

Socio-Cultural Impact of Mining Activities on Indigenous Communities in Australia

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the myriad challenges faced by the Indigenous communities in Australia due to the onslaught of globalization, urbanization, and commercialization. The indiscriminate mining activities have caused existential threat on the socio-cultural identity of the Australian Aborigines. Land is an inalienable part of their life that they inherited from their Dreamtime ancestors. In aboriginal culture, they are not the owner of the land, rather they belong to the land and it is in their heart. Rapidly increasing industrial and mining activities in their protected areas have impacted their social and cultural life negatively.

Keywords: Aborigines, Dreamtime, Marginalization, Mining, Protected Areas.

Indigenous people are the earliest known inhabitants of their land. These minority indigenous communities have been living in different countries across the world. These people have been practicing their culture least affected by the outside world. Natives, Aborigines, First peoples and Tribal are some of the distinct terms used to address them. Although living in different parts of the world, they share common social and cultural traits. Their kinship with the land and surrounding environment makes them different from the majority population in their respective countries.

Owing to the onslaught of globalization, urbanization and commercialization, these indigenous communities are experiencing different challenges in

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their day-to-day lives. People of these communities prefer to stay in isolation further away from the so-called modern community in their countries. In the process of modernizing less developed regions and "enlightening the less civilized" (Sahoo), they become victims of socio-economic marginalization. The increasing interference of the ruling governments, related organizations and corporate houses has managed to create a severe existential threat to their socio-cultural identity. Owing to their sense of belonging to nature, it becomes the utmost priority of the indigenous people to sustain the nature and natural resources as they are completely dependent on these resources, ranging from their livelihood to their very sustenance. From collecting fodder for their animals to gathering minor forest products to sell in nearby towns, nature is an inalienable part of their lives. (Vasavi, *The Indian Express*, 28 February 2019)

Land plays a pivotal role in the social and cultural existence for indigenous people. This land is of sacred value to them as they have inherited this land from their ancestors. Owing to lack of clear-cut information regarding indigenous people, the question of who are indigenous people and how are they different from the majority population has become a burning issue. Different international organizations have given various definitions for the term 'Indigenous'. These definitions have been formulated by various international organizations, such as the International Labor Organization, World Bank's Indigenous people's policy and the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in its report "Indigenous Peoples and Mining Encounters: Strategies and Tactics" gives a definition for indigenous people:

Population groups who from ancient times have inhabited the lands where we live, who are aware of having a character of our own, with social traditions and means of expression that are linked to the country inherited from our ancestors, with a language of our own, and having certain essential and unique characteristics which confer upon us the strong conviction of belonging to a people, who have an identity in ourselves and should be thus regarded by others. (7)

All these definitions make it clear that the relation of the indigenous people with nature and land is what makes them different from others. If we deconstruct the definitions, we find the following characteristics that delineate the indigenous people. Firstly, indigenous people throughout their lives are very closely associated with nature and environment. They worship nature because this is a life-giving force for them. In these societies, every individual is required to have an intimate knowledge of the environment for

his survival, i.e., about the forces of nature and flora and fauna around him/her.

Secondly, the social and cultural practices of indigenous communities across the world still adhere to their rites and rituals, and they are least affected by the scientific advancement that has taken place over the years. A few indigenous communities which have developed socially and economically are still attached to their roots and practices. These practices bring them closer to their indigenous identity. Thirdly, self-assertion by these people is critical to their indigenous identity. They uphold their cultural identity through every single aspect of life. Indigenous people who have shifted to metropolitan cities still prefer to use their own language within the people of their community as they are proud of their language, which is a marker of their identity.

Indigenous populations across the world occupy virgin land that is rich in mineral resources which has in recent times drawn the attention of big corporate houses who want to grab the land from indigenous communities in order to extract minerals and make maximum profit. The hidden ore in these lands is enough to fund the economy of many developing countries. The side effect of colonization has been the reduction of power and sovereignty of the native people over their ancestral lands. Owing to the very high demand for minerals in the market, big corporate houses want to make huge profits from mining activities in the lands occupied by the indigenous people. As land is the only source of their livelihood and sustenance, indigenous people are unwilling to surrender their land for mining, leading to sustained conflict between the people of these communities and the big corporate houses, which are supported by the ruling governments. The indigenous people do not want to lose ownership of their lands. This loss will create a serious identity crisis for the indigenous communities across the world. The land is the preserver of the history of their forefathers, and carries religious and cultural significance for them. The spiritual and emotional value of the land cannot be compensated by the monetary value assigned to it by the mining companies.

