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When the Mines Come: Some Observations

Kuntala Lahiri Dutta

Abstract

The core concern of this study is to understand in a wider context the socio-cultural and environmental impact of mines on indigeneous communities as they perceive it by analyzing their testimonies, which were collected from a representative range of individuals belonging to both, ST and SC, affected by mining.

Introduction

In India, growing concern at the economic plight of the indigenous communities in mining regions has led to several studies. Those affected by mining usually receive some form of compensation, yet they continue to sink deeper into poverty. This fact of economic, social and cultural impoverishment caused by mining and the links between social discontinuity and economic marginalization have been noted. The need of the hour is to develop greater understanding of the wider context in which the indigenous communities are operating so that more effective ways to assist them can be developed. The present enquiry is an effort in that direction. The scope of this analysis is restricted to reviewing the socio-cultural and environmental consequences of mining as perceived by those affected in the Jharkhand state.

Methodology

Testimonies were collected from a representative range of individuals belonging to indigenous communities (both SC and ST) affected by mining. These were analysed to draw inferences. It is assumed that the social memory system is more effective in determining environmental change.

The Problem Stated

From historical studies one knows what has happened at the official level of mining in the public domain: legislation, implementation, facts and figures, agitations, the intervention by organized movements, pronouncements by political leaders etc.

What is not known are the things that happened in the private domain, on the inside of the people involved. Such an insight is important if one needs to understand the impact of developmental processes on the individual's life, especially those that are difficult to quantify.

In recent years, the operations have increasingly shifted from underground to open-cast mining, the latter having a much larger footprint. It is generally assumed that a major reason for underground mines not being cost-effective is because, in India, the voids, left behind after extraction of the coal have to be filled up with sand afterwards. If good practice environmental precautions are adopted in areas of open-cast mining, such as filling up of surface voids and land re-contouring and revegetation, then it is likely that the open-casts too would not prove to be such boons. The increased thrust towards open-cast mining may, therefore, be ill-founded. Open-cast mines use up considerable amounts

of land and thus are unsustainable ecologically and socially in a densely populated country like India. The average life span of a colliery will depend on the extent of the extractable resource and the mining rate. Typically, it is about 20 years or more for both open-cast and underground operations.

By far the major use of coal is for electricity production. Demand for electricity outstrips supply, and keeps growing rapidly. Consequently, the requirement for coal is ever increasing. It is in the light of this situation, that we have to deal with the problems that have arisen in respect of adverse effects on *adivasi* and other village communities.

Above all, the recent changes in the Indian economy have made possible the existence of other players – such as multinational mining companies entering the mining sector. The 'creation of wealth' that followed in the region has not benefitted the weaker, more disadvantaged and "the poorer of the local communities. On the one hand,.large urban centres like Dhanbad, Ranchi, Bokaro and Jamshedpur have come up, on the other, massive displacement has led to dispossession and disruption of communities. This loss is entirely of the *adivasis*, and that is why it constitutes such a threat to their existence. They have no role – except as manual labour at the mercy of the mining administration – in the entire mineral resource management process that is now going on in Jharkhand.

In Jharkhand, conflicts are often interconnected in that competing histories frequently involve contests over geographical space. Both are fundamental components of identity, individual and collective, for *adivasi* communities. Mining is location specific, people are long settled on places to be mined, in possession of both natural and created assets. Although rarely considered so, these people are stakeholders in the mining as much as anyone else.

Their permanent domicile is in the mine area, they have given their land, their village and natural resources for mining. The opening of a mine can have a number of negative social impacts: involuntary displacement of people from home and/or land, the destruction of the economic survival base of a village community, the destruction of publicly used common natural resources which have supported these subsistence communities.

1. Socio-cultural impact of mining on indigeneous communities, knowledge and cultural values is related to the following:
   a. Common Property Resources (CPR) – Community losses.
   b. Changes in social life, festivals, marriage customs, and cultural values, etc.
   c. Change in clothing, food, dance, music, language and work schedule, etc.
   d. Impact on older generation and traditional unity.
   e. Lack of traditional education, loss of self-dependence, pride, identity and trust.
   f. Loss of orientation, great increase in the use of alcohol.
   g. Herbal medicines and change in use.

