MINING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS:
A NEW CHALLENGE TO HUMAN BEINGS

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ABSTRACT

Mining has emerged as one of the most important activities in the modern world. Mining has transformed many poor countries into the most wealthy countries of the world. But interestingly some of the poorest communities in the world have opposed mining on their lands. For them mining is destructive not only to their land but also to their mental health. Theodore Roszak was probably the first person to point out a relationship between human mind and environment around him. He also pointed out how human psyche was unable to bear destruction to the surroundings. The current paper discusses the relationship between mining and the psychological problems of the human beings.

KEYWORDS: Mining, mental health, ecopsychology, Roszak, Albrecht, Slastalgia.

INTRODUCTION

Mining has emerged as one of the most important economic activities in the modern world. It not only employs a huge work force providing employment to hundreds of thousands of skilled and unskilled workers, but also creates wealth for the nations. The money earned by petrol producing nations is known to everybody. In most of these countries, the people have made fabulous fortunes out of mining, but interesting thing is that the poorest people of the world are opposing mining in their lands. The most recent case has in Orissa where “47% of its population” lives on less than a dollar a day (Kumar, dispossessed). The issue of mining has been in headlines of most of the national newspapers in India. The poor tribals have been fighting to stop mining in their lands:

With sacrificial blood stained rice in their hands tribals on Sunday evening took ritualistic vow at the top of Niyamgiri hill in Kalahandi district to lay down their lives to protect their ‘Niyam Raja’ from destruction by proposed mining for bauxite.

Tribals of the area especially the Dongria, Kutia and JharaniaKondhs worship Niyamgiri hill as a deity and call it ‘Niyam Raja’. It seemed to be a scene lifted from Hollywood blockbuster ‘Avatar’. But for the persons involved in this effort to protect their traditional habitat, environment and source of livelihood movies are still a distant dream. (Das, Niyamgiri).
The issue of mining has been very complex because the mining for metals alters the whole landscape. The mining for oil is not very destructive because it is done by drilling holes into the grounds and the oil is generally pumped out of these wells and minimal damage is done to the ground. But there is another aspect of the mining where standing mountains are turned into abysmal pits and huge pits are dug into the ground which disfigures the landscape. Disfiguring of landscape is only one aspect of mining, it also decimates the local ecology, poisons the rivers and have very adverse effects on the local populations. The current paper studies the impact of mining on the people and environment.

There have been several studies regarding the impact of mining. Most of the studies have pointed out that the impact of mining is multifold. The basic impacts of a mine on local communities include:

- A loss of ability to hunt, fish and gather,
- A loss of freedom of movement,
- Locals being forced to resettle or relocate,
- A fundamental disrespect for traditions (Hilson, 2002, p. 66)

The most visible impact of mining is probably on the rivers because rivers are used by the miners as the dustbins. Whatever is useless is thrown into the rivers and the clear rivers are turned into drains. The waste products which are thrown into rivers are often poisonous which renders the water undrinkable and also poisons the underground water. According to James Lyon water has been called mining’s most common casualty” (“Mining and water pollution”). Mining often leads to addition of heavy metals in the rivers. Mining often leads to exposure of water to the heavy metals like arsenic, copper, cobalt, cadmium, lead, Silver and zinc to the river water and the water becomes hazardous for human consumption. In India there are many examples which show that mining is creating havoc with the water bodies. The impact is described in the poem “Mr. Don’t Scratch My Rolex” written by Aboriginal poet Lisa Bellear:

how us woman feel,
about mining,
we milk our children
our tomorrow
on breasts filled with poisons
comes from that sludge
in the river
‘member how we could walk into
Mmm the clearest sweet

Water. (1998)

The state pollution control Board of Meghalya has blamed coal and limestone mining in Jaintia hills for polluting the Lukhariver (Mining policy). While the ferrying of Iron ore in Goa is taking its toll on Goa’s major rivers:

A research report released recently by the Goa based National Institute of Oceanography reveals iron content in Mandovi (north Goa) and Zuari (South Goa) and blames it on mining operations in the drainage basins of the water bodies as well as spillage from transportations.(“Iron ore Polluting Goa’s Rivers”).

