Chapter 6
Portrait of Women's struggle in the coalmines

In this chapter, one seeks to describe the socio-cultural politics in the Jharia coalmines, and the unequal power relations in the day-to-day lives of the women miners. In order to understand how these inequalities led to the emergence of labor discontent in the Jharia coalfield, a closer analysis of the narratives and interviews of the women miners is necessitated; this then brings out a clear picture of the gender discrimination at work, and the covert politics at the work place.

Throughout this study an effort has been made to draw attention to the significance of the broader political economy of the situation. Therefore, while there are persisting similarities, a clear break is evident from the colonial era to the period after independence (1947). There is a further divide between the period after independence to the nationalization of the coal mines, and once again to the period after nationalization.

As is well recognized, women do not form a homogenous category. Though this thesis focuses on women workers, it is important to have a sense of a broader situation of women in the area as well as their different cultural practices. This can be explicitly seen through contrasting the status and culture of women from the tribal communities, migrant women and also the women from upper caste community. The primary objective of enquiry in this study belongs to the tribal communities.

In Jharia, the early coalmines employed women of tribal families as part of the 'family labour unit'\(^{49}\). Women comprised almost one third of the total workforce in the coalmining industry during the first quarter of the 20\(^{th}\) Century. Women in the mining communities were not seen as active participants in the economy; they were represented as working class women shouldering the burden of domestic responsibilities in deplorable living conditions, and also taking on the dangerous, dirty and irregular work of their husbands,

\(^{49}\) It implies that the entire family worked together in the mines, the husband, wife and the children.
fathers and brothers. People in the pits of early times were seen as men undertaking dangerous, dirty, risky and hazardous work and were characterized by masculinity suitable for independent heroes (Harrison, 1978, Lahiri Dutta 2006)

In the pits, according to Connell (1987;85), physicality is 'one of the main ways in which the power of men becomes “naturalised”, i.e seen as part of the order of nature’. Thus life in pits was perceived as a uniquely male world where the sharing of risks contributed to the formation of a particular form of male solidarity; endowing their manual labour with attributes of masculinity (Garside, 1971). Even on the surface, women were made to do all sorts of lower end jobs.

*The lament of the women miners.*

*At four in the morning we rise, in the middle of winter*
*To cross the river, to reach the quarry*
*Seven miles we have to walk each day*
*Returning home exhausted before we eat*

*Sleeping without a proper bed, relieved to have reached home at last,*
*But we have to leave in the middle of the night,*
*Leaving our children sleeping,*
*We have to hurry,*
*For we are late, we will not get work.*

*If we are just a few minutes late, the Haziri Babu harasses us,*
*Go away, he orders, or see me later!*
*If we miss work one day, he orders*
*Go back today, or demands, bring me a chicken tomorrow.*

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50 Rothermund’s (1994) report on the relationship between the degree of political awareness and levels of income amongst working women of the coalfields of Dhanbad, India, showed little positive relationship with the concentration of economic development.

51 A hole, shaft or cavity in the ground
At work sometimes our digging stick gets broken,
Whilst we cut the earth or breaks the rocks,
The lohar babu of char number bestee repairs them charging us two rupees a week.
The sahib, the sirdar, the Munshi and the Haziri Babu all make u weep.

At four in the evening our shift is over,
Then the leader Babu calls us to his house,
We carry coal for him; we carry bricks and lime to build his house,

He gives us some food but we have to wash his dishes and do his marketing.
He tells us, stay overnight, where will you go at this late hour?
How will you go home, why trouble yourself so much?
Again in the morning you will have to return,
And if you are late you will lose your job.
How will you get your job back? What will you eat then?

There are no more contractors,
Now you have a permanent Government job
You workers will run this colliery!
There are no more private companies.
So, come, come, Come and sit by me.'

If I refuse, his eyes turn red, his face turns black.
We give our bodies,
Our honour is robbed,
Our life is shattered.
But when the photos are taken, and the I cards are made,
Where are our names? Nowhere to be found!
Will anyone listen to the lament of a Kamin?52

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During the time of nationalization of the coalmines, the local miners were dominated by the migrant bosses and they faced discrimination at work. It was at this time that one kamin (women worker) of Amlabad narrated her life story to Satya Prakash Thakur, an employee of Bhowra colliery. This story of a women workers life revels the frustrations that she felt after nationalization, for not only was she harassed by her boss, the hazri babu (attendance clerk), but by the leader babu also. It is against such a background that one needs to view the struggles of the women workers in the 1970’s in the Jharia colliery.

The fact that women took and still take part in a nontraditional occupation such as mining (even though they work on the surface), challenges us to review the stereotypes and the conditions of work of the women in the mines. How did they assert themselves for their rights at work and how easily were they entitled to these benefits at the work place? When it comes to the Right to work, one thinks of equal pay for equal work, maternity benefits, and provident funds and so on. One has looked into the question of motherhood, mother craft and the maternity benefits which women workers are entitled to while working in the coalmines.

6.1 Motherhood, Mothercraft and Maternity Benefit Act

In the early years of the mining Industry, access to cheap labour was seen as India’s chief advantage. Industrialists, and to some extent state officials, had defended women’s employment in factories on the grounds that, even if ‘supplementary’, their earnings were essential for their own and for their household’s survival. Thus, women figured in the state, capitalist and reformist discourses in their capacity as workers, albeit as workers less able to uphold their specific interests.

There were major changes that took place in the post war era. Factory women were regarded less as workers with particular problems calling for separate remedies but more as special kinds of mothers and wives- ones who also worked. Alongside, debates about whether they should in fact work and what adverse effects such work had on their housewifery and motherhood, also were generated and there were attempts to isolate and remedy the specific inabilities of working wives and mothers.

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The burgeoning discourse about a state committed to the well-being of its large working population also found strong resonances in the growing concern about the ‘family’. To aid the family in repopulating war-ravaged nations, in bringing up the next generation of citizens and reproducing labour were important functions of the welfare state. The welfare state gave rise to a range of conflictual characterisation of the working-class family and women’s role within it. There was increasing emphasis on the duties and responsibilities of a mother in ensuring that families played their socially desirable role. Thus it was the ‘working class woman’, by virtue of marriage or motherhood, who qualified for attention rather than ‘woman worker’, in her capacity as a factory worker, who had earlier attracted legislation. State and capitalist welfare now, at least putatively, embraced wives, mothers and daughters of ‘workers’ even if they did not themselves work in the factory. Much of the ILO’s concern for women was focused on maternity and motherhood and this provided a context for the redefinition of women’s role in the working-class family (Sen 1999: 143).

In Bengal, in the closing years of the nineteenth century, motherhood had emerged as the central and defining element in the dominant discourses on gender. It had played a key role in the social reform debates. The elite men in favour of widow remarriage had persuasively argued against the injustice of denying child widows the ultimate fulfillment of a woman—motherhood (Chakravarti 1993: 130-58). Stagnation of population, high infant and mother mortality rates had also drawn out social reformers on the subject of childbirth and childrearing (Sen 1999: 143).

The idealization of womanhood as the repository of tradition and the construction of the domestic sphere as the proper and rightful domain of women, involved a general valorization of motherhood. The ideal woman was not only the creator and protector of the sanctuary of the home, but the good and chaste mother who, empowered by spiritual strength, was the iconic representation of the nation. The idealization found support in the notion that children were crucial for nation building and for ‘the maintenance of the race’. The responsibility of bearing and rearing children lay with women. If the ignorant and careless housewife was a threat to the social order, the neglectful and indifferent mother spelt national disaster. Women had to be taught to be good mothers. As domestic manuals
sought to train a new kind of housewife, so the new mother had to be inculcated with a self-conscious responsibility for the nation’s future.

The Washington Convention encouraged the extension of these discourses on motherhood to working-class women. It gave a new focus to anxieties regarding the physical deterioration of the working population of the country. Debating a shorter working day for the factory women, A.C Chatterjee, secretary to the Government Of India, Department of Industries, declared, ‘as a patriotic Indian, I think it is our duty to see that girls grow up sufficiently strong in order to become healthy and capable mothers’. Work outside the home, specifically factory work, was regarded as impairing women’s childbearing capacity. This stressed the ‘natural’ or the biological and physiological aspects of motherhood. Explanation for, maternal and infant mortality were sought not in poverty, environment or lack of medical services but in the working mother’s neglect, carelessness and ignorance. The solution was sought not in crèches, maternity benefit or health facilities but in teaching mothers how to take care of their children.

The ‘enlightened motherhood’ advocated for the *bhadramahila* required comprehensive education-hygiene and health, childcare and housework, and geography and literature jostled each other. It was clear from the beginning that the ‘education’ of working-class mothers did not imply formal education. Rather, it involved the kind of education which became popular in Britain as ‘mothercraft’¹⁵³ (Davin 1978). The term itself was borrowed by concerned Indians. The arguments promoting formal education for middle-class women and mothercraft for poor women were, however, based on similar assumptions. It was agreed that uneducated women endangered the physical development of children and ignorant women perpetuated harmful ‘traditional’ and ‘superstitious’ practices.

Middle-class convention took it for granted that the proper context of childhood was the family and the person most responsible for childrearing was the mother. In working class families, mothers considered it their prime duty to earn to ‘feed’ their children and children

¹⁵³ The term was indigenized as Matritva Vidyar Siksha, Pushpa Basu, Special supplement on Child Welfare, Ananda Bazar Patrika, 20 March 1941.
reciprocated by helping with housework or earning towards household expenses. The mothercraft formulae did not take into account the possibility that their application to the working classes would be fraught with difficulties and frustrations. The more unsuccessful they were, the greater was the urge to look for reasons for failures in custom, tradition or the lack of co-operation of the poor. Mothercraft had various facets. There was, first, a growing concern that factory work or any other strenuous work of that nature impaired women's actual physical and biological capacity for childbearing.