The societys' changing

What was the tribal's life before? Do *adivasis* remember their past as idyllic, optimal situations?

Not necessarily. Asked what was life in the *zamindari* period, the tribal Soren replied: "there were a lot of incidents. There was a big forest, if a policeman came to the village, the villagers would run away towards the jungle. There was exploitation. I have seen that they used to beat the people with sticks. They used to call all the village people to cultivate the *zamindar's* land and help transplant the paddy. We took our own oxen to plough his fields and the women used to go to do transplanting. Until we finished his work, we were not allowed to do our own ...

there were also *mahajans* then. They too were cheating us. My father had taken a loan and he was repaying it, but I completed it. I have seen that a man spent his entire life repaying his loan to the moneylenders, then his son had to complete the loan. Generation after generation kept on paying the interest on .the debt but the original loan remained where it was.

The tribal replied, "Our history, our culture shows that we never touch anyone's feet to greet them. Our culture is that when a guest comes, we will keep a pot of water near them, greet them first and then wash their feet. Among our friends and company we are easy, so touching feet is alright...Nowadays people's understanding is different. Nowadays selfishness has entered the people...

... I had expectations that ponds, roads and electricity would come to our area. There is a lot of wealth in Jharkhand state. I have seen that due to the mines, the people are not hungry in Jharia and Dhanbad. The people around the mines earn their living by getting jobs and by the coal sale depot. Everybody in the mines has bought motorbikes, transistors, etc. We allowed mines to be opened thinking that there would be jobs for generations and generations. But the tribals who got jobs are destroyed by drinking alcohol. Earlier, we were producing maize, *gondli, mardna*, etc. when the land had not been destroyed, people cared for it."

The traditional social structures of *adivasi* communities are centred around their extended family, tribal clan or subgroup and their hamlet, which are the elements defining their primary community. The large-scale coal mining projects have affected the social life of the people, have failed to give them appropriate or even formal representation in the decision-making process. Moreover the *adivasis* have become too demoralized by the impact of the mines and resettlement to take any advantage of the new situation.

Jublee Manjhi of Phusri, Saiga Tola notes with sadness that the young people in the village are no longer interested in the old customs of song and dance, and he blames TV and alcohol for this.

Adivasi communities have complex rituals and festivals, and often these are closely interlinked with either livelihood or annual rhythm of life with the passing of seasons. Their festivals were a celebration of life and almost every narrator looks back at those days with deep sorrow and regret. Manbahal belonging to Karmali Tribe in Chiryatand says "There is a group, but it is not like before. The youths don't pay any attention to it. When we ask them to dance *Jhoomar* and sing before the *Karma* branch they don't agree. They tell me. what do you know about anything? So I sigh and say, you are right, *babu,* what do I know?"

Jharni Devi too bitterly regrets the way social customs have changed in her community. *Sarhul* is no longer celebrated the way it used to be before the mines came and marriages have become more expensive. "Now you have tents and speakers and this is expensive. For the poor it is not feasible".

There is a sense of continuity, being in *the adivasi* way of thought, and the sense of elapsed time is very different, as if it all happened yesterday. Local people have a close association with the areas they live in and this strong understanding of the land allows them to identify issues, which may be overlooked by outsiders. In addition, local people have a historical perspective of the area. By drawing on local knowledge, mining development can achieve results that are relevant to the needs, values and resources of the local community.

Jharni spoke poignantly about what her village has lost due to the coal mines. "Before the opening of the mine, our village was a beautiful village like a newly wedded bride of *Bharat Mata.* There was peace and happiness, there were flowing springs of water, fields full of many

types of crops. All around was plenty of forest and with these things all around, the village looked like a blooming flower. After the opening of the mines everything has been lost and all our peace and happiness has been snatched away by the mining company."

Jharni talks about the changes that have taken place in the community over the years, and in particular since the arrival of the mines. She explained how life has become harder than before, how because of their lack of education they were not in a position to argue for better terms and just accepted what the company offered for the land. They also lost the forest, which was important to the livelihood of the community. Fruit and *mahuwa* trees also provided income and Jharni says they were not compensated for these. She explained: "We did not know that we were supposed to get compensation for all the trees we had on our land which went into the mine, therefore we did not ask for it."

She says the introduction of a fixed labour wage has affected the social fabric of the community as the villagers no longer help each other out with transplanting and harvesting...