Industrial mining near the traditional territories of the indigenous peoples has also posed serious implications for their communities. Mining companies claim to alleviate the poverty levels of the indigenous people in return for the use of the natural resources. The adverse impact of mining in these areas has led to hazardous health issues among indigenous people. Owing to their backward economic status, they are highly vulnerable to new-age diseases in the interior parts of their settlements.

Some of the common issues being faced by the indigenous people across the world include forced eviction from their land by mining companies,

police atrocities to acquire their land, human rights violation and rising cases of sexual harassment against women. The nexus between the governments and the mining companies has resulted in state-sponsored deprivation of indigenous communities from their land. The land holds spiritual and religious value for indigenous communities and deprivation from their land is a pathetic way to deprive them from their cultural and historical identity. Land is the only tangible thing that they can associate with. Taking away their land is tantamount to depriving them of their right to govern themselves and their land.

In recent years, the relationship between the indigenous people and the mining companies has become very complex as the former sees land as a source of sustenance while for the mining companies land is just a source of huge profit from the rich minerals that are hidden beneath the land. To make the maximum profit out of the land, the mining companies can go to any extent, including forceful eviction of indigenous communities without being sympathetic to the people who have been living there for centuries. In this process, the government machinery plays an equal role as these million-dollar companies provide a lot of funds to political parties to get policies changed that prove to be favourable to the mining companies.

Mining activities on the land previously occupied by the native people for years will eventually lead to environmental degradation and social disintegration of the indigenous communities. Various questions remain unanswered even after mining activities are done, such as the displacement effects on indigenous communities who were forcibly removed from the land and the violence that occurs during the phase of resistance by the indigenous people to protect their land. What is the responsibility of the mining companies who are allowed to extract minerals from this land? What share of the profit do these indigenous communities get from the mining companies?

Anthropologist Traci Brynne while talking about the relationship between the indigenous people and mining companies in her book *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* writes, "Just as many colonial conquerors thought that the new land they had discovered was vacant or 'uninhabited' many mining projects have been justified on the basis that the landscape is deserted" or a 'wasteland' (17).

The competition among the mining companies to win the right of extraction from the land makes the indigenous communities a victim of modernization and prone to exploitation by the mining companies. Those companies have already invested a vast sum of money to get the rights of extraction and are funded by international finance companies. In this process, a large number of stakeholders are involved and all are eager to reap their share of the profit. Since so many things are at stake for the mining companies, they

are least concerned about the indigenous communities and hence neglect their interests.

The arrival of mining companies in the interior settlements paves the way for urbanization and the arrival of migrant labourers in the indigenous territory. It poses serious threats to the cultural identity of the indigenous people. Apart from the negation of their cultural identity, mining activities also swallow their self-sustained economy. These people, who were earlier engaged in agricultural activities, are now compelled to work in the nearby mining sites and eventually, it takes these people away from their traditional ways of life. This is how the village culture gets annihilated by the mining industries; it changes the whole paradigm of indigenous people's life and their diverse culture is buried under a uniform globalized culture. The resulting conflicts between the indigenous people and the non-indigenous people eventually lead to violence. For indigenous communities, sovereignty is equated to their freedom to live their life in their own way and to practice their culture without any outside influence but the arrival of outsiders questions their sovereignty over their own land. (Narasimham, <https://www.ndpublisher.in/admin/issues/EAv63n1z.pdf>)

Environmental changes caused by mining activities reveal their impact over a period of time and the indigenous communities are least aware of the imminent catastrophe in their region. Mining activities generally affect the vegetation and the biodiversity of the region negatively and impact the indigenous communities that worked hard to sustain this diversity and vegetation on their land.