Women who worked in factories suffered greater post-natal complications to the detriment of their own and their children's health, even life. There was therefore call from some quarters to ensure, by legislation, women's withdrawal from factories or mines. But this was not just a biological problem. There were serious physical and health risks to children who were left unattended by working mothers. Poor working mothers often devised alternative childcare methods but these were unacceptable to professional welfarists who emphasized the mother's personal supervision of the child's well being. Thus the welfarists advocated the establishment of voluntary welfare centres to 'instruct' mothers in the scientific wisdom of motherhood. New social construction of motherhood was attended by a gradual evolution of standards of nutrition, the importance of breastfeeding, other elevated standards of childcare and a simultaneous denigration of the traditional methods of childbirth symbolized by the 'indigenous dia' whose ignorance constituted a danger for both the mother and the child (Sen 1999: 150). The welfarist realized that women could not be prevented from employment in factories, plantations and mines. The solution was a compromise- to teach them mothercraft to lessen as far as possible the harmful effects of ignorance and neglect. Instead of pursuing the institution of maternity leave, compensatory pay, and health services, they helped the state and employers to bring under their scrutiny individual childbearing and rearing practices of poor mothers. Unfortunately these services were not adequately provided in the colliery rather they were more in the Jute mill Industry of Calcutta.

The women workers did not use the Crèches that were provided at the mines, they would instead bring their child to work or let their extended family watch their child. Thus unlike
the Bombay mills, Calcutta jute mills and the Coalmines had no crèches. Some managers pointed out those young children were being exposed to the dust, heat and noise of the coalmines for very long hours. The danger of respiratory diseases were compounded for children ‘who toddled about and lived in the dust laden atmosphere during the working hours of the mines. Not all women took their children to work. Some may indeed have used opium, whether or not children were left at home unattended (Matheson 1930: 155). In villages children were often fed opium to sedate them into being quiet, so that it allowed women to carry out their domestic chores.

The main focus of the welfare centers and the Maternity benefit Acts was the new ‘mothercraft’. Motherhood was to be both ‘natural’, rooted in the physiology and psychology of women and at the same time a ‘craft’ that had to be learnt. Maternity facilities often became a means of extending the already existing invasive and intrusive systems of inspection in the place where the miners lived. Mine owner used the ideology of motherhood to justify women’s increasing marginalization in the factory employment. Company employed lady doctors, midwives and health visitors proved useful in gathering information. In the 1920s and 1930s, as managers grew more apprehensive of workers’ protests in the Jute mill Industry, they encouraged welfare centers and, especially, ‘home visiting’. The payment of maternity benefits involved elaborate supervision: the mill doctors had to issue certificates to pregnant women, clerks had to check the actual facts of birth and the sardars had to ensure that women did not work elsewhere. This was very common in the Jute mill or the Coalmines (Sen 1996).

In India, maternity leave had already been mooted in 1910 54. The Washington Convention introduced a new dimension to the issue- the question of compensation. The convention stated explicitly that compulsory maternity leave without adequate compensatory payment was unacceptable. In India, neither the state nor the employer was willing to accept the burden of compensation. Official interest was not particularly engaged.

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54 IOL, L/P and J/5/83, Civil Surgeon, Belgaum to secretary to the Government of Bombay, 1910, Judicial Department Proceedings, 1911.
Employers made much of the fact that women went home to their village for their pregnancies. Managers argued that it was safer and more healthy for women to have their pregnancies in their village homes where they had more access to nutritive food (more cereals and therefore more calories, if not proteins and vitamins), but this practice made the administration of a maternity benefit scheme more difficult. The proportion of women going home for confinement was calculated at 40-50 per cent in the Jute mills. It was argued that the usual customs and traditional rituals surrounding childbirth and the ‘pollution’ period prescribed for newly delivered mothers would be violated by a statutory definition of the length of permitted absence: ‘The chamber was of the opinion that labour would regard maternity benefit schemes in the light of interference’. The interference with traditional practices was put at par with intervention in family privacy; maternity benefit schemes would be ‘interfering in the private life of the workers’ (Panandikar 1933: 248). This was of course a difficult argument to sustain in the face of the ongoing welfare activity with its emphasis on home visiting and instructions of mothers. However in other parts of India, the concept of ‘pollution’ was not maintained by factory women. Since the majority of the women earned a bare living wage, most of them had to rejoin work very soon after their confinement. It was only when given financial assistance by the father of the child or other relatives, that women could take more time off, but in many cases such assistance was not available. If at all possible, women preferred to take more time off work after their confinement than before, and many women continued to work till their deliveries.

By the time the Maternity Benefit Act was finally passed, the proportion of women in the industry was declining steadily. The Act did not come fully into operation till 1934, after an amendment was enacted. Bombay’s example was followed by the Central Province in 1930, Madras in 1935, Delhi in 1937 and united Province in 1938. Bengal was one of the last to introduce the legislation (Act IV of 1939) which came into operation from 1940 (Sen 1996: 175). By 1946 it came into operation in coalmines in Bihar.

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55 Certifying Surgeon and K.C Roychoudhury, RCLI, V.1, pp 207 and 126. Dr Batra, RCLI,V.2,p.31
56 Narayanganj Chamber of Commerce, WBSA, Comm., December 1924, A40-54
57 Some women found assistance and support from women relatives.
Managers and trade union leaders shared the conviction that it was Maternity Benefit Act and the compulsory crèches provisions which had led to this drastic reduction of female labour. The employers, in fact, had agreed to the legislation only when they were restricting production and it was easier to dispense with women workers if granting the concession proved too expensive (Sen 1996: 176).

6.2 Working-class politics and women’s revolt in the coalmines

Kabeer argues that gender-specific constraints and responsibilities hinder women workers’ behaviour. Consequently, these constraints often do not let women act in a manner usually typical of a traditional full-time industrial worker in the context of trade union struggles. Kabeer further emphasizes that as women’s priority for flexibility is generally greater than men’s, they conform to a different set of imperatives. Life struggles nurture women into being activists. Women workers of coalmines, who are radical and assertive, sustain and even justify their leadership in terms of a universal motherhood. Rama Devi, and Ramanika Bose were prominent labour leaders in the coalmines and were addressed as matajee, maiji (mother), behenjee (sister), chachi (aunty). This has been explained as part of the zamindari style of leadership in Jute Trade Union (Chakrabarty 1989). It is necessary to delve into the significance of the use of the ‘motherly’, ‘sisterly’ images in more specific terms. Women’s traditional role in India was twofold and ‘normatively ambiguous’(Minault 1930: 33). While on one hand she was seen as the self-sacrificing wife, self-efficacy and obedient, she also became, as a mother, more powerful and self sufficient with age (Sen 1999: 229). The mother image associated with power, strength and endurance provided a means of seeking public activity as an extension of the familial role (Bagchi 1990). Most of the women leaders who involve in TU activities repeatedly caste their involvement in the language of seva (care) for the suffering poor rather than in the language of class struggle invoked by their associate male unionist. They invested an enormous significance in their ‘mother’ image. In the nineteenth century, middle-class women, encouraged by liberal reformers, had extended their nurturing role to ‘social work’. Such women were among the first to found women’s organizations. From this, politics was a short step; the national movement providing a moral legitimacy for such an
extension. The few women who did participate in the labour movement, sought to invoke a similar idiom through the use of the image of the 'mother'. Despite a great deal of obfuscation and mystification, their role in class movements remained severely restricted and this is as significant as the apparent ease with which their motherhood transcended the very social barriers of caste, class, community and language (Sen 1999: 229).

The period of the 70's saw an increased participation of the urban masses, drawing particularly the educated middle class in the urban areas. The post emergency's political awakening in the country led to a re-examination of the true nature of democratic polity in the country. This manifested itself in the emergence of numerous civil liberties organizations and women's groups. The UN declaration of the decade of women strengthened these newly formed women's group by providing both moral and material support as well as a rationale for their existence that could in some instances, camouflage their own political origin. In the case of women, the disillusionment with party politics led to the formation of independent and autonomous women's groups, drawing, in some instances, women from political parties, and co-opting others who would otherwise have been drawn closer to the parties. These independent and autonomous women's groups may be termed 'non-party political formations' and do not constitute a homogenous lot in respect to ideologies or strategies. Some of the groups resulted from dissatisfaction with the left parties' tradition and had a conscious class-based political and feminist approach with struggle as their focus. There were others that were the outcome of non-left political and trade union practices and had more of a developmental approach rather than struggle. (Kalpagam, 1994)

The very militant nature of mining working class movements in many countries has contributed in the construction of the masculine image of the mining industry. The changes that were taking place in the coal mining industry (mechanization), within the workforce (increasing number of upcountry males) and changing attitudes towards women, contributed to the breaking up of the family gangs in the mines. The process of men replacing women, migrants replacing locals and individuals replacing family units, gained much ground in the 1920s (Barnes, 1989). The whole coal production fell from 10.7

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million tons in 1930 to 8 million tons in 1933\textsuperscript{58}. Employment also fell from 71.5 thousand to 59.7 thousand during the same period. The Union existing at that time never supported women’s right to work, but was more in favour of the legislation to prohibit women’s work below ground. A column writer of a local magazine in Jharia asked the secretary of the Indian colliery Employees Association, what sort of work could be done by women on the surface once they lose their jobs belowground, during the investigation into the royal commission on Labor. S.C Bose, the Secretary, replied that may be women could be made to manufacture cane baskets, used for loading, but admitted that there was no definitive plan as such for women who would lose their jobs.

