

December 2023

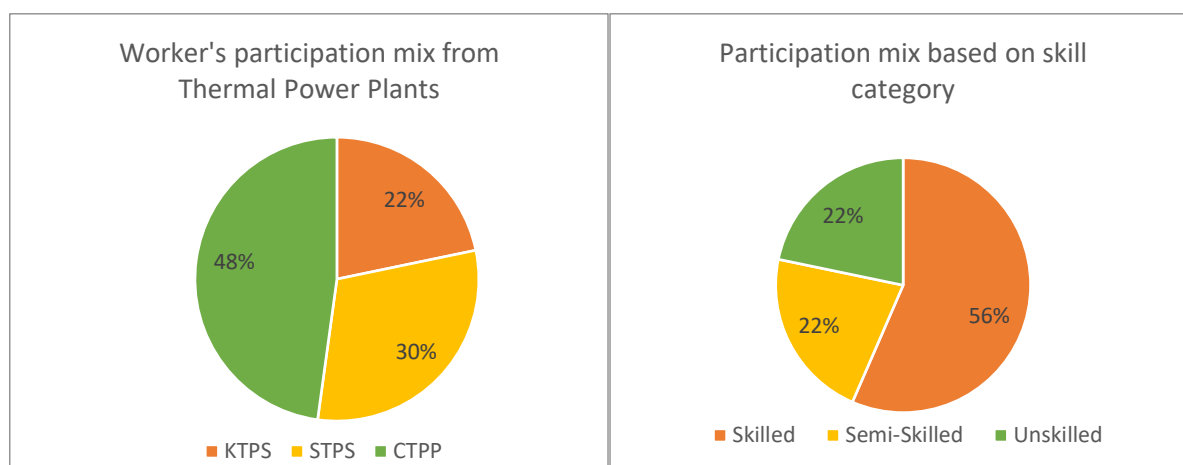
# Shramik Samwad

Dialogues with Thermal Power  
Plant Workers in Rajasthan



## Introduction

Centre for Energy, Environment & People (CEEP) and Centre for Labour Research and Action (CLRA) organised '*Shramik Samwad*' – a dialogue with workers of state government-owned thermal power plants in Rajasthan. The dialogue was a small effort to foster a dignified space for workers of thermal power plants across Rajasthan for critical collective reflection on workplace challenges, build fraternity and coalitions, and facilitate democratic participation in energy transition.



The event saw an active participation of 24 thermal power plant workers from Chabbra, Surathgarh and Kota. Out of these, 22% were classified as unskilled, 35% as semi-skilled, and 43% as skilled. Despite women making up only 5% of the overall workforce in a thermal power plant, they were not part of this discussion as there were logistic constraints with the few whom we managed to interact with during the field visits.

The dialogue was structured into four sections. The first two sections were designed to familiarise the workers with the complexities of energy transition, while the later sessions collectively explored policy priorities and the role of key agencies.

### Session I: Kota Thermal Power Station – An Overview

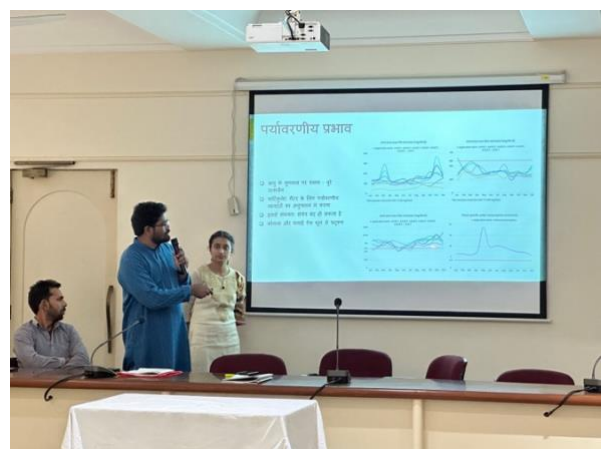
Nikita Tiwari and Manideep Gudela (CEEP, Jaipur) briefed the workers on the research report by CEEP titled “Navigating Energy Transition: Understanding Socio-Economic Complexities and Intersectionality in Thermal Power Plants”.

