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Impacts of Mining on Climate Vulnerability: A Case of Jharkhand

Suman Pathak
Indian School of Mines, Dhanbad

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- Institute for Human Development, Ranchi
- Shri Krishna Institute of Public Administration, Ranchi

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Suman Pathak

Jharkhand is richly endowed with minerals like coal, iron ore, mica, copper, uranium, and more. Mining of these resources is the major driver of industrialization in various districts of the state, which not only contribute to state's economic growth but also generates employment. However, this comes with a heavy cost to the climate. Large-scale and often unregulated or illegal mining has had widespread environmental and social consequences.

Mining does not only lead to environmental harm, but it structurally amplifies climate vulnerability by degrading ecological cushions, weakening community resilience, and making the economy more exploitative.

Excavation and overburden dumping during the mining process disturb natural landscapes. This also affects and severely pollutes water bodies from mining waste and silt, affecting rivers, groundwater, and drinking sources. Additionally, the very important aspect is air pollution from blasting, dust, and emissions contributes to various respiratory and health problems. Together, these impacts weaken our ecosystem and threaten the environmental stability of mining-affected regions. In a recent 2024 study of forest iron-ore mining areas in West Singhbhum noted that mining activities have significantly reduced forested areas, despite conservation efforts (Joy et al., 2024). Another case study of severe mining operation from Rajrappa coal mining area of Ramgarh district noted intense disruption to forest biodiversity and ecosystem (Kumar et al., 2024)

Mining for quartz in Jharkhand, specifically in the districts of Dumka, Sahebganj, Ranchi, Palamu, and East Singhbhum gives us a clear picture of a major conflict in how our economy works today. Even though quartz is just a common rock, it is essential for making modern things like construction materials and solar panels. This makes it a perfect example of both the "hopes" (green technology) and the "weaknesses" (sickness and pollution) of modern progress. However, digging it up causes serious damage to the environment and constantly breaks safety rules meant to protect workers. These aren't just random mistakes or accidents by the government; rather they happen because the capitalist structure is designed to prioritize profit in these developing areas, often at the expense of people and nature.

The extraction of quartz and quartzite in India and particularly in Jharkhand's districts such as Dumka, Sahebganj, Ranchi, Palamu, and parts of East Singhbhum offers a striking illustration of the structural tensions inherent to contemporary capitalism. Though geologically inert, these minerals underpin a wide array of industrial processes from construction materials to solar photovoltaic technologies and thus embody both the aspirations and the frailties of modern economic development. Their mining, however, is marked by pronounced environmental degradation and long-standing violations of occupational health norms. These patterns do not stem from isolated administrative lapses; rather, they arise from the prevailing logic of capital accumulation in a peripheral economy (Marx, 1976).

The quartz and quartzite mining sector illustrate how capital, labour, and nature interact in ways that magnify climate risks.

This essay examines the interplay between the forces and relations of production in this sector and argues that the prevailing model of development is fundamentally unsustainable. It traces the dialectical movement between capital's drive to valorise India's silica deposits of which Jharkhand holds some of the richest concentrations in the Chota Nagpur Plateau and the countervailing crises this process generates: the erosion of labour-power and the destabilisation of ecological systems. Any meaningful resolution, the essay contends, requires a transformation of productive relations towards human well-being and ecological balance.

1. Geological Abundance, "Cheap Nature," and the Architecture of Flexible Labour

India's extensive, shallow quartz and quartzite reserves constitute what might be termed an initial "geological advantage," offering capital a low barrier to entry. Jharkhand's quartz belts, stretching from Giridih and Hazaribagh through Ranchi to Gumla are characterised by surface-level deposits requiring minimal stripping, making them exceptionally attractive to small leaseholders and informal operators. Their accessibility reduces the organic composition of capital, enabling extraction with limited mechanisation. In the language of world-ecology, these deposits function as a form of "Cheap Nature", a frontier upon which capital can expand while externalising environmental costs (Moore, 2014).

