

8. The Thieves

Once we were going from Ranchi to Dhanbad for site selection visit of a new IIM. On the way we observed a large number of people carrying a gunny bag, delicately balancing the overhang portion on the two sides of the central frame of their cycles. The road was having slope up and down. When the slope was up, they will get down and pull the cycle and load. There was a wooden rod tied on one side, which was used as a stand. It was not one or two instances but we found several people, perhaps few dozen on our way.

They were not in groups, but carried the load as individuals, separated from each other by furlongs. They looked tired and perspired. We, the “outsiders”, asked the accompanying hosts, who these people were, carrying coal like this. “These people”, the host said, “engage in a sort of illegal mining, the excavate coal from open fields, perhaps in lots of about 100 kg and start walking to long distances, selling small quantities to needy customers in villages and make some money to run family. They return only when they sold the whole bags which could take one day to 5 days.”

“Thieves”, yelled one of the experts in the accompanying team “stealing coal”. The driver of our vehicle, who was quietly listening to us so far, now lost his cool and retorted. “They are not thieves. With hard work they excavate some coal and walk long distance to sell it to needy people, at least possible price and return home with some money for getting square meals for family. After all, the villagers, dhaba wallas etc. all need coal and get at the least prices. Somebody had to take coal out from mines and deliver to customers. Do not large companies and government do the same thing only? The only difference is that users get it at much higher prices 5-10 times from them. These people can’t make huge profit as they can’t excavate, carry and sell large quantities and can sell at high price”.

I wondered whether they are thieves or some large corporates, who do such things in an organized way, paying less to labour, charging high price to customers and restrict supplies to earn windfall profit. What is the demarcation line of a thief and non-thief?