

Status of Women Affected by Mining in India:

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Background:

India has a predominantly agrarian population dependent on land and forests for its sustenance and livelihood, socially, culturally and economically. Rural and tribal women are the primary actors in agriculture, collection of forest produce, in livestock management apart from nurturing their families. It has been accepted as an undisputed fact that women, rural and tribal, have a very intimate and symbiotic relationship with the ecology around them as they are untenably linked to the natural resources. It is important that this link between women and environment is understood when development paradigms are visualised by governments and societies to improve socio-economic situations. However, it is also a reality that women have been most often alienated from conceptions of development and their close association with their environment is even further ignored.

Mining in India:

In India, as in most Asia-Pacific countries, exploitation of land for mineral resources has a long history of abuse and plunder. Mining has been a focal industry in all the Five Year Plans of the country and it could not be perceived as anything but 'development' in demanding people's forfeiture of their lands for 'national prosperity'. Most minerals and mining operations are found in forest regions, which are also the habitat for tribal (indigenous) communities. India being a vast country, the history and status of mining varies from region to region. Starting from rat hole mining, small legal and illegal mining, to large-scale mining mostly by the public sector and since the 90's by the private sector's participation, there are a wide range of problems and conflicts in relation to mining. Especially, the problems of local communities, displaced or affected by mining have had far reaching consequences.

Status of Women in India:

The gender divide and exploitation of women in India has a history of female infanticide, dowry deaths, unequal wages, high levels of illiteracy and mortality, caste-based discrimination and other social evils, especially in mainstream Hindu societies. A look at the literacy figures should drive home this point – while the literacy rate for total Indian population is about 52.75% for male and 32.17% for female, the literacy levels among Scheduled Caste women is a mere 19% and for Scheduled Tribe women is 14.50%. Particularly in the mineral rich states female literacy is abysmally poor – 3.46%, 6.88%, 8.29% and 11.75% for Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Jharkhand respectively.

Impact of Mining on Women:

Given this background of women's status, one can easily surmise the condition of women displaced and affected by mining. At a broad level, there are three situations of mining –

areas proposed for mining (greenfields), existing mines and closed/abandoned mines. This paper specifically focuses on the experiences of women displaced and affected by mining in different sectors and the problems of women in abandoned/closed mines.

In India, people displaced by various projects, is estimated to be 50 million and of these, approximately 10 million have been displaced by mining projects alone. Seventy five percent of people displaced have not yet received any form of compensation or rehabilitation. In the case of women the issues related to displacement primarily affects their control over land and other resources.

Land and Forests:

With regard to land, women have no legal rights over lands or natural resources. The Land Acquisition Act of India is draconian and obsolete and gives over-riding powers to the state to encroach onto people's lands for any 'public purpose' including mining. The country to this day does not have any Relief & Rehabilitation policy as a constitutional safeguard for people. While the local communities are not consulted for take over of their lands for any projects, the women are the last to be informed and neither are their consent or objections ever taken into account.

Testimonies of women from coal mining areas of Orissa (Talcher) show that displacement and loss of land were the most serious problems affecting their lives, as their link to livelihood, economic and social status, health and security all depended on land and forests.

Whenever villages have been displaced or affected, women have been forced out of their land based work and pushed into menial and marginalised forms of labour as maids and servants, as construction labourers or into prostitution, which are highly unorganised and socially humiliating. While traditional livelihood systems based on land gave them an important role in agriculture, collection of forest produce, management of livestock and related activities, the immediate offshoot of mining has been a total destruction of this role for women both from land-owning communities and agricultural labourers.

Women displaced by mining, have lost the rights to cultivate their traditional crops, and forests being cut down for mining, they are unable to collect forest produce for consumption or for sale. The only access to health care for women, which is the forest rich in medicinal plants, is destroyed leaving them without this important natural support system. Since medical services and medicines have to be purchased (if available), women neglect their illnesses, as they never have the cash. However, a large part of the miners' wages are spent on medical expenses as companies do not pay for this, and as a result, they are caught in a vicious web of indebtedness dragging the whole family into bonded labour. The situation of miners in Rajasthan is a classic example of this situation.

