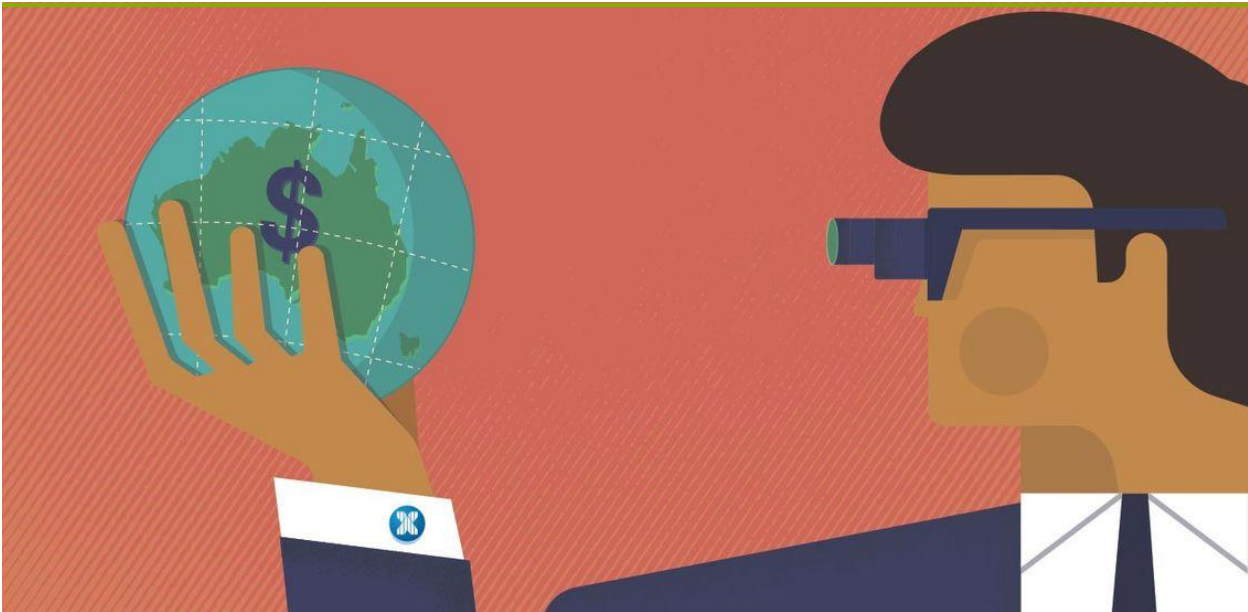


Mining, feminism and CSR

Anthropologist Dolly Kikon has provided an illuminating insight into how the daily lives of people already confronting complex political, social and economic transitions is altered by their proximity to mining and oil and gas production.

John Robertson*



14 November 2019 Kikon, a senior lecturer in anthropology at the University of Melbourne, embedded herself in communities in the north-eastern Indian state of Nagaland as a prelude to writing 'Living with Oil and Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India (University of Washington Press, 2019)'.

Kikon's book delves into the daily lives of ordinary people living in the insurgency-riven Himalayan foothills of Nagaland in east India. Added to deep-seated ethnic divisions, demanding geography, competing levels of government, disputed boundaries, tax gathering insurgents and individual ambitions for improved living standards is an increasingly intrusive state-owned oil company backed by heavy-handed security forces.

The extraordinary complexity of this mosaic is revealed through the recounting of numerous personal stories. Kikon's narratives, and passages of direct speech from interviewees, put a human face to those living beyond the security fences of a violence-prone, resource-rich region.

Kikon describes how people trade for food, what they eat, the structure of their social interactions and personal ambitions. Tendencies to alcohol abuse are explored through examples, as are longstanding social mores driving instances of domestic violence.

Perhaps a flaw in her book is that Kikon did not speak with anyone in the upper echelons of India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) about its conspicuous presence in the region. Nor did she represent the views of the largely anonymous

backers of the growing local coal mining industry.

In any event, Kikon's stories are not an overt attack on the extractive industries capable of rebuttal. People's feelings and the realities of their day-to-day lives are not to be denied. For many, too, mining and oil and gas have brought opportunity and fulfilment.

Kikon's deftly woven ethnography is a welcome counterbalance to more mainstream reporting about the social impact of extractive industries in which corporate, political or economic narratives dominate.

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Nagaland is nearly as far east as one can travel in India. Myanmar is the next stop. All the residents of Bangladesh live closer to New Delhi than do the geographically remote Indian Nagas. Nagaland, carved out of Assam in 1962 to become the 16th Indian state, is home to 16 major tribes with distinct customs, language and

dress, according to the state government. Still, around 90% of its estimated 3 million people are nominally Christian with Baptist churches playing a particularly prominent role in community life.

Kikon's travels and interviews focussed on the border area in the foothills between Assam and Nagaland. Here, Assam is on an oil-rich plain. Oil and agricultural plantations have enriched its inhabitants. The Nagas occupy the hills. They are economically less fortunate and rely on traders from Assam to act as middlemen in the coal trade.

The extractive industries have been caught up in the fight for regional self determination. Naga tribal bodies, supported by insurgent groups, banned exploration on their lands in the 1990s. Small-scale coal mining had occurred in Naga villages but new coal mines and larger-scale operations only became possible after a cease fire in 1997 between the government of India and an armed group fighting for a Naga homeland.

Issues of customary law and environmental pollution have held back exploration and development in the Naga homeland but, according to Kikon, the question of who represents the Naga people has been the largest single stumbling block.

Several participants at the launch of Kikon's book at the Australia India Institute congratulated her for using the book to display her feminist leanings.

In electing to read the book, I did fear that a worthwhile topic might have given way to a tribal rant of a more modern kind. That did not happen. Kikon's nominal supporters did her a disservice by implying she had biased her efforts in a way a non-feminist might have eschewed.

In one telling anecdote, Kikon relates how a woman had taken over management of the family coal company after the death of her husband knowing that she would never be entitled to own the business herself. It would pass to her sons but, meanwhile, she had to marry her husband's brother to retain control of the family mines. This was a valuable insight for anyone trying to understand the societal structure, whether motivated by feminist instincts or not.

Oil was extracted from highly visible spaces around human dwellings, yet the two worlds were disengaged from each other. Kikon vividly depicts high concrete walls, barbed wire barricades and security guards protecting the state-controlled oil company from the communities in which it resides.

Sounding much like John Le Carre describing George Smiley entering East Berlin at the height of the Cold War, Kikon recounts her one official visit to the ONGC. She had to pass through four checkpoints at which identification and bag checks were conducted before she met the company's corporate social responsibility officer. The CSR officer immediately proclaimed, without evident irony, how the company was open about everything it did and would welcome a visit at any time.

Kikon goes on to describe how the language used by the company "allowed the organisation to focus on exploration and to become familiarised with the landscape without engaging with the political reality of

the place or the experiences of the people". This is no abstract point.

A large Australian mining industry conference in the past month was notable for its headline grabbing clashes between police and demonstrators outside. Inside, the programme was overwhelmed by largely self-congratulatory talk of corporate social responsibility. The roles of management structures, reporting frameworks and enlightened government agreements were constantly emphasised to demonstrate the industry's modern face.

Kikon's depiction of the lived experience in eastern India poses an inadequately addressed question for the modern day CSR obsessed industry, namely, how much meaningful engagement occurs beyond the checkpoints.

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