CONCLUSION

The central objective of this study was to look at the everyday lives of the women workers of Jharia coalmines, their struggles and challenges and in specific their participation in the labour movement. A strong need was felt to understand not just their lives in the public sphere but also their lives within the private spheres for the lives of women cannot be understood without analyzing the manner that the public and the private spheres impinge on each other. The participation of women in the labour movement is integrally dependent on the limited time and freedom that women can exercise after their daily domestic grind. Therefore, the nature of their family, their marriages, their households, the differential positioning of members within the family, the formulation of household strategies and the process of decision-making in the household, the patriarchal values which play at both home and the workspace, are critical for understanding why women participated or did not in the labour movement. The thesis also addresses the very diverse backgrounds and roles of the coalminers of Jharia and the way in which these shape the experiences of the workplace. This study therefore has to necessarily engage with:

(i) the intersection between caste, class, gender and tribe
(ii) the diverse background of the workers, the urban rural continuum which defines different aspects of working class life and behavior
(iii) the socio-economic and the political culture of the workplace.

One has drawn attention to the fact that the region of Jharia plays a vital role in the economic development of the country as the coalmines of Jharia are India's most important storehouse of prime coke coal used for steel manufacturing. In the early mining days, about 63 per cent of the entire Bihar coalfield mines were spread in Jharia coalbelt. Jharia was also one of the chief destinations for labourers who migrated to East India in search of jobs. Yet the lives of workers did not reflect this prosperity. In a sense they retreated from visible attention. One attempts to revisit this section again, for as evident from this study, workers of Jharia coalmines have been studied at different points in history.
The challenges posed both by the nature of the field and the research questions demanded an interactive field method. Initial fieldwork suggested that a combination of methods would be the best way to elicit both intensive and qualitative information without neglecting the larger profile of the area. The use of In-depth interviews, oral histories and narratives, group discussions, observation, diary keeping and semi structured questionnaires were used in order to probe at the experiences of women in both the home and the workplace the coalmines of Jharia.

Within a mining company, women’s share of reasonably remunerative work is extremely small or non-existent and their rates of career progress slow and uneven. Men in general occupy the majority of the managerial, top executive and higher level positions, whilst women are concentrated at the lower level administrative positions or with cleaning and loading jobs. In office, women end up with ‘soft’ jobs such as receptionists, secretaries and office clerks. Employing women for operating heavy machine jobs appear ‘odd’. This work ethic often affects the women operators themselves who are conditioned into viewing their workspace as a masculine one with their own roles as that of subordinates and on the periphery. Supervisors and trainers do not see women as equal to men who force women to work much harder than men in order to prove themselves; this often implies adopting ‘male’ working styles and attitudes. Women who work in the mines are expected to work ‘like a man’-being at the bottom of the pile, they cannot afford to be ‘different’. Back in their households they are expected to fulfill the role of a mother, wife, and daughters-in-law. This leaves little time for them to be proactive to realize their own rights or participate in the union activities. The leadership at the trade union too has always been male dominated, and the patriarchal conditions do not allow much scope for women activists. Apart from the household, the lives of women remain dominated by men. The managers, from the General Manager to the leading babu, the contractors, the moneylenders and shopkeepers, the officers and most doctors, are all men.

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70 Munna devi is an example of a women miner with male workers attitude and working style. She is a heavy machine operator, rides a bike and talks to her boss in a very diplomatic way. *kisi ka himat nahi hain ki koi mujhe galat nazar se dekhne, haath pao tod kar rakh dengey* (No body dares to mess up with me or else I am know for beating them up.)

248
Though dominated by men, trade unions however cannot entirely ignore women’s issues. This brings us to the issue of the participation of women workers in the labour movements of the history of Jharia coalmines. Women’s participation in the labour movement in Jharia Coafiled was very crucial for the success of strikes, and strike-breaking women could spell disaster. While examining the experiences of the women workers in the past during those great moments of struggle, one can clearly see the impact they have left behind on the present day situation. One can see how those years of activism shaped the women workers identities as women, as workers, and how those memories, as several of my women interviewees admitted, are irrevocably related to their present self-perceptions. This has been looked at from the perspective of variations in locality, class, ethnicity, as well as its impact on their later lives. The struggle in the collieries revolved around two important points: the new need-based living wage and the proper implementation of the constitutional award with a view to ensure human, dignified life in the industrial town. Interpretation of the diverse dimensions of women’s memories—gathered from published memoirs and oral histories—has formed a mainstay of this work.

