him and earn a wage. In my judgment nothing else could have enabled us to retrieve the position and get back the coal cutter into the coal mine, we have been told that we could have got back labour to the coal mines by increasing wages. On this point what I would like to say is this, that this is an argument which within limits has its force but that when carried to extremes turns out to be worse than useless. My friend Mr. Joshi yesterday referred to the fact that they paid enormous wages to coal miners in England and that it was the best paid industry. Undoubtedly so. But Mr. Joshi forgot the fact that even in England where they pay such enormous wages to the coal miners, there has been an enormous shortage of labour available for coal mines. Therefore, Sir, the point is this, that wages could not be that sovereign remedy which it has been suggested to be. In our judgment, and I think it was a correct judgment, the only method of retrieving a very bad and a very serious situation was to take the decision that we have taken.

There is another point which is urged against the decision the Government has taken. I should like to meet this point quite squarely because it is an important point the force of which I confess I have always felt-namely, that there is shortage of coal in England and in other countries but there women are not allowed to work underground, why should then we allow women to work underground in India ? Now, Sir, the answer to that is two-fold. In the first place in other countries like England, where women are not allowed to work underground, they have the alternative remedy of conscription. They can compel people and they do compel people to go and work in coal mines. I have very

recently read a report that in Belgium, the 1941 class recruits required to serve in the army instead of being sent to the front were sent by the Belgium Government to go into the coal mines. That power, as the House will realise is not available to us and therefore we could not follow that remedy.

Now, Sir, the other reply that I would like to give is this. In all those countries like Great Britain, South Africa and other countries, there has been no tradition of women being employed underground. Their women worked at one time but that was probably for 60 or 70 years before. I appeal to the House to take a realistic view of this matter. In our own country is it not a fact that up to 1937 women did work in coal mines? Is it not a fact that women in this country were working in coal mines till eight years ago? Can anybody in India say as people in England say that our women have ceased to work underground for a century and that therefore this is a new departure?

The Honourable lady who moved the cut motion, I think, has forgotten what was the view of the All-India Women's Conference in 1934. I should like to explain it to the House. The Government of India had taken certain steps practically from 1929 with a view to close the employment of women underground and, as the House will remember, they had laid down a proportion, a dwindling proportion, so that according to that programme women would have ceased to work in coal mines in 1937. This was long before there was any talk about a convention. What was the attitude of the All-India Women's Conference? I find that this matter was taken up for consideration by the All-India Women's Conference in their session held on the 26th December, 1934. According to the report which I have in my hand, (Interruption by Mrs. Renuka Ray.) Please do not disturb me. The All-India Women's Conference set up a Committee to consider this question and I would like to read only two short sentences, which contain the view that the All-India Women's Conference took of the action of the Government of India. Sir, I will read from page 53, The report first gives the advantages and then gives the disadvantages. The report (I should like to tell the House that the lady who has moved the motion was a member of this committee appointed by the All-India Women's Conference)—begins by saying :

“ Our impression about the effect of the elimination of women from underground work is that it is on the whole not suited to the conditions in which the miners live. ”

Then, Sir, they conclude by saying :

“ If these women are removed from underground work in the present condition, the distress will be so great in the miners’ homes that it will far outweigh the evils of allowing them underground. ”

(Interruption by Mrs. Renuka Ray.)

Mr. President (The Honourable Sir Abdur Rahim): The Honourable Member is not giving way.

The Honourable Dr. B. R. Ambedkar : Sir, it is true that when this matter was considered by the All-India Women’s Conference at their session held in 1935 they came to the conclusion that they would support the International Convention which was passed, in spite of the fact that they saw grave objections to the course pursued by the Government of India. Now, Sir, I claim that this view that the All-India Women’s Conference took up in 1935 which was so different from its view expressed in 1934 was due to the passing of the Convention and I am sure that if in 1935 the Convention had not been passed, the All-India Women’s Conference would have continued to agitate against the decision of the Government of India to eliminate women from coal mines. I do not want to say that there are any sinister motives for the change of front on the part of the All-India Women’s Conference in this matter but I would like to say that I am not prepared to believe that within the ten years that have elapsed there has been such a revolution in the moral and political conscience of the people of this country that they are not prepared to tolerate the action which will be annulled as soon as the emergency vanishes.

Sir, I have been told that after all, the number of women employed in coal mines is only 15,000 and that they have not been able to produce more coal. Why, then, is it that the Government of India persist in keeping these 15,000 women underground ? The answer to that question is a very simple one. In the first place.....

Mr. Sami Vencatachelum Chetty : May I ask if the Honourable the Labour Member would give an assurance, a firm assurance, that he will continue to employ them whatever might be the public opinion ?

The Honourable Dr. B. R. Ambedkar : If my Honourable friend has such a wicked opinion about me, I cannot help him. He is quite entitled to have whatever opinion he has about me and I am free to

have my own opinion about him. I do not think we ought to exchange them on the floor of the House.

The question has been asked as to why we are keeping these women underground ? There are three reasons for it. First of all, it has got to be realised that in the situation in which we are placed the woman underground cannot be treated as a single unit by herself. She is a potential. If she goes.....

Mr. President (The Honourable Sir Abdur Rahim): The Honourable Member's time is up.

The Honourable Dr. B. R. Ambedkar : I have not spoken for more than 20 minutes.

The first consequence will be that if she leaves the coal mine, the coal cutter will also leave the coal mine and there would be a further deterioration in the situation. The second consequence will be that if she does not work, there will be more absenteeism in the coal mines. And thirdly that there would be a further reduction in the number of coal cutters because some cutters will have to do the work of loaders, a work which women now do. As a matter of fact, the argument that has been sometimes urged that the women have not been able to produce more coal is not correct and I would like to draw the attention of the House.....

Several Honourable Members : The Honourable Member's time is up.

The Honourable Dr. B. R. Ambedkar : As I said, we have no intention to keep women underground for a minute longer than is absolutely necessary. As the House is aware, we have taken several measures in order to meet the situation. We have imported Gorakhpur labour, we have imported machinery, and we have done several other things.

(It being Five of the Clock).

Mr. President (The Honourable Sir Abudr Rahim): The question is:

“ That the demand under the head ‘Department of Labour’ be reduced by Rs. 100.”

The motion was adopted.