

Mining and Mine Workers

Professor SM Mohnot & Rana Sengupta

School of Desert Sciences, Jodhpur

Introduction

Rajasthan, the largest State of the country has large reserves of mineral resources of both metallic and nonmetallic nature. The mining industry in Rajasthan employs a large number of people after agriculture, which comes to over 3.1 million, which includes organized (about 8-9%) and unorganized (90-92%). The State generate almost 50% of the country's value of minor minerals. This suggests the kind of minerals, and involvement of people and the kind of economy this sector holds. The widespread mining activities in Rajasthan till recently were characterized by small, privately owned, localized enterprises (the exception being a few major mineral leases exploited under the state, owned public sector bodies). These mines are mostly semi-mechanized or in some cases under complete manual operation.

Rajasthan possesses a wide range of mineral resources and offers considerable potential for future. The important metallic minerals with which the name of the State is intimately associated are lead, zinc, copper and tungsten. It is also richly endowed with a variety of nonmetallic minerals distributed throughout its territories. Rajasthan has also enormous deposits of building stone like marble, granite, sandstone, limestone etc. It is also leading producer of soapstone, gypsum, rock phosphate, calcite, wollastonite, emerald, jasper and gem garnet. In addition, the State has good deposits of lignite.

Gross violations, for instance, operating on illegal or expired leases, haphazard dumping of mine debris, paying less than the minimum wage stipulation to mine workers, hazardous work conditions, etc., are rampant in all kinds of mining activities across the State. In fact the extensive and erratic mining in Rajasthan partly derives its profitability from cutting the cost of labour by paying them less for long hours of work, intensive erratic mining exceeding lease limits, frequent nonpayment of cess/royalty etc.

The state mining department has neither the political will nor adequate number of personnel to monitor working of a couple of thousand leases. All this augments the oppressive work conditions of a large number of people who are dependent on seasonal mining activity. No support from mine owners as well as the State is visible any where in unorganized mining sector irrespective of nature of minerals exploited. The complexity of the situation increases further with large private capital entering into this sector for exploration mining, prospecting and setting up mineral processing plants and installing captive power plants, etc. The primarily mechanized nature of their operation will have serious ramifications on the quantum of employment generated in this sector.

Mine Workers Plight

a. Who are the mine workers?

Our survey at Jodhpur and several other studies in different parts of the State suggests that majority of mine workers belongs to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes or belongs to poor strata of society are either landless or have little and unproductive land in their possession. These people on the one side have been uprooted from their place of origin because of resource decline in the villages and on the other hand when took to mining for survival have to die prematurely after inflicting diseases like silicosis, asbestosis, bagassosis, silica tuberculosis as a result of occupational hazards.

b. Economic status of mine workers

In our surveys we found that mine workers are the poorest of the poor earning only Rs. 654 per month while an agriculture labour earns Rs. 952 per month working only for four months in a year. By and large, mine workers were found indebted with heavy loans, which they cannot repay, and eventually to work as bonded labour. A majority of them do not have houses and live only in small huts because they cannot effort to build even and offers considerable potential for room for living in absence of resources.

c. Intoxication

The hard work, illiteracy, poor economic condition and to continue working without good diet forced them to consume alcohol. This worsen their health and bring down economic status further.

d. Wage Issues

Mine workers are absolutely ignorant about wage records, procedures, ESI, PF, leave, group insurance and workmen's compensation act, etc. This gives mine owners free hand to exploit workers to maximum possible. This is strengthened further by lukewarm approach adopted by Government at every stage.

Helpless Workers and Killer Diseases

In absence of concerted effort and collective support by concerned people and organizations we do not have viable suggestions and corrective measures and remedies for workers suffering from occupational diseases and injuries. The factories and mines act has no meaning to State and mire owners. Interestingly most of our doctors are not aware of occupational problems and notifiable diseases. The apathy at all levels has led to rising frequency of injuries and occupational diseases suggesting increasing hazardous nature of working conditions.

For silicosis, surveys conducted by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) have reported, rates between 16-57%, while the ESI do not report any new case of silicosis between 1981-86. Many workers working in the stone quarries have complained

of cough and chest pain, many, are being treated for tuberculosis. Workers understand that the dust they are inhaling is causing TB. but they are unaware of silicosis.

