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The geophagous peasants of Kalahandi: De-peasantisation and artisanal mining of coloured gemstones in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a political economic appraisal of the de-peasantisation of indigenous communities through an ethnographic exploration of artisanal mining and trade of coloured gemstones in the Kalahandi district of western Odisha (formerly Orissa) in eastern India. It shows that the *Khonds*, one of the poorest indigenous groups living in this part of India have taken up mining of semi-precious gemstones since the 1990s. This period coincides with the opening of the Indian market of gemstones to the world, alluring this community to often replace their traditional subsistence agriculture with artisanal mining. In addition, a number of other factors have contributed to push more peasants out of agriculture to the informal mining sector for livelihood as it provides them with higher return and quick money. A series of droughts accompanied with deepening agrarian crisis and exploitative caste and class relations have particularly affected the Khond and other tribes of the Kalahandi region. At the same time, the increase in global demands have led to an intensification of informal gemstone mining by the Khonds. However, the indigenous people have not significantly benefitted; although the rate of out-migration has slackened, many are now without land and working in mines as daily wage labourers. This is because the proliferation of mining has also attracted the entry of opportunistic outsiders who collude with the local state, local politicians, caste-leaders and class-elites, police, and bureaucracy to sweep up the profits. This paper shows that the indigenous people continue to remain impoverished as the informal nature of the mining business further pushes them into living precarious lives.

1. Introduction

Bhuban Majhi is a resident of Sarajpalli village of Kalahandi district in Odisha (formerly Orissa),[1] and has about 5 acres of farm land in which he plants paddy. One morning, in 1993, a group of over 10,000 people unexpectedly arrived at his field and started digging. They vandalised the field completely and destroyed the standing paddy crop. When Bhuban resisted, they beat him senseless. Majhi's field was full of cat's eye and garnet, which are semi-precious gemstones. These people left with sacks filled with stones, after they exhausted almost all of it. Bhuban says, "Somehow they must have heard that my field has many of these stones," and, "I, the owner of this farm, did not get a single paisa[2] out of this."

Both Kalahandi and Bolangir are among the poorest districts in India (Sahu et al., 2004). Thousands of people have died here because of starvation, famine, drought and crop failure. Cases have been recorded of children being sold by parents for as little as .3 US dollars (about 20 Indian Rupees) (Banerjee, 1993). Kalahandi and neighbouring Bolangir districts have supported an artisanal mining rush for gemstones destined for local markets in western Odisha in India. Copiously found in these districts, these stones can be easily acquired through alluvial and surface mining. Since the 1990s, mining has expanded to the level of an organised network of miners, shop-owners, middlemen, agents, buyers and exporters, thereby linking this local chain to the global market. This business sends out stones worth more than 100 Crore Indian Rupees

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[1] Several state, district and city names have either been changed or re-spelt in post-colonial India. The name of Orissa state was changed in 2011.

[2] A paisa is 1/100th of a Rupee, Indian currency. It would be equivalent to cent notionally.

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(~16 million USD) annually of which half the stock is sent to Jaipur (in Rajasthan) and Bombay for cutting, polishing and exporting (Banerjee, 1993). The balance remain in the regional market to be cut, polished and exported to national markets.

A 150 km stretch of land from Sambalpur to Koraput in western Odisha has now become a hunting ground for these gemstones. Though Kalahandi and Bolangir are the main artisanal mining districts, others include parts of Koraput, Sonepur, Sambalpur, Deogarh, Rayagada and Phulbani districts. Various stones including corundum/rubies (*Manik)*, emeralds (*Panna*), garnets (*Ceyloni Gomed* and *Gomed*), cat's eye/tiger's eye (*Lahsunia*), aquamarine (*Beruz*), blue and yellow sapphires (*Neelam/Pukhraaj*), and small amounts of diamonds (*Hira)* are mined here.[3]

Primarily, gemstones gained predominance as jewellery adornments for allure for the growing upper and middle classes in India for whom gold has conventionally been distinguishing markers of status and class. Historically, emperors, kings and nobilities held exclusive power to acquire and own these valuable gemstones. By the late nineteenth century, the advent of large corporate houses such as De Beers (founded in 1888) promoted large-scale production and marketization of these stones. This led to a degree of democratisation of the gemstone market, whereby upper middle class and increasing middle class consumers of the world could buy gemstones and jewelleries. Gemstones offer them a sense of status, class distinction and perhaps even security (as investments for future). Weber (1978), in his work, illustrates how certain sections in society can occupy higher position in the social order through non-economic status by posturing of opulence and éclat. Similarly, Bourdieu in his work on class and distinction (1984; 56), describes how the aesthetic choices made by an individual or groups establish class-fractions or class based social groupings. This 'distinction' of aesthetic 'taste' inadvertently helps maintain a 'cultural hegemony' and subsequently power of one class (or caste) over another. A multi-million dollar industry thrives in India and throughout the world based on this ascribed (fetish) value of these stones which, purportedly, gives élan, style, status, power, prestige, honour and distinction to the owners. Gemstones have conventionally been used as liquid currency because of their ascribed high value. Their portability means they can be easily transported, often across political borders, in lieu of cash or gold.

