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## Women Mineworkers in Bellary District: A Case Study of the Vulnerable Groups of Mineworkers in Southwest India

### Overview

This case study focuses on the district of Bellary in India's south-western state of Karnataka, looking specifically at the plight of women mineworkers in the regional mines. Along with lower castes and the poor, women mineworkers are routinely exploited by the mine operators, who are desperate to turn a profit, often at the expense of the most vulnerable segment of the community. This case study shows that this abuse is not limited to the workplace, but extends into the women's village and home life.

### Overview of Bellary District and its Mining Sector

Bellary district is located in India's southern state of Karnataka India, about 300 kilometres from the state's capital, Bangalore. Situated on India's southern plateau and blessed with fertile soil, the district has had a long and rich history as an important political centre, being ruled over the years by many different dynasties.

On an organisational level, Bellary's administrative is quite complex, consisting of seven taluks, twenty-eight hoblis and one hundred and eighty nine village panchayats<sup>1</sup>. While villagers from the western taluks of Hadagali, H. Bommanahally and Kudligi work mostly in agriculture, villagers from the eastern taluks like Siruguppa, Hospet, Sandur and Bellary have more choice, finding jobs in mining, agriculture and trade.

In the past, many Indians have migrated from other states to this resource-rich and agriculturally productive region, largely attracted by the strong and diversified economy. Significantly, the manganese and iron ore mined from this area not only bolsters Karna-

<sup>1</sup> A taluk is a part of local government, usually comprising several villages or village clusters, that exercise certain fiscal and administrative power over the villages and municipalities within its jurisdiction. It is the ultimate executive agency for land records and related administrative matters. Governmental bodies at the taluk level are called the panchayat samiti. The hobli is a subdivision of a taluk.

### Summary of Issues

- Typical of India's mining sector, Bellary's mining labour force is divided along gender, age, caste and class lines, with women, children, the lower castes and the poor typically being the most exploited.
- This case study focuses on the gender issue, and the widespread exploitation of women mineworkers in the Bellary District of south-western India.
- Bellary's women mineworkers face constant physical, sexual and psychological abuse both in the workplace and in domestic life.

### How Bellary Got its Name

There are several legends about how Bellary got its name. One legend is that the city is named after Indra, the king of Gods, who slayed a Rakshasa (demon) named Balla who lived in a nearby forest. Balla-ari means 'enemy of Balla' (ari - enemy in Sanskrit). One of the two hills at the heart of the city is called Balahari Betta, and the Malleshwara temple is situated close by. Another legend explains that the city's name derives from the old Kannada word Vallari and Vallapuri.

For a long time the two rival dynasties of the Hoysalas and the Vijayanagars jockeyed for power, but eventually a ruler named Tippu Sultan gained control of the region. He consolidated his power by using the Fort of Bellary, previously built by the French, to stage attacks on enemies (Sloth Bear Foundation Website, 2008).

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taka state's economy but the Indian economy as a whole, with over half the locally produced iron ore being exported to the domestic and global market. Recent reports have estimated these ore-reserves to be over 18 million tonnes.

Much of the iron and manganese ore deposits and mines are concentrated in the taluks of Sandur, Bellary and Hospet. Of the ninety-nine mining leases that exist in the region, sixty-three are operational, while thirty-three mines are non-operational because the Forestry Department refused to issue or renew the owner's licences. The iron ore deposit covers about 0.4 million hectares and manganese under 95 thousand hectares.

Of the mines, three are government operated, and sixty are privately owned. The mines are all open cast mine operations, with more than half the ore being transported by road and rail to major port facilities, including Mangalore, Karwar, Goa, Chennai and Vishakapatnam. From these ports much of the ore is then exported to Koppal, Maharashtra, Goa, Andhra Pradesh and other states to be used in the steel industry. MMTC, a government owned company, manages the shifting, transportation, export and trade, also acting as a mediator between the producers and the buyers.

Since 2001, the production of ore has increased steadily as a result of rising demand. The work of digging and extracting small lumps from the barren and agricultural lands has been added to the main works. Iron ore is being dug out in the form

of Lump and Powder. There has been an increased demand for powdered ore since 2003.

