Coal mining in modern India expanded during the British raj and proved to be one area where indigenous women took up productive roles in the labour process. The conventional images of ‘Indian women’ do not fit in the way women have performed the non-traditional roles in the mines since the mid-nineteenth century till about the time of independence.

Analyses of how Indian society in eastern India adopted and resisted modernity under colonialism have stressed the active roles of urban men and the separation of the ‘private and public spheres’, and women ‘learning’ the mores of modern society under the benevolent colonial patronage. Studies have also posited a somewhat passive role for women in Indian society, a typification that can be subjected to the critique that feminist scholars have mounted against the failure to accord agency to women. My own research in the collieries of eastern India region using interdisciplinary methodologies reveal a more complex gendered division of labour than what has been described for India.

In this paper I explore the differentiation of women and men’s roles in the collieries by using marking theory. Marking theory from Jakobsonian linguistics for characterising these different, but overlapping roles for women and men is used as the theoretical framework to explore different gender roles. The paper concludes by reassessing the place of women and men in the Indian collieries, emphasising the great complexity of gendered roles in mining and migrant settlement contexts. The paper deals with the fact that women of particular castes and ethnic groupings joined mining work as against class groupings that attempt to interpret labour in the mines. Thus, the Indian collieries provide ideal examples of a threefold interface of class, caste and gender that is explored by this paper using historical data, official statistics and interviews with women workers.

**Introduction**

Contrary to popular notions of ‘Indian women’ representing weak and tradition-bound vulnerable victims of patriarchy is the image of a female mineworker sweating in Indian collieries. It is an image that is hidden from the direct gaze of social scientists looking for ‘labour’ or the ‘working class’ in the mines. Conventional western stereotypes of labour and industrial relations characterized by hard management, wage and capital and the
archetypal proletariat\(^1\), the coal miner also tends to dominate and hides from view women in non-traditional roles such as those in mining. When women and the mines are indeed written about, women are seen as members of mining communities and their roles as miners’ wives tend to shadow the various productive roles they played and still play in and around the mines (see Furumura, 2003; Robinson, 1998; also, Gibson-Graham’s 1994 work to see how in Australian coal mining towns women’s organizations gained legitimacy by supporting men’s struggles). Women have participated in mining in Asian countries for a long time (see the works by Kaur, 2001; Yoshida and Miyauchi, 2003). The mines are not isolated from the societal context in which they belong, however much an ‘enclave’ character they may have assumed in the colonial time. Simple questions such as who were these women and where do they belong to in the social and gender hierarchies of the mines are raised when one looks at women mineworkers either at surface or underground. Was the experience of women miners the same as those of Europe? If not, can we lead from there towards a gendered mining history of the ‘Asian’ or even ‘Indian’ kind?

This paper examines the caste-class interface in the collieries of India by examining the participation of women miners, commonly called *kamins*\(^2\) in collieries. Written accounts of Indian mining history itself is sparse and dominated by colonial sources, which put overwhelming stress on male miners. Indian *kamins* are barely visible outside of the mines as the proletarian miner becomes the hero and shrouds his female counterpart who can give us a better understanding of a gendered mining history. The *kamins* of India tell us about the way the British colonial empire brought modernity in India and gendered the resource extraction process became gendered. The paper enriches itself from the past work on Asian women miners by Burke (1993, 1994, 1995) and uses the marking theory to understand how specific roles and jobs become assigned to women and men in context of the mine.

Marking theory is used widely in linguistics; markedness stands for the linguistic phenomena consisting of polar opposed pairs\(^3\). Since mining is generally constructed as a ‘masculine’ world, where the codification of women and men’s lives as separate is seen as complete and total, marking theory provides us with a suitable theoretical tool to understand the ways mining jobs become gendered. Marking is closely linked with hierarchy that suits our purpose since role and status are two inseparable terms that are bound to appear in any discussion of role-fixing. Are *kamins* the opposites of coolies? In

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1 See Harrison’s 1978 book on the tensions an ‘independent collier’ as archetypal proletariat faces between existences as ‘honourable men or degraded slaves’.

2 *‘Kamin’* is the common name of Indian women mineworkers working at manual jobs in the mines. The term is a feminine opposite of *‘cooile’*, the physical labourer in almost all contexts in India. *Kamins* can be found also in the quarries such as stone.