Their narratives shed some light on the sort of struggles women workers have initiated, and taken part in. It was these struggles, and the ongoing everyday life’s struggle that gave colliery women the relative freedom of movement they display. They fought for various causes not just for wages and bonuses or the women workers issues. In most of the struggle, they did not have male leaders and were more likely to be involved in direct actions than negotiations. For the negotiation with the management the male leaders stepped in. Inspite of these struggles, women’s right to work has never been effectively supported by the trade unions. Women have always remained at the level of activists or supporters; Union leaders were always men. The irony lies in the fact that in spite of being so strong and active in the coalmines, women could not build on this history. Both their workforce ratio as well as their vibrant role has declined.

One encountered either an initial silence on this past or once persuaded to speak a certain romanticization. Two possibilities emerge from the resolute silence of the women miners on the question of their involvement in the labour movement or the Trade Union activities. Either the movement offered nothing worthwhile to remember or those memories are so
traumatic that the women do not wish to revisit the excruciating pain they endured. During the recounting of these past struggles it however becomes apparent that the period was romanticized precisely because women expected that the movement would tear down all structures of oppression, including gender. Their expectations were encouraged by their initial success in breaking certain social taboos and aspects of patriarchal domination for a brief period at the height of the movement. This however, could not be sustained later.

There are a range of concerns which the women workers in the coalmines faced. One of the major concerns was that of the Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) where there seemed to be no uniformity of opinion on the benefits of the scheme. While on one hand the disparity between the sexes makes some of the workers support the implementation of Female VRS, on the other hand others view it as a means to remove women workforce from the coal industry and replace them with men workers. An ethos of male dominance pervades the coal fields, as many women sacrifice their freedom to provide for husbands or sons. "They are groomed in a way that they are always dominated by the male [family] member."

The analysis of women's work, their roles in family and society and in the development process reveals the secondary status of women in family society and economy. Women in the colliery workforce performed multiple tasks involving simple manual labour such as gin-winding, loading, carrying and screening coal, bailing water, pushing tubs and cleaning boilers, along with the household work. These women are invariably paid less than their male counterparts doing the same job. Gender influenced the determination of mining jobs and influenced workers attitudes. Women are not given any training, and therefore there is no skill up gradation. VRS is used as and excuse to retire the women workers from the coalmines.

Other important issues that were raised included housing facilities, the lack of toilet facilities at work and lack of medical facility. Women who are replaced as a worker after their husbands' deaths want to work in a better office setup for instance at the hospital as a maid or at the headquarters as a peon, or be absorbed in doing clerical work rather than in the coalmines. In the mines they are made to do surface job like cleaning, or loading or
working as a security guard or a peon. Post contractualizations, the opportunities for employment too have been negated. For unions to demand the right for women to work in a context of shrinking job opportunity is highly unlikely.

There are clear linkages between caste background, types of work, the degree of freedom and the independence amongst women workers in the colliery. Wages alone have not given women freedom of action. Yet permanent jobs have given many women the possibility to challenge their families, bosses and society. The persisting roles of caste and community norms and values have a very major role to play in defining participation both at work and in labour movements.

Feminist theories have extensively examined the ways in which women’s labour is exploited in factory settings through lower wages for comparable work. In the coalmines one can see the feminization of certain jobs that occurred as women entered the labour force in increasing numbers. The jobs of a wagon loader, maid, coal pickers, telephone operator, peons, cleaner etc are mostly taken up by the women. The men moved out of certain occupations and these jobs become “ghettoized” as women’s work, with an accompanying decrease in status and wages.

Implicit in this thesis is the recognition that women straddle the crossroads of reproduction and production. They are the link between human and economic development, the primary workers in both the private and the public spheres. Women therefore work mainly as unpaid family labour in the field but leave the decisions about non-field operations, including marketing, to men (Banerjee 1995). Incidentally, this had led to an increase in the sex-wise segregation of women in work. In the coalmines women workers who come to work are thus almost all women who have family responsibilities and young children and are therefore tied down to their homes. In most cases they enter the workforce because of dire need. Therefore as a desperate, untrained and unskilled workforce they do not have much scope for negotiating or improving their situations.

As the coal industry is running in economic crisis the industry does not pay much attention to the labour welfare issues and therefore much of the women workers issues remain
unaddressed. The world that the *kamins* have to negotiate now is far more chaotic, complex and corrupt than ever before. The forces that women have to confront now no longer end at the GM's bungalow, the goonda or the moneylenders next door. Those forces are now faceless bureaucrats in Koyla Bhavan, or in Kolkata or even New Delhi. If the situation of women workers in the organized sector is so miserable, it would be interesting to study the unorganized sector women worker who works in the mines on a contract basis.