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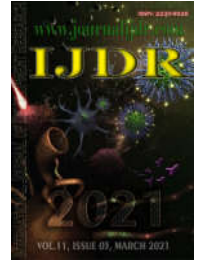
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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RELATIONSHIP OF TRIBAL PEOPLE WITH THE FOREST: A CASE STUDY ON THE ISSUE OF OPEN CAST MINING AT DIHING PATKAI

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ABSTRACT

Forests are the source of life especially for the indigenous people, who are dependent on the forest which provides them with natural elements of life for their survival. Interference from the outside world especially in the name of development by the government organisations affects their livelihood and natural habitat forcing them to leave their lifestyle along with the depletion of natural resources and agricultural practices due to commercialization of forests. With growing demand for mineral resources and favourable policy towards the mining sector, developing countries have become investment hubs for mineral extraction. Extractive industries such as coal mining generate negative externalities that bring irreversible changes in the socioeconomic and ecological scenarios, which adversely affect the local economy and threaten the sustainability of local livelihood systems. On other side this expansion of mines has provided employment to locals directly as well as indirectly, which has helped to increase finance. In recent years the discussion around coal mining impacts has become interspersed with that of forest loss. This is primarily because a large amount of coal reserves of the country is known to be located in areas which are forested, or officially recognised as forests, these forest lands are crucial for the survival of forest dependent communities (both tribal and non-tribal) as well as the wild flora and fauna which these habitats support. The objective of this paper is to analyse the effects of coal mining on local traditional livelihood systems in the Saleki area of the DehingPatkai Elephant Reserve in Assam. The results show that rural households in the mining area experience both positive and negative outcomes from the coal mining activities. Coal industry is one of the most significant legacies of the British rule in Assam. The introduction of the coal mining industry marked a landmark in the economic history of Assam and invited labour from places like Nepal, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh thus created a major change. Hence, rapid underground and opencast mining going on in this area leads to various land use changes in the mine operating areas.

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INTRODUCTION

The Dehing Patkai region is also known as the Jeypore rain forest and falls under Tropical wet Evergreen forest and home for various endangered species in the world such as White Wanged wood duck, China pangolin, flying fox, seven species of wild cat in India. Dehing Patkai region covers 575 km, which is 937 sq km has the famous The Dehing-Patkai Elephant Reserve. The region is called "Amazon of the East" due to the diverse biodiversity. However, The recent coal mining activities are the Saleki forest that has led the environment in grave danger leading to soil erosion, deforestation and causing numerous impacts over the livelihood of indigenous people who are dependent on the forest as a source of living. Opencast mining is conducted in three sites- Ledo, Tirap, and Tikak (Ann. Rep., MoC, 2013-14). Increased mining operations have impacts on the settlement, forest cover, and also on tree-clad area.

Therefore, there is a need to adopt a scientific approach in mining activity to minimize the deteriorating land cover dynamics of the region because the increase of mining operations affects land use and land cover of the region.

History of colonization in Assam & Exploitation of poor in the name of development: The British required coal or fuel from the beginning of their emergence in Assam because of the ease of transportation of coal from Bengal via railways and river networks. Reason for the British arrival in Assam due to better navigation from the Brahmaputra and the introduction of steamers on the Brahmaputra which would not be economically viable without the availability of local coal and local labor. The establishment tea industry changed the demographic structure of Upper Assam. An increasing number of industries increased the demand for coal in the region mainly to generate power. From 1895-1904 all the mines were under the administrative operation control of Assam Railway and Trading

Company. British domination granted industrial benefits to a handful of people leading change in culture into cosmopolitan.

Who are the Indigenous tribes of ASSAM?

The forest is the home for Indigenous Nocte tribes who live on the banks of the Dihing River. The Nocte village is known as the Naga village. The village has 38 houses and Nocte families, whose primary occupation is agriculture. The fields of the village are irrigated by canals that flow down to the Dihing river which is also a source of the fishery. The OCP in Dehing Patkai is still active and represents mining of a hill of about 300 to 400 m high above the ground level. The surface drainage from OBDs is acidic and the surface runoff enters streams and rivers. Though an acid drainage treatment plant has been installed it is not sufficient because the canals are polluted by the residue of sulfur-rich coal from the mining in the hills, which resulted in a loss in soil fertility. According to Engels and Marx the Basic principles of the eco-Marxist ideology states relationship between nature and man and due to the degradation of soil fertility and a large amount of coal found in the canals, the tribal shifted their occupation from agriculture to fisheries to carrying coals from the canals to earn their livelihood.