3 For example, the phonological feature unvoiced-voiced, the antonyms long-short, the grammatical relations singular-plural and active-passive. In such binary oppositions (contrasts) the poles also represent asymmetry such that one pole may be more special or specialized, more focused or constrained, less general and more complex than the other. In such cases, the specialized element is said to be marked and the more general one unmarked. The first discussion of markedness in modern linguistics originated in 1930s in the writings of the Prague school of structural phenologists Nicolai S. Trubetzkoj and Roman Jakobson (see Asher and Simpson, 1994 for more details on the development of markedness in linguistics.
traditional Sanskrit the connotations are described as ‘laksya’ (marked) and miners as having ‘laksanas’ (markers). Such application of marking theory in explaining social roles has been attempted by before. The American anthropologist Hage’s work (2001) was a fundamental application of the theory to social contexts such as kinship analysis in a cross-cultural and historical manner. In my analysis, the gender markedness in mining arise from two laksanas, the job being perceived as risky and dirty, thus requiring ‘protection’ for the weaker and fairer sex, and the job itself attributing a male solidarity among its workers, leading to a strong sense of male bonding and labour militancy. Here one may recollect the early work of Kerr and Seigal (1954) who suggested that the isolation of miners from the wider community (both in their work and their lives outside the mine) makes them a particularly cohesive group who tend to be characterized as the quintessential ‘other’. The manifestations of these laksanas are in space as well as in time, in the collieries – underground and on the surface – and in the present and in the past. Burke compared this bipolarity in terms of Yin and Yang. According to her (1994, p. 2), ‘The lack of visibility of women miners, both in public perceptions and scholarly work, raises questions familiar enough in other, better explored, areas of women’s history. In modern mining history, however, it takes on a particular quality due to the contrasting high profile of male miners. The Ying of invisible women is matched by the Yang of only too visible men.’ My paper examines the gender roles and notes how the markedness had been applied in popular conscience in the coalmines of eastern India.

Marking gender in the collieries
Coal mining, like the plantations in raj times, fully manifested almost all the symptoms of colonial modernity that descended on feudal economic relations and production systems of India – private investment and the involvement of indigenous capital, import of labour from other parts of the country to build up a reserve of ‘captive labour’, a low level of technology. Coal mines were essentially the secondary ‘enclaves’ meant to serve the primary metropolitan enclaves located in Calcutta within a vast sea of subsistence agriculture. Coal mining in India until the independence of the country in 1947 took place almost entirely in eastern part. The Raniganj-Jharia-Bokaro region had collieries that began in colonial times, and the history of coal mining, particularly in the early days of the industry, is synonymous with the way modern development has unfolded its trajectory in India whether in colonial or in postcolonial times. Coalmines are in important part of the colonial modernity where race and gender were constructed or invented in ways that are quite different from those in urban India. In collieries, kamins played a role in building the empire whereas in cities, ‘native’ women came out of homes under British patronage to learn English and ways of the outside world. However, kamins play an insignificant role in the colonial discursive practices that construct gender ideologies ‘by selectively focussing on certain aspects and ignoring other aspects (Sen, 2002, p. xiii). Colonial modernity in India highlighted fragmented aspects of an imagined reality, in urban-based education, and thereby invented gender paradigms.

4 I am aware that the concept of colonial discourse is a highly complex one and a contested terrain. In this paper, I use the term in the sense of a domain in which social practices and institutions pertaining to the colonial enterprise – such as the collieries – created marked identities for women and men. For a deeper analysis, see Spivak, 1987; Bhabha, 1994; or Nandy, 1983 reprint 1998)
Thus, the inclusion of local, poor, *adivasi* (original inhabitants) and lower caste women in coal mining is in no way comparable to the way women in urban India were exposed to colonial modernity. In Bengal, where the British influence was felt earliest and was strongest, urban women of upper caste or elite families were beginning to form new social subjectivities or forms of representation. Bannerji in 2001 has shown how the colonial ruling class invented a moral identities in which one can encounter constructive and interpretative attempts where Bengali/Indian women are subject-objects of both colonial and indigenous hegemonic exercises. In the primary enclave of Calcutta metropolis, a category of *bhadramahila* or the gentlewoman was being created under the patronage of both social reformers both English and Indian. They were teaching urban Indian women how to read and write, and how to interact with men in spaces other than domestic (Karlekar, 1991; 1986). What happened in the mines is a different process from the metropolis. In Calcutta, according to Bannerji (2001, p. 4) ‘The woman here, unlike in “Age of Consent”, is an upper-class/caste woman with more than a physical function. Thus she is not just a tropical body, a combination of animal sex and fecundity but rather the object-subject of a moral constellation which signifies transcendence .... As such, Bengali/Indian women end up as the agents and subjects of their own invention’. The women miners in colonial collieries were quite different from the more monolithic colonial stereotypes of middle class women. As we will see, they transcended the markedness of gender roles by virtue of the manual nature of their work and ethnic origins. Bengali women, Standing noted in 1991, have conventionally taken little part in waged work with the exception of a small professional group from the upper class. The separation of *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the outside world, was so complete by the emerging nationalist ideology in colonial India (Chatterjee, 1993) that there were only a very few instances where women worked shoulder to shoulder with men as in the collieries. Hence it is important to examine the *kamins* who did and see what they tell us about the colonial modernity in India. The gendered history of coalmines leads us to a rediscovery of Indian women and helps us to identify the reasons for the Indian women miners’ invisibility.