One local labour union estimates that about 20,000 workers are employed in the mines around Bellary. Of these 20,000, however, only about 5,400 work on a permanent basis in government and privately owned mines. The remaining workers are part of the unorganised labour market, and for this reason they have no access to essential services such as health, education, sanitation, clean drinking water, and others. Often, mining leaseholders, contractors and agents act like unscrupulous capitalists, paying labourers less while demanding they work more.

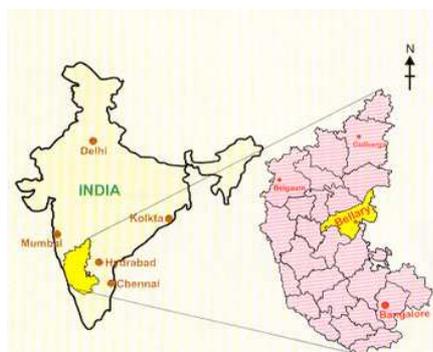
The Bellary district covers about 1270 square kilometres, but of this only about 84 square kilometres is protected forest. The rest of the land is used for agriculture or other land-based activities, like mining, which are the mainstay of the local economy. Bellary's labour force consists of more agricultural labourers than peasants, and significantly, more female labourers than males. Over 44% of Bellary's total labour force fall 'below the poverty line', which means they earn less than \$1USD a day.

Like much of India there's a deep rift separating the upper classes and castes from the lower castes and classes who make up most of the local community. The larger farms, mines and other industries are largely in the hands of the wealthy few who control most of the economy. Predictably it's the women in these communities that are often the most destitute.



Small scale miners filtering ore near the city of Hospet, Bellary District. Due to great international demands for iron-ore, particularly from China, local mining enterprises have expanded rapidly.

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Map of the state of Karnataka, with the Bellary District highlighted in yellow on the map on the right.

### About our Organisation

Through a combination of activism and research, our organisation hopes to give a voice to the typically exploited women workers in the mining industry. By creating an awareness of the integral role they play in the labour force and introducing local initiatives, we're attempting to improve local women's lives, giving them back their self dignity and a sense of independence.

## Class, Caste, Age and Gender Divisions Split the Mining Workforce

Typical of India's mining sector, Bellary's labour force is divided along class, caste, age and gender lines. This case study focuses on the plight of lower caste women labourers, who generally work in the mines as poorly paid, unskilled workers, or coolies, while the men are paid higher wages for work that's often less taxing.

Women usually engage in two types of work in the mines: processing (involving digging-crushing) and transporting (wagon loading). Not surprisingly, female mine and quarry workers often find themselves in much riskier environments, where men refuse to work.

Tragically, lower caste women become trapped in a vicious cycle - their jobs give them no skills and little pay, so they can't afford an education for themselves or their families, who are usually destined to the same fate. This means they can't ever climb

above the very lowest rung of the extremely hierarchical mining sector, and remain mired in poverty and ignorance.

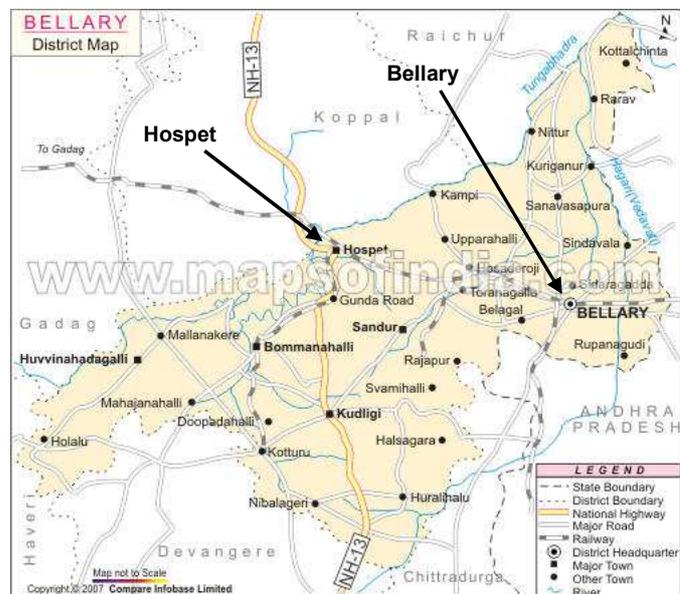
In an effort to learn more about the traditional roles, status and concerns of the region's women, our organisation carried out a survey to see how Bellary's mining labour force was divided on the basis of gender and age (see Table 1 on page 4).

