

Women in Mining Struggles in India: The Invisibility of Gender Concerns in Mining Struggles

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The brutal transformation of life in all dimensions social, cultural, economic, political and physical - as a result of a mining activity, is felt most agonizingly by the women in the affected communities. Women instinctively, understand deep within themselves, the tragic consequences of losing their spaces and resources. Often they are forced to shift to new economies and it has never occurred to humanity, in the past, that they are a community to consult with and to weigh development from a gender perspective. In brief, they have always been taken for granted when they are displaced, when their bodies are abused, even when they have not experienced any perceptible gains from what mankind has defined as development.

This perspective has so deeply entrenched into the mindset of society that what has happened to the women in the mining regions is completely ignored either by the policy makers or law enforcers or by the consumers while the industry prefers to down-play the consequences. Even for the women, it has never occurred to them that their unexpressed fears, their nauseating experiences, their unquestioned submissions to the might of the mining industry has a deeper injustice and discrimination based on gender. Women have so unconsciously accepted this discrimination that when they are part of a struggle in a mining context, their demands and protests are merely to ensure rights and better opportunities for the men in the communities and rarely anything directly for themselves.

This has been the history of mining struggles everywhere in the world. When the men are laid off, the women take part in large numbers to stop retrenchment of men. When fighting for wages and working conditions, it is for that of the men. When the companies are at their door-steps, they defiantly face the bull dozers to fight for their lands and for the men in the communities to get the jobs, or lands or compensation from the mining companies and from governments. Right from land alienation, displacement, prospecting and extraction of minerals to mine closure women experience a wide range of problems which are gender specific within the larger impacts of mining on the communities as a whole. These problems have to be recognized and addressed by the state, the mining industries and by the civil society and mining struggles themselves.

Women in the Existing and Abandoned Mines: Lessons for the Women in the Greenfields:

For the women living in the mining regions for years, life is a struggle for existence and for dignity of life. When the mines come, they bring with them all the social evils of external societies which may not have been present prior to mining. The socio-cultural disturbances which create situations of conflict and suffering on a daily basis for the women, seriously affect their physical and mental well-being. From a situation where women were pre-occupied with issues related to improved livelihoods and incomes, simple health and infrastructure needs, primary education, etc, in pre-mining conditions, the focus of problems shift to protecting their existing livelihoods and resources, fighting against new forms of diseases and illnesses, coping up with new forms of atrocities and human rights violations and participating in struggles for basic rights. While for the men, the mining companies and governments become their enemies, for the women they have to first cope up with the exploitation of the men from within their communities and households as a result of external influences and changes in social values and

cohesion. For instance, in a workshop organised with adivasi women from mining and non-mining communities, the problems expressed by women in the latter areas related to drinking water, roads, housing, agriculture development, etc (which are common issues of the community as a whole) while those from the former areas identified wife-battering, alcoholism, desertion, unemployment, starvation, gambling, infidelity, AIDS and other such issues as their most critical problems. Hence the struggles of women have taken new forms and dimensions making them defenseless against the onslaught of mining induced exploitation.

When companies close down or abandon the mines, they leave with little respect for cleaning up the land and environment or for any accountability towards its workers and local communities. Here the struggles of women from the mining communities shift to finding new ways of survival for their families as the men are retrenched and do not bring home any income. Here their struggle is for a new life which is alien and uncertain and which forces them out of their homes and to cope up with the prolonged tensions and conflicts between workers and management over closure issues.

Equipped with the exposure and information regarding the above situations, facilitated by voluntary organisations and community struggle groups as much as understanding their own symbiosis with land and forests, many local people's movements are emerging in forest regions where people are threatened by proposed mining projects. The mining industry is hunting for virgin areas for exploitation of mineral resources and given the proposals of private and transnational companies and approvals by central and state governments, the trend is towards opening up new areas (green fields) thickly forested and having vast populations of adivasi communities for large scale mining projects.