Open-pit quarries, the predominant mining method, embody this impulse: they maximise material access with little regard for dust dispersion, habitat destruction, or long-term landscape alteration. In Jharkhand, this often occurs adjacent to Adivasi settlements and common lands, where forest cover is already under pressure from coal, stone, and sand extraction.

This natural endowment intersects sharply with the social organisation of labour. Rather than confronting a unified workforce, capital actively constructs a segmented one. A small core of permanent employees is surrounded by a far larger contingent of contract, casual, and seasonal labour often comprising 60 to 80 percent of the workforce (Dutta, 2012). Jharkhand's quartz mining economy is additionally shaped by the presence of migrant workers from neighbouring states Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal alongside Santhal, Ho, Munda, and Oraon workers whose traditional livelihoods have been eroded by land dispossession, shrinking agricultural profitability and forest degradation.

By displacing risk and weakening collective bargaining, the system ensures that the biological and social burdens of production silica exposure, injury, and income precarity are borne by workers themselves (Lahiri-Dutt, 2018). The wage relation becomes implicitly coercive: the threat of unemployment forces workers to accept conditions that undermine their own health.

The resulting pressures manifest in two interconnected forms of crisis. The first is ecological: the "metabolic rift," wherein natural cycles are disrupted by industrial activity. Quartz mining accelerates this rift through topsoil removal, deforestation, hydrological disruption, and airborne silica pollution that permeates surrounding communities and farmland (Harvey, 2015). In western and central Jharkhand, villagers routinely report dust deposition on crops, drying of local streams, and the disappearance of minor forest produce that sustains rural economies.

The second crisis concerns social reproduction. Silicosis, the defining occupational disease of quartz mining, is not an unfortunate anomaly but a foreseeable consequence of exposing workers to respirable crystalline silica without adequate controls (WHO, 2017). The disease has been documented extensively among stone-crusher workers in Pakur and Sahebganj and among tribal miners in Dumka and Latehar, where diagnostic facilities remain sparse and compensation processes fragmented. As feminist and social reproduction theory reminds us, such injuries imperil the wider sphere of social reproduction, as sick workers become dependent on families and communities with minimal institutional support (Fraser, 2016).

The regionwide emergence of silico-tuberculosis syndemics further illustrates the biological footprint of exploitative extraction (Dewan et al, 2016).

2. Social Arbitrage, Nexus, and Misaligned Technology

A further barrier to sustainable development arises from the entrenched system of social arbitrage, in which the vulnerabilities of migrant, contractual, and debt-burdened labour are routinely exploited through a nexus involving mine owners, local political intermediaries, and sections of the administrative machinery (Kumar and Sen, 2021; Pal and Lahiri, 2020). Jharkhand provides a textbook case of small quarry owners, panchayat-level brokers, transport syndicates, and local political actors form a mutually reinforcing ecosystem that governs the allocation of leases, movement of material, and distribution of informal "rent" at district and block levels.

This alignment of interests produces a regulatory environment where non-compliance is tolerated, labour protections are selectively bypassed, and environmental oversight is weakened by design. In such a milieu, irresponsible extraction becomes a competitive advantage rather than a liability. The informal economy around quartz especially in Sahebganj, Pakur, Dumka, and Khunti and others thrives precisely because of these arbitrage opportunities, enabling operators to externalise the ecological and social costs onto Adivasi communities.

The challenge is amplified by the uncritical importation of advanced technologies from developed economies, technologies conceived for regulatory contexts with strong institutional governance (Kumar and Singh, 2020). When deployed in local settings without commensurate safeguards or democratic accountability, these technologies frequently intensify extraction, erode labour rights, and consolidate control in the hands of more powerful actors. Rather than enabling cleaner or safer mining, they risk reinforcing an extractive model that privileges short-term profitability over long-term ecological resilience and social justice.

3. Technological Contradiction: Advances in Knowledge Constrained by Social Relations

The tension between the forces and relations of production is particularly visible in the technological domain. Contemporary industrial hygiene science provides a clear roadmap for dust control: wet drilling, enclosed crushing, real-time monitoring, and appropriate personal protective equipment. These innovations have rendered the elimination of silicosis technically feasible (ILO, 1995; DGMS, 2022).