One of the managers at Jharia coalmines had opposed the removal of women from the mines, envisaging that there would be 50 per cent fall in the output if women were banned from below ground.\textsuperscript{59} But splitting of the family gangs, and paying women less than men, was one way of reducing the total wage bill by the bosses. Though the bosses were keen to reduce wages in the early 1920’s, they were reluctant, fearing industrial unrest. Wage differentials based on gender created fewer disturbances for them. The Trade Union leader of Jharia coalmines did emphasize minimum wages, and family wages while opposing women’s work in the mines. By undervaluing women’s work, and justifying it by gender and familial ideology, the bosses paved the way for the union leaders to demand for a family wage. Such demands would lead to sacrificing the rights of women to an independent, adequate and equal wage. The Struggle whatever little did take place, never challenged the patriarchal ideology and never defended women’s right to work as equals (Barnes). The ethnic identity and caste were from the very beginning, an undeniable part of labour identity in the Eastern Indian Collieries.

With the war-time boom in demand, the coalmines increased production, and even sought ways of tempting the miner to stay at the collieries. The wages of the miners were increased by 25\% in 1937 and continued to rise. Cheap ration was introduced, since prices were rising and colliery labour was finding it difficult to obtain adequate food grain\textsuperscript{60}. In

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{58} Central Institutes of Mining and Research, 1930-33.
  \item \textsuperscript{59} Evidence given before the Indian Coal Committee 1924-25, pg 45
  \item \textsuperscript{60} Indian coal Statistics, 1930-1947, Department of commercial intelligence and statistics, Delhi.
\end{itemize}

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1943, faced with bumper harvest, which is a disaster for colliery owners. The ban on women’s employment belowground was lifted and by 1945 over 11 thousand women were working down the coalmines in the Jharia coalfield again\textsuperscript{61}. In 1946, over 36,000 women were working in the Jharia coalfield; around 25 per cent of the workforce. Never again in the history of the coal industry have women held such an important place in the workforce, after the ban on women workers were reimposed in 1947. The months which followed the reimposition of the ban witnessed widespread discontent in the coalfield (Barnes 1989: 155). Along with the ban, the retrenchment of thousands of women, loss of the higher wages and the poor quality of ration they were receiving from the Government did perhaps lead to a new phase of History in many collieries of Jharia.

There was very little reference to any organized struggles of the miners until 1946. Each mine was different from the next, workers were separated by caste and regional backgrounds (languages), and the workers were largely migratory. By 1940s the coal field witnessed widespread discontent, with many spontaneous militant struggles erupting in the different coalmines of Jharia. In 1947, the Chief Inspector of Mines noted 77 strikes in the collieries.

In collieries, women were literally pushed out of the industry after underground work by women and children was prohibited in 1928. It is interesting to note that the ban against underground work by women became operative only in 1928 though the legal powers were available to the State since 1901. In the first two decades of this century, female and child labour were in demand for carrying coal underground, since no substitute male labour was available as cheaply. In 1928, when the economy was already slowing down and male labour was cheaply available, the law was made operative. Even then, in view of the large numbers of women working underground in collieries, the State had recommended that their removal from the work should be phased out over a period of ten years. In 1928, 29 per cent of underground coal labour was female; each year 3 per cent of these were to be retired. In actual fact, within the next year a quarter of the underground women workers were eased out of their jobs. So, in collieries women were pushed out of their jobs by men when they needed women's jobs. The years that saw the

\textsuperscript{61} CIMARs-1945

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introduction of coal cutting machinery below ground, also saw the decrease in the total number of women employed. (Barnes 113). The employers employed women in low-skilled and low paid jobs on the grounds that their earnings were ‘supplementary’ to the men’s and argued in favour of longer working hours for women on the basis that their extra earnings would benefit their household. When employers wished to reduce their workforce they drew on domesticity and motherhood to legitimize women’s factory employment and thereby enhanced women’s social marginalization.

In Bhowra colliery one of the biggest strikes of its history was organized in 1948. In those days people were simple, honest and their wages was very low, the rationing of essential goods, which the government had set up during the war to attract labor was allowed to lapse and sometimes the quality of the food was extremely bad. Once it was so bad that the women decided to go on a strike for three months and thirteen days. The workers went on many demonstrations shouting “Roti do ya Goli do!” (Give us bread or give us a bullet). The musclemen of the company would chase the workers and the men would run away, but the women stayed ahead. Women and children would lie down in front of the pit-allowing no one in or out. The management couldn’t bring in blacklegs, though they tried. There was one woman with a two day old baby on the picket line. Women were beaten up and jailed during the strike. Some 50 women, armed with broomsticks attacked the Management, injuring two men- 10 women were arrested. In Murulidih colliery, 5 women were seriously injured by bullets when they were at the front of the picket line (Barnes 1989: 333).

The strikes at Lodhna, as elsewhere, faced a good deal of repression from the authorities. Workers were tear gassed, meetings and demonstrations prohibited. The archives reveal the main opponent of such measures at Lodhna was a woman called Rama Devi. She continually and openly organized others, mostly women and children, in defiance of the Government’s bans. She organized the women to picket the colliery, and if workers refused to join the strike they would snatch away their tools. The authorities found

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In the report written by A mojd, the additional District Commissioner.
Rama Devi quite threatening. She again organized a demonstration of women, which was joined by men later, when the police fired tear-gas once again into the crowd to disperse them. Rama Devi, four other women and one man were arrested and sent out of the way to Purulia jail. It is interesting to note that the strikes and demonstrations of 1948 brought workers of different ranks and caste together. Men and women miners were all united to fight against the management over their own issues. Women were agitated about rotten food grain and inadequate supplies of food, men fought for wages and bonus demands, and the skilled workmen sought the victimization of fellow skilled workmen as their main cause for protests.

The Congress party affiliated union, the Colliery Mazdoor Sangh, consolidated its monopoly in the coalfield (CIM, 1950). There was a lack of basic facilities like water supply and sanitation issues in the settlements. Women’s health was in an even more worse off state. Reproductive and child-care facilities were inadequate and women hardly received any maternity benefits. The CMS leaders were busy repairing temples and mosques and setting up religious meetings for the miners (Banerjee 1981: 124).

For women these years were grim. Although the women had been active and militant during the strikes and the Trade Union struggles of the 1940s, the CMS had no need for them. When machines were introduced, the union accepted the retrenchment of women workers without any voice of protest. Instead the CMS involved itself in the setting up of the ‘welfare centers’ for women and children. These centers were supposed to make better housewives for the coalminers. They were to be taught sewing and knitting, advised on family planning, hygiene and food preservation and other necessities for the ‘ideal’ mining family household. They were, however, largely unsuccessful (Sen Gupta 1960:149).

The economic crisis also showed its effect during that time. Few blocks of Dhanbad districts were declared famine areas (Coalfield times, various years). The mine owners started to retrench old workers, and replace them with new ones through contractors (Ghosh, 1992: 280-281). By late 60s, the exploitation and oppression of the coalminers and the neighboring villagers had reached its peak. Moneylenders became influential and
rich, with most miners indebted to them. A strong caucus of contractors, pocket trade union leaders and moneylenders had emerged. Violent clashes between the miner and the muscleman of the colliery owner became widespread. Drinking and gambling constituted an enormous drain on resources. Such situation played havoc with the vulnerable household economic security of the tribals and by extension, the role of women as ‘household managers’. Women were at the receiving end of the resultant frustrations: directly through domestic violence (wife beating), or indirectly through gambling, drunkenness or absenteeism. Resistance would invite greater violence and abuse.

In the midst of violence and labour unrest the coking coalminers in the Jharia coalfield were nationalized in 1971. The mines under private ownership were ridden with corruption, mismanagement, and slaughter mining— an unscientific method. With the nationalization of the collieries, and with more money around, corruption increased. Huge numbers of outsiders were inducted into the workforce, mostly higher caste men from the plains of UP, and Bihar. Around 50,000 miners lost their jobs within one week of nationalization due to the influx of these outsiders (Sengupta, 1982:15).

The so called ‘mafia’ of the coalfield came into its own during nationalization. The ‘mafia’ started as union leaders/contractors/moneylenders (or all three), and had the support of the administration and police. With the sort of thugs that were employed by the erstwhile colliery owners to control the workforce, it was inevitable that any genuine labour movement would turn violent. Many tribal women had to make way for prospective job seekers under the garb of ‘voluntary’ retirement schemes. Tribal and lower caste women were cajoled by these migrants’ upper caste men to give VRS. In this way a large number of outsiders from Aarah, Chapra (parts of north bihar), Ballia (Uttar Pradesh) and other region as well, appropriated the jobs of tribals and other low caste women by producing fake marriage certificates and false affidavits claiming to be their husbands. In some cases genuine marriages indeed took place, but only temporarily; the outsiders left their wives immediately after they would get their appointment letters or after making them pregnant, which compelled women to knock on the doors of the management or the union leaders (Prasad, 1988: 5) Women miners suffered and continued to suffer from many similar disabilities in their day to day working conditions. The Tribals movement in
Jharkand enforced 'sexual morality drives' to prevent 'sexual and moral corruption of tribal women by non-tribal men'. Women either divorced or separated, working in the colliery were first warned that they should marry. Upon refusal to do so, they were beaten and forcibly married to someone chosen by the cadres and sent away to distant areas where their 'husbands' resided. Women willing to pay Rs 1,000 were however spared (Kelkar and Nathan, 1991:155).

Deep-seated hatred was felt by women workers against these chaprasis. These 'pahalwan's used to force the women miners to load wagons even at night. They had to take their small kids to their work place and put them to sleep there. One of the kamins was beaten and dragged out of her hut. These pahalwans were employed by the colliery owners to keep a watch on the violent coalminers. These chaprasis were living on the strength of their lathis (stick) that is how the struggle started. Wagons would come at any time, night or day. The Pahelwans (watchmen) would wake the women loaders and expect them to work at midnight, if they had little children, they were asked to carry them to work.