**Coal mining and miners in India**

The necessities of fuelling the industrial-urban engine during the British *Raj* encouraged coal mining in Raniganj in Bengal and its counterpart Jharia in Bihar. Here coal was first struck by Mr Suetonius Grant Heatly and John Summer, two employees of the East India Company in 1774. Coal mining in India continued to be sporadic in nature as long as it did not become economical to extract this resource in India itself. Realization of this economic need generated much enthusiasm in opening new collieries at random. The British emerged as the main investors when by the second part of nineteenth century coal mining picked up in the region in spite of immense difficulties. Transport of coal to the main market in Calcutta was the main problem as the Damodar and Ajoy rivers were not navigable in dry season and were flood prone during the monsoons, and often upset transport schedules. Koilaghat (coal point) on the Hooghly river in Calcutta strand still bears the old memory of riverine coal transport. Three factors (Lahiri-Dutt, 2002) provided the initial stimuli for growth of coal mining industry – the abolition of East India Company’s trading monopoly in 1813; opening of the Raniganj mine under
European supervision; and the introduction of railways in 1855 (Munsi, 1980) to facilitate coal transport to the market in Calcutta which was the capital of British empire in South Asia till 1911.

Indian entrepreneurs, mainly landlords, eventually came to dominate coal production; as many as 13 of the 17 companies were owned by Indian operators in early part of the twentieth century (Bhattacharyya, 1985). Prince Dwarkanath Tagore’s Carr, Tagore and Co was merged with Gilmore Humfrey and Co. to form the Bengal Coal Company that soon became the largest operator. In 1860, the 50 collieries of Bengal Coal Company produced 99 percent of Indian coal. The low levels of technology and capital investment ensured that Indian landowners could make an easy entry into the industry (Rothermund and Wadhwa, 1978). They were little different from the local landlords in their style of operation.

Techniques of mining, mining appliances, tools and methods were simple. Shafts were sunk every few hundred feet and quarries were often opened below the high water mark whenever an outcrop was found near a waterway. Coal was brought from the face to pit bottom in head baskets, usually by women. There it was put into larger baskets (6-7 maund or about 250 kg) and wound to the surface by a winding engine, called a ‘gin’ (an abbreviation also used in other industries such as cotton). The gin was worked by women, perhaps by more than twenty. Small ‘beam’ engines were occasionally employed to do the combined work of pumping and winding and were manned by three women. Steel tipped curved pieces of iron were used as picks with shapeless wedges and hammers and one inch round crowbars. This type of mining continued till about 1920s.

The technology of coal production in India began to change in response to greater demands by 1920s. They led to the replacement of open cast and inclined mines by deeper shafts. Around the same time various measures began to be taken to ‘protect’ women from the heavy mining work. The measures and their resultant exclusion of women workers took place at several scales; at the international level by several ILO measures – the 1919 Convention on Night Work (Women), the 1935 Convention on Underground Work (Women) – restricted women workers from working in both shifts and from working in underground mines (ILO, 1999; 1997; 1996; 1988). At the national scale, the Indian Mines Act, initiated first in 1901 restricted the age of employment of children in mines. In 1929 and finally in 1935 the Mines Act entirely prohibited company owners to employ women in underground work. Such orders were issued again in 1946, and then a complete ban in 1952 that stated that women miners will be employed only in surface work during the day shifts (Coal Handbook, 1997). These Acts restricted the period of work from 16 to 12 to 10 and eventually 8 for underground workers and 9 for surface workers. The Acts/measures were presented as a means of protecting women from an unsafe job such as mining. The Indian State assumed its traditional benevolent role through its commitment to the protection of women. The legislation tell us that women miners were perceived by the State as one group that needs to be ‘protected’ from the hazardous mining work.
The period after independence of India is a hazy area with regard to official statistics; this was the period of ‘company’ raj, non-Bengali business entrepreneurs, the ‘company’ owners, had replaced local zamindar\(^5\)-owners in many Raniganj collieries. The feudal relationship between labour and colliery-owners had been replaced by a more cash-oriented relationship, and the mining companies’ main objective was to increase production to fuel the industrial dreams of planned development.

