

An employee of Goa's electricity department, Krishna Pawar, variously described as an 'assistant linesman' or a 'lines helper', was killed in the last week of November, electrocuted while climbing down an electricity pole in Siolim after doing some repairs. 'Action' was immediately announced by the government. As announced by Sudin Dhavalikar, Power Minister, this 'action' included a suspension of the linesman who was Pawar's superior, placing a junior engineer in the same office under scrutiny, and setting up an enquiry by a 'high-powered committee'. Dhavalikar further added that the dead man's family would receive compensation 'according to the norms' in two months, along with a job for the widow which he said he personally guaranteed.

For this government, this is indeed a lot of 'action'. Because Krishna Pawar was not the first lines worker to die in Goa, nor even the first this year - he is reportedly the fifth to die this year in Goa. Yes, five electricity workers died on the job here since the beginning of 2023, all of them electrocuted while checking electricity lines. And *no* action taken till now.

Now the government has suddenly woken up, to boast of 'action taken'. But is this action for real? Like, why the delay of two months to get compensation? To allow the media interest to die off, so nobody will notice if compensation is actually received? And how is the family supposed to survive for two months? Dhavalikar did not bother to explain. Perhaps he thinks that everybody has big reserves of wealth like he himself, to rely on for those short intervals in between ministerial berths? Doesn't he know what people in his own electricity department earn? The kind of hierarchy of salary and work - with practically no work and lots of comforts at his end, and life-taking work with meagre returns at the other? The latter is where Krishna Pawar was positioned, in a job that required only two years of experience working on electricity lines, and was usually on contract which means that it paid crumbs. A job whose safety was supposedly protected by multiple rules and regulations, backed by a scientific knowledge of electricity that goes back more than a hundred years, but which, in India - like all other rules pertaining to the well-being of workers - are rarely implemented on the ground.

How is the shunting out of a linesman and the prople into a junior engineer (JE) going to make a difference here, especially when the four deaths before this were presumably not under these particular individuals? Nor are these five of 2023 the first deaths on the job - Goa's Electricity Department has actually become a byword for deaths on the job. Last year too, there were cases of deaths by electrocution of linesmen, one of which led to the announcement of a 'departmental enquiry' which has clearly made no difference. In 2020, three lines helpers were killed and five injured when a truck containing electric poles in which they were also travelling - linesmen and lines helpers don't get free cars like the Power Minister - turned turtle.

So, isn't the current action just the usual scapegoating of those considered unimportant, when it is obvious that there is a much bigger problem here, something utterly callous and rotten, not to mention systemic? And when it is systemic, a problem of the whole system, won't the rot have started right at the top which is where all the decisions are being taken?

India is a land of occupational deaths, with 45,000 such deaths annually, which account for a whopping 45% of such deaths in the world in 2015, according to one study. According to another of a few years ago, 48,000 workers die on the job here annually. A recent BBC article by Archana Shukla used the phrase 'factories of death' to describe workplaces which take minimal care to protect their employees and do not get pulled up by the authorities.

Discussing the case of an electronics-manufacturing unit in Delhi where 27 people died in a fire in May 2022, Shukla pointed out that injuries and deaths at work in India rarely result in compensation from employers; governments prefer to even offer compensation at times themselves rather than getting the employers to pay. And the grieving families themselves have no hopes of getting justice from the system, nor the staying power to fight, nor the backing of unions; and so remain quiet.

Things are no better in government-run enterprises, as the death of Krishna Pawar shows. Such incidents are usually termed 'accidents', like the recent trapping of the 41 workers in Uttarakhand inside a collapsed tunnel, part of the huge Char Dham National Highway Project. The workers were ironically finally rescued, after nearly 3 harrowing weeks, by 'rat-hole miners', who themselves belong to the most vulnerable and poorly-paid of communities. According to Impulse, a non-profit that campaigns for the safety of rathole miners, 225 died on the job between 2007 and 2014 before the practice was banned. In Uttarakhand meanwhile, Rs 50,000 was announced by the government as a reward for each rathole miner who took part in the rescue operation, but it has yet to reach them.

The Bangalore Metro is another example of a huge and prestigious project where 38 workers - mostly from among the lowest-paid contract employees - have died so far, without any action at all being taken against officials in charge of the works.

Nationalist sorts - especially the Hindutva brigade - speak of Shah Jahan cutting off the hands of the builders of the Taj Mahal because he did not want anything like that to be ever built again. This is actually a myth, because it is known that Shah Jahan intended to build an equally - or more - grand tomb for himself as a mirror image of the Taj, and it is pretty obvious that the king would want all his experienced workers on the job.

But our Hindutvawadis keep repeating such myths, when what is happening now is worse. Indians are being killed at work, regularly and systematically, in a time when few 'accidents' are really accidents - they are the result of known issues and problems which are being

ignored. Like the risks of the massive road and railway projects, and other haphazard 'development', in the Himalayan region has been known for a long while, with the latest tunnel disaster being the last in a string of 'natural disasters' hitting the region in just this one year. There are actually hardly any 'natural disasters' that come unpredicted today, which means that they are really, directly or indirectly, human-induced. That's why the powers-that-be prefer not to get any predictions done at all, besides quietly ignoring the existing rules and guidelines, and even diluting these whenever possible. Shukla points out that that India is revamping its safety laws - to make them less protective. Earlier a factory with over 10 workers needed a safety committee. Now only factories with over 250 workers need them. How many factories have over 250 workers in this era of decentralized and scattered sweatshop labour? Hardly any, which means that most are out of this regulation.

The result of it all is that, if anything horrible happens, as it surely will, you can shamelessly claim, like Sudin Dhavalikar, that it was an accident.

There is no shame at the top in India, and no accountability either. Responsibility is taken by bosses only for successes, not failures. Hence the suspension of two low-level employees, which, as everyone knows, is not going to make an iota of difference. In systemic failures, the only solution is to change the system, from the top down. What *really* has to be done for anything to change, therefore, is to first kick out the top guys, beginning with the Power Minister. The minister, along with the top bureaucrats in charge of electricity, should have been out with the very first injury years ago, leave aside the fifth death of this year. This is not a complete solution, of course, but a reasonable start.

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