The radiological investigations reveal a very alarming health scenario of mine workers. A large number of workers were suffering from silicosis, silicotuberculosis, tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases. These findings commensurate with a startling fact that there are village in which young widows of mine workers out number the other women in the population because their husbands died after working for several years in the mines. This suggests that mine workers are exposed to extraordinary health hazards. If the health problems of mi workers are assessed under existing situations, the incidence of silicosis, silicotuberculos tuberculosis, asbestosis, cough, asthma, breathlessness, chest pain, etc. is extremely high compared to normal situations. Sandstone mines in Jodhpur and near by areas comprises of almost pure silica. Workers engaged in tunneling, mining, quarrying, or chiseling are often exposed to silica dust. Exposed to high concentration of silica over a long period of time may result into silicosis. There is no specific treatment for silicosis.

The dust borne diseases are common to Thar desert. Of which, the respiratory illnesses resulting form exposure to silica particles is undoubtedly the oldest, commonest, best known and most extensively studied of all occupational diseases of lungs. Dust related lung diseases are mostly prevalent among mill workers, farmers and mine workers. The most affected are the mine workers because they are exposed more to dust than others. Dust related lung diseases like silicosis is dreadful because it cannot be cured. Several lung diseases are irreversible and ultimately lead to death like silicosis. The ill effect of silica is known since the time of Hyppocrates as early as 460 AD and earlier to Egyptians. But the seriousness of the silicosis was emphasized by Agricole in 1556 AD.

The silica particles of 0.5 to 5-micron diameter are likely to produce tuberculosis and silicosis. The US Public Health Service statements have described concentration of dust particles in the atmosphere as primary and secondary thresholds. The primary threshold consists of 5×10^6 particles less than 10 micron in size per cubic feet. Exposure to concentration below this level cannot cause silicosis. The secondary threshold consists of 100×10^6 particles of the same size cubic feet. Those exposed at or above this level will develop silicosis. Silicosis progress even after person had stopped working in sandstone quarries. Exposure of approximately for 40 to 48 hours to silica dust in a week and as long as 8-10 months in a year making mine workers valuable to complications produces by silica.

A study of two hundred eighty eight mine workers of both sexes from various sandstone quarries in Jodhpur division were undertaken jointly by The School of Desert Sciences (SDS) and the Department of Tuberculosis and Chest Diseases, KN Chest Hospital, Dr SN Medical college, Jodhpur. Their age group ranged form 20 to 60 years, having work duration of 6 to 15 years. Chest X-rays of each worker had their long function tests were carries out. The interpretation of chest X- rays was done by using ILO classification and various grades of Pneumoconiosis evaluated.

The chest X-ray profile of stone quarry workers shows that only 2.4% workers had normal lung appearance, whereas 43.75% were suspected to have Pneumoconiosis (Category Z, not having silicosis) and 9.7% workers had linear capacity (category L, not having silicosis). About 55% workers had Pneumoconiosis with whether small opacities (category P, M, N, 32.5%) or large suffering from different grades of silicosis. Tuberculosis is a major cause of death and morbidity. Among patients with silicosis the risk is higher among those with 'Pure Silicosis' than among those with 'mixed Pneumoconiosis' anthracosilicosis. And it is observed that a high prevalence was recorded in the persons who have worked for 6-15 years.

The radiological interventions coupled with socioeconomic and other aspects of workers in this sample survey of mine workers revealed a very alarming health scenario of mine workers. A large number of workers were found suffering from silicosis, silicotuberculosis and tuberculosis. These findings commensurate with a startling fact that there are villages in which young widows of mine workers outnumber women population since their men have died after working in sandstone mines. It is probably because of this extraordinary health hazard to which mine workers are exposed the State Government have framed strict legislation to protect and compensate the sandstone mine workers way back in 1995 called Rajasthan Silicosis Rules.

There is no specification treatment for silicosis. Therapy is directed at accompanying complications. Tuberculosis among pneumoconiosis victims responds much less satisfactorily ones. However use of Isoniazid has been recommended.