The land laws of India changed during 1930s to give both surface and sub-surface rights of the land to mining companies (Manindra, 1946). As long as coal mining was ‘extensive’ in nature, technology did not undergo any decisive changes, the units of production did not grow in size, and mines of similar size were added to each other to increase production, women miners continued to take a significant role in the industry. With more intensive, technology oriented production, and higher capital investments women's role in coal mining began to decline. In 1901 women formed about 48 percent of total mine workers in India. Of these women, 65 per cent worked in underground collieries. The proportion remained more or less the same till 1921 (61 and 60 per cents, respectively). The data in Table I show that the participation of women was significant till 1930s. The proportion of women miners decreased from such high levels to about 20 percent in post-colonial India and now has fallen to only about 6 percent. Most substantial declines, however, have taken place in recent decades under State ownership of the mining industry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>% of Female to Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>26520</td>
<td>55682</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>70831</td>
<td>115982</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>15181</td>
<td>60620</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>16094</td>
<td>169136</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>12875</td>
<td>165829</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>9879</td>
<td>151855</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Seth (1940), Census, CIL and Eastern Coalfields Limited Reports.

The Indian coal mining industry was ‘nationalized’ or brought under state ownership in several phases during 1971-'73. Nationalization of coal mining was in tune with the socialistic rationale of the Indian National Congress party representing the modernizing bourgeois elite and ruling the country from Delhi at that time since 1947 (Kumarmangalam, 1973). All minerals were classified into two categories, ‘major’ and

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\(^5\) A zamindar (spelt often as zeminder or zamindaar) is a landlord who does not cultivate his own land. They emerged primarily as a result of Permanent Settlement and became an intermediary between the raj and the ryot or the peasant. For more discussion on the sub-infeudation process in Burdwan/Raniganj region, see Bhattacharyya, 1984.
'minor', and all major minerals including coal were brought under State control. India is now the third largest coal producer of the world with an annual production of about 299 million tons which is about 68 per cent of total energy resources of the country (Coal, 1999). In eastern India, the individual colliery owners were given compensation at the time of nationalization, but the labour relationship they had instituted continued in the collieries. Women’s role in the mining industry has declined at a significant rate during the last two and a half decades under state ownership. Women now occupy a marginal position in the Indian coal industry (around 5 % of the labour force) because they were made redundant in the labour process (Ghosh, 1984).

**Ethnic identities, gender and the working class**

Cultural identities such as ethnicity, caste and religion have powerful influence on social and gender relationships within the formal industrial labour force in India. Class is inextricably intertwined with identities such as gender and ethnicity, a situation which necessitates that the assumption of a singular, monolithic working class be rethought. The relationship between the politics of class and community has been noted by subaltern historians (Guha, 1982-1997) who opposed the Marxist notion of a working class having universal validity in India. The political economy of coal mining in India has traditionally been characterized by three hierarchies - caste, class and gender. In coal mining, a specific cultural group of women participated traditionally; exclusion means these women are being denied of their subsistence; not the urban, educated, middle class women. Everett (1989) simply called them 'lower class' women but that brings us to the debate of the relationship between caste and class in India, whether they can coexist or are mutually exclusive (Bremen, 1985; Omvedt, 1981). The *adivasis* or the indigenous peoples and the lower castes together form that vast amorphous mass whom the Indian officialdom calls 'weaker sections of the society'. In the Indian collieries, women from lower castes and *adivasi* groups formed the initial labour force. Here, caste has been a useful tool in examining gender identities. This transcendental role of caste has at one level helped build allegiances; but at another level it has also provided the means to exclude and subjugate some sections of the society.

Was the definition of a 'working class' valid in such cases? Chakrabarty (1996) has shown that in India such universal categories of Marxist thought as ‘capital’ and ‘labour’ are not valid in defining the industrial working class. In Indian collieries, the labour process or the choice of technology is rooted in the culture of the ‘company’ owners as well as the labourers. The deeply entrenched mercantilist outlook and the cultural milieu

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6 Caste, has been famously described by Risley (1891, reprinted 1998) as the smallest endogamous groups of people in Indian society. Beteille (1996) has given the simplest definition of caste as ‘a system of enduring groups whose mutual relations are governed by certain broad principles’. Louis Dumont (1970) declared the uniqueness of caste-bound Indians as ‘Homo Hierarchicus’ that has been severely criticized by Gupta (1984). Though ‘caste’ is predominantly a Hindu phenomenon, similar groupings are also found among Muslims and Christians in India. The caste division of Indian society is in the realm of ‘cultural’ relations, and Marx’s formulation of caste for class is opposed to this cultural interpretation. Bayly (1999) dates the making of modern day caste to the eighteenth century and colonial intervention, which increased the stake that Indians had in their ‘traditional’ caste order.
of the British raj in India was not discontinued after the independence of the country\textsuperscript{7}, and have played significant roles in selective exclusions – whether of adivasis or women – in Indian coal mining industry.

