

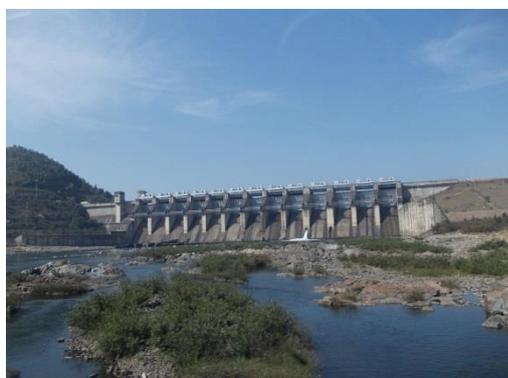


Going for Gold : Newsletter 7

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In early 2015, field research continued under the ARC Going for Gold research project. In late January, ANU researchers Dr. Kuntala Lahiri Dutt and Dr. Keith Barney, along with Mr Martin Foran from Minelab, travelled from Australia to Calcutta, India, and then onwards to a local gold mining site in the eastern state of Jharkhand. Arriving by train to the state capital of Jamshedpur, Lahiri-Dutt, Barney and Foran linked up with a *Going for Gold* national researcher, Mr. Tarun K. Bose of New Delhi, who had already conducted project-sponsored research in this area. The researchers used Jamshedpur as a home base, making daily field trips to villages living alongside the famed Subarnarekha River. As *Subarnarekha* can be translated into “*the streak of gold*”, the researchers felt confident that communities engaging in gold extraction activities could be aware of the existence of gold in this area of India!



With the informed guidance of Bose, the researchers visited an area of the Subarnarekha River upstream from the large Chandil Dam,¹ constructed in 1993 as part of the controversial, World Bank-supported, Subarnarekha Multipurpose Project. At the time of construction, the dam displaced some 38,000 Indigenous (*adivasi*) people, and flooded approximately 30,000 hectares of farm and forest land. In the process, gold-bearing tracts along the Subarnarekha were also lost.

While communities we visited living alongside the reservoir still remember their old villages, there is still gold to be found in the areas along the water's edge and in their fields, and local people are extracting this gold for their livelihoods.



Moreover, the alluvial gold found in these areas lies shallow in the soil profile, with local villagers reporting some larger, grain-sized nuggets that are occasionally found. Generally, the activity is so artisanal in nature that mercury use is non-existent. Upstream of the reservoir, these areas were considered to be compelling locations for Martin Foran from Minelab, who believed that these represent sites where metal detectors could play a role in supporting people's livelihoods. For the academic researchers, more interesting was the theme of the complex connections specific to this site, between agrarian livelihoods, development-induced displacement, local people's mineral extraction, and state's claims to control over natural resources. The poor whose lands were submerged by the dam did not receive the level of compensation expected

¹ See: <http://probeinternational.org/library/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/September-1991-Probe-Alert.pdf>

by them, and lost their primary livelihood of farming. Instead, they turned to seeking a livelihood based on gold, that the dam-builders had either no knowledge of or did not care about. However, the gold provides means for a livelihood to the displaced villagers, particularly women, as many men have migrated into nearby towns and cities in search of jobs.

The riparian tract along the Subarnarekha also offered a tantalizing glimpse into the forgotten colonial history of the area, as local villagers introduced the researchers to one of several old, reinforced, gold mining tunnels. Part of the forest road the researchers traveled along to get to this site also appeared to be of colonial origin. According to our National Research Partner in India, Professor Amalendu Jyotishi, it is possible that these tunnels were constructed sometime between 1870 to 1880s, at the tail end of the 'Indian gold rush'. All this provided interesting clues to a fascinating local context of contemporary and historical gold mining activities along the Subarnarekha that will be interesting to understand further.



The second important area along the Subarnarekha involved a site along the riverbank downstream from the Chandil Dam. In a number of places in this general location, dozens of local men were engaged in hard labour, digging into the coarse gravel of the riverbed in order to extract soil for gold panning.





Working in teams, their daily compensation from this work was often very low, but it still offered the chance for making a living better than in their on-farm work in the dry season. Again, the complex inter-connections between agrarian and mining-based livelihoods were highlighted in this site.



A key issue in this area of India, a situation common across Asia, is that local authorities claim gold resources as a state asset. Community-based gold extraction is then viewed as an activity to be forcibly restricted, and this is often framed in terms of the impacts of informal gold mining upon the environment and human health. Indeed, in Jharkhand state a local newspaper carried a story that indicated authorities would be working to curtail gold extraction activity. Thus, the non-legal nature of local people's engagement with gold extraction can pose significant problems, and indeed it also offer challenges for undertaking field research to better understand this important livelihood activity.

The *Going for Gold* project is oriented around considering ways in which social-environmental impacts of gold mining could be addressed, whilst gold-based livelihoods still supported. Thus far in the project the researchers have found fascinating case study examples of informal gold mining from Indonesia and India, involving research sites that both warrant further investigations. Our next task is to explore similar issues between mining, rural livelihoods, agrarian change and state authority in the context of Lao PDR. Currently, linkages are being established with the National University of Laos that would enable fieldwork to be conducted in Laos later in 2015.