

PROJECT BRIEF

# DODO BHEEL'S DEATH: THE EFFECT OF SECURITIZATION AND LABOR MALTREATMENT IN THAR COAL PROJECTS

RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY INSTITUTE



## Table of Contents

<b>Context .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Data Collection.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Dodo Bheel Beaten to Death.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Protests for Justice .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Politicians and Human Rights Activists Condemn the Murder .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Visit of Aban-Jo-Tarr by Ministry of Human Rights Commission.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Progress on the Case .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Discussion .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1. Difficulty in taking leave .....	8
2. Late payments to laborers .....	8
3. Health of laborers at risk.....	9
4. Security guards harass local labor .....	9
5. Limited jobs for Tharis .....	9
6. Restricted mobility of the locals.....	10
<b>Thar for Tharis and Pakistan’s Progress .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>12</b>

# DODO BHEEL’S DEATH: THE EFFECT OF SECURITIZATION AND LABOR MALTREATMENT IN THAR COAL PROJECTS

## Context

“Thar Badlendo Pakistan”, “Thar will change Pakistan” is a slogan you’ll encounter repeatedly as you enter Tharparkar via wide metaled roads, courtesy of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The slogan originally referred to the prosperity that the region’s abundance of coal would bring to the economy of Pakistan and the indigenous people — as Thar is known for its poverty, population growth, lack of clean drinking water, unemployment and high illiteracy rate. (Ghani 2017). The discovery of coal in the region, promoted a promise of jobs creation for the local population, and better health and education facilities. Of the 13 coal blocks, as of now three major coalfields Thar Coal Block I, Thar Coal Block II and Thar Coal Block VI have been earmarked for mining activities and coal power development.

Thar Coal Block II, which is home to the 2x330MW Engro Thar Coal Power Plant, is the only block where mining and exploration activities have fully commenced through Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company (SECMC). The mine-mouth power plant, fires 3.8 MTPA<sup>i</sup> coal for power production and has been connected to the grid since 2019. Two other sub-critical coal fired power plants, with a capacity of 330 MW each are under advanced stages of construction and aiming for a commercial operations date by 2023.

Sindh Sino Resources Limited (SSRL) holds the mining license for Thar Coal Block I while the coal from the mine will feed 2x660 MW coal power plant, which is being setup by Shanghai Electric Group Company of China (Shanghai Electric). By early 2021, 40% of the mining work in block I had been completed<sup>ii</sup>, and the power plants are expected to reach their commercial operations by February 2023<sup>iii</sup>.

Thar Coal Block VI, will be developed by Oracle Power, through its subsidiary Sindh Carbon Energy Ltd. (SCEL), which holds the 30-year mining lease.<sup>iv</sup> Currently the project is in its initial phase of getting approvals on project feasibility, securing financiers and obtaining regulatory approvals.<sup>v</sup>

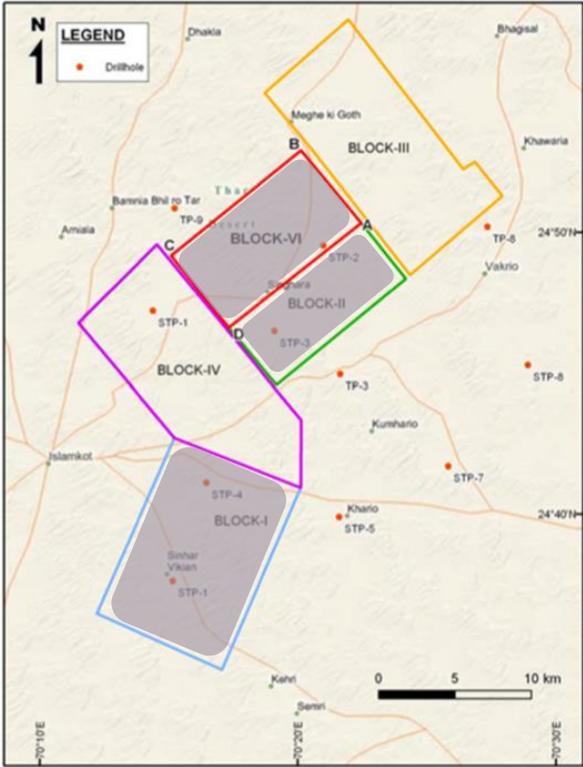


Figure 1: Thar Coalfields Block I, II, VI

Source: Matt Mcdonald

With all the progress in Thar — coal mines, coal power plants and corporate social engagement, there is still resentment among the local Tharis. A number of factors are contributing towards this sentiment including the environmental and social damages, displacement of locals without fair compensation, unfulfilled promise of employing locals for skilled and unskilled jobs, and securitization of locally employed labor. This brief will focus on recent case of the murder (beaten to death) of a local worker by security guards at Thar Coalfield Block II, that aggravated the resentment within the community.