Women are increasingly participating in grass-roots movements in opposing the entry of new mining until responsibilities to communities in earlier projects are fulfilled. They are either saying no to mining completely or demanding for proper rehabilitation and compensation before starting the mining projects. It is in this crucial situation of people's movements in mining that both local struggles and organisations supporting struggles have to get sensitized to issues of gender. The problems of women in mining vary between different stages of mining and from different types of mining. Each of these areas has to be studied in greater depth.

There is an urgent need to identify mining issues which concern women, build up the strength and capacities of women in identifying these areas and taking the leadership in mining struggles for focusing on these issues, provide information and enable women to take decisions independently on the nature of development, livelihood, rehabilitation and gender justice they desire, within or without mining. Organisations and civil society also have to get sensitive and lobby for policies which specifically focus on women in mining and women proposed to be affected by mining as this is a sector which has given least priority to women's rights and dignities.

There is a new arena in mining which is fast emerging and will be a crucial area of focus for India in the future, given the aggressive campaigns for propagating this venture by the mining industries. This is called corporate engagement and corporate social responsibility.

Corporate Social Responsibility Engagement with Women

The mining corporates including the World Business Council for Sustainable Development are today making hasty attempts at projecting a human face to their corporate misdeeds under the euphemism 'corporate social responsibility'. By this the industry implies self regulated codes of

conduct and adoption of corporate best practices to reform themselves and mitigate the negative impacts of mining on people and the environment in the future. They have admitted in their project on Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development (MMSD) report that most often local communities gain the least from mining projects and stand to lose their lands, resources and livelihoods apart from facing the risk of mine hazards and pollution even years after the mines are closed.

Therefore, they propose to engage with the local communities to negotiate on issues mainly of rehabilitation and compensation. They are coming forward with development programmes and incentives in lieu of the lands and displacement that would or have resulted from their projects. Governments have shown great interest in this approach of engagement as a means of reducing people's conflicts in mining affected regions.

Today there is an increasing pressure on communities and NGO's (as arbitrators/mediators) to enter into a dialogue and negotiation with the mining industries. Especially where NGO's are concerned the conflict over engagement ranges from positions of co-option, earnest attempts at getting the best for the communities they work with, a soft option in contrast to supporting a direct people's movement, or simply a means of survival and livelihood for the NGO's themselves (which includes international and bilateral financial institutions, donor/funding agencies, universities, academic and research institutions, consulting firms, intermediary organisations, advocacy groups, community based development organisations, trade unions and the like).

Where NGO's are not forthcoming to join this process, a popular mechanism being adopted by the industry is to themselves create NGO's and community development organisations which perform the tasks of consulting the communities and implementing their programmes. A very recent example is the Utkal Rural Development Society (URDS) of Utkal Alumina Project in Kasipur, Orissa.

Given this context of engagement what are the implications when communities are drawn into this process and particularly what is the nature and impact on the women in the communities when negotiating either with governments or with mining companies. First we have to understand the grass-roots situation in a country like India. Most mining projects are largescale occupying vast areas of forest and people's lands in rural and tribal regions of the country. These are areas where women are largely illiterate with literacy levels ranging from anywhere between 2% and 17%.

Women in the mainstream Indian society are vulnerable to social, cultural and economic discriminations and deprivations even in the traditional form of economy. They have no access to information, resources or to decision making either in the political or economic arenas. The country is still battling with age old gender based exploitation and has not achieved remarkable results in ensuring either education, health, basic amenities or to issues of equality or of safeguarding their rights and lives. It has not yet ensured consensus on pressing subjects like reservations for women, their participation in panchayats and other democratic processes, their right to equal education and employment opportunities, equal pay and wages or in eradicating child labour or female infanticide.