Women remember vividly those early days, the chaprasis' rule of terror, and their struggle against them. Some of the women's narrative helps us understand why the goondas were hated with such venom. Most of the women miners' families had been harassed and exploited, economically and physically by them. Women had been molested by these chaprasis (watchmen), but they had to bear it out since the workers were unorganised and weak.

It was a popular mass movement that seemed to have spread like wildfire and had engulfed the coalfield for a few years. BCKU leadership were often called in to help workers after violent outbursts, A.K.Roy, their union's leader, called the police to take away the goondas, for he did not want workers to blow up and kill them all. Of course driving away the musclemen was a difficult job then; the workers did not have enough food to eat or clothes to wear. But still they raised money for getting bail for their comrades and supporting their families. They collected subscriptions at the office, everyone gave. They collected rice from everyone's house to feed the families of those who went to jail. Comrades who used to come and stay at the office were fed by turn. Each day one of the workers' families would feed them.
These chaprasis became big goondas during the company's time, they harassed the workers. They robbed the honour of the women and tortured the men. There was one chaprasi/moneylender called Janardhan Singh who lived across the river. He had lent out money to workers at high rates of interest was going to collect his interest of money from the labourers. When he saw a young girl on his way who was the daughter of a mining sardar, on her way back from college, he raped her, in broad daylight! What a rangdar he was! Gunia bai says. He used to rob mahua liquor from someone, pick up a chicken from someone else. He'd loot meat from the meatshop and eat it! Then he'd pick up four or five bottles of liquor from the liquorshop. He'd never pay for anything of course. Anyway that day a group of women miners asked the rape victim about the culprit who raped her, and she identified him. Well all the women workers killed him with picks, chopped him up and put him into a bag. By the time the news had spread that Janardhan Singh was killed they had all ran away. If the middleman wouldn't have raped that girl the workers wouldn't have killed him says Basanti devi.

Though he was killed in the middle of the day, no-one was implicated, for no-one would say who had done it. The police kept coming to the workers houses, but they kept on misdirecting them, 'We don't know anything about it sepahi babu!!.' The menfolk couldn't stay at home, they hid in the jungle. The police would come any time, night or day, looking for the men. If they caught any of them, they were beaten up. The women used to sleep in one room whilst the men were in the jungle across the river. The women folk cook food at home and take it to them there. The police used to say, 'You must have hidden the men somewhere.' We told them, 'Of course we have! Should we let them get beaten up? Do as you please! If you want a fight, then fight with the women. We are not afraid of the police! They use to give them lots of gaalis, they weren't afraid of them. If the police tried anything with them, they would have started throwing brickbats at them (Interview with women miners). There was another rangdar called Ravinder Singh. One day he was hiding in someone's house. Sumita bhuni and her sisters went along with everyone else and broke down the door. He was swinging a big stick so the
three sisters grabbed his leg and pushed him on the floor. Then everyone began to beat him into a pulp. The sisters sat on him and smashed all his teeth! Then they left him and ran away, he was taken to hospital, but he didn't survive. The police harassed the women a lot.....It was obvious that women enjoyed the struggle too (Interview with a women miner).

A.K Roy (communist leader) told these women that Goonda Raj would come to an end, if they fight against it! And it did come to an end after their struggle. "We drove out the goondas didn't we!", Chutia devi". These are all women who waged struggles against the goondas through the Bihar Colliery Kamgar Union. Whatever gains they have won these women feel they have fought for them, they have never attributed them to the benevolence of trade union's leaders alone, unlike women from the Congress party's trade union. Many women feel that before 'the struggle' they were afraid of managers and colliery gangsters that they could not roam around freely. They are proud to declare that they, as women, fought the goondas, that they can now move around unhindered, or that they demanded and won permanent jobs in BCCL. Many asserted that the union was a school for them. Shanti from Bhowra, in her typical dramatic style says , "Our union taught us about Marxism and taught us how to fight!"

The women had to fight for every little thing. They had to fight for their jobs, their honour and respect, a place in the society. They only got jobs with BCCL five years after nationalisation. When they were removed, they went to Roy sahib (A.K Roy), he fought for the workers in the court and the women workers fought for themselves in the colliery. Once the managers tried to bring workers from another colliery to load the wagons, the women workers wouldn't let them..They would say, 'You've come to rob our bread, to kick us in the stomach.' Then the police intervened, and threatened the workers. But the women would refuse. They demanded their job back and wouldn't let the outsiders load the wagons. They would lift the planks and throw them away. The Police fired a couple of shots at them, some women would run away, but few women did not. The women would chase the agents; throw chunks of hard coke at them. The police caught hold of two local leaders (Basanti and Sumitra) and dragged them to the office. Their supervisor and a communist sympathizer came in the police station and released their women folk. You are
arresting women? You should wear bangles! (an emasculating gensture) You are not a man!’ (as narrated by the women miners)

Durgi, a women worker, informed all the women at the siding as well as a few who did not work there- to prepare themselves for a showdown the next day. They surrounded the managers and the loading babus and started abusing them. Hundreds of angry women gathered to ask for justice at Bhowra colliery. Many of the loading babus were beaten up, few were chased and their arms broken and for few days women could feel that they have better access to facilities around in BCCL (Barnes, 1989: 243).

These struggles outlined here indicate the sorts of issues that women faced at work in the collieries. Women had to fight for regulations of their work, to protect their employment from mechanization, the right to live and work in the mines and to curb excessive corruption. Nationalization of the coalmines did not solve problems faced by women workers, but created new ones, threatening women’s right to work itself. The participation of Mahato women in the Labour struggle became a curse for them, as the men thought that the women were to be controlled all the more at a household level as they had become quite vocal after the local struggle. This indicates that struggle was fought by a section of the Mahto community, not to challenge inequality or the system, but to ascend the hierarchy. This ascendance has proved to be disastrous for women of that community.

Women workers know the sorts of attitudes that the babus have towards them, but they do not tolerate comments made against them. A young Moslem tailor shouted some crude remark to Durgi as she was walking through the bazaar. She got furious and let out a stream of abuse for around ten minutes. Other people told the young moslem tailor that he should better know the consequences of insulting kamins in public. Once a doctor in BCCL hospital made a rude comment about one woman worker who was admitted as a patient. Within an hour, fifty to sixty women workers gheraoed (surrounded) the doctor, garlanded him with chappals and demanded his transfer.

A hospital is a place for genuine doctors not heroes like him. The doctor was transferred within few weeks (Barnes 1989: 271).
These discussions and incidents reveal the sorts of attitudes that men and the Trade Union members had towards women workers. Due to ‘social restriction’ and their illiteracy, the personal manager claimed, women cannot become trained for skilled work; if women became operators it would cause a big *tamasha* (scene). The manager said that the women were troublemakers too. Once women workers lay down in front of Koyla Bhavan (The headquarters of coalmines) and completely blocked the entry into the offices of BCCL for a whole day. BCCL management, he revealed, now aims to employ a female security force to control women workers. Women workers are generally employed on humanitarian grounds or due to union pressure, but he thinks machines would be quicker and cheaper than women.

Bosses, traders and union leaders may hold negative attitudes towards working women, but fortunately few men of jharia coalmines, are less oppressive in their attitude towards them. Most of the outspoken women however, do not have their husband staying with them permanently. Many are widows or have been separated from their husbands, and some are involved (or married) to other women's husbands. The absence of a man in the house has given women more freedom, or more scope to emerge as militant union activists.

Women workers are agitated about management’s attempts to get rid of them, “First the coalmines come and take away our land, destroy our houses. Then they give us jobs. Now they want to take away our jobs as well.....we feel we are been cheated”. There is a sense of agony, fear and threat in the minds of these women workers. Sundari bai feels that BCCL and the trade union leaders barely looked into women’s issues, few radical women miners made history in good old days but they didn’t get much in return. This is a very important reason why she does not believe in Trade Union activities.

They find nothing to fight about today, for there are many injustices around them but for them this is not a ‘real’ struggle. The real struggle was in driving the *Goondas* or the musclemen away from the colliery. Most of these women who were wagon loaders in the 70s are been given 'light duty', and come back from work almost as clean as when they started. "Now there is no big struggle. There are no moneylenders or *goondas*. They have fought against the payloaders."
They say it's better to have two hundred manual loaders than these big machines. When BCCL brought these machines the workers stopped them. They wouldn't allow them to load the wagons. But finally machines took over the women workers. There used to be around five hundred women here, working as wagon loaders, long ago... most of them have left now.

Drinking is a big problem here. During the struggle, none of the women drank. They didn't even take tobacco or paan. Leaders used to tell them, 'Don't take tobacco, don't drink, don't gamble!' In their mass meetings the workers were told not to waste their time and energy on drinking and gambling. Now all this has changed. Now everybody drinks. Twelve year boys, and girls drink 'English' and 'Desi' are the brands. The tribal's brew liquor out of mahua (the flowers which are used, fresh or dried, for food or are fermented to prepare an intoxicating drink). The Management would blame the workers for stealing coal for brewing liquor. The workers feel that even the management drink the same desi drinks but claim to be classy by carrying 'English' drink. The workers couldn't stand the coal dust. That is why workers drink so much to distress themselves. Nowadays even the leaders here are drinking. The leaders who told them not to drink before, are drinking themselves, so what will the workers do! Some women give the air of middle class respectability. They seem to be a woman not easily intimidated by anyone or anything.

The workers had a bell and when someone rang it they all would get together. Someone would speak, others would listen and learn. Sometimes leaders would speak, sometimes workers. That is how they all learnt to speak, they couldn't speak so much before.