## Data Collection

For collection of data, we have relied on both primary and secondary research. Some of the information listed here is from the interviews of the local labor, and testimonies from the relatives of the victim of assault. Another source used in this brief is the Fact-Finding Report (referred to as “report”) compiled by the Ministry of Human Rights through its Parliamentary Secretary Lal Chand Malhi and his team of delegation who visited the family of the tortured to death worker.

## Dodo Bheel Beaten to Death

The incident took place in the village of Aban-Jo-Tarr, Thar Coal Block II. Dodo Bheel, Mooro Bheel and Ghulam Qadir, workers hired by SECMC, were accused of theft by the security guards of the mining company. Mooro, shared in an interview to Soch Videos<sup>vi</sup> that he and Dodo were both working when Mooro was forcibly taken from his work around 4:00 PM. The guards didn’t ask him anything and began to beat him. After two days, they brought Dodo too to their private detention cell and told him to admit that he has stolen material from the store. Dodo denied the accusations, after which the guards started beating him continuously for an hour. The report reveals that they were kept in torture cells for about 10 days (from June 12 to June 22, 2021), whereas the area police were aware of the torture and the Station House Officer (SHO) visited the cells every day. Theft FIR no. 28/2021. dated 20.06.2021 u/s 379, 34 PPC, was also lodged against the accused laborers at Police Station Islamkot.



**Figure 2: Victim Dodo Bheel**  
**Source: Lal Chand Malhi Twitter**

Furthermore, the report states that the accused laborers were handed to the police in an extremely injured condition. Dodo’s father applied for his bail in civil court Islamkot. He was granted bail on June 25 and then immediately shifted to a hospital in Mithi. There he was referred to Civil Hospital, Hyderabad for treatment given his critical condition. However, after reaching there, he could not survive and succumbed to his wounds on June 30, 2021. His post mortem report shows 19 torture marks on his body.

## Protests for Justice

Murder of Dodo Bheel surged an outbreak of protests against the brutality of SECMC's security guards. After his death was announced, local activists<sup>vii</sup> Abdul Aziz Halepoto, Fakir Munawwar Sagar, Subhan Samejo, Nand Lal Bheel, Malo Bheel, Naseer Noon and the deceased victim's family, along with hundreds of men, women and children arranged a rally and marched through the streets of Islamkot carrying Dodo's body (Dharani 2021). They demanded that an FIR be lodged against the guards (namely Kashif Raza, Qamar Abbas, Qasim, Huzaifa Malik and an unidentified person<sup>viii</sup>) of SECMC responsible for their irreversible loss.

After 15 hours of sit-in, an FIR was registered against the guards, however, the police then accommodated company guards in getting bails, which created more agitation among the protestors. To disperse the protestors, police used shelling at midnight, as per the report. The police further registered an FIR against the protestors on the grounds of threatening the security of the Thar coalfield project. The police were criticized for resorting to shelling, as the report states that the sit-in was happening peacefully. Later a press conference was arranged by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leaders Mr. Krishan Sharma, Mr. Subhan Samaj, Advocate Shahnawaz Hingorjo, Mr. Kishore Jagani, Mr. Parshtam Soorani and leaders of other parties in Mithi. They condemned violence perpetrated by the police on protesting Tharis and journalists.<sup>ix</sup>



Figure 3: Protests in Tharparkar district

Source: Daily Times (Newspaper)

## Politicians and Human Rights Activists Condemn the Murder

By the time protests were held and continued until the FIR was registered against the SECMC guards, news of this incident received wide media coverage and got attention from politicians and human rights activists. They condemned the death of Dodo Bheel and injuries suffered by his co-workers during illegal detention at the complex, and demanded inquiry into the incident. Following are the views of key personnel on the incident.