Sometimes, mining companies show reluctance in paying any amount as compensation since they consider indigenous land as vacant or government land. For mining companies, compensation is only a means to fulfill the loss to the indigenous people and they club it with the economic prosperity of the people who are residing in the nearby areas of the mining land by saying that employment will be easily available to the indigenous people who are without any proper source of income. This non-indigenous perception towards the indigenous people means real loss of land for indigenous people which cannot be compensated with any amount of money.

In the modern times, indigenous voices are gaining worldwide recognition as various NGOs are working for the land rights of the indigenous communities, who are adhered to their demand for self-determination and cultural survival. These NGOs are working to spread awareness about environmental degradation in native areas. Environmental activists are also mounting strong protests against permissions given to mining companies by the government.

Indigenous people, who were the landowners before the advent of mining companies in their area, soon became labourers in these mining companies. Here starts the downfall of indigenous communities, the people who start to work as labourers in the mines and the people who keep themselves away and refrain from joining non-indigenous people creates inequality within the indigenous society. The social and economic gap within the indigenous communities is widening and giving way to alienation effect among the indigenous people.

In Australia, the indigenous people are known as Aboriginals. They are the earliest known inhabitants of Australia. Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander people have faced severe marginalization with the advent of white settlers in Australia. Within a few decades, Aborigines have become a minority in their own country which is now a country of white people. The racial policies of white settlers have subjected aboriginal people to marginalization. They have become deprived of their language and culture. In modern days, the aboriginal people in Australia have been facing different issues ranging from their land rights to forced displacement of Aborigines from their land for mining activities. The land is an inalienable part of their life that they inherited from their Dreamtime ancestors. The prominent Aboriginal writers such as Kim Scott, Sally Morgan and Alexis Wright, in their literary works, demonstrate the socio-cultural significance of the land in the lives of Aborigines. Signifying the importance of land, Sally Morgan in her novel *My Palace* writes "No matter what we become, our spiritual tie with the land and the other unique qualities we possess will somehow weave their way to future generations of Australians" (315).

Most of the Aboriginals live on the outskirts of big cities of Australia. Different aboriginal communities are living in different parts of Australia and they have been struggling for recognition of indigenous ownership and control of lands. Aboriginal people share a different culture and way of life from the majority population of Australia. Various indigenous communities are living in various protected areas in Australia. They have land rights over these lands where they have been residing. They have been facing the same problems that other indigenous communities across the world are facing. Rapidly increasing industrial and mining activities in their protected areas have impacted their social and cultural life negatively. The discovery of Uranium in Australia has increased the momentum of mining activities. Aboriginals share a different kind of relation with the land they live on. There are many sites which are of religious importance for aboriginals. For mining, these historical sites have been devastated by the mining companies. Last year, Juukan Gorge rock shelters were destroyed for an iron ore mine in Western Australia. These caves carry evidence of the earliest known inhabitants of Australia. These caves are of significant importance for the aboriginal communities living

there. Artefacts found in the caves include a 28,000-year-old animal bone tool and a 4,000-year-old belt made of plaited human hair. For economic development, these sites of historical significance are being devastated by the mining companies. There are various organizations that are working to protect the sacred sites of aboriginal people in Australia. One of the major organizations is The Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, which is a statutory institution that is working for the aboriginal people to protect their sites from being exploited for mining purposes. The government of Australia passed legislation in 1984 to protect the important sites of aboriginal people. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 is aimed at preserving the aboriginal heritage. It also provides respect to the native title of aboriginal people over their land. However, these legislations have not succeeded in protecting the indigenous land from mining companies. Aboriginal people have nominal control over mining and exploration on their land, and like the Indian government, the Australian government has also made it mandatory to take prior permission from the aboriginal community for mining on their land. Still, mining companies use different tactics to take assent of the indigenous communities for mining. The communities which live near the mining sites are severely affected due to mining.