Yet the social relations governing the sector inhibit their widespread adoption. Small leaseholders, operating with narrow profit margins, frequently perceive engineering controls as an unaffordable expense. More broadly, compelling firms to internalise these costs disrupts a long-standing pattern of externalising environmental and health burdens onto workers and neighbouring communities. Regulatory oversight, constrained by institutional capacity and political influence, rarely provides effective enforcement (CSE, 2020; Ghosh, 2003).

This contradiction yields a paradox: the knowledge required to create safe, low-impact mining already exists, but the prevailing organisation of production prevents its implementation. The technological advances grouped under "Mining 4.0" automation, digital monitoring, and AI, further compound this tension. While such tools hold the potential to improve occupational safety, they can also displace labour without corresponding social protections, exacerbate inequalities between large and small operators, and intensify extraction rates (Patnaik, 2012; Wright, 2010).

4. Concentrated Value, Localised Cost

A further contradiction lies in the spatial organisation of value. Although mining itself is highly fragmented, the downstream processing of quartz—particularly for high-purity industrial applications—has become increasingly concentrated among a small number of firms. In the spirit of classical analyses of monopoly capital, control over advanced processing technologies enables these firms to capture disproportionate profits, while primary extractors remain price-takers (Baran and Sweezy, 1966).

In Jharkhand, this is sharply visible: most quartz from districts like Gumla, Ranchi, and Palamu is exported unprocessed to units in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and southern India or shipped across the Bengal border, leaving mining villages with depleted landscapes while value-generation occurs elsewhere. This creates an "extractivist trap" - ecologically intensive, low-value extraction persists at the periphery, while financial gains are centralised in corporate hubs far removed from the mining districts.

The social and environmental costs,dust exposure, land degradation, water contamination,r emain concentrated among local communities, deepening regional underdevelopment even as national and global markets benefit. This pattern mirrors Jharkhand's larger mining economy, where coal, iron ore, and stone quarrying follow similar trajectories of resource drain and revenue outflow.

5. Conclusion: Towards a New Synthesis

The existing configuration of capital accumulation underpinned by degraded labour and damaged ecosystems contains within it the seeds of contradiction. However, change will not emerge from capital's self-correcting tendencies. Historically, improvements have arisen through the organised struggle of workers and communities. The mobilisation around occupational disease recognition and compensation in mining regions, particularly for silicosis, is emblematic, a collective effort translating lived experience into policy reform and institutional recognition (CHSJ, 2016; Dewan et al 2019).

A genuinely sustainable pathway must therefore transcend the confines of the current model. Such a transformation requires:

- **Socially Directed Technological Innovation**

  Automation, digital monitoring, and advanced engineering controls must be deployed for hazard elimination not labour displacement, under democratic oversight.

- **Reconfiguration of Labour Relations**

  Ending the entrenched divide between permanent and contract workers, instituting rigorous health surveillance, and enforcing strict employer liability would make the prevention of disease an economic necessity.

- **Ecological Restoration and Circular Material Management**

  Rehabilitation must be integral to mining plans, not an afterthought. Treating mining waste as a resource for allied industries can support a circular economy and reduce ecological loss (UNEP, 2021; OECD, 2019).

- **Restructuring of the Value Chain**

  State-supported processing cooperatives and shared facilities could mitigate monopolistic control and ensure that a greater share of value and safer working conditions, remains within mining regions.

Ultimately, the crisis of quartz mining in India is not a technical failure but a structural one. As long as labour and nature are treated as expendable inputs for the pursuit of exchange-value, sustainability will remain a rhetorical aspiration rather than a material reality. Genuine sustainability requires a political project that reorganises production around human need and ecological integrity.

The struggle for clean air in a quartz-mining district is thus inseparable from the struggle for a different mode of production, one in which society consciously regulates its interaction with nature and no longer confronts its own conditions of life as external, dominating forces. Only such a reorientation can plausibly claim the mantle of "sustainable development."

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