In a situation of mining where all these social evils and discriminations are aggravated, what is the basis on which companies and governments assure that communities and women will be consulted and that a level playing ground could be created for women to participate fearlessly, intelligently and equally to make decisions whether to accept or veto any projects and that their

decisions would be respected in actions by the governments and companies? For this to be ensured objectively, women in the communities have to be given project related information to make the right choices. Who would ensure that the right information is given to women governments, NGO's or companies themselves?

The history of people's struggles in India, whether with mining or with dams or with any other 'development' projects, does not provide an authentic reputation from either governments or companies while disclosing information to people. In a country where NGO's are equally in the lurch about project information and face repression for assisting people's demands for information, that women in the communities in future can live in confidence of obtaining information, is a matter of ridicule. Kasipur, Nagarnar, Borra, Hazaribagh there are too many live examples where women have demanded for information and have faced the consequences from the state and the mining lobbies.

Even when independent fact finding committees have visited disturbed mining areas, there have been brutal attacks and smothering of information through threats and assaults. Such instances were reported in the case of Nagarnar when a team visited the people who were protesting against the NMDC's proposed Steel Plant in Chattisgarh. Especially in mining projects where there is a strong presence of the mafia, extremists and political nexus, as in the coal mines of Jharkhand or the iron-ore mines of Orissa, or in the Singareni Collieries of A.P, the situation is too intimidating for women to participate in public meetings with the government or companies to articulate their problems and demand for redressal. Hence, most often, public hearings, consultation meetings, etc are a mere mandatory procedure rather than a proper consultation with the women or with the communities. The question here is, are our governments in a position to provide a free and fair atmosphere for women to participate without fear.

Along with illiteracy is the lack of skills to participate in mining. Neither mining companies nor governments have worked towards building the capacities and skills of women to take part in mining operations. Hence negotiations primarily relate to women's demands for employment for the men in the communities, which have no direct benefits to their own livelihoods. The trends in large scale mining projects under our new mineral policy are shifting from public sector projects to divestment and joint ventures. The transnational companies enter after the governments have acquired the lands. Complaints by communities that they have not been properly rehabilitated or compensated are not addressed by the companies on the pretext that the governments were responsible for this, as per the laws of the country.

India does not have a Relief and Rehabilitation policy, leave alone a gender based one. On what legal mechanisms do women in the affected communities anchor themselves with when mining industries report that they have consulted the women in the communities and that they have followed all rules and regulations with regard to community participation. Our Land Acquisition Act does not provide for women's rights to rehabilitation or compensation to their loss over the lands, livelihoods or other resources. The women's struggles either while fighting mining projects with the state (as in Nagarnar) or with the multinationals (as in Kasipur) or with Indian mining giants (as with the Jindals in Chattisgarh and Goa) or with small local mining companies (as in Rajasthan and in thousands of other places in the country) the experience has been far from a fruitful and a "win-win situation" for the women affected.

Where women are suffering mining related hazards, pollution, waste disposal, denial of access to natural resources, incomplete rehabilitation or housing facilities, mine disasters, etc they have not had any access to a dialogue or redressal of their grievances by the industry or if they did, the entire exercise is lengthy, tiresome and aimed at disenchanting the struggle group so much so

that people's movements are too fatigued to show interest in further dialogue. This has been the reality whether with private mining industries or with international financial institutions funding mining projects like the World Bank, a good example of which is the East Parej experience in Hazaribagh which is battling with the Bank even after the Inspection Panel's Report. One of the important demands and recommendations of the local group that the women's rights to entitlement over lands and rights of access to forest resources, is still pending with the Bank and the management.

The entire mining cycle throws up a series of problems for the communities. There are no concerns shown towards women's health and livelihood after mine disasters, accidents, spillage, closure. Most often companies declare themselves bankrupt and refuse to clean up. Also, most often there is no closure plan and if there is one, it is not properly implemented. Kolar Gold Fields is a stark example of this. When communities and women have very little bargaining capacity with public sector companies, their vulnerability is much more severe when they have to negotiate with the private sector which has no formal social responsibility.