In India, caste divisions played a part both in actual social interactions and in the ideal scheme of values. Members of different castes are, up to a point, expected to behave differently and ascribed different status according to their castes. Formerly birth in a particular caste fixed not only one's ritual status, but by and large also one's economic and political positions. Today it is possible to achieve a variety of economic and political positions in spite of one's birth in a specific caste, although caste still sets limits within which choice is restricted.

Other subaltern groupings of indigenous populations of India include tribals, untouchables, adivasis (original inhabitants), dalits (the oppressed) and Harijans (children of God, called by Gandhi). Of them, 'Tribal' is a colonial construction and has fallen into disrepute whereas the term dalit is often used generically to include (in the words of the Dalit Panther Manifesto of 1973-’75) 'members of the scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion' (Joshi, 1986). Recently, Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998) have retained the original term, 'untouchables', in their study arguing that both harijan and dalit are political names for a creature whose identity continues to be rooted in the concept of ritual pollution that is itself a part of a very elaborate theology of the pure and the impure. To call them ‘untouchable’ is to stress the fact that the destiny of these people is crucial to the social order - the caste society - which excluded them in a way such that their exclusion sustains the symbolic architecture on which this order is founded. Clearly, the terms dalit or harijan are far more wide ranging for my purposes of this paper.

An understanding of the ethnic division of labour in Indian collieries is important in examining the problem of the decline of women workers in non-traditional roles outside the home such as in the organized coal mining sector. I emphasize that the increasing marginalization of women miners in the post-colonial or the post-nationalization period has to be seen beyond the economic changes taking place within the country or the industry. It has to be put in the specific regional perspective and examined in terms of the overall transformations occurring in that context. The exclusion of women miners and the transformation of the labour force into a predominantly immigrant male working class represent a gender politics in the Indian collieries.

When Heatley opened his first mine in 1774, he had brought in some experts from England besides employing the local labour. William Jones, one of the early British entrepreneurs to invest in coal mining, was the first to employ local adivasi and lower

\textsuperscript{7} The government of India sees the presence of ‘lower caste’ called the Scheduled Castes population as a criterion of backwardness in a region. However, Rudd has recently (1999) shown that in some rural areas of Bengal, being of a lower caste attributes greater political empowerment. Mukherjee noted (1999) that today caste is denoted more and more as identification within the class-stratum its constituents belong to.
caste labour around the middle of nineteenth century. The British administrator of Burdwan district, Paterson (1910) reported in the Imperial Gazetteer that two-thirds of the total workforce in the mining industry was ‘locally born’. Of the different local *adivasi* and lower caste groups, the Bauris were the first to bring their women into the collieries and their contribution in the early development of Indian coal mining industry was quite significant. As a result, they came to be known as ‘traditional coal cutters’ though the traditional occupation of these peoples has been agriculture-related work. The Santhals, Kols, Koras and Bhuinyas also joined the mining workforce along with their women. Other low caste populations such as Beldars, Mallahs and Jolahs worked in the mines with their women. Upper caste women usually stayed away from the dirty, heavy work of collieries. Women of different local castes and communities participated in varying proportions in coal mining, as evident from the following table.

![Table 2](image)

**Table 2**  
**Ethnic division of women miners in eastern India, between the wars**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Castes</th>
<th>Women/100 Men of Their Caste</th>
<th>Castes</th>
<th>Women/100 men of Their Caste</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doms</td>
<td>111.0</td>
<td>Kurmis</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jolahs</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>Bauris</td>
<td>55.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telis</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>Rajputs</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalas</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>Beldars</td>
<td>102.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santhals</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhuinyas</td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mallahs</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Seth (1940), p. 129.

Around 1930s, women miners were employed in a variety of operations in collieries. As steam engines ‘phased out’ gin girls, and collieries came to be owned by Indian entrepreneurs, women found themselves working as *kamins* on the surface as well as underground work. However, eventually the job women workers came to specialize in was as ‘loaders’ – lifters and transporters of coal cut by their male partners - father, brother or husband (RoyChaudhuri, 1996). This ‘family labour’ system was suitable in view of the primitive techniques used in the shallow open cast mines, locally called pukuriya khads as well as the inclines.

