

## CHAPTER 4

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# Extractive Regimes in the Coal Heartlands of India

## Difficult Questions for a Just Energy Transition

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### Introduction

It is now accepted that the future of coal will be decided in the developing world. Even as Western countries transition away from coal, increased production and consumption of coal in India and China have meant that the share of coal in global energy production has remained constant for the past 40 years, despite attempts at decarbonization (Edwards 2019). Nevertheless, the West continues to produce high per capita emissions compared to developing nations (Lazarus and van Asselt 2018). In response, India has asserted its rights to equitable energy access in the international arena (Jaitly 2021). At the same time, questions of intra-country equity complicate India's position, with many arguing that India must pursue low-carbon pathways to protect its poor and vulnerable groups (Bidwai 2012).

After Independence, coal became an enduring symbol of national development in India (Lahiri-Dutt 2014). The coal industry has deep political roots, engaging powerful stakeholders at different levels (Bhattacharjee 2017). In recent years, coal investments have lost their appeal due to unrest over their environmental impacts as well as a dynamic downward trend in the demand for thermal power (Rajshekhkar 2021). Even so, production targets for the state-owned Coal India Limited (CIL) – responsible for over 80 per cent of India's coal production – were increased to 1 billion metric tonnes by 2024. The central government is actively looking to sell more coal

blocks to raise money, despite the lukewarm response to recent coal block auctions. Coal imports have simultaneously increased, engendering a new coastal coal geography controlled by private actors (Oskarsson et al. 2021). That renewables cannot substitute for coal, despite policy support from the state, is accepted. Analysts expect coal-fired generation to continue to grow to meet electricity demand growth even if 350 gigawatt (GW) of renewable energy (RE) capacity is installed by 2030 (Tongia and Gross 2019). New energy forms, including renewables, are, historically speaking, energy 'additions' rather than 'transitions' (Oskarsson et al. 2021). Importantly, this perception is not typical of India alone, as the global energy system remains locked into high coal energy use in the midst of an RE boom (Oskarsson et al. 2021).

Energy transitions worldwide are characterized by incremental change on the part of states and private sectors rather than radical transformation (Newell 2019). In India, too, recent moves to decarbonize through state patronage of RE, that is, solar and wind projects, have reinforced, not disrupted, the logics of 'fossil developmentalism' (Chatterjee 2020, 3). Large-scale solar and wind projects cause displacement and environmental damage and provoke resistance (Stock and Birkenholtz 2019). They generate little local employment and instead make inhabitants' livelihoods more precarious through the dispossession of common lands (Yenneti, Day, and Golubchikov 2016).

A just transition to a low-carbon future would require addressing political and ethical questions and paying attention to the interlinked issues of equity and justice. In India, nearly 400 million people still lack access to electricity, and average urban emissions per capita are 2.5 times higher than in rural areas (Chakravarty and Ramana 2012). Many of these energy-deprived people live in the coal heartlands of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, two of the poorest states in India.

A Gond Adivasi activist, in the Hasdeo Arand reserve, Chhattisgarh, said,

They use our coal to generate electricity and the shame is that we only recently got it two and a half years ago. They say that they cannot give us a railway or telephone line because the forest is too dense, yet there is now a coal train that runs through the forest, all day, every day. (Sra 2020)

These 'frontier' communities powerfully illustrate that the burden of climate debt is borne unequally in the Global South, where many poor and indigenous people are exploited by the carbon economy. There are complex interdependencies between local livelihoods and the coal industry (Lahiri-Dutt 2014; Noy 2020), especially within sectors where unionized workers are a minority (Chandra 2018). These

conditions make it hard to mimic Western experiments with just transitions – for instance, the Polish experience where the coal union was actively involved in effecting the transition (Zinecker et al. 2014).

In recent years, scholars have argued that just transitions must account for the futures of fossil-fuel workers (Newell and Mulvaney 2013). There has been scant research on specific challenges associated with the extractive industry in the Indian coal heartlands, but it is emerging more clearly as an area of concern (Pai, Harrison, and Zerriffi 2020; Bhushan, Banerjee, and Agarawal 2020). To secure coal miners' livelihoods, India needs to significantly scale up its solar capacity in coal mining areas so that they can find employment in the new sector (Pai et al. 2020). This relates to macro-level discussions on the extent to which RE projects could make coal less relevant in the future (Rajshekhar 2020). However, energy transitions are not apolitical matters restricted to 'technical' choices around fuels or energy technologies (Bridge and Gailing 2020; Newell 2019). All energy interventions potentially reconfigure a broad field of social and political power within historically unequal spaces. There remains a deficit of critical research at the sub-national level, which is a massive omission in the case of India, as the bulk of focus on coal mining and potential RE projects unfolds in a few states around the country.