We also arranged a focus group meeting for thirty women workers from the taluks of Bellary, Sandur and Hospet at the points of Papinayakanahally, Karinganur, Vaddu, Torangallu, Yashvanthagar, Jaisingpur and Nadihally. To gain a real insight into these women's life experiences we chose a few participants for in-depth interviews. It clearly shows how Bellary's labour force is divided on the basis of gender and age discriminating against women and children.

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### Analysis of the Survey

The mining labour force is split along gender, age, class and caste lines. Almost without exception all owners are male, and men are always given the better paid jobs with brighter prospects. On the other hand, women mineworkers toil away in the most backbreaking jobs such as stone breaking, crushing, sieving, grading, sifting, carrying, digging, loading, preparing tea and filling bags with red oxide powder. Even in the extremely rare case where a woman is the small-scale mine owner, she has little or no managerial or operational control over the mine, and is owner by name only. For example, the 'Parvathamma Mines', is managed by men who control all aspects of production, supply and utilisation, even though the owners are women. To make matter worse, although permanent employees have every Sunday off, day labourers, the unskilled and non-salary workers, typically work seven days a week.



Detailed Map of Bellary District. The city of Bellary is located in the west of the district and Hospet in the central north.

**Table 1 Bellary's Labour Force is Divided on the Basis of Gender and Age Discriminating against Women and Children**

Nature of work	Men	Women	Girls	Boys
Mine Owners	Y	N	N	N
Assistants	Y	N	N	N
Managers	Y	N	N	N
Engineers	Y	N	N	N
Surveyors	Y	N	N	N
Supervisors	Y	N	N	N
Accountants	Y	N	N	N
Technical Operators	Y	N	N	N
Drillers	Y	N	N	N
Over-Breakers	Y	N	N	N
Helpers	Y	N	N	N
Computer Operators	Y	Y	N	N
Contractors	Y	N	N	N
Sub-Contractors	Y	N	N	N
Male/Maistry	Y	N	N	N
Clerks	Y	N	N	N
Levellers	Y	N	N	N
Foreman	Y	N	N	N
Weigh Bridges	Y	N	N	N
Drivers	Y	N	N	N
Cleaners	Y	N	N	N
Security Guards	Y	N	N	N
Stone Breakers	Y	Y	Y	Y
Stone Carriers	Y	Y	Y	Y
Sievers	Y	Y	Y	Y
Stone Graders	Y	Y	Y	Y
Stone Sifters	Y	Y	Y	Y
Diggers	Y	Y	Y	Y
Sweepers	Y	Y	Y	Y
Loaders	Y	Y	Y	Y
Tea Makers	Y	Y	Y	Y
Suppliers	Y	N	N	N
Agents	N	N	N	N

Key: "Y" means present, "N" means not present.

## Child Labourers in Bellary's Mines

Mine operators take on not only women, but children as well. More often than not, for the poorest in the community, the entire family, including the children, are forced to work in the mines. In this way they make just enough money to survive. Child labourers get the lowest wages, and their work is usually backbreaking and tedious. Since they spend the entire mining season working, they have no time for school, missing out on any sort of education. This vicious cycle is self-perpetuating, and these families sink into deeper poverty.

Traditionally, Indian society sees boys as the family's only future breadwinner. The girl's conventional role is to look after the family's males, and even if they're not working, they usually aren't allowed to go to school.