This discussion focussed on understanding the socioeconomic dynamics between the Kota Thermal Power Plant (KSTPS) and the local economy. The facilitators discussed why contractual workers may be identified as the most vulnerable group amongst the larger workforce employed at TPP. The discussion a particularly focussed on the intersectional understanding of TPP contractual workers to navigate challenges arising because of possible loss of livelihood.

Long-term shifts in land use patterns around KSTPS were presented, highlighting key factors such as the establishment of the RIICO *Paryavaran* Industrial Area, expansion of both formal and informal settlements near the power plant, and expanding ash pond. Workers were invited

to explore the intricate relationship between their respective thermal power plants and the local economy, uncovering how the plant acts as a catalyst to contribute to the growth of associated industries and small businesses, providing livelihood opportunities for both locals and migrants. The comments also led to the environmental repercussions stemming from the operations of these power plants, highlighting intangible costs.

While participants acknowledged the positive impact of thermal power, especially employment opportunities and increase in economic activity, many participants strongly voiced health, safety and environmental concerns. This included impact of fly ash on agricultural soil and produce, frequent accidents because of heavy traffic movement and accumulation of dust on the road, growing cases of skin and eye infections, and deteriorating health of livestock.



## Session II: Launch and Presentation on the Energy Transition Primer for the Electricity Generation Sector

The first public draft of the Energy Transition Primer for Electricity Generation Sector in Hindi was officially launched with the participants. The Primer is designed especially for workers and worker unions and serves as a comprehensive guide to understanding the intricacies and uncertainties of the energy transition.

The participants were briefed on the context of energy transition at national and subnational levels, including its key drivers and key characteristics such as transition infrastructure, shift in skills, spatial shifts, and shifts in public and private ownerships. The session focussed on highlighting the multidimensional nature of energy transition, specifically technical, markets and spatial; while discussing the socio-economic uncertainties associated with energy transition.

In the context of uncertainties and challenges, the issues of justice were discussed. The facilitator discussed the evolution of conceptual framework of Just Transition. The session progressed by delving into the importance of recognising the effects of the transition, exploring the meaning of participation (especially, affected workers and communities) and mechanisms for negotiating trade-offs. In response, the session introduced concepts such as recognitional justice, procedural justice, distributive justice, and restorative justice as a conceptual framework essential for ensuring a just transition.

As a concluding reflection, participants were reminded that beyond the specific notions of justice discussed, the Constitution of India provides a comprehensive justice framework in various domains, including energy transition. The preamble and Directive Principles for the State, enshrined in Article 36-51 of Chapter Four, articulate a commitment to securing justice, ensuring equality, and fostering fraternity to uphold the dignity of every individual. These principles serve as a guiding framework for the state government, reinforcing collective responsibility and emphasising the imperative of promoting justice, social equality, and the well-being of all citizens for a just and equitable society.



### Session III: Mapping Short- and Long-Term Priorities for Justice (Group Exercise)

The session aimed to discern both short- and long-term priorities from workers' perspectives, addressing the immediate and extended concerns arising during the energy transition. To initiate the discussion and identify these priorities, the workers were organised into four groups. Participants were categorised based on their skill category to ensure a power balance within each group. Four groups were incorporated with two groups constituting skilled workers and members of worker unions. Semi-skilled and unskilled workers formed a group each, discussing short-term priorities. The skilled worker groups discussed long-term priorities.

There are some shared concerns in both short- and long-term priorities, such as ensuring timely payment of wages, workforce safety, health or life insurance, building capacities of workers for job transition in case of livelihood disruption, and the utilisation of CSR funds for community development. Here the pragmatic consideration was the implementation timeline. The identified short-term priorities do not require the creation or investment of extra

resources; rather they are part of existing practices, rules, or regulations. Thus, the key issue lies in the non-enforcement of these measures by either the plant or relevant authorities.