Women workers made their own history in the coalmines. These ongoing everyday struggles gave colliery women the relative freedom of movement they displayed. The struggles that women initiated were not only about wages and bonus, but encompassed a wide spectrum of issues, which were important to them as women and as workers. In the 1940s they fought for better quality food rations, for the right to organize in the early 1970s, for the right to move about unhindered, and for the right to be treated with respect. They often launched their struggles without male leaders and were more likely to be
involved in direct actions than negotiations. Often the women were on the front line of struggle, on the picket lines or against the lathi-wielding police. Management did try to break the strike by bringing workers from other collieries and most of the workers were persuaded by their fellow workers not to break the strike. Then the bosses tried force. Some 25 to 30 ‘Punjabis’ were hired by the management to harass the workers and drive them out of their dhowrahs. The workers, however, far outnumbered them, and drove them away. They snatched the turban of one of the ‘Punjabis’, after which the latter all ran away. Some veteran leaders say that strikers were given lots of support from miners in other collieries. The whole village supported the strikers and donated rice and money to the strike fund. Not a single worker produced coal during the strike. The management tried its best to oppose the strike but would fail to do so. If meetings were prohibited in the colliery settlement, the strikers held their meetings at midnight; they would secretly change the venue of their meeting. Repression, intimidation and harassment failed to bring the strike to an end. However, when negotiations with the management began, the male leaders stepped in.

The tactics, which the management finally employed, was a familiar one in the coal field—they set up a pro management union. At the beginning, all sections of workers supported the strike. As the strike continued influential employees of eastern Coal Company, who were not anti-management, sought ways to end the strike, and rid the colliery of the communists. Kedar Nath Singh and Buddhu Mia claimed (both Congress leaders) to be on workers side and helped the management break the strike. Both the pro management congress leader made big speeches about how the strikes are harmful to the workers as they are not gaining any monetary profit out of it. Kedar Nath Singh who was a good orator made false promises to the workers about their demands and was appreciated by the management people and soon became the Congress Union leader (INTUC). The workers slowly begin to drift back to the coalmines, though it took more than a month before full attendance was reached.

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63 This information was revealed during the interview with Asha Hembram, women leader from BCKU (17-12-2008).
64 Interview with Ex-manager and ex personal officer of bhowra coal mines S.Sen, V.Kumar (22-12-2008).
The strikers may have begun to drift back to work with none of their demands met, and the leaders jailed or in hiding, but the new union was not popular with the workers. Workers were angry with Buddhu Mia because he supported the strike in the beginning and then swapped sides. He was attacked by the workers when he was on his way to work. He was waylaid by around 150 workers and his arms and legs were broken.

In another incident, a group of women had come to the Manager’s office to see Mr.Hawk. One of the women workers were roughly handled by Hawk’s chaprasi. The women quickly mobilized a huge crowd which returned to the office. Hawk sahib had left for playing golf with other European managers. Sona Ram Mahto was Mr Hawks helper carrying his sahibs golf bag. When the huge crowd reached the ground, Hawk wanted Mahtos help, since he couldn’t speak hindi. But all the managers along with his helper fled. The crowd, however, only roughed Hawk sahib up a bit. All cases of assault were dropped and Hawk apologized to the women workers on his chaprasi’s behalf.

Most of the communist leaders and their followers were the biggest threat to the colliery owners and the Congress led Trade Union. The INTUC leaders thought the best way to oppose communists was to get oneself involved in doing ‘social work’.

The lives of women who work in the coal dumps of Jharia have improved along with the wages and conditions. But unfortunately women are once again getting marginalised. As in the early seventies, when women with permanent, well paid jobs, were rid by the management and replaced by machines, today it seems, the contractors are trying to bring pay loaders into the coal dumps too. Women are secure only if they are willing to accept lower wages and are at the disposal of the employers. When Putul Devi insists that they have to keep on fighting, she has to fight against much bigger adversaries than just local rangdars, or even Bihari mafia dons - as if that was not enough to take on. “The struggle is against development, the New Economic Policy, modernity and progress, as we know it” (narrated by Asha Hembram).

65 Narrated by Motilal Hembram, member of BCKU.
The New Economic Policy (NEP) has posed a new challenge before the old trade unions of the country. An obviously economic battle has overnight become intensely political. The simple has become complex. The battle was between the employer and his employees over sharing the fruits of labour. The target was the local managements or at best the owners. They were visible, perceptible and near at hand. The interaction was direct. Suddenly they have gone very far and even become illusive, beyond the reach of the ordinary strike. When there is confusion about who the owner is, what action is required will always remain uncertain. Earlier production relations meant those between the employers and the employees, the class position was determined by one's place in the ownership of the means of production. So the class interests of the employers and the employees were mutually opposed. Now the picture is blurred with the entry of a third party lording it over both. All the economic activities in the country are now being tied with the global economy. This has brought a new factor, international division of labour, into play, having a great bearing on local disputes - putting traditional trade unionism in an awkward position, having no definite say in the matter. With the real authority ruling by remote control, a new weapon is needed for the working class to strike the far-off targets. This calls for suitable political warhead on the economic missiles. In short, the fight against capitalism has changed into that against imperialism eating into the economic sovereignty of the country. This development is the gift of the New Economic Policy.

6.3 Narratives from the field

While conversing with women mineworkers, the researcher came across some rich data on identity construction, perception of women workforce, gendered division of work and the discrimination at work. A closer look at these narratives is therefore essential.

**Budhiari bai** is a fifty five years old General mazdoor who works in the bhowra colliery as a *jhora kamin* (loading bags of coal, cleaning job). She is a migrant from Madhya Pradesh, and her parents migrated to the mining areas when she was a child. Her parents belonged to a lower caste community and were given jobs in the mines through a sardar. She started working in the colliery as part of the family labour unit and later got married to a man who had a job in the mines as well. Once married, she was not allowed to work.
Budhari's husband was in the same colliery and he was killed in an unfortunate underground mines accident ten years back. Budhiari then replaced her husband as a worker. Women like Budhiari form a large segment of the workforce in the colliery. The gender needs of the women workers are hardly met at the workplace. There is no toilet facility, nor are there women's rooms where they can eat their food, and relax. Even in the health center there is no separate queue for the female workers to see the doctor. The health center is poorly maintained.

_Budhiari:_ These facilities are not there in the mines, nor do we have any good health facility especially for gynecological problems, but what to do we women workers are so small in numbers and moreover our work is more important so other things are overlooked.

_Researcher:_ What do they think about women who participate in union activities? Do they take up these issues?

_Budhiari:_ See, I don't know much about other women but I don't participate in the union activities since I am a respected women who work in the mines for earning my living, I have to look after my family. I know it is not fair but it's better than working in underground mines. We don't work that hard as those men who work underground. I am a good woman - I stay out of trouble and leave it on the union people to fight for our issues. We are not capable of raising our voices, we are better equipped for household work. _Unionbazi toh mardo ka kaam hain_(Trade Union is men's zone, no women would like to participate willingly).

_Researcher:_ Any kind of discrimination at work? Sexual harassment, abuse at work place or any kind of misconduct by the management?

_Budhari:_ There is no comparison between the male miners and the female workforce. The male are definitely paid more than the women
miners. Their work is tough and needs a lot of manly power. It’s not easy to extract coal and do heavy jobs. If we women give the management a chance to mess with us, they definitely will take that chance. Women who sincerely do their jobs and don’t create any trouble are less picked up on. Women who don’t dress up properly, and are mostly into drinking are easy targets of sexual harassment as they invite problems for themselves.

Budhiari emphasised on the idea of a ‘good woman’, ‘respected woman’ whose job it is to stay out of trouble and do the household work. She accepts the management’s fault at not providing the women workers with their basic needs at work. However, at the same times she is also justifies that the women workers do not work as that hard as the men working underground. She differentiates between her work and the work of an underground miner. She gives the essence of ‘identity work’: constructing her identity as a worker through various representation of reality. Although she is a good worker, she is also a good mother who takes care of her family and is quite feminine. Budhari tries to justify the reason for misconduct by the management and blames it on the women miners who dress provocatively and ‘drink at work’, and hence give reasons for men to enter into their personal lives. It seems that Budhiari wants to draw a picture of the mines as not a bad place of work as long as one conducts themselves well. She also implies that safety may be one reason for the decline in proportion of women workforce in the coalmines. She is happy that she is almost at the verge of retiring; she retires in the next five years.

**Jhumri**

Jhumri is from tribal community of Jharkhand. Her husband died in a mines’ accident in Kustore colliery some 20 years back. She got this job after her husband’s death, prior to which she was a housewife adhering to household chores and bringing up her children. When her husband died, her in-laws wanted her brother-in-law (brother of her deceased husband) to join the colliery. But
Jhumri had no other means of earning an income and hence wanted the job for herself. Her inlaws boycotted her and never kept in any contact with Jhumri after she joined the colliery. The inlaws were apprehensive that with a government job Jhumri would become independent and exercise power over them. This was a turning point in Jhumri's life. With her financial independence she has been able to educate her sons. Now that her sons are educated (10th pass), she expects them to take up her job so that she can sit at home.

Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) has been actively used as an instrument to release women from the workforce and this scheme is opposed by the CITU affiliated Trade Union (Bharat Colliery Kamgar Union, BCKU). Jhumri even though a sympathizer of BCKU, feels that VRS makes more sense as women can get to sit at home and men can take up the dirty, tough colliery job.

Jumri: I strongly support VRS as this would give me a chance to sit at home.

Researcher: How will that benefit you?

Jhumri: I have spent 20 years working in this deadly place, coalmines is not meant for women workers...the work conditions are very bad(sobs). I overlooked all difficulties since this was my only way to bring up my two sons. Had my Brother-in-law taken up this job, he would have thrown me and my sons out of the house. My in-laws deserted me for taking this drastic step. I am here in the mines because I had to, but had my husband been alive he would have taken care of me.