The cash flow that tribal and rural women have access to, by sale of forest produce and by breeding livestock, has disappeared. They have been forced to walk miles away from their villages leaving behind their children, either to collect forest produce or find wage labour and have had to sell away all their cattle. In many situations there is seasonal

migration leading to work insecurity, breaking up of family relations and exposing them to various social hazards.

Economic Dependence:

It has always been the men who received any form of rehabilitation either in cash or as employment which has led to complete 'idleness' in the economic sphere for women while they wait the whole day long, for their men to return from the mine-pits. When some of the men received employment, the women were forced to manage the land (not lost for mining), and agricultural activities on their own. In such situations, their drudgery has increased, and has led to situations of share-cropping and gradually to mortgaging of land.

Women from land-owning communities have been forced into wage labour, which is a socially and economically humiliating shift. Most of them depend solely on the wages of the male members as mining by nature of its activity does not permit women to participate. Women are also forced into petty trades or other businesses but the social taboos of participation in these sectors, their lack of literacy or skills, exposes them to further exploitation in these trades.

Displaced tribal communities who never received any form of compensation or rehabilitation, have migrated to bordering states in search of land and forests. A very clear example is the migration of tribals from Orissa to the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh where the Khonds had to occupy lands high up on the hills or encroach forest lands at the risk of being 'criminals' in the eyes of law.

They have cut down vast stretches of forest for survival and face the harassment of the forest department every year and are accused of practicing 'unsustainable' agriculture like shifting cultivation. Women, old and young, have to keep moving with their little children due to multiple displacements. Some of them who have settled closer to the tourist towns had to shift to construction work, petty trades or prostitution as a means of survival.

Women as Mine Labour:

Where displaced women were absorbed into mining related activities, it is mostly in the small private or unorganized sector where women are the first to be retrenched, have no work safety measures, are susceptible to serious health hazards which also affects their reproductive health, and are exposed to sexual exploitation. The largescale mines, which are shifting to technology dependence, have no scope for women's participation as they are illiterate, lack technical skills and face cultural prejudices. Where women formed 30-40% of the workforce in mining, they have been reduced to less than 12% and in the coal sector alone, to 5%. Schemes like VRS have been thrust upon women so as to retrench them first.

While the largescale mining has no space for women, the small-scale sector absorbs them only as contract or bonded labour under highly exploitative conditions. Wages are always less than those for men, they do not get a paid holiday even one day in a week or

during pregnancy or childbirth, no work equipment is provided, there are no toilets or work facilities. The women are exposed to the exploitation, physical and sexual, of the mine-owners, contractors and other men. They have to walk back miles to return to their villages and are vulnerable to assault on the way.

The women suffer from several occupational illnesses right from respiratory problems, silicosis, tuberculosis, leukemia, arthritis, to reproductive problems. They work with toxic and hazardous substances without any safety. Women living in mining communities eke out their livelihood by scavenging on the tailings and wastes dumps, often illegally, and are constantly harassed by company guards, local mafia or police. They are at the mercy of local traders for selling their ores.

Whereas women could take their infants to the fields or to the forest earlier, women working in mines have to leave their children behind at homes, unattended. If they do manage to take the children, they have to expose them to high levels of dust and noise pollution, are susceptible to accidents due to blasting or falling into mine pits while playing, etc.

Social and cultural impacts of resettlement:

The living conditions of women displaced by mining - their private and cultural spaces, infrastructure facilities, protection from social customs, etc - have serious negative impacts reducing them into helpless situations. The resettled tribals of bauxite, coal, iron-ore mines in Jharkhand, Orissa, Chattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh are crammed into badly constructed dingy houses, which are of poor quality, have no water, toilets, electricity, open spaces, poor drainage, etc and is a totally ugly contrast to their earlier traditional settlements. The women in these resettled colonies have no facilities for bath or toilet as the open fields and forests have disappeared. Neither does the new system provide them with space for recreational or socializing needs.