In recent years, in the northern territory of Australia, the discovery of Uranium has increased the presence of mining companies. Half of the population in this territory is aboriginals. In this region, the Ranger and Nabarlek are the sites of huge deposits of Uranium. Nabarlek was located within the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve. Mining was done here for four years for uranium and it affected the aboriginal communities who were residing in this area. It caused an influx of European population in the areas possessed by the indigenous people of Australia and it severely affected their social and cultural life. To sustain the aboriginal culture and language, their endeavours cannot be negated. It has changed the social pattern of the indigenous communities of the territory. Though employment is easily accessible to these people from the mining companies, they will still have to relinquish their traditional way of living. They do not find it attractive to work in these mining companies and instead prefer to keep themselves among their own people. Alcohol consumption has suddenly increased and has led to domestic violence in their households which is causing the disintegration of aboriginal families. The consequences of mining affect local people gradually and can be traced over five to six years. In Ranger, when the mining was stopped, serious health issues were noticed among the aboriginal people from that region. With easy access to money, which they got as royalty from the mining companies, the tendency of alcohol consumption has increased among the aboriginal people.

In aboriginal culture, they are not the owner of the land, rather they belong to the land and it is in their heart. Owing to mining activities in Western Australia, which is a hub of uranium and other minerals, many important sites are under threat. The Kakadu National Park which is also a World Heritage Site on UNESCO World Heritage Sites list is facing severe threats to its flora and fauna. While emphasizing the significance of the land in the life of aboriginal people, the aboriginal writer Ali Cobby Eckermann observes:

Land is my family, that rock is my grandfather and that sand dune is my mother. We have our ways and they can be customized to modern life but the core wisdom won't change. We have to stop the intergenerational social impacts but every time the government meets us and then we are called ungrateful. Till today, there is no proper discussion with aboriginal communities over anything leave alone environmental impacts of mining (Menon, *The Hindu*, 19 January 2015).

The Carmichael coal mine in Queensland proposed by the Adani Group is being opposed by a large number of environmentalists, indigenous communities and politicians due to environmental threats posed by this project in Australia. This project will cause irreparable damage to the Great Barrier Reef – the world's largest coral reef system. Local communities will be displaced for mining purposes. The coal from Adani's Carmichael mine will end up in India's Godda district. Most of the villages in this district are from the Santhal tribe which is an indigenous community. Santhals are forced to leave their land for a proposed power station. While these people protested against the acquisition of land, they were severely beaten by the police and a large number of Santhal people were arrested. The police charged five men who did not want to give up their land with criminal trespassing. In both the countries, the indigenous communities are getting affected due to this coal mining project (Langa, *The Hindu*, 13 June 2019).

Among Aborigines, there are different concerns regarding mining activities on their land. They share a sense of spiritual and cultural attachment to their land, and owing to this reason, activities of resource exploitation are unacceptable to the indigenous people of Australia. Historical incidents of exclusion and marginalization of indigenous people from their land make them more sceptical towards mining companies.

Apart from India and Australia, it has become a common phenomenon where indigenous communities across the world are facing existential threats due to mining activities in the area where they have been living for generations. Mining companies are involved in extracting minerals irrespective of the social and environmental impact on indigenous people. Post-mining impact is more detrimental for the indigenous communities owing to the non-disposal

of hazardous minerals. While talking about this issue, German-born Mexican sociologist and anthropologist, Rodolpho Stavenhagen in his book *Peasant, Culture and Indigenous Peoples* writes "The widespread practice of dumping toxic waste in indigenous territories has been the cause of many abortions and cases of cancer and other diseases among indigenous women" (50).

To arrive at an amicable solution, more number of indigenous people should be included in the decision-making body before the mining activities take place in their areas. Violation of terms and conditions and not meeting the environmental expectations by the mining companies are major reasons of conflict between the indigenous people and the people from mining companies. The rights of self-determination should not be affected either by the Government or by the mining companies. While participation of indigenous communities is vital, consultation should take place from the first stage itself. Mining companies should prepare this framework to eliminate any such possibility of conflict with the indigenous communities. They should make an assessment of cultural, social and environmental impacts of mining on the indigenous communities. Finally, it is the government's duty to keep a vigil on non-compliance and proper enforcement of the guidelines and safeguard the rights of the indigenous communities over the land.

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