<b>Shah Mehmood Qureshi</b> Foreign Minister	He called IGP Sindh to investigate the incident and take stern action against the culprit. He also called protesters, condemning the cruel act, and assuring them of justice. <sup>x</sup>
<b>Murad Ali Shah</b> Chief Minister Sindh	He formed a three-member ministerial body to probe the matter and report him as soon as possible. <sup>xi</sup>
<b>Justice Ahmed Ali Shaikh</b> Honorable Chief Justice of Sindh High Court	He took administrative action over the incident and asked the District & Session Judge Tharparkar to formulate a report over the incident. <sup>xii</sup>
<b>Dr Shireen Mazari</b> Federal Minister for Human Rights	Based on media reports and civil society protests, the matter was taken up by the Ministry of Human Rights and a fact-finding commission was established, which was led by parliamentary secretary Lal Chand Malhi. The Fact-Finding Report was submitted on August 10, 2021.
<b>Veerji Kolhi</b> Special Assistant to Chief Minister Sindh for Human Rights	He alleged the security guards of Thar Block II had brutally tortured and killed Dodo Bheel. <sup>xiii</sup>
<b>Shushil Malani</b> Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leader	He joined the protest along with other party workers. <sup>xiv</sup>
<b>Fakeer Sher Mohammad Bilalani</b> PPP MPA (from Islamkot)	He visited the protest site and called for registration of an FIR against the guards and their employers. <sup>xv</sup>
<b>Gianchand Essrani</b> PPP Tharparkar chapter's President, Senator	He condemned the incident and demanded a judicial inquiry. He assured that such companies which practice violence will not be allowed to operate. <sup>xvi</sup>

**Dr. Qadir Magsi, Advocate Wasand Thari,  
Nawaz Shah Bhadai, Qadir Ranto**  
Sindh Action Committee Leaders

They showed their solidarity with the protestors and journalists who became target of police brutality.<sup>xvii</sup>

SECMC management also shared its condolence with Dodo’s family. However, they stated that the company “has always strictly followed human rights issues of its workers. They ensured their support in an unbiased investigation of the unfortunate incident” .<sup>xviii</sup>

### Visit of Aban-Jo-Tarr by Ministry of Human Rights Commission

The delegation from Ministry of Human Rights led by parliamentary secretary Mr. Malhi, visited the afflicted families on July 8, 2021 in Aban-Jo-Tarr village to offer their condolences and also find out facts on ground. They also met the injured co-workers of Dodo, along with leaders of Thar Samaji Tehreek and Bheel Intellectual Forum. The immediate family of Dodo demanded justice for their son and their supporters who protested against the biased treatment of police as well as SECMC. They demanded that all those involved in the murder of their son be arrested; innocent protesters be released for police custody and FIR against them be withdrawn; biased police officials be removed from the case; and the promised compensation be timely provided to them.

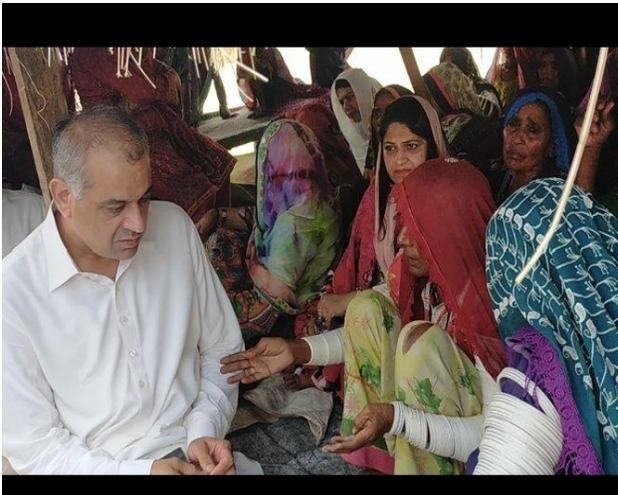


Figure 4: Delegation meeting Thari women



Figure 5: Delegation meeting affected families

Source: Lal Chand Malhi’s twitter

A visit to the area and meeting SECMC CEO was also part of the plan. However, SECMC executive refused to meet the delegation on the advice of Mr. Imtiaz Sheikh, Chairman, Board of Directors, SECMC.

The delegation also met the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Hassan Sardar Niazi, who the local residents report to be biased towards SECMC. During the meeting with the delegation, the SSP presented

the actions that had been taken regarding this case to date. He also justified police shelling on the protestors on the grounds of halting local businesses and threat to a project of national priority. Besides police being inconsiderate about the loss of a life in their community, the delegation also noted negligence on part of police prior to the death of Dodo Bheel. He was under police custody for few days before he was shifted to hospital, while timely action could have saved his life. The delegation also considered it a failure that a company operating at such a large scale has no mechanism or system in place to curb misuse of power.

To ensure that such cases do not happen again, the delegation recommended that the newly elected police law be enacted, human rights and labor laws be implemented properly by the company. The delegation further recommended that the company maintains an amiable relationship with the local community, which is vital for the progress of coal projects on the land of Tharis, and a judicial enquiry be setup as the locals do not trust the area police.

