

A CASE STUDY:

GOLD PANNERS OF SUBARNAREKHA AROUND GHATSHILA



Introduction:

Ghatshila is a town in the State of Jharkhand in India . It is located in the East Singhbhum district. If searched on the globe it is found to be in 22°36'00 North longitude and 86°28'60 East latitude. Its relative altitude is about 540 meters (1800 feet) above sea level. The city is located on the true left bank of the river Subarnarekha. This is in the Dalma range of hills. Soil is mostly laterite and cultivation is possible

According to 2001 census Ghatshila had a population of 37,850. Males constitute 53% of the population and females 47%. Ghatshila has an average literacy rate of 73%: male literacy is 79%, and female literacy is 65%. In Ghatshila, 11% of the population is under 6 years of age.

The area around Ghatshila is rich in minerals. A copper mine is there only three kilometers away to the West at Musabani, and uranium mine is eight kilometers away to the west at Jadogora.



Land and people

The land here is not that productive so far agriculture is concerned. Cropping is possible only for once in a year. Rice is the main crop. Besides rice some vegetables are also grown. Watering in the field is difficult here. The land is lateritic and hilly. Average altitude is 600 meters. Previously the area was completely covered with forest.

People of the villages around Ghatshila can be divided into three major categories, that is, 1. General cast, belonging to Kshetri and Brahmin cast and the like. They constitute only 12% of the population and are migrated some 100 to 150 years ago; 2. Scheduled cast, belonging to Dhibar, Tamli, Kumbhakar and Keot, they also are migrated and constitutes 30% of the population and, 3. Tribals, belonging to Santal, Munda, Oraon, Shabar and Khariya tribes, constituting the rest 58%. Shabar and Khariya people are the poorest of all. They don't have any land and depends solely on forest, which is rare in this now at present except few scattered patches.

The Adivasis (indigenous tribal peoples) of Jharkhand continued to be victims of development projects and land alienation. Jharkhand Government had signed over 42 Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) with investors including Mittal Steel, Tata Steel, Jindal Steel and Power Company Limited since Jharkhand became a state in 2000. These projects could displace large number of Adivasis. But the government failed to rehabilitate even those displaced between 1951 and 1991, nearly half of whom were tribes. In many parts of rural Jharkhand, a large

chunk of tribal population did not have access to health care and still depended on *Ojhas* (exorcists).



A Shabar woman

Beginning of the story:



Gold is not only a precious metal but it is also a sign of good omen to most of the Indian woman. Every Indian woman, irrespective of age and religion, likes to wear some gold ornament on her person. This is the main reason for which gold is costlier in India in comparison to other countries.

The river Subarnarekha is famous from the age of early history for its sand which carries gold. The ratio of gold mixed with sand is low so industrial extract is out of question, but the poor people of the villages around the banks of the river depend on the gold of Subarnarekha for their living. All they need to separate gold and make that ready for use is a wooden tray and one small bowl in the field and a blower in home, mostly that blower is shared by others also. Only the costly thing is the wooden pan which is more like a concave tray. It is made up of the bark of an age old tree which can only be found in forests; even there such trees are rare now. This pan costs around rupees 1200 a piece but can be used for several years if maintained properly. All of the panners say one common thing that closure of the copper mine in Musabani decreased the availability of gold from the river bed.

(Musabani copper mine of Hindustan Copper Limited closed on 1995 due to management problem. It has started production again since November, 2007. Previously, it was found that the slag was dumped on the left bank of

Subarnarekha river and it was polluting the water. Now the new management is trying to be cautious and they are dumping the slag for filling the mined field.)

It is difficult to say, what was the real picture of gold panning here in earlier days and what these panners (these panners are always older women) were used to earn. In older Bengali novels it was said that never it was very profitable except for one or two stray cases. All these women agreed with the fact that it is more like participating in a lottery game. They really use this term to describe their earning from it.

The irony behind the story is the role of middlemen. They pay rupees 6,300.00 for every 10 gram of gold to these collectors whereas the market value of same amount is rupees 12,000.00.

Case study I

Renu Dhibar



Renu Dhibar is a 65 year old, widow lady of Dhibar (fisherman) community. She is an inhabitant of the village *Aamainagar*, just opposite bank of Ghatshila. She has two grown up sons, who works in a local brick field, married and have their own family with their children. Renu, though stays with them but she has to earn her own living. Normally she sells vegetables in the

Ghatshila market, just opposite bank of river Subarnarekha. That earning is not adequate to enable her to maintain her family so after returning from market she goes to Subarnarekha and finds a spot where she can find some gold dust. She works in the river bed most of the days in a week from 10.00 in the morning to 04.00 of the afternoon. Labor of a week earns her 200 to 300 rupees. She told she earned even 500 rupees in a week earlier. She sells her gold to an agent in her village. There are four or five local agents in that village who purchase this gold and take that either to Dhalbhumgarh, 20 kilometers away or, to Jamshedpur market, some 45 kilometers away. Two years earlier she has undergone cataract operation in both eyes in a charitable eye operation camp conducted by a local NGO. She even could not afford to her post operative glasses.

