

Mines, Minerals, Marbles



Some 14-kilometer east of Katni railway station is Majgawan, a village with rocky, hard soil and sparsely populated. It is difficult to dig earth here. You hit rock-bottom and red metallic ores begin to shine under the force of your digging tool. The soil here needs enormous water but in the absence of any irrigation facility, underground water is only source of irrigation or for drinking purpose. To pull up underground water, one needs to have pump but electricity is often erratic and therefore land remains mostly parched. Landholders not only find irrigation a difficult proposition labour too is difficult to find. Land-holders desiring of labour has to fix a prior appointment with the available labour force, which is scarce. Conditions here are difficult. Land is rocky and uncultivable and irrigation is totally dependent over the rain-god. The wage work yields at most forty rupee whatever the kind of work. Normally it is less than this. Women generally get paid less, for often the same kind of work. Generally, whether in mines, illegal or legal, or in farm work, wages are between twenty and forty rupees. This when Madhya Pradesh government has minimum wage legally fixed at Eighty-four rupees. This disparity in wage is most felt in mining region where work is dangerous, backbreaking and without any social security or food security. Yet there is not much happening either in government or in civil society to enforce minimum wages that is legally fixed and giving less could be criminal. How would you enforce something when system itself is in dilapidated state? In Katni's district court, the advocates sit under the shadow of water tank. A table under a hut is their office and system is loaded with touts and deceivers.

In order to understand issues related to mining in Katni district we travelled to different parts of Katni district and visited live mines of dolomite, bauxite, marbles and lime-stone. We also visited processing plants for marble and dolomite and bauxite ores. Most of the mining are in far-flung zones of Katni and shall be hard to police. They are scattered in the vast expanse of Katni's geography. As noted earlier most land-stretch is un-irrigated and remains in one form or another under the department of forest. Katni also has vegetable centers at some places. For instance, Salimnabad is known both for marble mining and vegetable growing. Both of which is exported out of the district. Salimnabad is also witnessing establishment of Stone Part, on the pattern of Electronic City or Industry Park that governments institute to encourage the entrepreneurship.



Another 10 kilometer away from Majgawan lies a place called Pathra where we see first dolomite factory on the road side. Here big stone is crushed to make chips. These chips are used in flooring. The crushed stone leaves tones of powder too. They are deposited adjacent to factory and pile increases constantly. Once upon a time, these powders are packed and sold to coal mining companies. These powders are used as

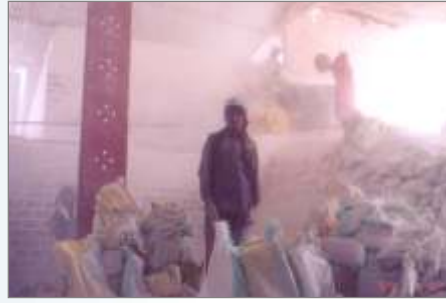
fillers as they are bad conductors and prevent underground fire in coal deposits. Years of deposit of stone-powder are picked up one day. Chips that are used in flooring are exported mostly to eastern India although its demand has been constantly falling recently. Chips are fast being replaced by another stone-form called marbles.

These factories do have some clandestine operations, as they are quite opaque to the outside world. In this above factory we found men and women, more women than men, working under the supervision of a man. Men stood near the crushing factory, and women brought stones on their head to be put into the machine. Women did most of the work but running the machine which was the job of a man. Man did supervision. Women came to work clad in best of clothes and bit of make-up although they worked amidst one of the most dusty environment. The manager received a

payment of rupees three thousand which was a princely sum. Now days most labourers are contracted through a contractor. He is asked deliver a fixed amount of work in a specified time frame. It was upon him to employ number of labourers or pay their wages. Mining in the absence of any other organized avenue of employment is attractive proposition. It is also somewhat without any village specific power-relation or hierarchy.

Most mine owners are city dwellers and are settled in Katni or other cities of Madhya Pradesh. It is their local henchmen who manage their mines and processing units. Dolomite mines or processing units mostly are labour-specific with minimal technical inputs.





Chip making factories or dolomite mines from which stones are broken for chip making employ mainly local labour as there is not much skill required. What one

needs is the brute power as most of the stone breaking is done manually with rudimentary tools. While men break stones using iron-hammer and pierces, women generally carry them on their head to over-ground and make a pile of it. The pile is done according to the quality of stones. These piles of stone is carried in trucks or tractors to factories where stones are crushed and chips are packed in

sacks after due measurement. The whole process from breaking stones to packing chips in synthetic sacks is manually done except the crushing which is done by giant rotating machines. Most often these machines are run electrically, which suffers from erratic supply of electricity. A decade before mine-owners were even reluctant to install crushing plants at the site of mining itself. It is only a decade when crushing plants began to dot the Katni's landscape.