In the past, people's struggles in India, had not experienced abuse of women participating in movements to the extent that it is happening today. Women have always been in the forefront of movements facing the police, the government or the landlords. Today there is a visible increase in state and corporate aggression towards women also. Women protesting or demanding for their rights and for their lands are being brutally beaten up, taken into illegal custody, physically and sexually abused and constantly harassed to force them to give up their struggles. Such abuse against women is taking serious turns with the growing criminalisation of politico-corporate powers and the involvement of multiple 'stake-holders' up to global levels in a sector like mining.

A good example of this situation had become evident in the attempts at suppressing the Kasipur struggle in Orissa where multiple players were involved the two transnational companies (Alcan and Norsk Hydro) along with Indal, the World Bank with its Business Partners for Development (BPD) and CARE International. The BPD has allegedly been involved in calling NGO's and the people for talks on "Building a Tribal Vision For Development". A workshop to 'engage the local community' was organized and co-sponsored by CARE India to intervene, clearly, on behalf of the company. In reality, the BPD engagement was with the non tribals from the surrounding villages who were not affected by the project and this heightened communal tensions in the area. It became unsafe for women to go the village markets and finally led to a police firing in Maikanch village where three people were killed and many women and children were injured. Many false cases were filed against the tribal women opposing the project.

Corporate solutions to women's grievances have been to offer welfare schemes and incentives like community health counseling, micro credit and income generating programmes, hosting of cultural events, vocational training, primary education and the like without addressing the fundamental issues of land rights, loss of livelihoods, pollution induced health hazards or abuses and atrocities.

The Ideal Vs the Real:

While it is true that companies do project well intentioned and sensitive policies (increasingly today) with regard to project affected communities, while it is also true that financial institutions, academic, research institutions and technical experts appointed/hired by the projects for review and rehabilitation do recommend just and fair measures to be adopted for ensuring people's rights and best practices in mining, the actual issue is reality. In a situation of intrusion by larger and more powerful players like mining industries and the state, it is the people who are left to

defend, to prove, to protest, to demand and to continue to suffer while it takes years of media, civil society and vigilant and assertive communities to make governments and industries comply to communities' rights and environmental concerns. Most often, women are intimidated and humiliated when their allegations of suffering ill-health, pollution, etc due to irresponsible management, are over ridden by companies' display of technology and usage of terminology which is beyond the comprehension of illiterate rural and tribal women.

One Pound of Flesh:

Hence, corporate social responsibility, best practices, benchmarks and community engagement can have meaningful results to women affected or proposed to be affected by mining when:

- Accurate and timely information is given
- Women's participation in decision-making is taken seriously
- Women's education and occupational skills are significantly enhanced
- Women are provided legal and real rights over natural resources
- Women have the right to oppose
- Companies first take responsibility for the physical, emotional and sexual atrocities on women committed in past and existing projects
- Companies clean up projects existing and abandoned before entering into a dialogue with women in the green field areas
- Companies and governments make an earnest gender audit of existing and abandoned projects
- Companies achieve responsible behaviour from their male employees to stop abuses and atrocities on women
- Stop colluding with mafia, political and other stake-holders in suppressing women's struggles in mining
- Companies ensure livelihood and economic enhancement for women in the regions not just through model income generating schemes but in a more universal manner like in their traditional economies
- Extract minerals in a manner which does not destroy the other natural resources which exist in the same regions so that women's livelihoods, security and ecological resources are sustained
- When governments respect women's decision to choose their livelihoods mining or traditional land based systems and have the capacity to resist industrial lobbying
- Our governments provide a sensitive gender policy on mining and ensure proper implementation of laws and policies related to women's rights and livelihoods
- Our governments can provide a situation of enhanced economic and social status for the women where mining can be proved to be a more desirable and viable option for them than any other form of existing or probable economic activities with the natural resources available.

The important question is are our governments and the mining industries prepared to confront and ensure these 'benchmarks' of social responsibility and gender justice?