Case study II

Sushila Dhibar

Sushila is a 42 years widow of the village *Aamainagar*. She has two sons and two daughters. Both of the daughters are married. One of her sons works as a



day laborer and can not get job everyday. The younger one reads in a school in fifth standard. Sushila also sells vegetables in the Ghatshila market but that income is insufficient for her family. For at least twenty days in a month she goes to collect gold dust from the sand of the river bed. What she told is that finding enough gold is like playing a lottery game. No one can depend

on that. But as she has no other options so she goes for gold panning. Even five years earlier she was not used to it but after the death of her husband she had to purchase the wooden pan and started separation of gold for extra income.

Case study III

Laxmi Keot



Laxmi is a old woman of 60 years. She has three sons. Eldest one is of 30 years, works in construction projects in contract. He purchased one small ferry boat for his two younger brothers, one is 16 years old and the other is of 12 years. They engaged themselves in ferrying people across Subarnarekha, from Aamainagar to Ghatshila.

Presently Laxmi is suffering from hepatitis and she was encountered in the ferry boat when she was returning from a charitable dispensary. She can not do any hard work, which her weak constitution does not allow. So she opted gold panning for some earning.

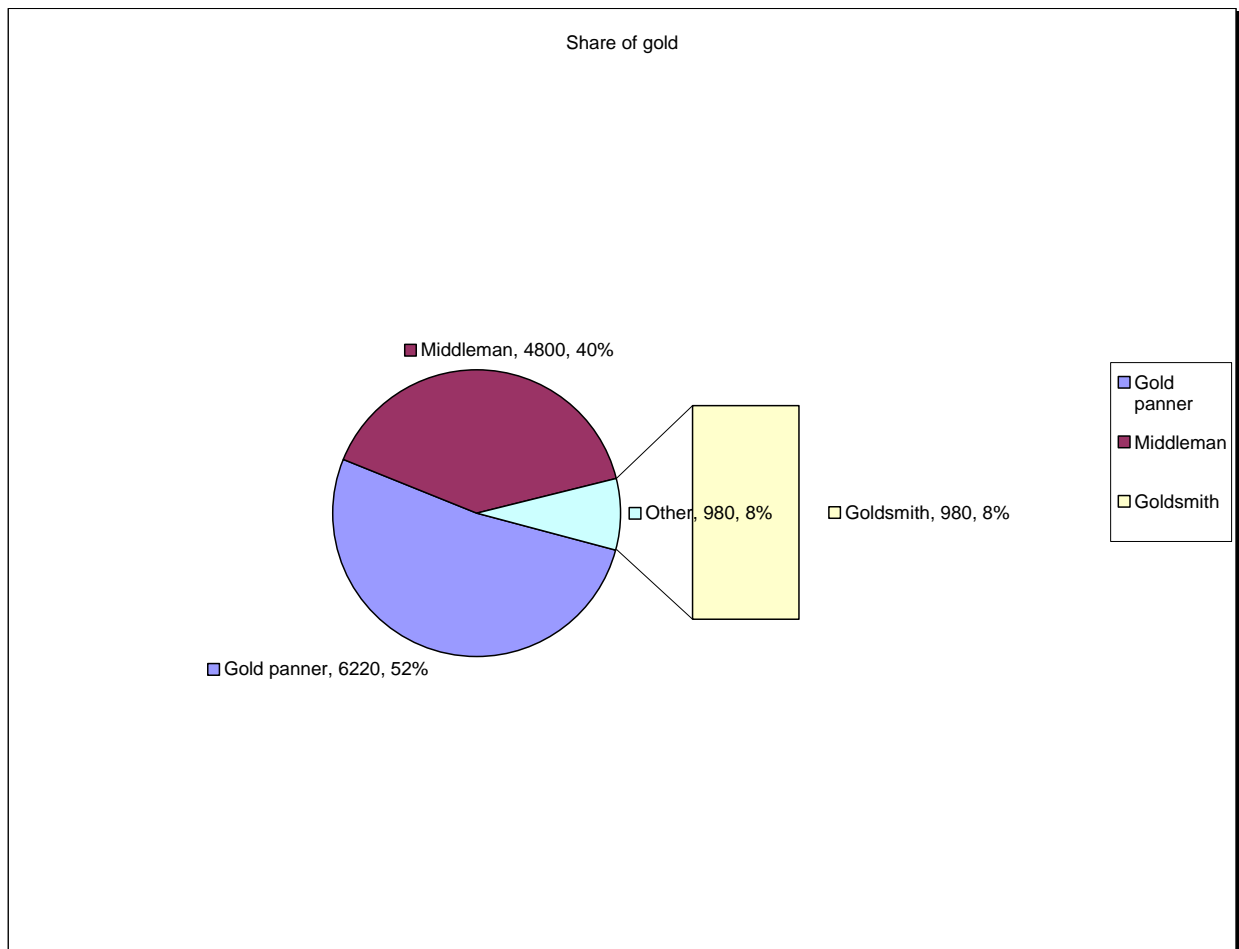
Renu, Laxmi and Sushila told one thing in common, that is the amount of gold they can extract in a day. According to them one can separate 1.5 to 2 rati in a