## Progress on the Case

Sindh government announced financial compensation of Rs. 10 million for the family of Dodo Bheel and Rs. 5 million each for the families of other two injured workers.<sup>xix</sup> Furthermore, two of the accused security guards, Kashif Raza and Qamar Abbas, have been arrested by the SHO Jhangro Police Station Mr. Majid Qaimkhani on July 14, 2021.<sup>xx</sup> After their medical examinations, they have been sent to sub-jail in Mithi on judicial remand for 14 days.<sup>xxi</sup>

## Discussion

The incident of Dodo Bheel's death is an alarming reminder of injustice, discrimination, and insensitivity towards the woes of the local community of Thar. The fabricated dream of progress for Tharis, is nothing more than a tale of oppression in terms of depriving them of their native livelihoods, displacing them from their ancestral lands, robbing them of their traditional sources of livelihood, while leaving them without any future prospects of employment at the plants — environmental damages not even factored in yet.

Government of Sindh has 'promised' to compensate Dodo's family, but human loss cannot be recouped. Dodo's father Kerno Bheel, shared his sentiments with RDPI and said, "We do not need money nor do we need any compensation. We are ready to spend our life by surviving on begging, but we do not [want to] take the compensation amount. They [the other party] are stronger than us. We spend our life on a daily wage work basis. Now they have killed our son. What should we do with the land, house or money?"

The victim's father further said that he will not be able to rest until the main culprit "Qasim Commando" is arrested. He added that his son had been away for work since last three months and now he has been sent his body. He suspected the theft accusations on his son, saying Dodo was not allowed to be out of

the coalfield before the completion of three months. Especially, because of Covid-19, the protocols for exit and entrance were strict and required quarantine.

Nevertheless, this incident also opens discussion of similar cases in the past, and oppression faced by local workers on daily bases that goes unchecked. In our telephonic conversation with local activists, we were informed of the day-to-day issues faced by local labor. These issues have been listed here along with interviews of on ground labor.

### 1. Difficulty in Taking Leave

It is tough for the laborers working in these mining companies in Thar to take any days off. According to a local worker, he once asked for a leave because of a death in his family, but he was denied by the guard. On his protest, he was able to take leave, but when he came back, he was beaten.

We interviewed another worker - a truck driver named Ghulam Rasool, who also shared similar difficulty in getting leave for two hours only. He had to attend the religious rituals of his late father, for which he spoke with his supervisor Mr. Waseem, the production manager. He requested for a day pass too, so that he is able to leave and re-enter the complex through the authorized way. However, the worker was told by the supervisor that there was no need for a pass and he can leave through the informal way as he won't be bothered at the main gate upon his return by security guards or the army men. However, when he came back to the complex through the informal way, he was interrogated by two civil dressed persons, who insulted him and then brutally fought with him. The army men took notice and helped Ghulam, as they were aware that drivers and construction workers use this informal way regularly. His production manager, however, called him in his office, threatened him and then blacklisted him from work. Not only did he lose his job, but also claims to his payments. According to Ghulam, Mr. Waseem is solely responsible for creating difficulties for all the local drivers who have lost their jobs because of his ill treatment. Around 150 drivers have been blacklisted from work because of him.

### 2. Late payments to laborers

The local activists shared that the local labor receive their salary late, usually after 10<sup>th</sup> of every month. Ghulam, also shared that during early days the company paid the workers allowances and monthly salary. But after a month, for 8 to 10 months they did not receive any payment. The conditions became even harder during the lockdown as they were not granted any allowances.

Another issue is that some contractors take advance from company in Thar Coalfield Block I, against the provided local labor, and then the contractor vanishes from the site leaving all the workers with the company. The laborers are then not allowed to leave until the completion of work and they also do not get paid. The local activists shared that this has happened about three times as per their knowledge.

### **3. Health of laborers at risk**

The local activists shared that the laborers do not get proper food at the complex. They have to wait in long lines for the meal only to get cold food that would affect their health. Moreover, there is no emergency medical facility for the workers. If they get ill or injured, they do not get timely treatment.

Such an incident took place in the past which claimed the life of 28-year-old engineer Haresh Kumar Meghwar, from Vehrijhap village of Diplo taluka. After completing his studies from China, he joined Thar Coalfield Block I as an engineer.<sup>xxii</sup> Few days after joining, he had a cardiac arrest, but was not taken to hospital and or nearby medical facility. Due to inattention by the company to his sudden deteriorated health condition, Haresh unfortunately died. This incident also erupted protests in the community, demanding probe into the incident, and fair and timely compensation to the grieved family.