A brief of the discussions by respective groups is presented in the tables below:

<b>Short-term Priorities</b>	
<b>Wages &amp; Bonuses</b>	Assurance of timely disbursement of wages <sup>1</sup> (by 5 <sup>th</sup> of every month).
	Periodic revision of wages based on inflation and other important factors.
	Timely disbursement of annual bonuses to the workers <sup>2</sup> .
<b>Recognition of Experience &amp; Skills</b>	Appropriate recognition and documentation of workers' experiences and skills.
<b>Rights &amp; Safety</b>	Receiving <sup>3</sup> PPEs which are timely replaced when damaged.
	Enforcement of the labour laws that protect workers' rights and interests irrespective of their contractual status.
<b>Medical &amp; Health Services</b>	Receiving first aid kits at work site to promptly address medical emergencies.
	Earning paid leave for treatment and recovery of workplace injuries.
	Regular health examinations conducted by specialists, including screenings for potential diseases.
	Immediate issuance of ESI <sup>4</sup> cards to each worker.
	Plant to set up an ESI hospital in its proximity to ensure prompt medical treatment in case of emergencies.
<b>Basic Amenities</b>	Safe drinking water, clean washrooms and healthcare facilities at the workplace.
	Panchayat or relevant government bodies to conduct regular water quality checks.
<b>Grievance Redressal Mechanism</b>	Plant to set up a representative platform for workers to raise their issues without fearing job-loss and regularly engage with workers in a transparent manner to understand their challenges.
<b>Compensation &amp; Insurance</b>	Contractor to provide compensation to workers in case of workplace accident for their recovery and overall well-being.

<sup>1</sup> The workers voiced that, at present, their wages, which are paid by the contractors, are not being disbursed on time. As a solution, the workers proposed that the plant's administration should directly manage the payment process.

<sup>2</sup> Defined under Payment of Bonus Act 1965.

<sup>3</sup> It was noted that when a safety kit becomes defective, the plant does not offer a replacement. To ensure their safety, workers get a new kit at their own expense.

<sup>4</sup> Despite ESI deductions from the workers' bank accounts, ESI cards have not been issued, resulting in barriers to access facilities.

	In case of workplace injury leading to disablement, workers should be compensated for loss of earning capacity to ensure their well-being and successful rehabilitation.
	Families of workers who have succumbed to illness or accidents outside the workplace to receive pension.
<b>Livelihoods and Skill Development</b>	Locals residing in the plant's vicinity to get the permit to sell their products and set-up small businesses within the plant colonies.
<b>Environmental</b>	Local farmers should be informed of any harmful discharges from the plant to protect their cattle and irrigation lands.
	Plant to take interventions to monitor and reduce air pollution <sup>5</sup> , to address the health concerns of both workers and local residents.
<b>Social Welfare</b>	CSR funds to be utilised only for the development of nearby villages affected by the plant's operations.
	Village infrastructure to be developed, focussing on schools and hospitals.
	Facility of veterinary hospital in nearby villages.
	Electricity and water to the residents of nearby areas.
	Equal education opportunities for the children of workers in the schools of plant's housing colonies.
	Improved teaching practices in government schools in nearby villages.

<b>Long-term Priorities</b>	
<b>Wages</b>	Minimum wages to be periodically revised with inflation.
	Policy to ensure workers' remuneration is determined considering their skills, experience, and expertise.
<b>Rights, Safety, &amp; Security</b>	Limited and regulated practise of contractualisation <sup>6</sup> of work in thermal power plant.
	Stringent compliance measures to ensure the safety and security of workers, including provisions for life and health insurance coverage.
	Participation and representation of the workers in event of dismantling the plant.
<b>Health</b>	Improved state of health facilities to ensure access within convenient distances.