There was a variety of plants and herbs here...

The indigenous communities, through their occupation of certain territories for thousands of years, have developed an intimate knowledge of the local ecology. The local flora and fauna provides them with food, and are important for their survival in providing essential medicines. The coallmines have failed to open up opportunities for these communities, while usurping their traditional bases of subsistence. In this way, a whole knowledge system is being lost; a system that teaches us how to live with nature in harmony for generation after generation. In particular, the continued poverty and exclusion of indigenous communities force them to rely on traditional medicines and practices to treat illness. This form of local knowledge is very important to them as is indicated below.

Munnu Manjhi has had a number of jobs including loading coal, working on the roads, farming and working for a *sahib* (master). He is knowledgeable about herbal medicines that can be used to treat illness. Although he is over 72 years old, he does some agricultural work and acts as an adviser for the use of herbal medicines and rituals such as *Chawie Panja* (performed to find out the cause of an illness). Such traditional knowledge as that of Munnu's is transferred from one generation to another. Who taught all this to Munnu? He replied, "My *manjhia kaka sasur* (middle uncle-in-law) taught me the use of herbs as medicine. He used to go for *Chela Dhaidan* (a type of dance) and he used to take me with him. He visited and danced from house to house and got maize as gift. *Chela Dhaidan* is *Devi's mantra,* and there are separate *mantras* for each of the three *devis."*

Some of the knowledge of herbal medicines was found in dreams. In Munnu's dream 'an old *jatadhari'* (man with long tresses) told him the medicines for various diseases. Only the medicines for *apsam* and *miry* (epileptic seizures) were learnt from other people.

Many of the things that *adivasis* like Munnu say seem strange and unbelievable to the members of a modern society. But it has to be understood that the *adivasis* have remained marginal to the society and actually it is their culture that gives them their identity. However, development projects all over the world believe in a myth. That of the vast emptiness to be put to use. The low population densities of areas inhabited by indigenous communities allow them to live in balance with their environment.

Maiti Devi of Bhurkhundwa says, "We people get cured with herbal medicines only. We are poor people, so how can we afford to spend thousands of rupees on hospital treatment when we don't even have grain in our house for eating? Whether you are shivering due to cold or due to 'fever, somehow you have to save yourself and so we deal with our sickness with our

own medicine. Those who do not have the money power to save themselves from sickness, they have to depend upon *jari booti* only... we are old people, and we have always taken *jari booti* for our sickness, and even in our childhood our medicines were given to us by our own parents during sickness. The same cannot be done with children of the new generation. They get cured only when they take injections. In the old days, people remained healthy after eating *jari booti. mahuwa* and *kain* and did not fall as sick as the present generation does. They fall sick for one day and they are out of action for a long time."

Maiti is also a popular medicine-woman. Does she sell her medicine for money? "No, we don't sell them for money only, though money is badly needed. We give our medicine and accept anything like maize, *mahuwa, urad dal* (pulses) in exchange. When a person is sick then only he requires medicine, and when he asks then we have to give the medicine. When things are done willingly and happily, then only the cure takes place. Happily he will pay me something, if he is unhappy, we would not like to take anything from him as it will bring us a bad name. If they cannot meet our demand then they will feel that we have done something evil. Women who have children in their laps, and ask for *reetha-madole,* and do not have anything to pay us, we give them what is required, asking them to pay later whatever they can, when the needful has been done. If the desire is fulfilled then definitely they will give us some rice at least. To expect too much from the poor would not be appropriate. It would not be proper for us to make extensive demands."

We can sum up our notes with the words of Bhajhu Ganjhu of Benti, Hargari village: "There were a variety of plants like *mathdhas* for headache, the bark of *karam* tree for fever and leaf and shoots of *sindwar* bark of the *dhhotaha* gave immediate relief from cough if you chewed or ate it. If someone had-large parasites in the stomach, we used something called *gaithi.* We used to eat this as our staple food. Today it has vanished. We can't even get it as medicine. We still go to the jungle but it is very far."

This is a symbolic distance we are now seeing - something most unnatural - between the *adivasis* and their surroundings.