Other factors that make it difficult for children, and particularly girls, from the poor local community to get an education include the fact that: poor families can't afford to pay for their children's education; children

often have to travel great distances to reach school; parents often feel that an education is irrelevant and that their children should work or help out in the home instead; and if girls are educated it's much harder to find a suitable husband of high standing, not to mention that the dowries they have to pay to wealthier, better educated families are usually much higher.

While mothers from middle and higher middle class families can afford to pay for child-care, poor families can't. But the mother still has to work, as their salary is an indispensable part of their family's overall income. So, typically, the mother is weighed down with the double burden of working fulltime and raising her children. Consequently, many girls have to ease their mother's load by staying at home, caring for their siblings and doing the household chores while their mothers are off at work.

Once again, this means that the girls remain uneducated and illiterate, further com-

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### Poor Literacy Rates among Bellary's Female Mineworkers Reflects Faulty Education System

The workers in the small mines and quarries are commonly migrants from the neighbouring states of Andhra, Goa and Maharashtra. Unlike the local labourers, they do not have permanent houses and typically live in temporary huts or shelters. They do not own their own land, and can't afford an education for their children.

This dire situation is reflected in the 2001 national census data, which reveals Bellary's poor literacy levels (about 61%), which is lower amongst the women (46%) than men (72%). This data illustrates clearly the deep divisions in literacy rates slicing through class, caste and gender, with the worst literacy rates among poor women, and particularly among women from the lowest castes and ethnic tribal groups.

Education is essential if mine workers are to escape the poverty trap, as developing skills and technological expertise enables them to get higher paying jobs that offer better prospects, and the possibility for promotion. Without education and training, workers are labelled as 'unskilled' and put into the lowest employment category, where they're forced to work harder and longer for pitiful wages. In almost all of Bellary's mines and quarries this unenviable section of the labour force is made up of lower caste women.

## Bellary's Women Mineworkers - Victims of Mine Operators' Discriminatory Practices

As most of the female labourers in the mines are from migrant families, they don't possess their own house or land like local mineworkers. Typically, they live in tents and dilapidated huts by the side of the mining hills, where dust and pollution blankets the landscape. It's not uncommon for local and permanent mineworkers to also live in squalid tents and huts that fringe the mines, which are often provided by the mine owners. Living in pitiful conditions, these poor families desperately struggle just to earn enough to eat, with little, or no, prospect of escaping this hand to mouth existence. Most of the women workers are from lower castes. Being illiterate and nearing middle age, these women cannot earn equal wages to their male counterparts. As such they often need to work two jobs, often doing up to 18 hours a day, to be able to provide for their families. They get very low wages for their hard labour. Sex discrimination is also common.

The overall effect of these conditions is that these women labourers have no autonomy over their own lives. In other words, they have no say on whether they get an education or some sort of vocational training, and can't choose their job. They have no control over what hours they work, and tragically, they often have little control over their sexual choices or family planning decisions.

For this reason, they often live in fear and without dignity. Often they're also guilt-ridden, as they can't provide for and take care of their families. Even though they wake at the break of dawn, perform all the household chores, walk up to ten kilometres to work, toil away all day at dangerous and physically exhausting work, and come home to prepare their family's dinner and look after their children, they have very little to show for it at the end of the day.

Without any protective equipment like masks, goggles, shoes or helmets being provided, female labourers perform all sorts of tasks, without recourse or complaint.

Covering their faces with locally made coarse towels or strips of sari ends, they're rarely protected from the red dust spraying off the manganese.

This dust gets into their eyes and nostrils, causing lung disease and other respiratory illnesses, not to mention skin conditions, injuries and long term eye damage. Women also get back and chest injuries from carrying heavy pieces of stone.

Other conditions that women are typically affected by include aches and pains, anaemia, white discharge, urinary tract infection and AIDS.

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### No Insurance or Medical Care for Poorest Mineworkers

Only permanent employees are eligible to receive service benefits such as EPF (Employee's Provident Fund), EPS (Employee Pension Scheme) and other benefits through the Ministry of Labour and the Iron and Manganese ore labourers' unions. Labourers employed in the unorganised labour market however struggle to survive from day-to-day barely eking out an existence.