<sup>5</sup> The presence of fly ash in the air has resulted in respiratory issues such as asthma and lung infections, impacting not only the workers but also the villagers of nearby areas. Furthermore, this environmental concern has adversely affected the livestock of the villagers.

<sup>6</sup> Workers reported that contractualisation practice has a detrimental impact on the entitlements of workers, jeopardizing their safety and security.

	Policies to ensure health facilities are planned along with the plant construction to address prospective health issues that workers may face.
CSR Fund	Measures to ensure compliance of the guidelines for utilisation of CSR funds so that intended beneficiaries in the affected areas receive the targeted support and assistance they require.
Livelihood Support	Socio-economic assessment of the existing workforce to map their skills, experience, and expertise.
	Receive provisions of financial assistance - low-cost loans to workers in pursuing self-employment opportunities.
	Plant to conduct skill-development programmes for the contractual workers and enhance their capabilities to address the employment challenges.
	Skill-development programmes for women <sup>7</sup> to increase livelihood opportunities to be introduced.
	Plant to prioritise repurposing of unutilised land <sup>8</sup> in a manner which creates employment for worker and benefits local communities.

## Session IV: Exploring the Roles of the Firm, Workers' Union, Contractors, and Government (Group Exercise)

The final segment of the dialogue explored the roles that various entities in the broader landscape of energy transition. Workers were encouraged to select a theme (Firm, Worker Unions, Contractors, Government) that aligned with their preferences, with a representative of CEEP facilitating the discussion. A brief of roles as understood by the respective groups is presented below.

### Role of Firms

- Conduct its operations with utmost efficiency, placing a primary focus on safety and maintenance protocols to ensure profitability and uphold the interests of all stakeholders involved.
- Conduct a socioeconomic assessment of the existing workforce mapping their skills, experience, and expertise.
- Engage in the development of the capacity of its existing workforce, enhancing their skills and competencies.
- Ensure that all contractors operate in compliance with relevant laws and regulations, including the Factory Act and the Boilers Act.

<sup>7</sup> In the event of livelihood disruption, families can better cope with the associated burdens, ensuring overall economic stability and the well-being of the families involved.

<sup>8</sup> Specifically focusing on restoration of affected agricultural land.



- Establish provisions to ensure contracts are awarded based on the quality of work and skills and expertise of workmen.
- Ensure timely release of funds to contractors<sup>9</sup>.
- Monitor the safety and compliance of the contractor.

### **Role of Government**

- Reinforce and enhance compliance mechanisms within relevant departments, including the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB) and the Labour Commission.
- Formulate a comprehensive policy plan to ensure job insecurity during energy transition. This plan should strategically address concerns by providing support for skill development and training initiatives. Furthermore, it must efficiently identify both directly and indirectly affected categories of individuals.
- Facilitate an open and accessible mechanism towards a transparent and equitable approach addressing grievances among contractual or informal workers, and thereby ensure equal participation of all concerned individuals.
- Focused commitment towards the establishment and enhancement of ESI hospitals and educational programs.
- Introduce an updated Minimum Wage Policy that considers variables such as inflation, skill levels, and other pertinent considerations, thereby acknowledging the skills, experience and needs of the workers.
- Formulate a policy that prioritises consensus among all the involved stakeholders by ensuring that every single viewpoint and concern is taken into account, thereby promoting transparency and inclusivity in the energy transition process.

### **Role of Contractors**

- Comply with all relevant rules and regulations as per the law, including disbursement of bonus as per the act.
- Comply with safety regulations and timely provide quality PPEs to the workers.
- Adhere strictly to supplying jaggery to workers<sup>10</sup>.
- Advocate for a per annum revision in wages with plant, taking into account the skills, expertise, or experience of the workforce<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Frequent delays in payments from the plant's administration to contractors lead to delayed payments to workers.