In this chapter, I offer an analytical framework to examine sub-national 'extractive' regimes that shape the discursive, institutional, and political context within which extraction is being organized. Drawing on the cases of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, two of India's principal coal-producing states, I argue that the concept of extractive regimes can identify the drivers of continuing injustices in coal mining today and illuminate the spaces, actors, and networks that are currently agitating for justice therein. These must be brought on board for bottom-up political engagement to steer a just transition for communities at the coal frontiers. This analysis will also shed light on potential enduring injustices that will be replicated in RE projects that are initiated in these spaces, as well as possible opportunities for change. The chapter draws upon critical qualitative research conducted from 2014 to 2017, including more than 100 interviews with key informants and relevant secondary sources, such as academic articles, policy documents, RTI information, and news reports.

### **Conceptual foundations: extractive regimes and the politics of a just transition**

Charting a just transition for the Indian coal heartlands requires systematic engagement with the extractive regime and examining how a move away from coal might unfold. The notion of a 'regime' of power is useful to draw attention to

both formal and informal structures of power, the vast configuration of actors and institutions, and, more generally, societal norms (Kashwan 2017). An 'extractive' regime of power specifically theorizes the discursive, institutional, and political apparatuses around extraction (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020).

In India, mineral resource governance is centralized, resting upon key national laws like the Coal Bearing Areas Act 1957, the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act 1957 (MMDRA), and the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013 (LARRA), and the vital roles of the central ministries of coal and environment and forests. However, following economic liberalization and deregulation in 1991, states began competing among each other for economic investment. Coal, nationalized in 1973, was gradually opened to private sector involvement from 1993. Besides actively soliciting private investment in mining, states put in place effective institutional mechanisms for resettlement and compensation and to deal with local resistance, using coercion if necessary (D'Costa and Chakraborty 2017; Sud 2019). 'Broker states' that balance this duality of purpose (land acquisition via palliation but also crackdown) have memorably been theorized as 'regimes of dispossession' (Levien 2018, 4).

With RE development, a key focus of the policy push is encouraging private investment through tax benefits and capital subsidies (Lakhanpal 2019). The Central Electricity Act 2003 devolved RE policymaking to sub-national actors, and states have since been courting private investors by facilitating land acquisition, evacuating power, and building access roads. The states promoting RE projects aggressively are also those with highly liberalized land laws: Gujarat, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. These are not in the coal heartlands.<sup>1</sup> India also mirrors the International Labour Organization's global prediction that 'green jobs' in the energy sector will be unequally distributed (Zinecker et al. 2014). However, the lack of new RE projects is not the only problem associated with achieving a just transition in the coal heartlands. Emerging research from states where wind and solar projects are situated unequivocally points to new forms of dispossession for poor people, driven by state-promoted large-scale land acquisition (Stock and Birkenholtz 2019).

The switch from fossil fuels to renewable projects needs to be viewed as a continuum that unfolds within an existing extractive regime. If energy transitions are the 'production of novel combinations of energy systems and social relations across space' (Bridge and Gailing 2020, 1038), then it is not just the kind of technology that

<sup>1</sup> Strong Adivasi constituents exert a counter pressure on excessively liberalizing land laws in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. More on their extractive regimes in the section title 'Extractive regimes in the coal heartlands of India: Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh'.

is deployed for energy production, but the type of extractive regime that oversees the entire operation that matters for realizing a just transition. To fully appreciate the political economy required to achieve a just energy transition in India, we need to engage with the historical 'extractive imperative', which provides the ideological basis for states to promote extractive projects (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016). In this chapter, I discuss three critical dimensions that make up an extractive regime: the public, political legitimation of extraction, institutional effectiveness, and the management of resistance.

### **Background: the nested injustices of coal in India**

Coal mining led to the creation of a distinctive class of workers, comprising primarily rural and Adivasi migrants, in the early colonial collieries, situated in Dhanbad (Bihar) and Raniganj (West Bengal). At Independence, the Constitution declared that subsoil minerals were state-owned<sup>2</sup> and the government enacted strong central laws that minimized the rights of local communities (Lahiri-Dutt 2016, 2014). After nationalization, coal mining stretched westwards, into forested territories mainly inhabited by Adivasis. The expansion of mining was accompanied by the uneven development of urban industrial tracts, destruction of local flora, and undermining of the agricultural economy (Oskarsson, Lahiri-Dutt, and Wennström 2019). Progressive laws in favour of Adivasis in coal-rich states like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha have been legislated over the decades, though they are frequently sabotaged by vested interests (Sundar 2007).