As temporary employees they aren't eligible for medical coverage from either the mine operators or the government. For this reason hundreds of private nursing homes have opened capitalising on the scarcity of public health and medical facilities. Ironically these facilities are too expensive for most labourers. Although the Labour Welfare Department has opened hospitals at Kariganur and Sandur they lack casualty units operating theatres and expert doctors.

Mine owners do provide medical facilities, but typically these are only available to a few select workers, and when workers fall sick, proper clinical examinations are rarely carried out to determine the kind of disease the labourers have and their causes. If such tests are conducted the results are not made public. This conspicuous lack of medical facilities and the negligent treatment by medical practitioners has led to a significant increase in the number of patients suffering from chronic chest conditions, AIDS, and lung and respiratory disorders.

Recently, investigators visited the health centres to collect statistics in an attempt to expose this unfortunate situation, but medical officers refused to release dates and information. Despite this, the circumstantial evidence shows beyond doubt that mine-related pollution adversely affects the mineworkers and the local community's health.

**Note:** EPF is a benefit fund that covers life insurance, sickness, and superannuation, among other things. (Source: <http://www.tn.gov.in/policynotes/archives/policy2004-05/labemp2004-05-12.htm>)

## Legal Provisions Don't Protect Bellary's Mineworkers from Exploitation

The Factory Act 1948, Estates Act 1957, Mines Act 1957, Contract Labour Act 1970 and Inter-State Migrated Workers Act 1980 have legislated that mine owners and contractors must ensure the welfare of all contract workers guaranteeing access to health facilities, canteens, restrooms, clean drinking water, latrines, crèche facilities and first-aid. In reality, however, such facilities are rarely provided (Kerala Government Website, 2008).

Meanwhile, it's almost impossible for mineworkers to voice their grievances, as they have little or no direct contact with the mine owners and operators. Mineworkers can only access management through the mine contractors and **mistries** (supervisors), but these middlemen are acutely aware that the mineworkers, particularly the women, and lower classes and castes, desperately need the work and are unlikely to make any complaints. Agents, contractors and **mistries** openly exploit these vulnerable groups. Women are categorised as 'flexible workers', and are exploited in a ruthless 'hire and fire' process.

Poor literacy rates amongst these mistreated groups only compounds their problem, as they can't defend themselves legally against mistreatment resulting from the blatant disregard of legal provisions.

Indeed, mineworkers are often unaware of any wrongdoing at all.

Meanwhile, mine operators try to protect their interests and tighten their control by bending or ignoring government laws, and even rules and regulations within the mine's own operating constitution.

As previously discussed in this case study, the mine operator's total contempt for the mineworker's, and particularly women's, legal rights has resulted in a situation where more often than not mineworkers are profoundly exploited. This exploitation occurs on many levels, from financial, to sexual and physical. During one of the group discussions initiated by our organisation, a female mineworker, called **Sithamma**, explained tearfully the reality of their desperate situation, "It's difficult for us to keep the hands that feed us away from our bodies".

Although women workers generally follow orders coming from the labour contractors and head **mistries**, they've little chance of getting heard by any workers' organisations or unions. One of the greatest hurdles facing females seeking better working conditions is their inability to organise themselves into unionised groups, which have better legal representation and are taken more seriously by mine owners and operators.

*A female mineworker... explained tearfully the reality of their desperate situation, "It's difficult for us to keep the hands that feed us away from our bodies."*



Female mineworkers and their children in the Ramandurga Mining Precinct South of Hospet, Bellary District

### Women Mineworkers constantly Face Abuse and Disempowerment in Domestic Life

Domestic violence is a tragic reality constantly facing women mineworkers both in the workplace and at home. Ironically, although the wages earned by female quarry workers is an integral part of the total family earnings, these incomes rarely translate into more empowerment and respect for women. Despite hours of backbreaking labour in miserable conditions, and their important financial contribution, women are powerless to defend themselves against the sexual, physical and psychological abuse perpetrated against them by their own families and the wider community.

Women have little control over how to spend the cash, whether they invest it in their family's future or, unthinkable, spend it on themselves. It is common for a husband to forcefully take the money and squander his wife's income on alcohol, **bidis** (an indigenous form of cigarettes) or even on prostitutes.