Apart from polluting water, the process of mining renders the land useless for agriculture and creates problems for the local communities which believe that the land in sacred. In fact, the literature all over the world is replete with the instances where the mining has been compared to rape. Mining has often been compared to rape by the Aborigines. Mudrooroo, the noted Aboriginal writer, commented:

They did approach mining operations as if it was a sexual act, hard thrusting without a care for the women beneath without a care for the universe, the land beneath. We’ll fix it up when we are done with her, much like the battered wife syndrome. (Mudrooroo, Mining 570)

Similar is the description in the poem “Time is Running Out ”

The miner rapes

The heart of earth

With his violent spade

For the sake of the greedy trade. (Kath walker 1988)

Without any doubt, mining has severe implications for the environment, but the important point is that the impact is not restricted to the environment, but the biggest toll its takes is on the human mind. The people who live in mining areas start suffering from various psychological problems. The relationship between human mind and environment was first explored by American philosopher Theodre Roszak. He gave the concept of ecological unconscious to explain the relationship:

The core of the mind is the ecological unconscious. For ecopsychology, repression of the ecological conscious is the deepest root of collusive madness in industrial society; open access to the ecological unconscious is the path to sanity (Roszak, 1992, p. 320)

According to Roszak, the people in the modern world are more prone to psychological problems because of the environmental degradation that is taking place in the world. Though environmental degradation includes many factors, mining is one of the biggest among them.
According to Roszak, human unconscious developed with the development of the complex ecosystem on the earth. Due to this when the ecological balance is disturbed by the human beings the consequences are evident on the human mind. In other words Roszak blamed environmental degradation for the psychological problems of the modern world. Roszak sought to develop a new discipline to restore the balance between human psychology and the ecosystem. He named the system as ecopsychology:

Just as it has been the goal of previous therapies to recover the repressed contents of the unconscious, so the goal of ecopsychology is to awaken the inherent sense of environmental reciprocity that lies within the ecological unconscious. Other therapies seek to heal the alienation between person and person, person and family, person and society. Ecopsychology seeks to heal the more fundamental alienation between the person and the natural environment. (Roszak, 1992, p. 320)

In fact there are so many examples available to us which prove that Roszak was right. One of the most important examples available even in modern times is that we often refer to earth as mother earth. Now if the earth is mother to all the human beings then it is moral and ethical duty to save the mother, but what we are forced to do is seeing the mother getting disfigured a few people. It is sure that the children cannot watch mother dying a silent and painful death.

Whatever was said by Roszak about the connection between mental health of the people and environmental degradation was reinforced by the research of Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht who coined the term solastalgia:

The pain or sickness caused by the loss of or inability to derive solace connected to the present state of one’s home environment. Solastalgia exists when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under assault (physical desolation). It can be contrasted to spatial and temporal dislocation and dispossession experienced as nostalgia. Solastalgia is the “live experience of the loss of the value of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the immediate and given. In brief, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one experiences when one is still at home. (Albrecht, Glenn, “Solastalgia: a new Psychoterratic illness”)

According to Albrecht mining forces a person to feel like a stranger in his own home and this is the beginning of problems for the human beings. Trying to prove his point, Albrecht cited the examples of Native Australians and Native Americans the people who are worst affected by the mining activities going around the world. Albrecht acknowledged that the “Australian Aborigines, Navajos and any number of Indigenous peoples have reported this sense of mournful disorientation after being displaced from land” (qtd. in Smith, Daniel B.). He terms the feeling of staying at one home land as “heart’s ease”, but when one is displaced from the homeland, he loses “heart’s ease” and starts suffering from problems like depression:

People have heart’s ease when they’re on their own country. If you force them off that country, if you take them away from their land, they feel the loss of heart’s ease as a kind of vertigo, a disintegration of their whole life (qtd. in Smith, Daniel B.).
The important point about Albrecht’s theory is that it not only discusses the impact of displacement from land, but also disfiguring of land by natural and man-made disasters. It is important to point out here that mining is the worst activities of human beings which disfigures the landscape beyond recognition.

The important point that has been raised in this paper is that mining is very destructive for human beings. The paper does not argue that mining should be entirely stopped or banned. Rather the paper argues that since there is a definite connection between the disintegration of human psyche and mining, so the efforts should be made to save the human beings. The mining should not be done in a reckless manner which transforms the entire landscape; it should be done in a regulated manner which will save the human beings from going mad and will save the landscape from destruction. In fact, the reckless mining has been a result of man’s greed rather than man’s needs. What we need to address is that the earth’s needs should be catered to along with the needs of the human beings. Human beings can survive only and only if the earth remains healthy.

WORKS CITED


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