Some Alarming Facts of Mining in Rajasthan:

- ❖ Over 3 million mine workers are engaged in mining in Rajasthan.
- ❖ Some 67 kinds of metallic and nonmetallic minerals are extracted in Rajasthan.
- ❖ As per official estimate a total of 342239 sq. km. is under mining operation.
- ❖ More than 90% of the Mineworkers are either Dalits or Tribals.
- ❖ As many as 95% of these workers belong to the unorganized sector.
- ❖ Mining stands as the second largest employment sector next to agriculture in Rajasthan.
- ❖ Around 37% and 15% of the total Mineworkers are women and children respectively.
- ❖ The state earns 800 crores of rupees annually as revenue from the mining sector.
- ❖ Little percentage of mines are semi-mechanized while most of them are under complete manual operation.

Problems Faced by-Mine Workers

Not to talk of equity and social justice, the Mineworkers are even denied of their right to minimum wages and other benefits arising out of the labour law of the land. The hazardous working conditions coupled with scant regard for occupational safety by the mine owners further endanger their health due to occupational diseases like silicosis, tuberculosis, asbestosis, silicotuberculosis, other respiratory diseases, physical injuries and disabilities, etc. Hard work, illiteracy, poor economic condition, lack of proper nutrition and the use of intoxicants have brought down the health and economic status of these workers that have reduced workers longevity. Mine owners usually prefer to employ workers in the age-group 20-35 years, the prime of one's life, and a large number of these workers are working as bonded labours. There are no regular working hours observed nor do the mine owners maintain any records of the workers.

There is no system of holidays or weekly off. It is also strange to know that not a single legal case of compensation has been filed in any of the courts. Survey reports reveal that 71.6% of the mineworkers suffer from respiratory diseases and in cases of accidents generally the mine worker has to pay for his medical treatment.

In a survey conducted by Mine Labour Protection Campaign (MLPC) reveals that 90% of the mineworkers consume alcohol daily. The shops of country liquor are located in and around the mining area. Workers consuming alcohol say that they consume liquor to get rid of the pain and fatigue because of very hard work they do every day in mines. There is high rate of indebtedness among the quarry workers. This is primarily due to the practice of taking advance from the contractor and/or the leaseholders. Since no written records are maintained at the time of the transaction, the debtor continues to work at lower wages in the quarries and the loan amount never seems to get repaid.

Women are doomed to a shattered life in terms of widowhood, rape, molestation, prostitution, destitution, exhaustion and silence. Majority of women (84%) belongs to SC. Women are engaged in work like removing the debris, breaking pebbles and loading them in tractors. They are engaged in assisting the men worker at the work site by taking the tools to the blacksmith for mending supplying drinking water, tea and also for loading the stone chips in the tractor. On an average 2 to 3 women workers work in each mines. Most of the women mineworkers are of age group 10 to 40 years, the most productive period of their lifetime. There is a significant population of adolescent girls involved in mine work. They are denied of going to school as well as acquiring certain basic life skills that are critical for them for a healthy growth.

Almost a good quarter of the women work force comes from widows of mine labours who had died of silicosis, tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases. Some of the reasons of working in mines are cited to be poverty, death of the earning member, due to illness of the earning member, desertion by the earning member and non-availability of other source of employment.

Destitution and Debt Bondage

What was passed in 1994 as a policy is now beginning to have its impact at the level of the mine and the mineworkers. It has already contributed to the augmentation of the oppressive work conditions of a large number of people who are dependent on seasonal or permanent employment wage labour in mining to maintain only bare subsistence levels. In fact the Mining sector continues to thrive making profits from cuffing the cost of labour by paying them less for long hours of work.

The mine owners are able to extract as high as 300% profit.

There is a high rate of indebtedness among the quarry workers. This is primarily due to the practice of taking advances from the contractors and/or the leaseholders. Since no written records are maintained at the time of the transaction, the debtor is forced to work at lower wages in the quarries. The loan advanced once never seems to get repaid. It also gets added on to in the case of the worker again borrowing for some conspicuous consumption or meting out a major life saving health expenditure. In fact in the calculation of the amount of the initial loan to be advanced the contractor assesses the worker as an animal weighing his potential to work in the quarry and ability to sustain the production at a certain profitable level for a long time. The mine owner advances heavy amount of money only to those workers who are young and he is sure that they will work the whole life with him to repay the debt. The workers has no intention to repay the loan because he thinks that if he repays the loan than he may be asked to leave the job anytime. If the mine worker leaves a job and joins another mines then the debt is transferred to the other mine owner. The workers prefer to work on piece rate and there is one worker who works on piece rate and employs two or more workers under him on daily wage. These daily wage earner demands some advance from the piece rate worker before he starts working with him. The amount of advance is paid by the mine owner on the recommendation of the piece rate worker and is added to the total advance of the piece rate worker and he is liable for their payment of the same. Higher production leads to higher profit of the mine owner and it is the worker on the piece rate basis suffer the most.