## Technological Change Threatens Mineworkers' Livelihoods

India's rapidly expanding economy, and the drive of mine owners to maximise productivity and profits ensuring global competitiveness, is seeing the mining industry push for a more technologically advanced and mechanised approach to mining. This could spell disaster for a large segment of the mining labour force, particularly the unskilled and temporary workers.

Increasingly, a large number of women workers are being made redundant by mechanical equipment, that performs their duties more effectively and at a lower cost once the equipment has been paid off.

Jobs like stone breaking and powdering, and many others, are now performed by big machines.

In the past, the whole family was involved in wagon loading. Typically one railway wagon consists of fifty compartments, each compartment having a 55-60 ton capacity. Each worker was capable of loading up to 5-6 tons; so to load a whole train took about five hundred workers, each one receiving Rs. 80 for their few hours work.

A total family could get Rs 250. These days things are changing, and machines can do this work cheaper and in less time, with human labourers becoming unnecessary, or even a liability.

In previous years, the loading stations where the ore was transported from the mines were few in number. Local mineworkers benefited greatly from the extra income earned by loading ore. Now that the global market is demanding more iron ore, the loading stations have multiplied, but contractors are employing many more labourers at significantly reduced rates.

Recently established loading stations include Vysanakere, Kariganur, Hospet, Papinayakanahally, Byluvaddigere, Gadinagur, Toranagal, Allipura, Hagari, K Veerapura, Yashwant Nagar, Munirabad, Donimalai, Samehally, Rajapura and Ramghad.

The outcome of this rapid mechanisation of Bellary's mining industry is that human labour is quickly being phased out in favour of a more efficient automated system.

### Mining's Environmental Impact

Mining is also creating deforestation, which is exacerbated by workers cutting wood for fuel. Mine owners more often than not, ignore environmental regulations, cutting costs at every corner in a desperate attempt to ensure maximum profit.



Mining Road from Hospet to Sandur, Bellary District

## Conclusion

This case study has shown beyond doubt that the mine owners in the Bellary District routinely bend state laws, rules and regulations in their push for higher profits. Mine owners shamelessly pursue mining practices that subjugate the most vulnerable groups in the community - contract workers, lower classes and castes, ethnic groups, children and women. Women earn pitiful wages performing the most backbreaking jobs, and still have to take care of their children and families. Despite their gruelling existences, these women mineworkers face physical, sexual and psychological abuse not only in the workplace, but also in their homes and villages. Without education, and with no control over their destinies, these women are trapped in a viscous cycle of poverty, ignorance and abuse. They face this prospect without complaint or recourse.

Our organisation is trying to help these women by holding focus sessions where the women can voice their grievances, and see that they can live their lives with dignity. But, sadly, things are set to get worse, as the national and global markets demand more iron-ore at cheaper prices. Growing mechanisation of Bellary's mining sector will see the 'unskilled' workers become more and more redundant, losing the little income they survive on. The only way women can reclaim independence and improve their lives is to actively form unionised organisations that have better legal representation and a stronger voice. Unfortunately, few of these organisations have been established, and Bellary's, and indeed India's, women mineworkers remain voiceless and exploited.

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### Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) in Asia-Pacific Portal – <http://www.asmasiapacific.org>

#### ASM Asia-Pacific Case Study Series

This series of case studies documents concrete examples of equitable, effective, and sustainable local-level partnerships including small-scale miners or their communities as a guide to develop better policy and practice in the Asia-Pacific region.

The project has been led by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt. The case studies have been edited by Joel Katz and designed by Rachel P Lorenzen.

#### Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) in Asia-Pacific Portal

The ASM Asia Pacific Portal is the public interface of a loose network of individuals and institutions working on poverty eradication, development and livelihoods in Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM) in the Asia-Pacific region.

The portal's mandate is to disseminate knowledge about ASM in the Asia-Pacific, to document best practice in community development and environmental management, and to promote fellowship and cooperation among stakeholders interested in poverty eradication and sustainable development.