Researcher: So who will take up your job?
Jhumri: My eldest son will take up my job. Even though with less experience he would initially be paid less, but he will do well eventually and take care of me. I did my duty and now it is time for him to take care of me.

Researcher: What are the main problems at work?

Jhumri: Who would like to work in a coalmine which is such a tough place to work? Every women feels the same way- we are made to do lower end jobs, men mock us, make fun of the way we look; upper caste men calls us ‘jungles’. For the same amount of hard work we are paid lesser than the men workers. This is why I feel my son would benefit from this job. Had it been an office job, I would have enjoyed it. At least one would not have had to stand in the scorching heat and do the loading and cleaning job.

Researcher: Why don’t you women talk to the union?

Jhumri: We are not rich or powerful- the union listens to only those who can bribe them or are powerful.

Women’s work is negatively constructed in the coalmines. The women miners themselves construct their role in negative way and this brings us closer to the class, caste and gender interface as experienced in Indian collieries.

Narratives like this question rigid separations between the public and private. Marginalization of women from visible forms of work leads to seclusion and domesticity which tend to close boundaries between spaces- between the inner and the outer worlds. Women’s stories on the contrary, bring out the processes through which boundaries were negotiated and the way in which the lines between the inside and outside were blurred and
redrawn. It is not as if the public sphere becomes less masculinized, but for women, their presence outside is important in reconstituting their individual lives.

**Kajoria Gorai:** She comes from a Gorai family—traditional tribal belt background from Jharkhand. Kajoria joined work after her husband’s death some 10 years back. She was a newly married girl from a different village of Jharkhand and she never knew the life of a coalminer. She insisted on accompanying her husband to his work place so that she could be shown the mines. However she never could imagine that one day she could be working there herself. Kajoria feels that the life of a coalminer is very uncertain; it is almost like working with fire. Any mishap can take place underground, either water fills up or the roof falls off or the poisonous gas leaks and these lead to fatal accidents. The wives of dead miners have much to go through (overtaking the mines job, facing the management, mixing with male members at work, being faced with eve teasing, unpleasant comments etc.) and it takes almost a lifetime to overcome the pain of losing one spouse.

Kajoria (sobs) and continues....

When it comes to work, women are always given the lower end jobs, and made to work on odd jobs like carrying bags of coal to the officers’ houses, cleaning and cooking for them if their family is away, buying vegetables for the *sahibs* etc. This does not let the women form an identity of their own or comprehend the exact nature of their job profile. It is good that we don’t have to work in the underground mines and our job is easier than the men miners but for the kinds of jobs that we do in harsh conditions we are not paid well.

The exclusion of women from the collieries took place in a completely different circumstance, primarily through the introduction of shaft sinking technology, but began as a similar measure of ‘protection’ for women from the harsh working condition of these mines (Lahiri Dutt,2001). These pit women (Known as Kamins, dulangs or palliris in various societies) are “crucial in building a gendered understanding of mining”. Whatever the name, women workers in the mines have remains obscure, hidden, forgotten and devalued (Dutt, Macintyre, 2006).
Munna Bai:
Munna is a Manjhai and has been working in the coalmines for the last 20 years. She joined Lodna colliery after her husband became unfit for work and died. She is 52 years old and has a reputation for daring to pick up fights with men who trouble her.

Munna: The manager was trying to test my patience, he used to tamper with my attendance sheet and mark me absent if I took a break for nature’s call, so I punched him on his face and twisted his wrist. We are seven women here in this colliery and nobody dares to mess up with us. I am a feared in this colliery.

Researcher: You are a heavy machine operator, how do the men react to it when u do such a skilled job?

Munna: Initially it was tough for me to take up this job. I use to hear many unpleasant comments, it wasn’t easy. But I never bothered and overheard many sour comments. In fact I picked up many fights here in this project....I am sure my coworkers would have told you about me being a promiscuous woman. If women are ready to take up any challenges, and be confident about their role and job they can help overcome the discrimination at work.

Researcher: How do the women perceive their job in the colliery?

Munna: Women workers were also found in Office jobs, on the site as heavy machine operators, who were more vocal and conscious of their rights at work, they knew how to get their way out of any difficult work. In the office job there were women who were replaced after their husbands’ deaths who were at the managerial level and their wives are educated. They know how to operate a computer or typing machine. The annual income of
these grades varies from Rs 1.5 to 2 lakhs. These women educate their children, they have a vision in life, and this definitely means that they perceive their job in a more positive way. They have a dual role to play, in the colliery as well as in the house so they are much stronger than the men and still people think colliery is not the right place for women. The most important thing that women lack here in the mines is ‘respect’; a woman is not respected if she is a mine worker, even if she gets a decent salary.

Researcher: Will you allow your daughter-in-law to work in the mines?

Munna: No... I wouldn't allow my daughter-in-law to work outside. Things were different when we were appointed at work. These days people do not pay respect to newcomers (female) at work. I roam around in the colliery and people pay due respect to me. They call me ‘chachi’ (aunty)... nobody says anything... they all know me. But when I was a newly wedded daughter-in-law, people made wrong gestures and unpleasant comment. 

_Hum ghumte phirte hain_ (I roam around a lot) says Munna, people said _‘abhi zayada ghumne lagi hain- buddhe-buddhiya ke samne nahi ghunti the_ (She roams around now. When the old parents in law were alive she did not).

Work outside the home was important in shaping the self perceptions of women and their relationships with the domestic and the outside. Munna, for instance works in the colliery. She like many other women in the coalmines is a widow who has inherited her husband’s job. Her knowledge of space in the city extends beyond the bounds of the mohalla. She talks about far out bazaars and about travelling to distant places in the city with a sense of confidence and self-assurance as though she could move around anywhere and was in control of her surroundings. Age, widowhood, the presence of a young daughter-in-law and grandchildren, and the absence of any higher patriarchal authority, give women like Munna a different position. However stories like hers, also show that ideas of seclusion did
not always exercise a hegemonic power over individual lives: restrictions on women's mobility had often more to do with authority structures within the family.

**Malti Roy:** Malti's experience of men has been particularly bitter. Her father gave up a well-paying railway job for some unknown reason, and it was her mother that managed to bring up her children, albeit in acute poverty. Her sister's first husband harassed her, so she left him. Malti's own husband defies description. Her father-in-law was a drunkard too. And she continues to be troubled by the local union leader – another man.

It is frustrating to hear about Malti's story in many respects. Although she repeatedly narrates how her husband left her and vows never to return to him, she has been going back to him again and again in the past. Her tragedy is that of many women, for she has had nowhere to go. Her mother's household was bordering on starvation, she tried to stay with her parents' relatives, she even went to the police; but no-one could provide her shelter for long. As understood by Malti, the rightful place for a married woman is with her husband, and it is, after all the husband's right to beat 'his' wife! This gave her no real choice- tormented by rumours and nasty allegations she was forced to accept inhuman treatment instead.

Yet, ultimately she did manage to leave him. It is important to note that this was only after she got a permanent job. There is obviously a correlation between the two. The researcher has come across many women in the coalfield who tolerate violent, drunken husbands, but never a woman working in BCCL who accepts such treatment for long.

Malti now lives with her mother, brother and sister-in-law in a village on the southern side of the River Damodar. She is the main earner in the family. Since her job was made permanent, she was given the opportunity to train as an electrical helper, so she no longer does the filthy job of carrying coal slurry on her head. She is keen to learn and keeps making plans to study more. She bought herself a cycle recently and now rides it to work. Everyone stares at her, she says, but she is not bothered, "let them stare, that doesn't hurt me."
"I was born here, in this village. But this house is a new one. I’ve built it myself. My grandfather and father worked in the railways. My father was a bit cracked in the head. Not stupid, he’d studied up to Matriculation, which really meant something in those days, he could even speak English. But he never gave any of his children an education, he thought that educating daughters was pointless. And he had six daughters, and then only my brother was born.

During my childhood we were always hungry. My father, for some reason I don’t understand, wouldn’t work regularly. He’d only work three or four days in a month. So whilst I was still a baby my mother fought with my grandfather and grandmother and took us all back to her village. We stayed there until I was three or four years old, then my father came and brought us back again. But he worked for three or four days in a month so we really had a tough time, especially my mother.

As soon as we were old enough my mother started working in the colliery, under some contractor belowground. Somehow she managed to feed us from her earnings. She’s cook early in the morning, keep our lunch ready, before going to work. Then again in the evening she’d cook again for us. Still four of my sisters died, when they fell ill, we couldn’t afford medicines, so they died. They all died young, around two or three years old. Two of us survived somehow.

After a few years my sister’s marriage was arranged, but that was a disaster. After her daughter was born she began to come back over here. She’d ask my mother for some rice, and she’d take that back with her, maybe five or ten kilos. Then when it was finished, she’d come back for more. Then her son was born soon after. One day though, she’d had enough. She fought with her husband and told him, ‘How long can I bring food from my mother’s house? You keep your children with you; I’m going back to her.’ So she came back here. After a few days her husband brought the children. Her daughter died here when she was four years old, her son survived. Anyway my sister was still young, only twenty four or five, so she married again. She met her second husband whilst she was working in
the colliery. He’s alright and she stayed with him and had two more sons and two more
daughters.”

“Well, that’s all about my sister, now my story begins. I started work when I was eleven or
twelve in Patherdih colliery, across the river. By then my mother was too old to work. I
couldn’t even wear a sari properly, my mother would tie it on for me and then I’d go along
to work with all the others from this village. I’d come back in the evening and sit with
other kids to read. I managed to buy some books from the money that I earned, and studied
up to class two. I never got the chance to go to school even though I wanted to. When I
was younger there was never enough food in the house, and no-one seemed to send me to
school anyway. My mother was out the whole day, and my father never paid us any
attention.