States Response

In the wake of economic liberalization, globalization and privatization, there is a rat race among the states to generate more revenue. This process of competitive fiscal federalism has done a lot of harm to poorer states like Rajasthan and especially to its poorest section of the populace. In its attempt to garner more revenue the state government of Rajasthan tried and liberalized the mining sector in 1994, allowing big companies and multinationals to come in. While there has been a lot of debate about the pros and cons of MNCs coming into mining but one unrefuted fact is there will be a lot of displacement and retrenchment of the mineworkers. It's to be noted that as such there is a excess supply of labour into the mining sector. The failure of agriculture, degradation of pastures (declining pastoralism), lack of industrial development and service sector, frequent droughts and all does not leave any scope of alternative labour deployment. In view of all this a large-scale retrenchment will mean more woes to the

labourers. Further, competition by small operators and big companies will result in more hazardous working condition for mine workers.

As such the mine workers do not have any working safety or social safety net. The state government neither has the political will or the manpower to ensure standards. With liberalization and competition coming in the labourers are left to themselves to think about their lives. One thing that is clearly visible at this stage is the growing indebtedness by the mineworkers. Though we do not have any hard data to substantiate the arguments at this stage but field observations do suggest that more and more labourers are getting entrapped now.

Mine Workers' Settlements - Inappropriate and Insecure Habitats

Diminishing opportunities of livelihoods in the rural regions is the primary motive for migration in the urban areas. People from nearby districts who come to work in the quarries live in rented shacks close to the quarry sites. These shelters are generally owned by the leaseholders to whom they have to pay rent. Near the older quarry sites slums having more than three hundred to four hundred houses have emerged.

This increased in flow of people into the mining settlements has placed stress on the already fragile capacity these habitats to meet even the minimum standards in cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation, potable water and nutrition. There are no practically no provisions ensured by the city municipalities to make accessible basic services like health and education facilities. In addition very soon it is clear that the primary motive of movement i.e. livelihood stability is only partially met. This is not to mention the new drudgeries that the mineworkers have to face that are typical of urban slums. Crime, delinquency, substance abuse and heightened family violence and stress characterize the daily life of these settlements. Increasing consumerism and the negative role of the media has also contributed to unrealistic aspirations and the skewed perceptions of personal needs and growth.

Women & Children - The Shattered and Dehumanized

Women

In the overall context of crippling poverty, the women are the most vulnerable groups in mineworkers' families. They are subjected to a whole range of deprivation and biases. The daily life of women tells story of dehumanization and fear, lack of dignified living and often resulting into subhuman conditions. Traditional conservative practices and the persistence of feudal ethos continuously keep the women silenced, exhausted, and confined to interiors, veiled and scheduled from birth to death. They used to supplement the family income by indulging in traditional skills like dyeing, embroidery, weaving and helping informing. With reduction in handmade products in rural exchange circuits, and decline in agriculture due to unfavorable climatic conditions, the women slowly came out of the rural interiors to the mining to supplement the family income. Majority of women (84%) belong of Scheduled Caste.

Most of the women mineworkers are of age group 10 to 40 years, the most productive period of their lifetime. There is significant population of adolescent girls involved in mine work. They are denied of going to school as well as acquiring certain basic life skills that are critical for them for a healthy growth.

Almost a good quarter of the women work force comes from widows of mine labours who have died of silicosis, tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases. Some of the reasons of working in mines are cited to be poverty, death of the earning member, due to illness of the earning member, desertion by the earning member and non-availability of other source of employment. They are doomed to shattered life in terms of widowhood, rape, molestation, destitution, exhaustion and silence.

Besides economic and health wise exploitations they are also physically exploited by the contractors/mine owners, of which they are afraid to disclose due to fear of being thrown out of job. And even if they dare to report, they do not get justice because of powerful lobby of the mine owner/contractor. Women workers are not provided with any benefits like maternity benefit, weekly off, creche for keeping their small children, toilets etc.