The inflow of non-tribal populations and the loss of economic status for the tribal women brought in degrading social customs. While the custom of bride price is followed among traditional tribal communities, it has shifted to Hindu systems of dowry, extravagant marriage ceremonies, etc. Social evils like wife-battering, alcoholism, indebtedness, physical and sexual harassment, prostitution, polygamy, desertion, etc have emerged in many places. Human rights violations on women miners or women affected by mining have shockingly increased, actively encouraged by state and corporate powers.

Violence and Atrocities Against Women:

The most hard-hitting reality of a mining town is the predominant existence of violence against women – violence by the men within the community, by men from outside who are truck drivers, traders, migrant miners and others, by company hired mafia, staff, visitors, by the politicians, and most of all by the state machinery. It is a well known fact that in the coal mining belt, for instance, the nexus between the coal mafia, mining companies, political parties and government machinery is too close for any comfort of the communities. Prostitution, trafficking and other forms of abuses on women are actively promoted by all these collective forces making it impossible for women to get any

justice. The social and behavioural deviance in mining towns as a result of mixed and external populations invading culturally cohesive communities where companies have done precious little to contain these trends has thrown women into totally inhibiting situations. Besides, the fact that the state has no earnestness to pursue issues of atrocities on women has only encouraged mining companies and mining societies to abuse women with wantonness. The truth is also that the companies have neither the sensitivity nor the remedies to prevent such shifts in social patterns towards women.

What is however, most alarming, is the growing corporate violence against women in communities protesting for their rights in mining regions or fighting against entry of mining companies into their villages. With the support of the state machinery, mining companies are using brutal methods of suppressing people's protests where women are also not spared. The incidence of police firing, killings, false criminal cases and harassment of communities especially on women has ingloriously increased. There have been instances where women have been locked up in police custody even when they have infants to nurse. If development has to stoop down to levels of torturing women, the nature of development through projects like mining have to be seriously questioned.

Status and experiences of women in closed/abandoned mines:

The life of the women living in the gold mines of Kolar, Karnataka, proposed for closure and under a legal tussle between the government and the union, is a stark evidence of the exhaustible 'sustainability' in mining. While the workers are protesting that the mines continue, the government has declared it a bankrupt and exhausted mine. As the laid-off men remain idle, the women are pushed out of their homes to eke out a living for their families. The whole mining town sees women and young girls leaving their homes at four in the morning to travel 100-150 kms away to the cities for work as maids, factory labour, etc and return late in the night. In a span of one year since closure, there have been atleast 35 deaths in this small town, due to stress and trauma, thus increasing the pressure on the women to support their families. The government and the company have deliberately washed their hands off any responsibilities towards the future of the miners except for offering a small compensation. The land is unfit for any other form of usage by the local communities. In such a situation, it is despair all the way for the women.

Experience of negotiation with the government, industry and financial institutions:

In India, the experience of communities displaced or affected by mining in demanding or negotiating for proper resettlement or for redressing grievances has been mainly with the public sector. The fact that 75% of those displaced are still not rehabilitated is clear evidence of the lack of motivation of the government or the industries in implementing rehabilitation programmes.

The entry of large private industries and multinationals has only just begun since the '90's and hence the communities have not yet had experience dealing with such macro players. However, the kind of influence being wielded by the mining industry to lobby for changes in policies and legislations affecting mining, has been tremendous in such a short span of their presence or proposed entry.