Dolomite mines are of soft stone form. Hard stone form can be cut into big blocks which can later be turned into marble sheets. Even marbles is mined





from dolomite stones, what makes one stone suitable for marble and one for poor chips is the strength and hardness of stone. Dolomite mines yielding chips number about 150 to 200 in the whole Katni district. Some fifty owners control these mines. Some are very powerful and are linked politically. Some owners either play direct political games



by virtue of being candidates of established parties such as Congress or BJP in general elections. Some other owners have indirect link by virtue of they bank rolling the individual politicians' campaign expenditure. In the decade of eighties dolomite mines for flooring-chips was very much a profitable proposition. Village people also had stone-quarries as only source for income. This form of mine is labour intensive. But slowly, availability of labour has relatively decreased. Although Katni's land is not very fertile, income generation opportunities has increased due to expanding urban areas adjacent to Katni, increased sources of irrigation

through pumping up water that has helped in rising land productivity, government's own measures to mitigate instances of extreme poverty, district administration's food for work programme.

Each sack of crushed stones contains about 25 kg of chips. It is manually weighed and mostly women seal sacks. Even in factories there is clear divide of work on gender lines. Women bring big stone blocks on their head to machine where with the help of men they put in the crushers. In dolomite mines and factories, women generally outnumber men. Most women and men belong to young group. Such manual work requires more of brute power. But back breaking and dusty nature of job does not prevent most women from wearing their best of working dress, put red lipstick even while it is mostly cheap manufacture. These women wear colorful saris. The working hours varies keeping season in mind. In summer, working hours begin very early morning with some gap in mid afternoon and goes on till late evening. In winter the elongated gap in mid afternoon is shortened. Now-days most labourers are under the contractor system. This system puts responsibility for the well being of and payment to the labourers a concern of contractors and not the mine-owners. It also protects mine owners from any liability owing to instances of fatal accidents or from making any provision for the welfare of workers.

Chip industry is facing crisis of sort due to more lucrative industry of marbles which too are extracted from the earth bed. Finding labour for labour-intensive work in dolomite mining is becoming difficult as people have found alternative sources of income. Just as labour have chosen better income generation alternative, its owners too have moved to greener

pastures. Marble mining is undoubtedly one such option though marble miners are bigger players and pump in big money as it very much a technology intensive mining. The work force in dolomite mining comprises mainly of adivasis, other communities are generally absent. In marble mining, the workforce is generally imported from Rajasthan as marble mining and processing is much more skilled work. Rajasthan is an old marble site. It is prime location from where marbles are sent to all over India or even exported abroad. Katni came on marble map very recently, about five years ago.

In chip industry, maximum a worker gets paid is rupees forty. There is disparity of wages between women and men although work for both of them is equally back breaking. Generally a male-worker gets paid upto 35 to 40 rupees and female worker for same number of work hours gets paid 25 rupees. Workers at factory get trifle higher wages than the workers toiling at mining sites. Conditions at work are dangerous and there is no provision for health services, or even shelter as protection from hot summer or rainy-

season. Generally workers belong to nearby villages but are occasionally brought on tractors from distant villages. There is no crèches or canteen, no provision for water or toiletries. Dolomite mining has retained its labour intensive ways and has not seen much technological improvements.

It is difficult to make estimate of the turn-out in mining. But there are big mine owners like HukumChand Limestone company, KP Sons and Company who are in the business for very long period. They all have political linkages.

They either fund different political parties or stand themselves in elections by being party candidates.

Marble mines make enormous environmental hazard.

In these mines, technology is much in use. Massive cranes work day and night. Workers are often non-local as marbles mines require skill labour and technological know how. Most labourers therefore are imported from Rajasthan, which is traditionally known in India for being marble country. Owners too belong mostly to Rajasthan. Marble mining in Katni is recent phenomenon, having emerged in late nineties. It requires massive investment and therefore aspires for government patronage. Marble mining and processing here is completely in the hand of private companies. Government did not help even in the prospecting of resource, which private companies did themselves. Companies take land on lease and pay government revenue according to earning. It is here that most underhand deals are made. Most often deals are only for some specific land but companies spread their





tentacles in vast expense causing turmoil and environmental pollution. It is in these sites where workers are imported from other places that prostitutions flourish. Workers quarters are in dire strait.

Marbles are mechanically broken from the earth bed by an advanced engineering technology. Big stone slabs

are taken to processing plants and are processed through costly machines.

Workers eat and drink in small huts and tea-shops.

The International Labour Office report that the problems facing casual agricultural workers are 'legion'. Women who comprise the majority of casual workers are losing out through weak labour rights, casualisation, low wages, long hours, lax health and safety practices, gender stereotyping and sexual harassment. Most women tend to do unskilled and vulnerable forms of work (casual, temporary, seasonal and flexible), which, according to a World Bank study, has allowed agribusiness firms to avoid paying benefits stipulated under labour law, such as pensions, health insurance, maternity, holiday and sick leave. Women are less likely to unionise than men and are segmented by gender into a rigid division of labour determined by sex. Hence women tend to do the laborious yet 'feminine' tasks such as weeding, pruning, cutting, picking, sorting, grading and packing.