These incidents depict the callous attitude of coal extraction companies towards their employees, especially Tharis. First, they are not given management tier jobs, and if they make up to such a position, they are denied their basic rights to health and safety. It is surprising that SECMC has won many international awards on safe and healthy working environment since its inception, but lives of locally employed Tharis are still at risk.

### **4. Security guards harass local labor**

Security guards at Thar Coalfield Block II leave no opportunity to harass the local labor. One heinous example of their brutality towards local labors is inhumane torture of Dodo and his co-workers, which led to death of Dodo and left many others injured. According to the local activists, this has become the habit of the security guards of stealing material from the company themselves and later blaming it on the local laborers. In another incident, the guards once demanded a Hindu worker to chant slogans against his gods to get the permission to pass through the area. From some laborers, the guards demand some percentage in their income.

### **5. Limited jobs for Tharis**

Tharis have mostly been given jobs of dumper truck drivers, daily wagers, and construction workers. Non-muslim Tharis get jobs only of janitors or gardeners. Then those who get jobs are mostly from other cities such as Badin or Umarkot. SECMC pledged to bring employment opportunities for local Tharis, but numbers from 2018 shows that only 28 out of 221 managers at the company were locals, and from these 28 managers only three had permanent contracts.<sup>xxiii</sup> Furthermore, the work force from Thar receives lower salary than others in the company on same level and job. The local activists also share there is an age limit followed for the workers hired i.e. only people between the ages 20 – 40 can become part of their workforce.

## **6. Restricted mobility of the locals**

Mobility of local workers and local population is also very restricted in Thar coalfields, and especially during the Covid-19 crisis, the conditions became stricter. Once a worker would leave the complex, he could not enter without PCR testing and mandatory quarantine. Allah Bachayo, a resident of village Qari Ghulam Shah, shared with RDPI that if their cattle cross the restricted areas of the company, the company would not return it. If they request security guards to find their cattle, they would not assist and if they find other ways to find their cattle, the security guards would brutally punish the locals. Moreover, he shared, that they do not move from village to village now, as their land communication has been blocked due to restrictions of the company. They have no adequate means of communication such as roads from one village to another.

### **Thar for Tharis and Pakistan's Progress**

SECMC has engaged in corporate social responsibility in Thar and has initiated many programs for capacity building of the locals, including Thari women. The company claims that its programs like “Khushaal Thar”, “Thar Information Technology Program”, “Khushaal Nari” etc. are reaping benefits but speaking with locals paints a different picture. Even if their programs are benefiting some segment of the local population, their practices towards the skilled and unskilled labor are creating an environment of hostility among the majority locals. The workers employed by the company face mental and physical tortures on daily basis, and there is no systematic approach in place to register their complaints, and address their concerns.

The case of Dodo Bheel is not the first of its kind incident. Only few months before his murder, Engineer Haresh Kumar also lost his life to company's negligence. It is also worthy of noting that such incidents cannot take place in isolation. The once peaceful lands of Thar have been taken over by foreign conglomerates and corporations who do not face any kind of accountability over their actions. Security check-posts have been set up across Thar Coal blocks, where locals regularly face harassment and discrimination. There is a marked absence of a grievance registration and redressal mechanism in place where the complaints of the locals could be heard or justice meted out.

There could be multiple incidents of the kind which were snubbed by local police, or did not get media coverage and government attention. Unless the companies developing Thar Coalfields, value lives of Tharis, prioritize harnessing peaceful relationship with the local population and create systems based on equality and impartiality, we cannot ascertain that there will be no more deaths of hardworking Tharis.

To revive the confidence of local population after the deaths of Dodo Bheel and Haresh Kumar, government needs to give heed to their demands. The compensation packages promised by the government to the affected families should be disseminated timely. Not only the accused murderers have to be penalized, but also everyone else who facilitated them. The system in which security guards are

treating local labor like slaves, offensive language is used with minority workers, and their health and safety is neglected, needs to be reformed. Tharis have to be involved in these development projects at both management and non-management tiers, and programs to build and enhance their skills set should be introduced, so that they fulfill the merit requirements for the available jobs. It would also be unjust if Thar develops and Tharis don't; consortiums of foreign and local companies occupy Thar while Tharis are displaced of their ancestral lands and livelihoods; and if foreign workers experience upward mobility in their lives while Tharis lose their lives. The slogan "Thar badlendo Pakistan" has to speak for Tharis too.

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