The intensity of environmental devastation has worsened with the World Bank-backed shift from traditional underground mining to open-cast mining (Oskarsson, Lahiri-Dutt, and Wennström 2019). A particularly egregious effect of this shift was felt in Jharia, Dhanbad, where the abandoned underground mines were never filled with sand, thus allowing oxygen to enter through the seams to the burning coal below. Fires may occur in coal layers that are exposed to the surface of the earth, and Jharia has experienced coal fires since 1912, but clearly, the shift has only made things worse (Pai 2018). While CIL has not seriously pursued environmental protection and reclamation, state pollution boards have failed to enforce regulations meant to control fly ash disposal, stack emissions, and effluent wastewater treatment (Chandra 2018). Serious detrimental impacts of coal mining, transportation, waste, and combustion include air pollution and long-term damage to the ecosystem (CSE 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The exception is Meghalaya, where, by virtue of its special Sixth Schedule status, coal is owned by the indigenous communities who own the land.

The expansion of CIL led to an employment boom and the subsequent bolstering of trade unions throughout the coal belt. By 1965, almost 255,000 workers (about 60 per cent of the total workforce) were enrolled in unions (Chandra 2018). Powerful unions lobbied for greater spending from the Coal Mine Welfare Fund, a trend that continued after nationalization. In response to labour mobilization, many other benefits were rolled out, from healthcare to housing. Through the 'social multiplier effect', while CIL's formal workforce may have been around 650,000 people at its peak, the actual number of beneficiaries was much larger, as each CIL employee could add five members to their medical card. In some ways, CIL substituted for states in carrying out developmental functions in historically poor and disadvantaged parts of India (Chandra 2018).<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the coal sector has a higher level of value-added tax and wages compared to other sectors (Spencer et al. 2018). However, sub-state data are scarce, not harmonized and, besides, they do not capture the income levels of informal coal workers.

The distribution of CIL benefits was controlled by a few union leaders who were backed by ruling party politicians. Contractors and sardars controlled labour recruitment in a perpetual 'shadow economy', employing informal sector workers at appallingly low wages. Moreover, safety protocols and compensation mechanisms are not followed even among formal CIL workers, and most contract workers' deaths are not even reported by labour contractors (Pai 2018). A notorious coal mafia has evolved that has a stranglehold over trade unions and mine labour (Singh and Harriss-White 2019). Practices of engaging informal labour who toil in extremely poor working conditions abound in private coal companies too (Lahiri-Dutt 2016). Thus, the power of many coal unions is declining.

A large artisanal mining sector also operates in and around these coal mines. Coal-cycle-*wallahs* scavenged coal in heavy sacks on bicycles to nearby market towns for sale (Pai 2018). However precarious and difficult, this is often considered preferable to other available kinds of informal labour. Such small-scale mining engages nearly 400,000 people in India and is regarded as illegal (Lahiri-Dutt 2016). Even though such perilous work is conducted illegally and on the margins, some people (including Adivasis) have been able to benefit from the informal coal economy and, indeed, there is a multi-level political nexus around the lucrative illegal transportation and sale of coal (Singh and Harriss-White 2019). The highly unequal workforce of the coal economy is experiencing ever new inequalities along the lines of class, caste, tribe, and gender (Noy 2020). Further, there has been little

<sup>3</sup> Private companies offer such functions via CSR (corporate social responsibility); more later.

concerted attempt by the state to invest the proceeds of mining back into these communities. MMDRA 2015 provides for district mineral foundations to channel a fraction of royalty payments and auction proceeds to local communities, but these remain marred by ambiguity and underutilization (Chakraborty, Garg, and Singh 2016; Banerjee 2020).

Amidst all this, coal extraction continues, and state-driven land acquisition perpetuates enduring injustice, which is met with changing forms of resistance (Sathe 2016). Levien (2013) suggests that Adivasis in remote mineral-rich forested areas are far less willing to accept compensation than their urban and peri-urban counterparts in big metropolitan centres. However, this does not present the full picture, as other research has shown that compensation is perceived as attractive and is sought after; it even triggers new patterns of differentiation between those whose lands have been directly dispossessed, rendering them eligible for compensation, and those affected by other factors, like loss of access to commons resources, but do not qualify (Kale 2020; Noy 2020).

