

Same and Equal or Different and Equal? Continuing the Debate on Gender and Labour in Indian Collieries

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Between 1900 and 2000, the century significant for its feminist achievements, the percentage of women employed in the Indian collieries fell from around 44 per cent to less than 6 per cent. In addition, during this century, the coal mining industry rose to the position of a national icon in India. This paper investigates the causes behind the drastic fall in the number of women workers in Indian coal mines in India. Women's labour in mines is placed within their rights to work in other modern manufacturing industries, but women's work in the mines arouses arguments based on women's physiological abilities and attributes, invents women as 'special workers' in a special kind of work that then justifies their exclusion. The paper explores four inter-related factors largely responsible for the fall in the number of women as compared to men in Indian coal mines: the laws surrounding women's rights to work, gendered impacts of technology use, the neglect of women workers' needs and interests by the trade unions, and the gender-discriminatory attitudes and instruments of Coal India Limited. In doing so, it explores a grey area in feminist theory—that of a woman's specificity as a worker in her biologically-based attributes and her sameness in demanding gender equity, a complex 'difference versus equality' problematic. This feminist ambiguity is expressed in all areas of work, but most clearly so in women's work in mines, and has had serious implications for coal mining women of India.