After working for a couple of years my father began to look for a husband for me. I was
around thirteen years then. The family that my father found me demanded a dowry – a
watch and a cycle. Of course my father couldn’t give such things; he couldn’t even feed us
properly, so he lied to them. He said, “I’ll give you a cycle and a watch, but first you marry
my daughter.” They agreed, but they wouldn’t come here for the wedding ceremony, we
had to go there. My father agreed to this because he thought he’d avoid the expense of
feeding all the guests. So he took me there and got me married. I had no idea what
marriage meant, I was so young. My naniji (maternal grand mother) went with me, and I
cried when they left me there.

My father-in-law used to drink a lot, and would create big scenes when he was drunk. My
husband used to drink as well, but secretly. When my father came to take me home after a
month or so, I complained to him, ‘What sort of family have you got me married to, they
drink so much.’ But still I was sent back.

Brutal beginnings of motherhood

There was no shortage of money or food in my in-laws’ house. My husband and father-in-
law worked in the coal mines. But still I remained hungry. Only after everyone else had
eaten would my mother-in-law serve me. She gave me such a small amount to eat that I
was still hungry. But I kept quiet. My husband started beating me up soon after marriage,
but I had to tolerate it, there was no-one to protect me. My husband would come home drunk and say, ‘Your father promised me a cycle and a watch, but where are they? I’ll not keep you here.’ I told him that it was my father that had promised these things so he should ask for them. What did I have to do with it?

One year passed like this and then I became pregnant, I must have been fifteen by then. My husband was twenty two years old when we married. Almost every day my husband fought with me about the watch and the cycle, and he’d usually end up beating me. One day he decided to send me back to my mother’s house, so ten men from his village brought me back here. I must have been around three months pregnant by then, but I didn’t know it.

That year my mother’s family were facing starvation. The paddy crop had failed and work under the contractors wasn’t available either. My father had given up his job. So my mother used to collect some bel fruit. She boiled them and fed the whole family with this. We ate rice only once a day. I used to go with my friends to pick up coal from Sudamdih colliery and sell it at distant places to people who made bricks. I didn’t know I was pregnant, I told my friends that something had happened to my belly. They asked about my monthly periods and I told them that they had never stopped, but I couldn’t remember for how long. Then they told me that I had a baby in my belly. I must have been five months pregnant by then.

One day we set off at three in the morning to bring coal. When we reached the river I felt a slight pain in my belly, so I said, ‘I’m not going with you’. But my aunt said, ‘Don’t worry, we are with you. Let’s go. Nothing will happen, the pain will go away soon.’ So we started wading across the river. When I was halfway across the pain came back again, so I refused to go further. I cam back home and the baby was born before midday.

Well my in-laws were informed that I’d had a son. They came, saw him and went back. The baby was alright in the beginning. But after two months his body became covered with boils. I didn’t have money to take him to hospital. I pleaded with my mother, so somehow she managed to arrange some money, and I took him to a private doctor in Bhojudih. The doctor gave an injection, then I don’t know what happened, the baby got worse. My mother borrowed seven rupees from someone and took us to Patherdih. We got some
medicines there, and after a few days the boils disappeared. Then, suddenly, after five or six days the baby died. I don’t know why, he’d been crying a lot, and then he died.

My in-laws were informed and they came and abused us. They said, ‘You have deliberately killed my son.’ After this I decided that I wasn’t going back to their house. I started working under a contractor in Sudamdih. He (husband) used to come there often, but I wouldn’t talk to him. One day, it was a Sunday, I went there to pick up my weekly wage, and he was standing by the river. He said that he’d come to take me back. I said that I hadn’t married him of my own free will, that my parents had decided, so I wouldn’t go. I told him to go and ask them. So he came and my father said, ‘She will go only if your father comes to take her.’ After a few days his father and some men from the village came and took me back.

After four or five months the daughter who is still alive came into my belly. But I still used to get beaten up. Perhaps he couldn’t digest his food without a fight. He didn’t need any reason, he’d come home drunk and demand food. When I gave him food he’d sat, ‘Why have you given me so much?’ So I’d remove some of it, and then he’d say, ‘Why have you taken it back?’ When he shouted and I remained quiet he’d say, ‘Why don’t you talk to me?’ and get even more angry. He fought with his parents too and for some time they lived in a hut outside the main house.

Soon afterwards my daughter was born. They only gave me flattened rice once a day for food for nine days-I was so hungry! Then I was allowed to take a bath and they gave me rice, but such a small amount. One day I told them that I need more rice to eat, but hey refused. If I helped myself to the food my mother-in-law would beat me. So I remained hungry. My baby cried all the time from hunger since there was not enough milk in my breast to feed her.

At night the baby used to cry a lot and he would say, ‘I’ll throw this baby away.’ So I took her outside, in the middle of winter, and stayed there until she calmed down and went to sleep. One day I’d had enough and told him, ‘You are neither feeding me nor my daughter. She’ll die from hunger.’ He got so angry that he started beating me up. He tied my hands and feet and kept me in the sun in the courtyard and gave my daughter to his mother. His
parents didn’t say a word. I cried a lot. He tied me up in the morning and they untied me in the evening when his grandmother came. She gave me some ricewater to drink. I hadn’t eaten anything the night before or the whole day, so I drank it to save my life. I thought that I was going to die. I thought......(sobbing)

Anyway.....in the night my husband went to work. The baby was crying a lot, but my mother-in-law wouldn’t let me breastfeed her. But since my husband wasn’t in the house I snatched the baby from my mother-in-law and started to feed her. I thought to myself, I’m going to leave this place. I wouldn’t stay there any longer, and I wouldn’t go to my mother’s place either. I’d go somewhere else.”

Escape from torture

That night I didn’t have any blouse or petticoat on me. Only a sari. From the trunk in the house I took another sari, and one belonging to my mother-in-law, and one brass lota, and put them in a bag in a bamboo grove near the house. I secretly came out of the house with the baby and waited near the bamboo until eight or nine o’clock in the night. There was no one around so I started walking by the stream, through the woods towards Patherdih. I didn’t have any money with me at all. I reached Patherdih at eleven o’clock. Only then did I think about where to go . I didn’t think about it before, but now I became nervous and didn’t know where to go at that hour of the night. I didn’t even know the direction of the roads, but I’d no intention of going to my mother’s house. I thought I’d go wherever I liked. Anyway I reached the main road and asked one man which place it was, and he told me, ‘Patherdih’.

I remembered that one boy of our village had his sasural in Patherdih so I thought that I’d go there. I asked someone else, tell me where the sasural of so-and-so Mahato is. He took me to his house. When I saw my body covered with wounds and bloisters from the red hot iron which they had beaten me with, they were very sorry. They made some rotis to eat and then I went to bed.

Malti Roy now works at Bhowra Coal mines as the Heavy machine operator and it took her almost years to get a license for operating that Machine. She took car driving lessons, to build her confidence. She now resonates confidence and is capable of facing any
challenge “Zindagi ne itna kuch dikhaya ki ab kisi baat se dar nahi lagta (I have seen so much of ups and downs in life, that problems doesn’t frighten me any more).”

Panmuni Majhain: "I am from Maheshpur, a village in Dhanbad district. I was born there. My family was very poor, we didn't have much land, my father worked as a forest guard. We are Harijans. A lot of people used to come from our village to work here during company's time. All of us were starving. The company's trucks would come daily for us and bring all of us hungry villagers. There were at least a hundred and fifty labourers who used to come each day from the villages.

Then nationalisation took place and unionism started. One union came thinking, 'Let's capture them.' So they all started capturing labour. 'This one is mine, that one is mine...Take my ticket....', like this unionism started. But we went to our leader, Lalaji, he told us, 'I am here. Why should you go to other leaders? I shall look after all your problems.'

At that time I was working in the siding. There was one leader called Jagdish babu. He was murdered. Lalaji called me and said, 'Look you manage the trade union work here. If someone is absent, mark them present as we all have to consider each other's problem. If sahebs refuse to give a job to someone, sort it out.' So I started doing that. Now coal was being stolen, so they gave me job of guarding. They said, 'Chase them away. Control the thieves.' That was around one year ago. A lot of coal used to be stolen then. The Agent saheb said, 'Only she can stop the stealing.' So I was appointed as a security guard and I did justice with my job. I would go at five in the morning and stay there on the loading side until ten at night. If I get any basket or bag of coal I snatched them and gave it to the agent.

As Lalaji said, I did. I looked after the labourers. When some worker died I would arrange Rs.3000 from the office and I would go myself and sit there until the body was lifted, as if it was my own family. I've been working here since childhood, I know everyone. I was never afraid to speak. Whenever I saw any injustice I would open my mouth, even if that led to a fight. If I saw somebody harassing the workers or doing some badmashi I would protest. I wouldn't care who the chap was, nor about my own
life, I'd beat him up. Even now I do this. If the staff demands money from the workers, I protest. Now the staff is getting a government salary, aren't they? Still if any worker goes to get any work done, they will demand Rs. 10 or Rs. 20. This is why BCCL is running at a loss. It is sinking because of this corruption.

I've been managing my family for a long time too. I was married when I was fifteen or sixteen. My father had died by then. I had small brothers and a sister. My husband had a drinking problem so I left him in anger. I started looking after my younger brothers and sister and I got them married. I remained single. I did not keep another man. I have my job and my family - they are my husband, my son for me.