The indigenous population faces exploitation which takes place in the forest in the name of development are many;

Firstly, the tribal are forced to move away from their traditional sources of living to non – traditional sources such as laborers, diggers, lifters, while a few migrate across states and work as construction workers. Generally, the tribal land holds less value in the market and is non-transferable which is the major aspect that adds for illegal acquiring of land for mining purposes. Tribal areas account for the country's most coal, mica, bauxite production which holds high value in the market

Secondly, The mining activity along with affecting livelihood also impacts the quality of water and agriculture. Due to increased technological advancement, the jobs are highly reserved and provided to the skilled manpower such as “white-collar employees”. Where the opportunities in the name of the job for the tribal are optimal. Moreover, the technological advancement in the environment sector has resulted in men occupying the roles in handling machinery and leaving women behind the traditional and socio-economic roles. However, Gradual migration by the non-tribal from outside into the region led to a feeling of threat to livelihood and land among the tribal people. Since the tribal land cannot be given to any private body the tribal people feel the move for mining operation as a conspiracy to alienate the tribal people from their forest land. The alienation of people from their primary occupation to mining creates an imbalance in agriculture production and creates a section of new class and laborers. The new class of people who were once forest dwellers are forced to move away from their livelihoods and prone to various diseases.

Rehabilitation

Coal mining (both opencast and underground mining) has challenged the livelihood of forest people and accelerated the creation of additional problems like displacement, compensation, and rehabilitation. As a part of displacement activities, the NEC promised to provide economic growth associated with the coal mining activities leading to semi-urban development, improvement of social and living standards. This supports the development of ancillary and supporting industries and other related activities through the generation of direct and indirect employment to the local community. Indirect manpower for outsourcing coal and OB extraction and secondary employment through coal transportation and other commercial activities. Nearly 1200 employees are directly employed in North Eastern Coalfields, and a large section of beneficiaries belongs to Assam and nearly 3000 people are directly dependent on NEC for job opportunities. The coal industry of Upper Assam, As a public sector, has been entrusted as a nucleus for the future industrialization of this region and plays a role

in the socio-economic and cultural development of the people of this region. The NEC is recommended to develop road connectivity in villages and also provide drinking water facilities as desired by local village communities besides providing them with employment opportunities and skill up-gradation facilities by providing good training and retraining, if necessary, to earn their livelihoods

Institutional based solutions: The constant protests undertaken by the tribal groups caught the attention of various thinkers, NGOs, and media due to which continuous PILs were filed, due to the constant pressure and nonacceptance of the various proposal by the tribal groups, the State Government ordered a judicial inquiry into the illegal coal mining at the Dehing-Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary. To curb the adverse effects of the above-mentioned problems, the management of North Eastern Coalfields, has taken various measures for Pollution control such as to check the state of the environment at the collieries and their adjacent residential areas, periodical Ambient Air Quality monitoring is carried out at the collieries of Tikak, Tirap, Tipong, Baragolai and Ledo along with water quality monitoring and noise level monitoring as well for some selected locations. The health of workers will be checked regularly under periodical medical examination (PME) in which each worker is covered in a span of 3 & 5 years for employees aged above 45 years and below 45 years respectively. Regular monitoring will be carried out for noise level measurement quarterly. The region is highly inhabited by tribal people further suffers for meeting the need for compensation for each tribal family as the land belongs to the community and the distribution of land is highly made on communal ownership basis. As a result, estimating the loss incurred by the individual family is very difficult and compensation for such loss is more complex. The social benefits provided by NEC under different programs. They informed the subgroup that the broad requirements of villagers were: (i) employment in the mining of the proposed projects, (ii) road connectivity, (iii) drinking water supply, (iv) electricity, etc. The subgroup had a word of appreciation for the same and suggested that NEC should establish a Centre for promoting traditional cultures of the region as a part of CSR activity. In Dihingpatkai coal mining region, there is the backfilling of the void, it carried out in a manner to restore the original topography so that the native forest communities can once again be easily established. The officials of NEC suggested that the water quality of streams in the area should be properly assessed. The environmental quality in NEC should be monitored regularly. Yearly Social audit of CSR activities undertaken by NEC should be carried out through a nearby reputed Institute or University. NEC should go the whole log to develop road connectivity in villages as also provide drinking water facilities as desired by local village communities besides providing them with employment opportunities and skill up-gradation facilities by providing good training and retraining, if necessary, to earn their livelihoods.