Bio-medical health may not be the topmost priority for people in poor countries, where long-term health is often traded-off for short term employment, and individuals may make conscious choices to sacrifice their health for the sake of income to support their families.

A low percentage of households in the mining region report participation in village level decision making. Except for voting, engagement in civic life is minimal in the region. There is however considerable involvement with critical issues in the villages.

While mining for dolomite has been an old story in Katni setting of crusher unit has been about ten years old. Investment is said to happen only when owners see greater profitability. For long the whole dolomite mining industry was more a labour intensive enterprise. Technological investment was rare and therefore owners used more of labour with primitive tools. Mechanization has become burdensome. As and when electricity is there, crushers run regularly but when electricity is absent the machine is run on tractor. This adds into cost. Main workforce constitutes of Adivasi community. Owners belong mainly to people with political connection. Mohan Shukla, a MLA of Janta Dal, owns mines in Malan village. But owners are getting to scent greener pasture. Most are shifting to marble mining and processing. To undertake work, owners employ sub-contractor who is directly responsible for workers' recruitment and work. This way owners avoid giving any benefits to the labour. If one gets hurt while on job, no wage is given. There is no legal accountability of owners because they only keep fictitious names on their list. Rest of the workers are casuals.

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Stones are blasted by dynamite. A group of labourers work on 10ftx10ftx1ft area and is given Rs. 200 for the effort. Stones are kept in the categories according to their quality. Dust given out by dolomite mines is indigestible in human system. No factory labour laws apply on these mines. Most of lime-stone mines are found in Khaimur range. The gas emitted from lime processing plants is most dangerous. Mining officials rarely visit mining sites to ascertain the irregularity as most are on pay rolls of mine-owners. In the villages that supply mine-workers, agricultural work is only for 1-2 months as most are single cropping areas. Mining season peaks up in February-June when there is also spurt in construction activities. During monsoon, the mining season gets slackened. It is said that there is no night shift. When work is increased due to high demand then workers are imported from distant villages. While agricultural wage in the region is about 25 to 30 rupees, in mining too wage varies from 25-40 rupee range. Sunday is given holiday but it is unpaid one. Payments to workers are made weekly. One day's wage is not given and is kept as security deposit. A labour at the rate of 25 rupees a day can earn at most rupees 600. Minimum wage in Madhya Pradesh is rupees 82-84. A mineworker owing to risk involved should get more than an agricultural worker. But unions are not allowed in mines. Even if workers get united they could approach the political leadership for redress but most of the political leadership is embroiled in mining and many directly own them.

Most families are a seven member unit in mining villages. In case of marriage or any other celebration, debt becomes an inevitable recourse for most villagers as they rely have no disposable income given their income level. Still, some ten percent of families in a village in the region sleep with one meal a day. Most families draw their cash need from six to seven days of plucking of leaves of tendu which is used for making smoking pipes. For each of hundred bundles of leaves, one has to give 5 bundles free. One gets 40 rupees for each of hundred bundles. Agriculture is totally rainfed and due to which a farmer gets only 15-20 days of farm work.

Bauxite Ores

Bauxite ores is generally found in Katni and numerous mines are scouring the earth for the bauxite ores. The land on which these mines are dug may be privately owned or may belong to village common land. At Kanwara, there was every sign of mines being illegal. Labourers are mainly responsible for digging of Ores and filling it in truck. For each truck-fill working labourers get Rs. 400. Two persons working for four days could fill one truck. The work is done by hand held tools. At best rate of work one could earn something close to 40 rupees a day. Otherwise average would come to

be rupees twenty-five per day. In most digging pits husband-wife team works simultaneously. Man digs while women collects and removes to awaiting truck. The dug soil is sieved through iron nets and soil and bauxite ores are separated. Most labourers lead a marginal living, with specter of starvation looming large. It is also a life of debt ridden. Most labourers have at most half an acre of land and it is mostly un-irrigated. Most therefore undertake dry land agriculture. Agricultural yields only give food for ten days a year. This is insufficiently equivalent to even labour inputs. Small children play at the site itself but there is no proper huts for either children to play or adults to rest. Most have cloth-sheet balanced on twigs to provide little shade. There is no provision for drinking water at the site. In fact safety and working condition of labourers are no responsibility of contractor who is an invisible person. His work is overseen by some body appointed by him. Bio-medical health may not be the topmost priority for people in poor countries, where long-term health is often traded-off for short term employment, and individuals may make conscious choices to sacrifice their health for the sake of income to support their families.

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Government has three kinds of minimum wages for various kind of mud-digging work. It is according to soil's hardness; harder the soil greater is wage. Yet most labourers working under contract system in mines never get government fixed minimum wages. The site of mining is often disputed between forest and revenue departments. Most often lease of revenue land is bought but digging takes place in nearby forestland. This can only be done with connivance of mining personals. In Katni's mining supervisor's office one could only see hand-held tools as things confiscated from illegal mining. ■