To British visitors A. A. Purcell and J. Hollsworth (as mentioned in Sinha, 1975) such a family system of labour appeared entirely ‘different’ from that ‘in our collieries’ where miners as an industrial working class had already been formed. Indian coal miners collectively were not yet an industrial class and their traditional rural roots and occupations were still strong. The family system of labour operated well for several social reasons too – the adivasi sentiments of family attachment, and the unwillingness of women to carry coal for men of another caste. Above all, the dominant economic reason was that it provided uninterrupted maintenance of work schedule.
An account of coal mining in Raniganj in early twentieth century was written by Col. Frank J. Agabeg, the General Manager of Apcar and Co., the pioneering coal mining concern. He described how Asansol, now a major urban centre, had then just started to develop and Raniganj was the most important mining town. Barakar was the western terminus for the East Indian Railway, whereas Ondal had a large railway siding. These towns have now grown into major urban centres with over two hundred thousand populations. Collieries located at a distance from the railway transported their coal by bullock carts across dirt tracks. Only those adjacent to the railway lines had sidings for loading and unloading of coal. The cost of such infrastructure construction was borne by the companies using them. However, the Bengal-Nagpur Railway eventually extended the subsidiary lines to the less accessible collieries after 1930s and an intricate network of 'company roads' grew up around the collieries.

What was the view from below? Paku Mejhen, whose Santhal adivasi ancestors came originally from nearby Dumka four generations ago, describes the hierarchical colliery life which placed women workers like her great grandmother at the bottom:

‘In the colliery, Managershaheb was the boss. Borobabu (’babu’ denotes the educated Bengali middle class men, the Bhadralok) was under him, translated his instructions and in case of any trouble controlled the situation. The managershaheb would shout, ‘borobabuko bulao’ (call the borobabu) if any problem arose! Gomostababu managed the coolleys and kamins, Gudambabu looked after the store, Hazribabu took attendance, Loadingbabu supervised coal loading, and Batibabu distributed the lights. We Santhals did all the dirty and heavy jobs - our men cut the coal and women loaded it in baskets. We grew up on collieries; my great grandmother first went into the khadan (mine) with my great grandfather. She had to work very hard even on days she wasn’t well.’

Clearly, women were at the bottom of the pits’ gender hierarchy. More babus (clerks) from upper caste Hindus gradually came to occupy middle-positions between the malkata (coal cutters) and the Manager in collieries after 1930s. The Bijlibabu for instance appeared with the advent of electricity in collieries around the Second World War. So came Compassbabu (surveyor), Miningbabu and inchajbabu (in-charge). This structure has remained more or less unchanged till now.

The social fabric of colliery communities went through a process of transformation as coal began to be mined. The physical and social isolation of the adivasi lands of jungle mahal was more or less complete before mining began in the region and cultivating castes had claimed much of the more accessible land. Since the local adivasi and semi-divasi labour left the collieries during cropping season to work in the agricultural fields, and this interfered with maintaining mining operations, collieries were interested in creating a captive labour force. They began to employ ‘upcountry labour’ from north India around early twentieth century. Thekadars (contractors) brought hardworking able-bodied males from eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and even Madya Pradesh. Intra-state voluntary migration was initially comparatively smaller in volume, possibly due to the ravages left by frequent bargi (Maratha raiders) attacks from the western states of India (Guha, 1955). A statutory body called the Coalfield Recruiting Organisation was introduced to maintain, often forcibly, the supply of labour to the mines (Mahindra, 1946).
Tales of how labourers were kept in chains in the coolie-barracks have now become part of the folklore in Raniganj. Work was at least for 12 hours and cash wages could never compensate for a kind of work that these agricultural people could not even visualize. Many of the upcountry labour left the mines after their 11 month contract period never to come back. Collieries are known to have maintained ‘lethel’ (armed guards) to regulate and control the new recruits (Dasgupta, 1997). Paku Mejhen remembers how ‘Bilaspuris’ and ‘Gorakhpuris’ (labour from Bilaspur in Central Province and Gorakhpur in north India) were brought in to work in collieries and kept in ‘labour depots’. The manager used to send the sardar (leader of workers, a foreman) to a depot to get a few additional hands as soon as there was a labour shortage. The organization received commission from the companies in return. Bilaspuris and Gorakhpuris, of course, began to permanently live in Raniganj-Jharia-Bokaro collieries as working conditions began to improve in post-colonial times when trade unions began to wield their full weight. Paku still names each coolie dhaora (residential quarters of miners) by its cultural origin; to her it is always a Santhal basti (settlement), Kora, Nunia, Madesiya Gorakhpuri or a C.P. (Central Province) dhaora. As mining brought in a large number of male labourers from adjoining parts of the country. The adivasis and lower caste workers, in order to maintain their family units of production, opted for work in plantations or in construction of roads or railways where both women and men could again ‘join hands together’. The adivasi labour, had exchanged ‘the plough for the pick’ (Read, 1931) and still continued to prefer the plough from which they were displaced by the first wave of colonization (Guha and Gadgil, 1989). Gradually a large segment of the workers in the collieries become typically immigrant and male, caste Hindus from north or central India. Women like Paku’s grandmother still carried on, though their contribution in the resource extraction process increasingly began to be devalued in more ways than one.