<sup>10</sup> The consumption of jaggery by TPP workers aids in cleansing specific substances from the lungs. It is the responsibility of contractual workers to supply jaggery, as mentioned in the general conditions, Section 16.03 of the contract of work order which says, "The contractor shall have to arrange and distribute GUR to the eligible workers working in dust polluted area as per rules."

<sup>11</sup> Contractors usually struggle to find experienced skilled workers willing to work for minimum wages. This situation often leads to either compromising on work quality or necessitates that workers do overtime on a daily basis to earn better wages.

- Contractors must engage in negotiations with the plant's administration to secure timely fund disbursement.

### Role of Workers' Unions

- Engage in dialogue and negotiate with the plant's administration or contractors for the provision of safety kits and appropriate work tools or equipment for all workers.
- Monitor compliance with safety regulations and other labour laws on timely disbursement of wages and bonuses by the firm and the contractor.
- Advocate for the provisions to support workers during times of illness or injuries to provide financial assistance to the families of workers.
- Engage in a dialogue with the plant to provide basic amenities such as safe drinking water and toilets to the workers.
- Negotiate for representation of unions at all levels of decision and policy-making to safeguard the interests of workers.



### Key Observations and Commentary

It is not surprising that workers of thermal power plants are deeply occupied by the challenges and concerns of the present. The challenges of safety and poor working conditions plague all workers. Contractual workers find themselves further marginalised as they have little options but to work for minimum wages in an industry that systemically doesn't value their skills and experience. The frequent delay in wages of already marginalised workers is an act of

oppression. The ability of workers to organise and assert their rights is low, and that too varies significantly across thermal power plants.

Based on our research, experience, and engagement with TPP workers and worker unions, their ability to participate in energy transition discourse is fairly limited. Such possibilities are further diminished by the absence of any formal transition management discourse at the firm-level. While we, at CEEP, refrain ourselves from advocating solutions, it is our firm belief that understanding and acknowledgement of systemic issues plaguing the TPP workers itself unveils many pathways towards a just transition.

## **About the Organisers**

### **Centre for Energy, Environment and People (CEEP)**

Centre for Energy, Environment & People (CEEP) is a Jaipur-based human-centric research and policy advocacy initiative driving critical research and fostering democratic coalitions for low carbon transition and climate justice.

We work at the intersection of energy, environment, and people to enable institutional response, investments and political shift towards clean energy and sustainable practices. As an institution, we prioritise addressing socio-economic disparities and vulnerabilities faced by disadvantaged individuals and groups through inclusive and representative policy action.

### **Centre for Labour Research and Action (CLRA)**

Centre for Labour Research and Action (CLRA) promotes workers' rights in the vast informal sector economy of India. It seeks to facilitate the organization of workers into trade unions that can take up the struggle for decent wages and improved work conditions. It undertakes policy advocacy with the state so that workers receive their due entitlements.

## Annexure I: Agenda of the Roundtable Convening

DATE & TIME: 9:30 AM – 4:30 PM, 9 December 2023			
VENUE: Conference Hall, Rajasthan Adult Education Association, Jaipur			
Time	Topic		Speaker
10:00-11:00	Agenda setting and introduction session		Moderated by Nikita Tiwari and Simran Grover
11:00-12:00	Session 1	Presentation of KSTPS case-study and reflections from respective regions	Nikita Tiwari and Manideep Gudela
12:00-12:15	Tea Break		
12:15-13:00	Session 2	Presentation of Energy Transition Primer, followed by Q&A	Shivanjali
13:00-13:45	Lunch Break		
13:45-14:00	Briefing of next session		Nikita Tiwari
14:00-14:30	Session 3	Group Exercise I: Mapping short-term and long-term priorities	Moderated by Team
14:30-15:00	Briefing of group exercise I		
15:00-15:15	Tea Break		
15:15-15:45	Session 4	Group Exercise II: Mapping role of different agencies (State, Firm and Worker Unions)	Moderated by Team
15:45-16:30	Briefing of group exercise II & closing remarks		Moderated by Nikita Tiwari