Both Hindu and Islamic traditions and cosmology in the Indian subcontinent bestow gemstones with powers of controlling the features and futures of human lives (Khalid, 2015). In other astrological traditions of the world, they are considered to be therapeutic and capable of curing diseases when combined and worn with metals of different kinds, such as gold, silver and copper. These astrological traditions make gemstones a high-value marketable product in India. A secondary use of gemstones is in large industries; diamonds are the most well-known example but Taylor (2005) describes a range of uses for both precious and semi-precious gems. Gemstones are broadly categorised into: diamonds and its types; and other coloured gemstones, which are further categorised as precious stones and semi-precious stones.

In this context, the paper shows how one of the poorest indigenous communities, the *Khonds*, have informally taken up the mining of gemstones such as rubies, garnets and other semi-precious stones. Traditionally, Khonds had migrated whenever their subsistence was threatened by dry monsoons or poor harvest, this has changed since the 1990s, the period that coincides with after the opening of the Indian market of gemstones to the world. This period also coincides with an increase in global demands, and by the entry of opportunistic outsiders who collude with the local state, local politicians, caste-leaders and class-elites, police, and bureaucracy. A series of droughts accompanied with deepening agrarian crisis and exploitative caste and class relations have particularly affected the Khond and other tribes of the Kalahandi region. They have responded to the distress by taking up informal mining for a livelihood. This paper argues that the intensification of informal gemstone mining by the Khonds has not significantly benefitted them. Although the rate of out-migration of some tribal or *Adivasi*[4] people has slackened, many are now without land and working in mines as daily wage labourers. This paper shows that tribal people continue to remain impoverished and the informal nature of the mining business has further pushed them into living precarious lives.

The empirical observations and data that have propelled this paper have been collected through extensive fieldwork and in-depth interviews carried out in western Odisha, mainly in Kalahandi district. There are several interviews that have been referred to in this paper. For the purpose of anonymity, we have numbered the interviewee (as 1, 2 . . .), but mentioned the caste/tribe, job, venue and date of interview taken wherever possible. The paper is structured as follows: first it sets out the theoretical position of the authors in the next section, then outlines the geological and geographical aspects of gemstones, followed by a brief historical outline of Kalahandi, and its agrarian distress. Detailed descriptions of informal mining activities are outlined along with an analysis of trade. The concluding section outlines the impoverishment and dispossession of the rural poor in informal mining, with an analysis of the factors that have contributed to the growing levels of destitution.

2. Mining by peasants

In the international mining literature, informal modes of mineral extraction are collectively known as artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) (Hentschel et al., 2002). There is no single definition of ASM in South Asia, and often panning and gemstone mining is equated with 'artisanal' aspects of this mining. In this paper shallow incline and surface mining such as quarries, and also small mines—mainly unmechanised surface as well as underground mining—are discussed. These are unlicensed, unauthorised, unregulated, small-scale, alluvial and scavenging activities of gemstones that encompass both legal and illegal extractive operations. For many rural people, informal mining is a continuation of traditional livelihood. But many others are forced into it as a result of sudden translocal economic changes; such as losing land due to rise in development projects and industries. This has led to a surge of 'development refugees' into informal mining (Lahiri-Dutt, 2007).

Mining in India dates back to 400 BC, hence, there is a strong sense of community occupation and tradition. Historically, all mining was 'artisanal'; hence there is doubt about the current meaning of the term ASM in this case. It is further complicated by the fact that modern mechanised mining started in India during colonial times. Colonial authorities mooted laws to legalise state mining and facilitate export of minerals to colonial metropolises. These laws were created to exploit the colonies and simultaneously modernise the peripheries. The postcolonial state popularised large-scale mining even further, imparted western forms of

[3] Interviewee 1: Discussion with Jamal (name changed) my key informant in Sambalpur on 20th May 2015. He is a practicing Muslim and a petty gemstone trader, from Uttar Pradesh. He and his brother are now settled in Odisha and own a small gemstone lapidary and retail shop in Sambalpur. They trade in gems originating in Kalahandi and other districts of western Odisha.

[4] Adivasi means 'original inhabitants', is a term used to depict the heterogeneous set of indigenous people living in South Asia. It is a politically loaded connotation recognising the rights and autonomy of these autochthones.

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