week and one is paid rupees 110-120 for one rati. Rati is equal to 0.18196 gm. They don't go to a goldsmith of Jamshedpur or Dhalbhumgarh, because they are afraid of urban people so they sell their gold to local middleman.

(Old Indian standard of weighing gold is Bhari. 1 bhari is divided in 16 annas and 1 ana into 4 rati, i.e, 1 bhari = 64 rati and again to correlate it in present day standard, 11.646 gms. = 1 bhari.) Present market value of 24 carat gold in India is rupees 12,000.00 per 10 gms.

According to present market value 1 rati would cost around rupees 217 whereas the middlemen in the villages pay only 110 to 120 and so except very rare occasions, when one gets larger amount of gold by sheer luck, they earn for a weeks labor something around rupees 250 to 300.

Another two facts are: (1) no able bodied person engage himself or herself in gold panning for such low earning, and (2) only older women carry out such work, though it is heard that some tribal old men also do this gold panning who find it difficult to carry out hard labored job.



Some points related to gold panners:

1. An area from Galudih to Dhalbhumgarh, total 280kilometers of length of Subarnarekha was selected for this survey.
2. Total 26 old women found who are engaged in this job, mostly from Musabani and Aamainagar.
3. Everyone confirmed one story that, 15 years before the gold availability was much higher than present. Sometimes granules of gold were also found by some of them.
4. According to those illiterate gold panners, slag discharge of copper factory of Hindustan Copper Limited increased gold availability.
5. The extraction plants discharging their acidic water to Subarnarekha causing death of aquatic flora and fauna, especially fish, by which the fishermen around Subarnarekha earned their living. The white mark on the rocks and boulders of river bed ratifies the fact.
6. The gold panners earn only 52% of their labor, 40% goes to the middleman and rest 8% to the goldsmith, who purchase the gold to make ornaments.
7. Gold panning in Subarnarekha around Ghatshila decreased by 25% in comparison to earlier condition.



Some of the NGOs working around Ghatshila:

1. *Bharat Sebashram Sangha*

Bharat Sebashram Sangha (hereinafter BSS) working specially among the tribal people since 1995. They established their center at Barajuri, 8 kilometers away from Ghatshila. What they have already done in these 13 years are:

- (a) A 60 bed free hospital in 12,000 square kilometers with optics, pediatric, dental, gynecological units including operation theatres, X-ray and pathological units.
- (b) 4 mobile medical units at 64 points covering 450 villages.
- (c) Weekly tuberculosis unit, which already cured 5000 people.
- (d) Eye camps covering 200 surgical cases in last 3 years.
- (e) Free residential school for boys at main center providing 150 boys their education, food and clothing.
- (f) Free residential school for girls' at main center providing 114 girls' their education, food and clothing. Both the school is strictly for tribal boys and girls, some of them are orphan.
- (g) 16 free primary schools at Barajuri, Deuli, Pukhuria, Chhotodhatika, Jambad, Hulluing, Tetlakocha, Kerukocha, Ramchandrapur, Haludbuni, Danmari, Jhatijhana, Bhmru, Moulisol, Arjunbera and Hariniya. 1550 children get their day meal, uniform, shoes, books and stationeries.
- (h) A free secondary school providing 156 students with same facilities as above.
- (i) A camp school for drop out girls.
- (j) Carpentry training cum production center.
- (k) 3 Handloom training cum production center, one of which is meant for backward tribes.
- (l) Soft luggage training cum production center.
- (m) Handicraft training cum production center.
- (n) Rope making and jute products training cum production center.
- (o) Mushroom production training center.
- (p) Granny program for 90 old people, mostly from backward Shabar and Khariya tribe.