During the years from 1891 to 1931, the outbound migration was almost double in size of the inbound migration in the colliery tracts of eastern India Ray Chaudhuri (1996). However, the high rates of outflow of local labours subsided over the years and inbound migration grew rapidly as more collieries were opened. In a heterogeneous local labour market of the collieries, an abundance of unskilled local workforce was certainly available. Still, the majority was drawn from outside areas. Moreover, the colliery workers, like other rural-based workers in Indian industries8, neither economically nor ethnically belonged to the same class. The withdrawal of adivasi labour from Indian collieries during late nineteenth and early twentieth century proves this. It also indicates how changing production relations changed the social-ethnic composition of labour, and eventually affected its gender composition.

Women still participate in mining, including coal mining; in India and elsewhere in the world (see for example, Mitha, et al, 1988), but their roles remain insignificant. In India, women miners in the collieries shows how changes in the economic organization of resource extraction in colonial and post-colonial India have interacted to produce rigidly hierarchical and marked roles for women and men.

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8 see Chakrabarty, 1996; De Haan and Sen, 1999 for more discussions on the cultural rootedness of industrial labour force in Bengal.
Gender and the working class in Indian collieries
The trade unions have come a long way in the Indian collieries from the old days of long working hours, lack of security and frightful conditions as described by the leading Marxist leader, Dange in 1945. The formalization of the coal mining industry and the successful bargaining on the workers’ position have now put the trade unions in a place to have representations in each management decision and discuss issues like pollution in the region. The unions have indeed earned for the workers many of the benefits they enjoy now, and have in turn made getting a job in collieries a highly attractive proposition - far better than what was described by the Government of India in 1967 survey report on labour conditions in the coal mining industry. It is true that instead of treating ‘family’ as a unit of production, trade unions fought for equal wages and have thus helped to achieve a better valuation of women’s work in mining. Ensuring that a widow gets the job of her deceased husband was also the achievement of these unions.

The trade unions have remained insensitive to the declining numbers of women workers in collieries. As institutions they are male dominated in that neither the leaders are women, nor have the number of women members registered a significant increase. But above all, while some trade unions have added women-related issues to their ‘list of workers’ demands’ their policies have not placed them at the forefront of these agendas. Women workers are excluded at the level of leadership and policy, and even if women are members they are discouraged to participate in union meetings. The belief in a monolithic working class is shared by all trade unions whether leftist or not thus subsuming gender issues within the class issues.

Union activity seems to be shaped by a gendered discourse that looks at women as a ‘special’ category externalized from the general interests of workers (Basu, 1992). The colliery majdoor sabha (labour congress) takes pride in their mass movements and how women ‘participate’ in these movements, but most often these are dominated by upper caste men. Mining is such an overwhelmingly male world in terms of power and domination; men are perceived to be risking their lives to earn the bread for their families. The notion is that women belonged in the home and were only working to earn ‘the butter’, claiming equal wage where it is clear that their frail bodies can not put in the kind of hard labour demanded by coal mining.

The recently introduced Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) is a good example how women workers are made redundant. Phulomoni Kora, an indigenous woman, told me how she has been identified as ‘surplus labour’ by the mining company and will be retired soon in spite of her repeated requests for jobs that she is skilled to do, such as sorting of coal or making ‘guli’ (mud-containers for explosives) or baskets. These are skills that adivasi and lower caste women workers have acquired over generations of participation in coal mining work. It may not be impossible to train Phulomoni to do other kinds of machine work towards the creation of a ‘womanpower’ in the collieries. In post-colonial India the exclusion of women from the industrial workforce and the subsequent construction of a male working class have not been limited to the coal mining sector.
only. In coal mining, trade unions are less responsive to women workers than their male members’ interests.