My father had some land, not much though. Many years ago some higher caste persons came to till our land by force. Then a murder took place and a case started. See we are Harijans, the government helps us you know. Anyway when they came to till the land my father and uncle went and hatched one of them on that land. I also took a sword and lathi and slaughtered one of them, I was so angry. For five years the police came to my house there, every evening two policemen came. They threatened us, you see they were big people. For eleven years the case went on, and ultimately we got the land decreed. I had to fight the court case alone, my father died and my mother was old, and my brothers and sister were younger than me. If I had not fought and they would have taken our land, my brother would have had to beg from door to door. So I worked in the colliery, fought the case.

And now we have this *mahila samiti*. There should be one in every village, and then everything will be alright. Children should get food, and an education. Poor families can't afford to send their children to school. No-one here drinks booze. Well by chance one or two people drink, but they are scared to face us....

(shouting from outside)...Look they are calling me, some fight is going on, I'll have to go and sort it out. Sorry. I'll have to go...."
Ramia Devi: "I was born here in this colliery. My father came from Gaya during the company's time, he worked as a miner and my mother as a loading kamin. When we were children we used to dance and play, we never studied. Our parents didn't bother about educating us.

When I grew up I also started working in the colliery. Then nationalisation took place. The manager said to us then, 'Look, let one man from each family work, women should not work. He also told us that every family would get a bonus. So they stopped our work and the miners carried on working. Somehow my mother managed to keep on working. One day my sister said to me, 'Why should one person work and ten others sit idle? What will we do sitting at home? Let's all work. How can one man manage to look after ten people?' So we started to work again. After three years I was made permanent. I was a loading kamin then, now I supply water to the babus in the attendance room.

I get around Rs. 9000 per month now. I spend a thousand per month on food, I buy milk for the children, and I save Rs. 100 as life insurance. I've got more than Rs. 20,000 in the bank. My husband has retired now, so I am working alone. We faced a lot of hardships during the company's time. We didn't get enough rice to eat. Ours was a big family, we never had enough to eat. So now we are well off, enjoying happiness for some time. Our children are eating well and we are saving some money.

We never had any mahila samiti in those days. There was also no time for such ventures since we were living on a hand to mouth existence. There were no unions, and no-one collected subscriptions then. If we had any trouble, or any fighting broke out, we would approach the sahibs to intervene.

The Union came after nationalisation. There is only one union here from the very beginning, and I will never join any other union. Surely I will live to cast my vote once more? Kanti Mehta is our union, it is the biggest union. There's never been any strike or any trouble in this colliery..."."
Mongli: "There was a strike once..."

Ramia: "Yes there was, but that was a different party. Other parties conduct strikes and things. They try and involve us, but we don't want anything to do with these sort of activities. Other unions do that. Like the party in Angarpathra, they cause trouble, that's the Jharkhand Party I think. They have come to this colliery now. They think that our union is weak here. But I have not joined them. Some Majhis in this bustee and Mahatos in that bustee, they have joined them. But not us. Our colliery is running alright, we have no problem.

Our union has taken out processions when we have some demand, then the Agent says, don't bring out the procession, I'll solve your problems.' Our main demand here is that we want water to drink. Water is such a big problem that for four years our quarters couldn't be white-washed. There are only a few taps and four hundred quarters. We fight amongst ourselves for water. We get up and queue for water at three in the morning. How can we do our duty properly without water? Except water we don't have any other problem."

Chutia: "So long as our didi is there we have no problems. We are free."

Ramia: Mahila samiti started here four years ago. Before that our problem was that we had nobody to tell us what to do. We used to give thumb impressions, now didi has taught us all to sign our names. We all sign our names now when we pick up our salary. These didis take classes three days a week. Except for a few old people everyone signs their names now. Before they came we never bothered much about our problems. If we received all our dues, it was alright; if we didn't it was still alright. Now we have our union. We have Lalaji, Om Prakash Lala, MLA. If we have any problem we tell didi, she takes us to Lalaji, he notes it down, then talks to the agent.

Our mahila samiti has tried to get people to stop drinking. But if the government doesn't prohibit it, what can we do? This didi has advised many people, 'Don't drink, educate your children, your family will be happy and prosperous, other people will praise you. If you drink then good people will not let you near them because you are dirty. But if you
behave properly they will sit with you.' Many people have given up, but those who don't listen, who don't understand, they drink.

Those who come to the classes listen to what the didi says. Then they go back home and say, 'Hey, didi has told the right thing, Don't drink, save money...' Suppose someone in your family has died, if you have no money you'll have to beg for the kafan (cloth). If someone in the family is ill, You 'll have to borrow money from the staff to buy medicines. Then you'll be in debt, you'll have to pay interest. The interest will mount up until it's more than the amount I borrowed. Then one day the moneylender will come to the pay counter with a big stick and snatch it back. That's why mahila samiti tells people to save money, your children will be happy and others will praise you.

Those who don't listen say, 'Why am I earning if I can't drink? I carry sixty kilos of weight, work the whole day with picks and shovels, where will I get the strength to work like this if I don't drink? You be in your mahila samaj, I'll earn and drink.'

Apart from this we have no fighting here. This was always a very peaceful colliery. Here the owners were Gujaratis, so it was quiet. There were no moustache-wallas here to force us to work. That used to happen in other collieries.... They have brought payloaders here, some wagons are loaded by them, and some by labourers. If they bring more machines they'll have to give all the women time-rated work. No-one will resign. How can they remove the women? If someone's husband dies and she has small children to look after, can she not get his job? How can they get rid of women?

**Kunti Singh:** Mrs Kunti Singh (MLA, Jharia, Wife of late Shr Surya Deo Singh who is know as the Don of Dhanbad) joined politics after her husband's death. This she says was due to great pressure from her family and the urgency to overcome her crisis. Her narrative tells of how she suffered as a widow with young children surrounded by male relatives intent on defrauding her off her property. The male members of the family would never allow her to contest for elections. But she soon realized the way in which she and her children were being marginalized within the family and so she contested elections in order to attain some sort of control over her circumstances. She won the MLA seat. The general people of Jharia say that she won the election with sympathy votes after her husband's
death. A.K Roy (Communist leader) has rightly stated that worse and adverse situations make women bold and strong. Adverse situations bring out good leadership qualities in people. Kunti Singh's main responsibility, after the death of her husband, was towards her children; giving her sons a good education and marrying off her daughters. Kunti Singh came from a very poor, feudal and a patriarchal background. Hailing from a very simple family of Bihar she was muted by conventions and did not know how to speak up for herself. Accepting her fate was all she was conditioned to do. It was therefore extremely difficult for her to change her attitude some ten years back when she decided to join politics and face the public. She claims that she was so introvert and shy that she would refuse to meet people, especially men, even on political gathering. There are tremendous changes in Kunti now; she addresses the Vidhan Sabha and makes public speeches. Although this often makes her nervous, she tries her best to sound confident and catch the attention of the public. She is looked upon as goddess or mother (Devi je, Maa, Chachi) in her community. This she encourages as it erases her sexuality in the world outside the home. The 'spiritual' signs of her femininity are clearly marked in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanor, her religiosity. Whenever she can, she also goes on pilgrimages.

Kunti Singh was married when she was barely 12 years old and did not know what marriage meant. Not only was she a child bride but also there was an age gap of 10 years between her and her husband. When she came to her in-laws house, she was told that she had to live with her in-laws. Her husband would visit her occasionally as he was a migrant worker in Jharia coalmines. Her husband was a pahelwan (muscleman), whose job it was to watch the coalmines from any kind of theft or robbery and to control the workers from any disputes or confrontation with the management. After some years of her marriage she came to colliery and started her family.

When she joined politics her daughter used to accompany her everywhere and was her moral support. Now she is mostly by herself. She never had the confidence that she could ever be a political figure. Now in retrospect she finds a drastic change in her attitude towards life. On being asked if she would allow her daughters-in-law or daughters to join politics, she flatly refuses and says that it is a men's zone and women join politics only
under adverse situation. She thinks her daughters-in-law would never face any adverse situations in their lives. The researcher took almost three months to build a rapport with her so that she could open up and talk more about her life history. She would become very nostalgic, while describing how her husband took care of her when he was alive. Even though Mrs Singh has seen a hard life right from her childhood she always had a protector behind her be it, her father or her husband. However, after her husband's death and loss of her eldest son, she became desolate. Though quite a public figure she often feels insecure. Her children remain her main support. Kunti Singh has unanimously been elected as an MLA by the Jharia constituency in the 2009 elections. She is happy and says people elected her because of the genuine work she has done in Jharia and not merely on sympathy grounds as earlier.

The picture that comes out from this chapter is that women are victims of economic exploitation and social oppression taking place in many ways. Munna is very assertive about her rights and uses physical violence to put her point across. This on the other hand makes her unacceptable to male workers. Budhiari bai in contrast, wants to be in the good books of the management and play the part of a 'good woman' so that she does not have problems getting leave and has a cordial relation with her boss. But here one may pose two relevant questions. Are women like Budhiari just passive victims? Are they incapable of engaging in resistance or carving out, even momentarily, a limited space for themselves? How do the women workers negotiate with the patriarchal work set up, and deal with the macho work culture.

The tribal women have a specific historical cause of their marginality at work. The economic and political resources for poor women in the state are different from those of the tribals. The Santhalis, Majhain, Oraon, Mundas and Ho women have a recognized marginalized status as a schedule tribe while the non tribal women who are economically poor are without an equivalent formal marginalized status (Purkayastha, Subramaniam 2004: 123). Tribal women tend to think they are more liberated from the patriarchal norms than the non tribal poor women.
In the next chapter, one would talk about the everyday life of the miners in Industrial town of Jharia. There is a big shift in their lifestyle from rural to an urban. It becomes important to document the manner in which the workers identify themselves with the mining town and therefore lead their day to day life.