2. Environmental Impact on environmental resources and livelihood are related to the following:

   a. Environmental Issues – toxic elements, loss of forest cover, pollution, erosion, decrease in water table, etc.

   b. Water – River, wells, drinking water-availability and related problems.

   c. Forest Produce – Loss of fodder and fuel wood and related change in lifestyle and cultural links.

   d. Climatic Change – Effect of rains on agriculture.

   e. Coal washery and Colony settlements – its pollution.

   f. Pollution – Air, noise (blasting) and water contamination.

   g. Ecological Imbalance-Destruction of Wildlife, Migratory Corridors.

Where has the jungle vanished?

Somar Soren, 70, of Moya Potanga, Raska Tola (Urimari) says: "The people of this area have not destroyed the jungle. The government has destroyed it. We *adivasis* are a part of the jungle. We have lived by eating the fruits and foods from the jungle. What shall I say? We went to the jungle to collect *saag.* The *dikus* (outsiders) have destroyed the jungle. The poor people lived off the jungle, they gathered wild fruits and collected food to survive. We *adivasis* have fundamental rights to the jungle... We the Santhal people or villagers have not finished the jungle. I have seen that in the underground mines they put wood, they are running trolleys and they use wood (for the tracks). They use it as poles. The jungle is given to the contractors and they cut all the trees.

They have no love for the trees. With the cutting of the jungle the rain also does not come in time. The jungle has become *tand* (barren land). Even the hills have been destroyed. There is only rock in the hills. But even in rock there is wealth. There is coal, gold and everything. We have all the wealth here in our land, only we are not benefitting from that wealth. The forest animals, like tigers, have run away due to the damage to the forest. Earlier, people feared wild animals, now there are two legged animals who have started to destroy the jungle."

Munnu Manjhi, sitting under a big *sakhuwa* tree on the west side of village Lopangtandi, echoed simitar sentiments. Munnu recalled: "there were big forests here. Where we are sitting now, there was a dense forest. There were a lot of wild animals like *sambhar,* wild pigs and deer. But now God knows where they have gone. There were plenty then."

There has been a noticeable loss in forest cover and this has affected the tribal culture and traditional hunt *(Sendra)* and associated customs like the hunt council meeting or *durbaar.* The incoming mines and their managers completely ignore this.

Munnu recalls "At that time people took interest in *Sendra.* Now we don't get any animals. When we went to the Jorakath forest then we used to halt for the night near the Balodar River. At *Sendra we* used to have a big *durbaar* and lots of matters used to be discussed. Even the cases of elopement of boys and girls used to be discussed and decisions were taken by the entire community".

Somar Soren too adds "If there is some kind of dispute, or supposing the *Maahto Mafik* of the two villages are fighting, not listening to reason, then all that will be resolved through *Panchayati* during the hunt. People call this *Lo Kitabir.* Everyone follows *Lo Kitabir.* The decision made there had to be accepted by all. If the guilty does not accept the *Lo Kitabir* rules, then he is excommunicated from the tribe. He may not think it much at the time but when he becomes old and his children grow up, then he'll need his tribe, no?"

Phucha Soren of Potanga thinks that it would have been better if the mine had not come. "Before the mine we felt very good. Clean air used to come from the forest side. Nowadays from the colliery mines, dust is created and we feel very bad. Our clothes get dirtier than what we can afford." With the jungle went away a way of life. Anjhius Beck of Kalyanpur recalls: "There was a big forest earlier. We brought a lot of useful things from the forest. The forest looked good with flowers and fruits and greenery."

Not only food, but the jungle provided other essential needs too: "We got various types of herbal medicines from the forest along with food items like *gaithi* (yam), *thena, khajur, bamboo, sawai* grass, *datun* (twig used for brushing teeth), leaves, etc. We did not have to spend money to get all this. But now we have to spend money for all these things. Now we have to think about going to the forest. If the forest hadn't been destroyed due to the mining, then we would still be getting these things from the forest free of cost. Even now we remember the forest and realize how much we used to benefit from it. We brought *piyar, bel, kaind, kachnar* flower, *dumar, amid, pindar,* etc., from the jungle."

Thus, with the vanishing of the forest, a way of life as well as the identity of the *adivasis* is being wiped out.

Dr. (Ms.) Kuntala Lahiri Dutta
Department of Geography
University of Burdwan
Burdwan (W.B)