The lack of activism among the women coal miners is partly due to political silencing and partly because of the organizational strength of the *majdoor* unions (Barnes, 1989). The militancy of the trade unions has a long history that is outside the purview of this paper. The Hindi term ‘*majdoor*’ itself denotes a male worker and the trade unions usually perceive themselves as male organizations. They prefer to avoid the responsibility of ensuring jobs for the widows of deceased mineworkers, a right that was historically been granted by the companies. For example, Dulali lost her husband in a wall-collapse accident in late 1980s, and applied to the company for a job. During our conversation, she noted: ‘I made rounds of colliery offices for two years. Finally I went to the union leaders who insisted that I accept to my elder son being given the job. Following their advice, I decided in favour of my son and now I hardly get two square meals a day.’ Her son has now deserted her and she lives by what she describes as 'collecting coal' from an abandoned mine locally. She remained quiet for a long time when I asked why mine widows like her do not protest about the union's reluctance to entertain them, she said, ‘we are always ready for action, but first think before shouting. If the leaders are enraged, we will be in big trouble. So we keep quiet’. When I probed further, she said, ‘Look at Prakashbabu (the local trade union leader) - he is just like other babus in colliery. How can we talk to him as an equal?’ What we have here is a double dose of exclusion, where ethnic or caste identity along with gender creates a position of double minority for *kamins* in the Indian collieries.

**Conclusion**

Mining is an area where women had at once interfaced with men, with overlapping spheres of activities. It is a sector that has geographical ramifications from the local economy and socio-cultural levels of the region and national as well as international levels. Indian collieries made the country part of the large global enterprise, a network created through the British empire that brought the remote, isolated, jungle tracts into the contact of European modernity. As we have seen, women played a major role in this aspect of empire building, and thus, *kamins* in Indian collieries provide a fascinating way to trace these connections conceptually and visibly. Here we see how the male coal miners’ ‘markedness’ as manifest by the masculine conceptualization of his work derives from the fundamental inconsistency of their position and the effects these have upon gender identities. In Indian collieries, coolies have come to occupy the position of the archetypal mineworkers whereas *kamins* have been relegated to the background. However, as we have seen in this paper, the opposite of ‘coolie’, the ‘*kamin*’, does not necessarily imply the wives of miners located in homes. The *kamins* have their special places alongside men, as partners in the production process in the Indian collieries. They

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9 Jhabvala first showed in 1985 how retrenched women workers from cotton mills of Ahmedabad in west India were pushed into lower paying and insecure jobs. Banerjee (1991; 1992) noted the lack of political protection of women workers by unions in the unorganized sector. Baud (1991) demonstrated that in the textile industry in South India, gender segregation is most marked in the mills where regulation and trade union activity is more evident. Fernandes in 1997 showed how the politics of gender, class and culture produces notions about the spheres of work of women and men.
played equally important roles in empire building in the Indian subcontinent, and in quite
different ways than urban women in the metropolitan city of Calcutta educated
themselves to turn into that idealized feminine who is equally at home with outside men
and family members.

The state measures reflect a compartmentalization of the issue of women workers. The
various protective legislations developed for women miners, though probably designed to
improve their working conditions, have acted as instruments to exclude them from the
formal mining sector. The nationalized company has been unwilling to recruit women
because of their special and protected status on the one hand, and on the other hand the
legislation has not included any means for the protection of employment opportunities
and job security. Thus the special biological attributes of women have been at the centre
of concern by the ‘protectors’ rather than against discrimination due to cultural, social
and economic factors (Pathak and Rajan, 1992). As a result, the kamins, women of lower
castes and indigenous ethnic groups that traditionally did mining jobs have been more
affected than white collar workers. The exclusion of women miners brings out how the
real exigencies of power struggles between genders in party politics are downplayed
successfully and an ideology of ‘protection’ dominates women’s active role in natural
resource management. The separation of ‘home’ and the ‘workplace’ becomes complete,
and women become ‘protected’ within the family and the home; 'work' in the mines
becoming a mode of access to the public space, the mines. Mining becomes constructed
as a ‘masculine’ world, where the jobs are gendered and codified as women’s and men’s.
Here marking theory provides us with a suitable theoretical tool to understand the ways
mining jobs become gendered and stratified according to gender divisions. Role and
status are two inseparable concepts that we have noted to operate in this process of role
fixing. Are kamins the opposites of coolies? In this analysis, the gender markedness in
mining arise from two markers, the job being perceived as risky and dirty, thus requiring
‘protection’ for the weaker and fairer sex, and the job itself attributing a male solidarity
among its workers, leading to a strong sense of male bonding and labour militancy. The
manifestations of these markers appeared in the collieries – underground and on the
surface – turning into special and gendered places as well as in time, in the past and in the
present. The markedness of gender roles eventually become set in concrete in popular
conscience.

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