Various Schools of Environmental Economics: From the Eco-Marxist lens view degradation of resources is viewed as the result of the political and economic system of capitalism and means to subjugate the working class and the same way subjugates the natural resources. Eco-Marxist emphasizes the participation of humans to save nature because both are connected and exploitation of anyone can impact the other. The people are stuck in a growth-oriented economy that exploits natural resources. The truth is the growth-oriented economy has zero space for resource conservation. In DihingPatkai case, the approval of coal mining project near DihingPatkai Wildlife Sanctuary falling under DihingPatkai Elephant Reserve by the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) on 7 April 2020 shows less strictness of clearance process for development projects under Environment Impact Assessment rules of 2020 under Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC). The hydropower projects in and around the forest areas of Dibang valley of Arunachal Pradesh, open cast mining in upper Assam as well as Meghalaya, oil drilling approval in Dibru-saikhuwa wildlife sanctuary are much related because the primary relation comes from the narrative around development models. The forested Patkai region represents the vibrancy of indigenous communities residing in the

region like Tangsa Naga, Singpho, Tai Phake, Khamti, Ahom, Sema Naga, Mishing, Nepali, etc. and significant characterizes is that the same indigenous community lives in different political vicinity under this ecological umbrella. The promise of employment generation for the native indigenous people for development model projects is an illusion, on the contrary, they keep on losing their nature and community resources because of the flawed devolvement model which is enormous and proliferate causing more displacement of cultural heritage practices. In this period of neoliberal economic structure, consumer behavior have managed to show the indigenous people's aspiration of development. But the fact cannot be denied that there is a practice of misusing sentiments of aspiration of these people to for benefits of the corporates. Thus, under these development projects, there will be a lack of basic adequate facilities for fulfilling the basic requirements like water, sanitation, health, education, agriculture, transport, and the market for the produce.

Research scholars from Guwahati University and IIT Guwahati on June 8, 2020, mentioned in Northeast Now that Coal India Ltd. Is one of the largest mining companies in the world and has been contributing to the state through dividend and taxes on the generation of coal. The lockdown estimated loss of revenue by Rs. 4500 to Rs.5000 crores to the key coal-producing states for the financial year 2021. With the passing of Mineral Law (Amendment) Bill 2020, the initiatives of Govt. have been inclined towards the utilization of domestic coal and to reduce dependency on international exports. Thus, a rise in interest to promote commercial mining. Indisputably, India process development through the natural resources like coal but accelerated creation of additional problems like displacement and rehabilitation even ecological degradation etc. here treating nature as a resource in Dehing Patkai increased agriculture but increased its exploitation through coal mining that let to loss of land under nature and settlement of outsiders to hinder the indigenous culture of the tribes. On other hand as public sector the coal industry of Upper Assam has entrusted as nucleus for future industrialization of this region and plays role for socio-economic and cultural development of the people of this region. Contributing amount of revenue every year for the nation has been seen as its historic move in creating a developed society including migration of people from parts of country have strengthened the socio-economic and cultural integrity of this region thus sharing over 61.6% of total commercial primary energy sources in India.

