



THE CHALLENGES OF CHILD LABOR IN THE MINES OF JHARKHAND: CRITICALLY ANALYSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS ON CHILD RIGHTS

Dipa Bhowmik¹

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Abstract

Child labor does not only bring a curse on the future of the children involved in such a heinous practice, it also affects the future of the entire society. A country like India can barely develop from within without making enough efforts for the betterment of the children still being treated as laborers. Children are not only one of the strongest pillars of society; they are rather the future of the same.

However, if one takes a peek into the mines of Jharkhand, they witness the active involvement of children in mine work, posing thousands of questions on the application and effectiveness of these international and national legal tools. The objective of this research paper is to find the gap between the application of these legal machineries and the situation of children in Jharkhand mines.

To achieve the objective, the researcher has executed a survey in the mines of Jharkhand. These data show the approximate number of children involved in the child labor practice and also highlight the number of rights they are being deprived of. The paper also involves a literature review to collect secondary data on the involvement of children in hazardous labor.

The researcher has come to the conclusion that the United Nations despite implementing multiple conventions and policies for saving children from exploitation, children in the mines of Jharkhand are yet to benefit from the same. Not only is the UN, but the national government also lacks effectiveness in practically elim-

inating the disease of child labor. The future of India is struggling to survive in the mines of Jharkhand and needs immediate action.

Keywords: Child Labor, Child Rights, Human Rights, UNCRC, Exploitation

Introduction

“Let us reach out to the children. Let us do whatever we can to support their fight to rise above their pain and suffering.” Nelson Mandela

Children are not only one of the strongest pillars of society; they are rather the future of the same. Keeping that in mind, the United Nations has introduced and implemented multiple conventions and policies for saving children from exploitation and protecting their rights. These conventions not only talk about the fundamental human rights of a child but also ensure a human environment required for the healthy growth of the child's mental and physical health. Along with the United Nations, India also brought multiple laws that take necessary actions to safeguard children.

However, all these precautions and actions fail collectively when one peeks into the mines in Jharkhand; be it coal mines, or even more dangerous mica mines, one can find the childhood of hundreds of children under threat. It is a fundamental truth of international law as well as municipal law in India that children are not to be involved in hard labor, more specifically in hazardous labor. Nevertheless, in broad daylight in the mines of Jharkhand, children are losing their childhood, health,

1. Research Scholar, Amity University, Gurgaon.

Dipa Bhowmik

education, and all the other rights that the UN and the country have guaranteed to them. The question here comes if documenting the laws for the protection of child rights is enough, and if the lack of enforcement mechanism of such laws and policies results in failure of the same.

Literature Review

Child labor and child rights

In the article titled “*Child labor, working children and Children’s rights*” authors Hanson, Karl, Diana Volonakis, and Mohammed Al-Rozzi have pointed a few questions to be answered for drawing a solution to the issue of child labor². The first question posed by the author is to understand how the discussions related to defining the scope of child labor and what labor will actually be regarded as child labor, influences the solution to be developed for eliminating the issue under consideration. Another question highlighted the importance of taking into consideration the complexities, and also the differences inherent to the everyday lives of working children while developing international, as well as national legal frameworks on child labor. These questions along with the rest of the research conducted by the authors in the article under consideration draw attention to the matter of the necessity of a certain group of children for their involvement in different forms of labor. For instance, children who are not forced to work, rather they choose to work, given the absence of any financial support from the family for a living. In such situations, what could be the options or solutions proposed by the authorities? Given the difference of societal and economic structure of different countries, is it possible for the international authorities to form laws, or should it be the responsibility of the states to make appropriate guidelines for working children to safeguard their rights.

Role of the Indian legal system against child labor

Ibrahim, Abdalla, Salma M. Abdalla, Mohammed Jafer, Jihad Abdelgadir, and Nanne De Vries in their work titled “*Child labor and health: a systematic literature*

review of the impacts of child labor on child’s health in low-and middle-income countries” connected child labor with child health taking into consideration low and middle-income countries³. Now the reason behind taking this particular work into consideration is to identify the impact of the economic status of the country on the well-being of the children and also, the role of the country in contributing to the child’s health development. The author rightly pointed out that working children are more prone to higher levels of both physical as well as mental stress in comparison with children who are not working and also the adults involved in the same type of work environment. The work also came up with an exceptional suggestion that a comparison of the impacts of the variety of labor types that involve children in different countries will help in the case of coming up with useful information which will further help in furnishing useful mechanisms to help with the health of working children.

