

# Preface and acknowledgements

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This book presents experiences and insights gathered by a number of academics and policymakers through years of engagement with the thematic topic of informal, artisanal and small-scale mining, also known as ASM, the unprecedented rush by the global poor for commodities or jobs in extractive operations that have been unleashed by an increasingly resource-hungry world. My personal interest in the phenomenon began with my research into environmental and social changes that took place in mining areas during the mid-1990s in India. Those years roughly marked the beginning of a 'mining boom' in the country as the economy began to adopt more liberal economic policies. My early investigations of the impacts of mining on local environments and communities brought me to examine how—in the face of a degraded local environmental base—the communities living around mining areas survive. Around the coal-mining belt in eastern India had grown one of the world's largest continuously urbanised tracts into which the cities and towns not only sucked in people from all around, but also absorbed the surrounding rural land—the built-up tract expanding and transforming the rural areas. The undulating hills of the area began to be mined for stones and other construction material. Not only did the environment degrade but, with the expansion of mining and urban centres, the local peasantry began to decay as traditional rural farmers moved on to other, non-farm occupations, often working as wage labourers for contractors. These contractors were charged with procuring stones, and thus removed the overburdens, extracted the material for the mining companies, transported them to storage depots, loaded them onto the trucks and hauled them across all the sinews of transport—from the major arterial highways to local village roads, and narrow tracks that wound through the few bits of forests that were still left. This fundamental transformation of the social landscape was accomplished within the span of less than two decades.

This book takes up the much-needed task of investigating and explaining similar transformations—triggered by a number of ill-understood factors—that are sweeping through the mineral-rich tracts of countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia. In particular, the book deals with and puts under the microscope the political–economic processes of unleashing the extractive giants that have also pushed or lured the local communities to join in, leading to an extractivism unfamiliar to the industrialised world and hence cannot be explained by the same models of processes pertaining to that world. The extractivism of the poor creates an untidy and chaotic world that is difficult to explain and accommodate in the discourses of mining: of the triple bottom line, win–win solutions, unionised labour, corporate social responsibility, social licence to operate, sustainability and health and safety. Therefore, to shift the prevalent understanding of such mining as destructive to the environment, to make sense of the array of theoretical, conceptual and practical issues thrown up by it, to place them within the historical context and to relate them to the contemporary political economy of resource extraction is an urgent priority. The contributions in this book deal with a range of such issues pertaining to this little-understood world, attempting to make sense of it in different ways. It is also important to ‘get inside the belly of the beast’ to understand it, and several contributions from renowned scholars and practitioners help us understand a whole range of issues related to this kind of mining. Consequent to the immense variety that exists within informal, artisanal and small-scale mining, one can only expect the diversity of voices, interpretations and explanations that can be detected in these contributions.

Personally, it has been a long journey in understanding the social, economic and political aspects of the transformations of space and territories within which informal, artisanal and small-scale mining takes place. In this journey, I have benefited from having the privilege of knowing colleagues and receiving support from a number of organisations operating at the local, national and global levels. From India, my research took me to Indonesia, where a number of colleagues, including my dearest former PhD student Nina Lestari, gave me company in my early days of visiting remote locations, to Lao PDR, where I was fortunate to know Chansouk Invouanh who exposed me to the fascinating history of Phon Tiu mine, and to Mongolia, where Hishgee Dondov took me deep into the rangelands of the Middle Gobi to observe how the lives of nomadic herders are changing in the face of the onslaught of mining. All three helped me to appreciate the vastly different contexts, allowing

me to expand my vision and deepen my understanding. Besides the three mentioned, I am grateful to a number of individuals at a personal level for sharing their insights, which have enriched my intellectual journey. There are far too many for me to name each one of them individually within this space. I will name only two persons: Dr David Williams, my husband and partner in crime, who walked the rough paths with me, and my younger son, Ovimanyu Dutt, who made the great sacrifice of spending days and nights alone so that his mother could sprint around. I am grateful to both.

Besides individuals, a number of organisations need to be acknowledged. In the early years, the Communities and Small-Scale Mining (CASM) group (now defunct) offered two lots of development grants to establish the ASM Asia-Pacific Learning Network in 2004 and 2005. This allowed me to reach out to ordinary people, to build partnerships with them in a context that was characterised by a lack of knowledge at that time. The network is still alive at [www.asmasiapacific.com](http://www.asmasiapacific.com). In more recent years, in 2013, the Australian Research Council generously provided funding for an action research project, titled ‘Beyond the Resource Curse: Charting a Path to Sustainable Livelihoods for Mineral-Dependent Communities’ (Discovery Project DP130104396). This project examined—jointly with civil society partners based in India—micro-level mineral-based livelihoods, placing them in context of the local history of agrarian transition. As a metal detector manufacturing company came forward to invest in the understanding of informal and artisanal gold-mining, with them as partners and jointly with my colleague Dr Keith Barney, I received funding yet again from the Australian Research Council for a project titled ‘Going for Gold: Safe Livelihoods for Informal Gold Miners in South and Southeast Asia’ (Linkage Project LP130100942). Together, the projects attempted to shift scholarly attention from viewing informal miners only as environment destroyers, to the context of poverty and rural political economy within which the mining communities operate. I thank the Resources, Environment and Development Group in the Crawford School of Public Policy where these projects were based. They culminated in a major international conference in 2015 that was held at The Australian National University, which also provided additional funding. Selected papers from the conference have undergone phases of reviews, revision and copy-editing to form a part of this book. Finally, I thank the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore for offering me a Senior Visiting Fellowship in 2014 to write up parts of the chapters that I co-authored.

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