CONCLUSION

The country's reliance on coal and coal-based power generation were evident from the first five-year plan. When the need for increasing coal production and its efficiency was one of the tasks set out for independent India. With the gradual establishment of a nationalized coal mining sector, most of the coal mining in India has historically concentrated on feeding the domestic demand. The coal mining industry in Assam was a logical conclusion of the investment in plantation and oil sectors. But after the invasion, it became environmentally unfriendly as it creates damage to every component of society and nature. Declaration of The Dehing-Patkai region as Elephant Reserve under Project Elephant in 1992 and on the other hand accepting the coal mining activities shows the double standard of the government. Where under the very nose of the government corporates are permitted to exploit nature while the poor and miserable tribe groups in the region are forced to move away. The indigenous tribe group who are illiterate and consider the tribal land and forest and hunting as a source of livelihood, are forced to move away from their original occupation as hunters and gathers. In the case of Dehing Patakai and constant exploitation of natural resources led to massive protests from tribal groups in the region which caught the attention of NGOs and political parties due to the constant pressure the Government of India to withdrawal the coal mining activity in the region. For the eco-Marxist extensive community participation in managing resources rather than undermined by the over-exploitative practices of multinational corporations has increase forest density in the community forest of Nepal between 1990 and

2010. In the region of our concern, Ledo Open Cast Mining Protection Committee and PatkaiPahar People's Protection Committee protested against open cast Mining along with other organizations like All Assam Tribal Sangha, Tribal Students' Federation, Students 'Science Society etc with concern for tribal people rights. Gradual migration by the non-tribal from outside into the region led to a feeling of threat to livelihood and land among the tribal people. Since the tribal land cannot be given to any private body the tribal people feel the move for mining operation as a conspiracy to alienate the tribal people from their forest land. The network among different indigenous communities in the region of our study exists due to similar traditional practices around bio-resource management. This trace the relationship between people and forest of the region and the traditional knowledge among these communities defines their livelihood and other practices like the traditional practice of tea cultivation, rice cultivation, and cultivation of oranges. (indigenous tribe)

Why this will remain still an issue: The proposed expansion of the Dehing Patkai Wildlife sanctuary to a larger area may indeed be a welcome step, but it would not bring any permanent solution if corruption and illegal mining continues. It has been seen in Assam that declaring a forest as a reserve forest or wildlife sanctuary has its limitation and has failed to save wildlife and the environment. The declaration of a region as a reserved forest and prohibiting the localities from their source of living to new sources creates a new class of society to the people. Moreover, there is no Re- habitation policy provided by the government but certain amenities provided by the corporate and government which focus on the job opportunity and providing better road connectivity and drinking water facility, etc which is a welcome move. The amenities provided by the government and corporates such as the construction of roads to better connectivity and safe drinking water are mainly for the benefit of their employees and for better connectivity to transport the coal. Since the houses are in close vicinity to the road and coal mines the movement of trucks and mining increases the air pollution in the region making the households prone to various respiratory problems such as Asthama. The water which was once pure is being polluted by coal mining and the release of hazardous chemicals has polluted water, soil, and the environment. The tribes can no more hunt as the area is declared as reserve forest, they may have to be dependent on the coal mining activities for their livelihood. Moreover, The coal mining activities require labor where men are appointed for minimal wages due to their proficiency in technology. Whereas, women who used to collect wood from the forest and do agriculture can no more be dependent but must find other sources of livelihoods such as taking certain programs of the central government.

Acceptance of the EIA is highly problematic in the region of DehingPatakia as the region is called the "Amazon of East" due to the vast diversity of flora and fauna. Moreover, it's very evident government and corporate are two sides of the same coin, and acceptance of the draft causes much devastation and exploitation of nature, tribes, and environment. Moreover, the recent draft Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) 2020 notification that seeks to replace the existing EIA notification 2006 has been criticized by experts and environmentalists. The EIA notification regulates the process of environment clearance, which is required by projects such as dams, mining, thermal power plants, highways, ports, airports, and townships. This only proves the Centres credence towards the industries in the name of sustainable development rather than people and the environment. Amidst all the crises if the MoEFCC approves such disastrous law, it will further lead to the devastation of the environment and biodiversity. The need of the hour is the inalienable right to the ecosystem to exist and flourish and give the rights to people to file a petition in case of violation of the rights. Where the government is held responsible for providing remedies. Which is a great step for humanity for a paradigm change where nature which was seen as property due to traditional context is viewed as the defendant.

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