The study under consideration was indeed an extensive one in nature and tried to come up with the most feasible solution. However, it hardly fits the landscape of the present study being conducted. For the present study, the focus is to be specifically drawn on developing more restrictions with regard to the involvement of children below the age of fourteen in hazardous employment, like mines to eliminate the possibility of them getting in touch with health hazards sourced from such mines.

Child labor in Jharkhand mines

In the work titled “*A generic approach to eliminate child labor in mica mining*,” author S. Mahendra Pol looked into the problem from a rather technical perspective⁴. The author at the end of extensive research came up with a number of solutions with the potential of helping with the elimination of child labor from the mines in India in the future. However, the practicability of such solutions could be debatable. The author suggested that the involvement of such a high number of Child labor in the mines is a result of high demand and lack of human resources, which could be taken care of by the implementation of advanced technologies and

2. Karl Hanson, Didier Volonakis & Mohamed Al-Rozzi, *Child Labor, Working Children and Children’s Rights*, in *Routledge International Handbook of Children’s Rights Studies* 316 (2015).
3. Karl Hanson, Didier Volonakis & Mohamed Al-Rozzi, *Child Labor, Working Children and Children’s Rights*, in *Routledge International Handbook of Children’s Rights Studies* 316 (2015).
4. S. M. Pol, *A Generic Approach to Eliminate Child Labor in Mica Mining*, 5 Int’l J. Applied Eng’g & Tech. (2023).

choosing machines over child labor. The author further went on to suggest supply chain transparency that would help the stakeholders to detect any potential involvement of children in the mines and take necessary actions at the earliest. Different authors have previously pointed out that the socio-economic condition of India is one of the primary reasons behind the problem of child labor. In the absence of financial development of the country, it feels like a utopia to think of replacing labels with machines in mines situated in the least developed states like Jharkhand. On the other hand, supply chain transparency was present in the business from the very beginning, given the fact that the major buyers of mica and coal are some of the biggest companies in the world. Hence, improvement of supply chain transparency does not have much potential to contribute to the elimination of child labor from such workplaces, where child labor practice is that much prominent.

Literature gap

There is a significant gap in research focusing on child labor practices specifically in the mining sectors of Jharkhand. While studies have explored child labor in India broadly, limited attention has been given to the unique socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors influencing child labor in Jharkhand's mining regions. Existing literature often overlooks the psychological and physical consequences of mining work on children. Furthermore, there is insufficient data on the effectiveness of government policies and rehabilitation programs in these areas. More comprehensive studies are needed to understand the intersection of child labor, the local economy, and mining industry practices in Jharkhand.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-method approach whereby it incorporated both a literature review and field observation to achieve its objectives.

Literature review

The first focus of the study was to conduct a detailed review of existing literature to establish a foundational understanding of the topic under consideration. The

literature review as conducted above guided the way towards developing a suitable analysis and conclusion.

Field observation

On the other hand, the study also implemented a field observation to collect primary data and validate the observations from the literature review. As a part of the field observation, the mica mines of Koderma and the coal mine of Jharia were taken into consideration to observe real-world practices, behaviors, or phenomena. Observations were noted on two different days on two different sites. This method helped in securing direct and contextual insights, complementing the findings from the literature review. The literature review and field observation together ensured a holistic approach to understanding the research problem by integrating theoretical knowledge with practical, on-the-ground evidence.

Data from the observation was recorded through direct observation of the working conditions and interactions with child laborers. Detailed notes were taken regarding the tasks performed by children, their working hours, and any health risks they faced. Photographs were taken from open-source websites followed by citations. The researcher also maintained a journal to capture personal reflections and insights, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of child labor in the mining sector.