Apart from these works they are constructing one modern hospital at Ghatshila which would be able to provide 316 patients at a time.

BSS is thinking of closing the mobile medical units and up gradation of its schools as they are suffering from lack of fund. Yet they are the oldest and biggest NGO working in Ghatshila sub division.



A Tribal woman working in soft luggage production center of BSS.

2. *Ramkrishna misson*

The center of Ramkrishna misson (hereinafter RKM) is situated in Dahigora, Ghatshila. It was previously a private centre for 50 years run by a monk of RKM order and affiliated to Belur on 2004. It has one free coaching centre for the local poor students and a free medical clinic for local people. Once a year it conducts blood donation camp. It is a small center and a Math center so its scope of philanthropic activities is limited.

3. *Debimath*

This is a philanthropic organization run by women. It has its activity elsewhere also. The Ghatshila unit started in 1994. It is situated at Bankati, 2 kilometres away from Ghatshila railway station. It runs a secondary school of 100 students for local poor boys and girls. This organization suffers constantly from lack of fund yet it tries to provide assistance to the poor villagers around providing cloth and food from time to time.

4. *Other organizations*

From Feb 2007 some students of Kolkata, West Bengal, started visiting the tribal village at Tomankocha near Pathargora, 1 km from Sidhukanu college near Ghatshila on the way to Musabani. The inhabitants of Tomankocha are Bihores and Shabars which are termed as primitive tribes. Then they have also visited Bhadua and Chotordanga near Borajuri beside the village Mosduba. They are also mainly Shabars. The villagers were provided with garments and blankets. The organization Parivaar also visited these villages and accommodated 40 students from these areas mainly in their organization. Recently some students/volunteers had conducted one medical camp at Mohishdoba.

Some Jamshedpur based Christian missionary societies were active in these parts in previous years but apart from establishing some schools they are more interested in converting illiterate, poverty stricken tribal people to Christianity rather than developing their livelihood. Their activity is now limited to running 10 secondary schools in Ghatshila and Musabani block.

Violations of international humanitarian laws in Jharkhand

Jharkhand faced a serious problem of Maoists violence with the guerrillas' active in 16 of the 22 districts. More than 500 people had been killed in the Naxalite conflict in the State in the last four years. The Maoists killed at least one legislator and one panchayat secretary in 2005. Three suspected Maoists allegedly killed Mahendra Prasad Singh, Communist Party of India- Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML) legislator from Bagodar while he was talking to some physically challenged persons at Durgi Dhowaiya village in Giridih district on 16 January 2005. A panchayat secretary was killed and three others were injured when alleged Maoists opened fire at the Kanker Collector SK Raju's carcade while they were returning from Koileebara on 11 November 2005. Others who were killed by the Maoists during 2005 included six police personnel and a driver who were killed in a bomb blast by suspected Communist Party of India (Maoist) rebels on 3 February 2005 while enforcing the Assembly polls boycott at Maraiya Bhalai village under Chattarpur police station limits in Palamau district, a constable on 7 February 2005 who was killed in an alleged Maoist-triggered landmine blast at Manatu area of Palamau district, two villagers identified as Hazibullah and Mohammad Quasim by alleged Maoists during a raid at Tarwadih village in Latehar on the night of 18 May 2005, killing of 15 villagers and injuries to six others during an attack by alleged Naxalites at Bhelbadari village under Deuri police station in Giridih district in the late night of 11 September 2005 and killing of a street vendor identified as Md Neyaz at Mohanpur on 11 November 2005. The Maoists also continued to deliver Kangaroo justice through their "Peoples' Court", *Jana Adalat*. On 23 July 2005, Maoists reportedly killed one John Hembrom, chopped off the hands of two other persons and an ear of another, all of them hailing from different villages in Giridih district, following their convictions in the *Jana Adalat* conducted by the Maoists somewhere in the adjoining Jamui district in Bihar. (*India Human Rights Report 2006, ed. Suhas Chakma, Director, Asian Centre for Human Rights Published by: Asian Centre for Human Rights*)

Remote hilly areas of Ghatshila and Musabani block is also disturbed by Maoists. The area is adjacent to Purulia of West Bengal and Sambalpur of Orissa, the two neighboring states and also affected by these Maoists. On February 10, 2008 one police station in Sambalpur district of Orissa was ransacked by Maoists and the armory was looted. 18 February, 2008 a joint encounter of paramilitary force and military force recovered some of the fire arms and killed 4 Maoists during encounter. On February 17, 2008 5 Maoists was killed by the village people of

border area of Jharkhand and West Bengal. They brutally killed two villagers the previous day as they were members of some political party.