Women are engaged in work like removing the debris, breaking pebbles and loading them in tractors. They assist the men worker at the work site by taking the tools to the blacksmith for mending, supplying drinking water, tea and also for loading the stone chips in the tractors. On average 2 to 3 women workers work in each mine. These have further downed their health status leading to increase in weakness, anemia, abortions, still birth and death. Unfortunately their work is neither recognized by the state nor by her own family. On top of it brutal behavior by her intoxicated husband, and other family member further demoralized them.

Children

Children of the Mineworkers are exposed to demands on their time and energy. With the decline of daily earnings creeping into a mine worker family children are left with little option but to get involved in augmenting the family income. The 1993-94 sample survey of MLPC had shown that around 4% of the work forces were children. In all these years in a context of complete absence of any State protection, welfare schemes giving access to education, alternative employment opportunities working in mines is fast emerging as the only option available. Estimates made today suggest that the numbers have increased by more than four times.

Even in cases where the children are able to go to a school they have to work for some time in the mine to earn some income to partly finance their education. What emerged thirty years ago as a livelihood option for a distress migrant from the village is becoming a hereditary profession for the slum dweller in the mining settlement. This apart from perpetuating child labour has it's own very serious implications on debt bondage as well.

MLPC - A Major Campaign

For over a decade we have been deliberating mining related problems of the desert, with a view to understand the environmental degradation like, water, soil, forests, pastures and germplasm. In this process, we realized, that, a more serious issue that need to be tackled urgently is the health hazards and status of mine workers in relation to their socioeconomic conditions and legal provisions. Our agenda shifted from environment to humane issues as emerged out in at least half a dozen National, state and regional seminars, workshops and group meetings which we organized in the last 3 years at Jodhpur, Udaipur, Alwar, Jaipur and elsewhere in the state. It was felt in these meetings that we as NGO's must starts a campaign to protect the rights of mine workers - This is how the Mine Labour Protection Campaign (MLPC) came into being with Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer as its patron.

Under the auspices of MLPC and several professional and social action groups, a 'Jodhpur Declaration' was made at the time of National Seminar on mines and mine workers on April 16, 1993, at Jodhpur, highlighting the problems at mine workers and our struggle against dust related health hazards.

The campaigns mandate is straight and clear. It strives to protect the interests and rights of Mineworkers through meaningful dialogue with mineworkers and the state to provide them health care, occupational safety and fair wages. The campaign also believes in empowering mineworkers and tries to identify local leaders to fight for their rights. Our approach to achieve this is as follows:

- ❖ To educate and organize for accidents and deaths during work.
- ❖ To facilitate formation of unions and cooperatives.
- ❖ To build public opinion against indiscriminate, illegal, unplanned and unscientific mining.
- ❖ To take initiatives for the prevention of ecological degradation and loss of biodiversity.
- ❖ To make mining sector accountable for human misery depletion of natural resources and destruction of water systems.
- ❖ Lobbying and advocacy for policy changes.
- ❖ To improve the living habitat of the mineworkers.
- ❖ Facilitate opportunities for children to grow and develop their creative potential in a safe and healthy environment.

The concerted campaigning of the organization was instrumental in the Supreme Court order that led to the formation of the state Silicosis Board. For the moment the board exists only on paper. Judicial injunctions are not enough to mobilize political will. Which is largely absent in the state due to the entrenched vested interests of dominant players. The state will be willing to pay any amount of lip services as long as it does not

have to disturb the powerful mining body. Indeed many of them of the political brotherhood have personal stakes in the mines.

At present mining in Rajasthan is characterized by violation of all kinds. The entire industry is thriving on irregularities. It is unlike that this form of mining activities would change into any other form of production. Their profitability and survival is dependent on unrecognized labour intensive mining. Whatever the policy changes mining in Rajasthan is likely to be dominated by this form for more time. This is primarily because the new entrants are interested in high value minerals like base metal, lignite, gold, gemstone and oil and gas explorations. The new MNCs have not started mining. Foreign investments in mining will take some more time to materialize.

The new mineral policy of Rajasthan as discussed earlier is geared to make things easier for the private sector. The various exploration projects are presently at an MOU stage. The ultimate materialization of many of these would be dependent on several factors. Once they are formalized they would have critical impact on settled habitats due to their sheer size and nature of production. To intervene effectively in these areas in future, one would have to have strong base in combination with a coherent strategy much in advance.