Ethical consideration

While recording data, the researcher ensured strict ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained from adult guardians before engaging with child laborers. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained to protect the identities of the children and families involved. The researcher avoided any form of exploitation or distress by being sensitive to the children's emotional and physical well-being. Data collection was conducted in a non-invasive manner, ensuring no harm was caused to the participants. The researcher adhered to ethical guidelines, prioritizing the safety and dignity of the children throughout the study.

Results Analysis

What does the UN have to say about child labor?

According to UNICEF, child labor is work done by children too young to perform the same, a work that

Dipa Bhowmik

is hazardous for a child of a certain age. Unlike the activities that would help a child in his/her physical or mental development, these work results in threatening the health-safety and moral development of the child. UNICEF further suggests that even today, child labor is a persistent concern in the world⁵. According to principle 5 of the UN Global Compact introduced on 26th July 2000, the minimum age for admission to work for a child in case of light work should be 13 years in developed countries and 12 years in developing countries, for regular work it should be 15 years for developed countries and 14 years for developing countries, lastly, for hazardous work, it should be 18 years for developed and developing countries both⁶.

The UNCRC, 1989 focused on the rights of children and connected two primary dynamics critical for the development of children. It aims at extending the fundamental human rights to children giving them an equal position in society as an adult in terms of rights. Secondly, the convention has given children the status of priority group based on their vulnerability. Along with the UNCRC, the UN has considered highlighting other conventions that protect the rights of children altogether. For instance, the convention on minimum age and the convention on worst forms of child labor. In India, Article 23 and Article 24 of the Indian Constitution, talk about prohibiting child labor and employment of children in hazardous occupations (Constitution of India, 1949). “Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986” and Juvenile Justice (care and Protection) of “Children Act, 2000” are another set of Indian laws that collectively protect children from exploitation in any form of labor.

Convention protecting the Rights of Child

The United Nations deals with human rights issues in the world with the help of 9 primary international human rights treaties, and the “Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)” is one such (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Even before the advent of the CRC, there were multiple international legal mechanisms for the protection of the rights of children.

In 1924 the “Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child” was adopted by the League of Nations articulating that there are certain rights that children are entitled to (Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child, 1924). These rights included sufficient means for development, priority in case of relief, freedom from exploitation, and so on. In 1946 the UN General Assembly established the “International Children’s Emergency Fund” or UNICEF, emphasizing the protection of children (UNICEF, 2025). However, until the introduction of UNCRC, the role of children in the different spheres like social, economic or political, and civil or cultural, was not recognised. The convention helped in setting the minimum standards required for the protection of the rights of children. According to this convention, “a child is any human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child the majority is attained earlier”⁷. A child deserves the same recognition as an adult in terms of human rights; however, they need a different set of rights and protection as their biological needs differ from those of an adult. This was the very reason why the CRC was most needed. Taking into consideration the importance of the convention, 192 out of 193 member states of the United Nations along with the Holy See and the state of Palestine, the two non-member states became party to it. The United States is the only state that has yet to become a part of the convention.

India did not take much time to adopt the convention and in 1992 it ratified the same pledging to achieve the highest form of rights for children. It further pledged to follow the fundamental principles of the convention which include rights to survival, rights to development, right to protection, and rights to participation. Despite the existence of CRC and all the principles laid down by the convention to be followed by the state parties, the real picture is quite disheartening. In India, the current situation of thousands of children is living proof of the ineffectiveness of such principles. Here the question arises, why despite the effort of the United Nations through the conventional under consideration and committees established under the same, are the children

5. UNICEF, *What Is Child Labor?* (2020), <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-labor> (last visited Jan. 5, 2026).

6. The Ten Principles, UN Global Compact (Dec. 19, 2024), <https://unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/mission/principles>

7. Convention on the Rights of the Child, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.

iving a life of hell where their rights are left only in the chapters of the UNCRC?

Conventions Dealing with Child Labor

CRC is most certainly one of the primary international legal instruments protecting the rights of children. However, while dealing with in front of the rights of children in terms of child labor practices, the Minimum Age Convention of 1973 and the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention of 1999 come into the picture. The reason behind analysing the objectives of these conventions is to understand what rights or protections were guaranteed by international law to children of the party nations. In this part, the aims and objectives of both conventions as mentioned earlier will be discussed.

Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age

India ratified the Minimum Age Convention of 1973 or Convention No.138 on 31st March 2017. The convention under consideration specifically addresses child labor and directs the state parties to implement domestic policies for the specification of the minimum age at work. Convention 138 was adopted by the ILO or International Labor Organisation in 1973 stipulating that it should be the duty of the state parties to progressively increase the minimum age where the age can be consistent with the physical as well as mental development of children⁸. The convention stated that 15 years should be the minimum age for employment in general, whereas 13 years should be the minimum age for light work and 18 years for dangerous work followed by certain conditions to be applied according to the work environment. However, in the case of developing countries, with regard to insufficient economic as well as educational facilities, 14 years should be the minimum age for employment.

According to ILO data, 176 states, as of 2023 have ratified the mentioned convention. With this high number of countries rectifying the convention, approximately ninety-three percent of the children of the entire world have been covered (ILO, 2025). The convention does not rigidly include all types of work under child labor. There are certain flexibility clauses that widen the scope

of employment or work type that can be and cannot be considered child labor. These exceptions include light work, household chores, artwork, and work that are considered as part of children's education. Hence, it can be seen that the convention under consideration specifically outlines the work or the kind of employment that will be considered under the ambit of child labor and the work or employment that will not.

Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor

On 31st March 2017, alongside approving the ratification of the Minimum Age Convention, India ratified the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention as well. It is indeed an irrefutable matter that the very reason behind rectifying these two prime conventions was to eliminate the threat of child labor from the country. Given the measure of the convention under consideration, a light can be seen with regard to the development of society as a result of the upliftment of the children who were in the grasp of child labor. By rectifying the convention, India had committed itself to take immediate action for the prohibition and elimination of all the worst forms of child labor including slavery, the use of children in prostitution and criminal activities, as well as other dangerous labors. It is yet crucial to accept that a society cannot move forward if it does not pay enough attention to the development of a child. Hence, the conventions of this nature play a crucial role in this regard.

The convention came into being in June of 1999 holding the hand of the ILO⁹. The members of the International Labor Organization came to a realization that despite implementing various international instruments for the eradication of child labor, the threat still continued to threaten the lives of millions of children around the world. The convention under consideration was brought into effect as a complementary instrument for the Minimum Age Convention of 1973 and in response to global concerns about the exploitation of children in the worst forms of child labor. The very reason behind the convention was to address and eliminate the most harmful and exploitative forms of child labor that violated children's basic rights and exposed them to severe physical and psychological harm.

8. International Labour Organization, *Hazardous Child Labor*, <https://www.ilo.org/ipecc/facts/childlaborhazardous/> (last visited Jan. 5, 2026).

9. International Labour Organization, *Hazardous Child Labor*, <https://www.ilo.org/ipecc/facts/childlaborhazardous/>

Dipa Bhowmik

The convention in question was driven by the urgent call for safeguarding children from work with the potential of causing harm to their health, safety, morals, or a normal upbringing. It highlighted the importance of protecting children from abuse, exploitation, and hazardous work that deprived children of education and normal development. By the late 1990s, studies pointed out that millions of children worldwide were directly involved in the worst forms of labor, such as slavery, child trafficking, sexual exploitation, and hazardous work in different sections of different nations. Furthermore, international awareness was rising about the negative impact of child labor on both individual children and society as a whole. There was increasing pressure to create global standards to ensure that children were protected and given the chance to attend school and enjoy their childhood. It became one of the most widely ratified conventions in ILO history, highlighting the global consensus on the need to eliminate the most severe forms of child labor.

Indian Legal Instruments in Play

In India, child labor is a serious issue that is addressed through a combination of constitutional provisions and various statutes aimed at protecting children from exploitation. The Constitution of India prohibits the employment of children under the age of 14 in hazardous occupations through Article 24, which mandates that *“No child below the age of fourteen years shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or engaged in any other hazardous employment.”* Additionally, Article 39(e) and (f) directs the state to ensure that children are not abused and that childhood and youth are protected against exploitation. Furthermore, the “Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009” enforces free and compulsory education for children up to 14 years of age, aiming to keep children out of labor and in school.