A few Cases:

The Struggle in Kasipur:

Having seen the fate of women affected by mining in other parts of their own state of Orissa, the tribal women in Kasipur are fighting tooth and nail, to oppose them. The local struggle called Prakritiko Sampadano Surakhya Parishad (PSSP), where the people are resisting a bauxite plant which is a joint venture of Alcan (Canada), Norsk Hydro (Norway –this has recently withdrawn) and Indal (India) since 1992 has faced state repression and corporate abuse. The company, which brought in non tribal mafia, political goons, and also adopted tactics of consultation with the aid of development agencies like BPD (Business Partners for Development), has only created tensions and rivalries between the tribal communities who will lose their lands and the non-tribals who entertain hopes of employment. Women have stood up to their cause and refused to relent to any pressure from the company. Even after a police firing where one tribal woman was killed and several others were injured, the women have not allowed the company to enter their villages.

The Case of Rio Tinto in India:

The abuse of communities by multinational corporations is growing dangerously. Rio Tinto has entered as a joint venture in Keonjhar (Orissa) for iron-ore mining. This is a scheduled area which is protected by the Indian Constitution under the Fifth Schedule law stating that no tribal lands should be alienated to non tribals. The Samatha Judgement of the Supreme Court of India (1997) reiterated this safeguard in the context of mining and declared that all private mining is null and void in these areas. Yet, Rio Tinto has been given a lease here, which implies that the multinational corporations are influencing our weak governments to violate their own laws at the cost of social responsibilities. While the fate of women displaced by mining has been disastrous, there is an imminent threat to largescale displacement of tribal women in future, due to these drastic changes in laws.

The Collective Voices of local struggles:

Local struggles against exploitation from mining are gaining strength as the situation of those who have undergone the ‘development’ by mining is starkly visible for all. When the government has not taken any serious action towards reducing the educational, vocational, social, economic and gender disparities in this highly populous country, the entry of large multinational mining conglomerates only enhances the women’s vulnerability to macro policy changes negatively affecting their lives. It is difficult to expect that tripartite agreements between communities and particularly women, governments and industries can have a level playing ground considering the illiteracy, lack of information for communities and lack of transparency from government and industries.

Women and Mining Network in India:

We in India have a national alliance called **mines, minerals & PEOPLE**, to bring together mining struggles. An important focus of the alliance is the gender related problems of mining. A network of women in the mining struggles is emerging to

confront mining from a gender perspective. The participation of women in local movements is a growing evidence of their realization and determination to assert.

We, from the national alliance have three important focal issues with regard to women and mining:

- Demand for moratorium on mining in all Greenfield areas
- Gender justice and protection of the rights of women mine workers in existing mines
- Corporate accountability towards all the losses faced by women, both in existing and past mining projects

Conclusions:

In traditional societies, nature is not put up for sale or negotiation. Neither are women negotiable commodities. The theories of economics start from respect for nature and the interdependence of man and nature. It is based on balancing man's (and women's) needs with ecological sustainability, which is the primary principle of extracting natural resources. In today's situation of economics, the mining industry and governments have grossly violated this principle. Economics starts with over extraction of one natural resource (minerals) at the cost of other resources for the sustainability of the industry and not of communities. It starts with the assumptions that development requires compromising on social justice, especially when it comes to women. Most of the countries which have allowed their lands to be exploited for minerals have some of the worst indices of human development. They also have the worst indices of gender justice.

From a gender perspective, what does mining have to offer women - atrocities, violence, degradation of social and economic status, depriving them of any decent livelihood and which makes them powerless compared to their traditional systems, however modest. The MMSD report of IIED in its section on women, admits the widespread negative impacts of mining on women and offers only solutions like 'naturalising' mining societies, by which they mean that mining companies should encourage miners to live with their families in the mining towns. It urges women to participate in community programmes of the mining companies. However, for the women from the communities in India a few bags of seeds, a few packets of medicines, a training programme on micro-credit or an awareness camp on health are no compensation to what they have lost for mining or what future mining has to offer to them. Therefore, they have an important challenge to pose – can a gender audit be carried out in mining regions and prove how sustainable mining is to women?