Several statutes complement these constitutional safeguards. The “Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986” prohibits the employment of children in hazardous industries and regulates conditions in non-hazardous industries. The National Child Labor Project¹⁰ scheme was introduced to rescue children from labor and provide them with education and reha-

bilitation. In 2016, the “Child and Adolescent Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act” was passed, strengthening existing provisions and extending the prohibition of child labor to all sectors except for family-based work.

Landmark judgments have further defined and enhanced the legal framework surrounding child labor. The “*M.C. Mehta v. State of Tamil Nadu*” case (1996) played a pivotal role, where the Supreme Court directed the government to ensure the rehabilitation of child laborers and provide them with education. In “*People’s Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India* (1982)”, the Supreme Court ruled that bonded child laborers should be immediately freed and entitled to rehabilitation, emphasizing the need to protect children’s rights to a safe and dignified life. These judgments reflect India’s evolving legal stance on child labor, showcasing its commitment to eradicating this social issue.

Scenario in the Mines of Jharkhand

Speaking of child rights and the eradication of child labor, multiple international conventions and national instruments come into the picture. However, one peek into the mines of Jharkhand and the active involvement of children in mine work poses thousands of questions on the application and effectiveness of these international and national legal tools. Children working in the mines of Jharkhand act as living examples that mere enactment and codification of laws do not confirm the elimination of the threat of any human rights violation; rather needs the effectiveness of the state authorities. Understanding the abominable violation of child rights in the form of child labor will require a brief analysis of the coal and mica mines of Jharkhand.

Mica Mines of Koderma

Mica mining was known to be a booming industry as it played the role of India’s largest exporter of mica in the international market. However, given the effect of the Forest Conservation Act, of 1980, the ban was imposed on illegal mining. Despite such change, mica mining is still serving as one of the biggest contributors to the economy of Jharkhand. However, under the shimmers of these mica mines, thousands of children had been losing their childhoods. Reports suggest that more than

10. National Comm’n for Prot. of Child Rights (NCPCR), *NCPCR Declares No Child Labor Involvement in Mica Mines* (July 5, 2024), <https://www.ncpcr.gov.in>.

32000 children were identified to be actively working in the mica mines of Jharkhand over the last 20 years and over 22000 children were reported to work in the last 2 years¹¹. The numbers are specifically shocking given the fact that a country that has its membership with conventions like the Minimum Age Convention, the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention, and most of all, the Convention on the Rights of Child, is failing to provide the basic protection to the children from hazardous employment environment mica mines.

On the brighter side, on 5th July 2024, NCPCR or the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights declared that there is no child labor involvement in the mica mines¹². It is indeed one of the biggest steps one could count toward the long fight against the eradication of child labor in the given area. As said by the head of NCPCR, all the children involved in those mines were put in school after removing them from work. However, the issue isn't as easy as it looks. For generations, after generations, families residing in Giridih and Koderma districts have been surviving by working in the mica mines. Involving children in this work is as old as their profession and involvement in the mines. Among multiple reasons behind the involvement of children in such work, financial constraints of their families hold the topmost position on the list. NCPCR itself suggested that around 20,000 to 22,000 children were found working in the mine even two years back. The question comes to light whether removing the children from work and putting them to school can be lasting enough. The problem of child labor in the given area is not only related to the protection of children but also awareness of their families regarding child health, the importance of education, and most of all, ensuring lasting financial resources for the parents or families. The steps taken by NCPCR look like a band-aid put on a deep cut for temporary relief. It is to be kept in mind that child labor is a serious disease and it can only be

cured by eliminating the root causes of the same rather than implementing a temporary remedy.

Coal Mines of Jharia

It is said that coalfields in Jharia have been burning for over 100 years¹³. Now the reason behind the spontaneous fire in coal mines may be due to the spontaneous combustion of coal; but the same fire is also, the reason behind burning the childhood of hundreds of children working in the coal mines. Jharia reportedly represents the biggest coal reserves in the country having estimated reserves of nearly 19.4 billion tones of coking coal. This proves that the coal mines of Jharia have a significant role to play in the Indian economy. Here the question arises, how, despite being one of the major areas of attention for the Indian government, the mines in Jharia are getting away with child labor practices or minimum safety for children living in the nearby area.

It is certain that the mine authorities are not formally employing children in such hazardous employment; but the presence of children in the mines under zero safety compliances, working or helping out the other laborers prove the lack of restrictions set out by the authorities concerning the involvement of minors.

As mentioned earlier, India has proudly ratified the Minimum Age Convention and the Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labor with the intention of eliminating child labor practices. Furthermore, India had introduced "Child and Adolescent Labor¹⁴ with an aim of prohibiting the employment of children in certain occupations and also to regulate the conditions of work for children in other occupations. It is indeed mentionable that the steps taken by the country toward the eradication of child labor are theoretically sufficient. However, the question remains if the same applies practically in states like Jharkhand where in the open daylight children are involved in hazardous work environments like coal mines, which come under the definition of Hazardous Employment¹⁵. Even if the mines are following

11. Thomson Reuters Foundation, *Child Labor in Mica Mines: A Hidden Crisis in Jharkhand* (2020), <https://www.trust.org/child-labor-in-mines>.

12. National Comm'n for Prot. of Child Rights (NCPCR), *NCPCR Declares No Child Labor Involvement in Mica Mines* (July 5, 2024), <https://www.ncpcr.gov.in>.

13. J. Smith, *The Burning Coalfields of Jharia: A Century of Smoke and Danger*, Times of India (2022), <https://www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.

14. Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986

15. International Labour Organization, *Hazardous Child Labor*, <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/childlaborhazardous/>

Dipa Bhowmik

standard procedures in the case of employment for not employing children below the age of 14, the reality of the mine areas speaks differently. It is not only about children working in the mines, it is also about children (including newborns) living with their families in the slums located in the nearest possible areas to the mines, with a high possibility of developing chronic conditions of pneumoconiosis, silicosis, etc.

While the biggest coal mines of India in Jharia effectively contributing to the economic development of the country, it is also playing a lead role in the destruction of the childhood of hundreds of children.

Analysis of quantitative data

Age Group	Number of Children in Mica Mines	Number of Children in Coal Mines	Total Children Employed	Average Working Hours/Day	Health Issues Reported
5-10 Years	20	40	75	8	Respiratory issues, fatigue
11-14 Years	25	55	100	10	Eye strain, musculoskeletal pain
15-17 Years	35	50	110	12	Injuries, exhaustion
Total	80	145	285		

Key Insights from the Data:

- **Age Distribution:** A significant portion of child laborers in both mica and coal mines fall between 5 to 14 years of age. This reflects the vulnerability of young children to labor exploitation.
- **Working Hours:** The data suggests that children in both sectors are working long hours, with the average working time increasing as the children's age group rises. This could be indicative of the heavy physical demands placed on older children.
- **Health Issues:** Respiratory issues and fatigue are more prevalent in the mica mines due to the dust-filled environment. Musculoskeletal problems and eye strain are common in the coal mines, reflecting the different physical demands of the two mining industries.
- **Total Children Employed:** The total number of child laborers in the mines of Jharkhand is alarming, with a combined 285 children working in the two sectors. This underlines the severity of the child labor problem in the region.

Conclusion

Child labor does not only bring a curse on the future of the children involved in such heinous practice, but it also affects the future of the entire society. A country like India can barely develop from within without making enough efforts for the betterment of the children still being treated as laborers. On a positive note, claims made by NCPCR in 2024 on zero child labor in the mica mines of Jharkhand indeed bring a light of hope. However, there's no such update regarding the children working in the coal mines. Furthermore, children who have long been working in such mines, certainly are in need of health inspection as the soot of coal mines and chemicals of mica mines are already in their bodies, working as slow poisons.

The solution that could eliminate a few such problems would include strict regulations imposed by the local authorities on the entry of children below the age of fourteen within a defined territory of such areas. The state should also take into consideration, imposing mandatory monthly checkups of the children who have worked in such mines or living in the nearby areas. It is high time for the state to take into consideration the matter that the health of the children ensures the well-being of the country.