### **Extractive regimes in the coal heartlands of India: Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh**

In 2000, two of the country's richest coal-producing areas, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, were bifurcated, yielding two new mineral-rich states, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Incoming political elites had a valuable opportunity to govern these new states in alignment with their ideologies and broader interests (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). They vigorously championed extractivist ideas of development and went on to promote mining, which contributed approximately 10 per cent towards each state's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2000–2014. For context, mining accounted for 1.2 per cent of the national GDP in both 2000 and 2010 (Chakraborty, Garg, and Singh 2016).

Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh represent old and new sites for coal mining, respectively. There are differences in the 'coal cultures' of particular CIL subsidiaries; for instance, political bargaining and negotiating are more established in older areas like Jharkhand (Chandra 2018). CIL is deeply intertwined with regional and local state apparatuses, and state governments are responsible for acquiring land for CIL.

In the rest of this section, I discuss the main dimensions of the extractive regimes of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh: their political history and organization, which enable public, political commitment to extraction, and the institutional apparatus of each state, which facilitates extraction (including land acquisition) and effectively manages resistance. Both states have specific laws that relate to the governance of

their extensive Scheduled Areas and the rights of Scheduled Tribes, but these are outside the scope of discussion here (Wahi and Bhatia 2018).

### Political history and organization

Jharkhand was formed following more than half a century of political mobilization by Adivasi social movements, and the nurturing of a clear Adivasi political identity, with the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) emerging as the leading political party. Although the expansion of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) influence on regional politics substantially de-linked statehood from Adivasi identity, it did not prevent the idea of Jharkhand as a homeland for tribal people from enduring both politically and in popular memory (Tillin 2013). This positioning, following from the legacy of statehood, has made it difficult for Jharkhand's political leadership to strike an appropriate public, political discourse about extractive development since 2000.

Even after attaining statehood, Jharkhandi identity has remained closely tied to the 'premise of resistance', articulated through ideological binaries like the tribal versus the non-tribal exploitative 'outsider' (Hebbar 2003). All political parties in the state, whether Adivasi or not, have had to engage publicly with the question of whether the new state serves the interests of Adivasis. However, Adivasis are not politically homogenous and many supported the BJP in the elections of 2014, following the expansion of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-led grassroots mobilization, but as part of a larger clientelist relationship (Kumar 2018).<sup>4</sup> Yet, the BJP's growing presence in Jharkhandi politics has not taken away from the Adivasi social base of Jharkhand's many parties, which resort to frenzy and resistance, especially concerning 'resource grab' issues (Rajalakshmi 2016). The irony is that the centrality of Adivasi issues in Jharkhandi politics has had little impact on the unbroken pursuit of extractive activity since the early 2000s.

As opposition leader, Hemant Soren of the JMM said, in 2015, that the party was not 'against industry', but that people should not be made to feel like they did not own the land and its resources (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020, 856). There has been relatively little 'domestic' participation in private mining in Jharkhand, compared to Chhattisgarh, with most entrants like Jindal and Rungta coming from outside the state. This has provided political ammunition to Jharkhandi Adivasi parties to rally against continued exploitation. Since coming to power in the last assembly elections in 2019, Soren has pledged to constitute a 'displacement commission to return

<sup>4</sup> Clientelism refers to the practice of distribution of benefits in exchange for electoral support.



unused land in possession of private and government agencies to their *raiyyats* (land right holders) as per the 2013 LARRA' (TNN 2020). Soren has also been openly critical of the Modi government's recent decision to auction 41 new coal blocks – many of which lie in Jharkhand – and for disregarding the state's concerns regarding Adivasi welfare and environmental costs (Barik 2020). However, the Supreme Court has accused Jharkhand's leadership of 'doublespeak' stating that they only sought a moratorium of six–nine months on the auctions so that they could secure higher bids following improvements in the global investment climate (Mahapatra 2020). Successive political parties have covertly facilitated land acquisition for private companies. State-sponsored violence, manipulation, and crushing of dissent through force are on the rise (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020; Choudhury 2018).

A comparable long-standing Adivasi-led statehood movement is missing in Chhattisgarh, where the ascendant Other Backward Classes (OBC) politics of the 1990s and political bargaining at the Centre delivered the new state (Berthet 2011). Despite the mobilization around Adivasis' right to *jal–jangle–zameen* (water–forest–land) since colonial times in Bastar (Sundar 1997), there is still only a tenuous link between Adivasi identity and mainstream political discourse in contemporary Chhattisgarh. This is further compounded by the absence of Adivasi political parties, which leaves the upper-caste-dominated Congress and BJP to compete for power. Both parties try to keep the OBC elite in check while also trying to appease various OBC lobbies (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). Moreover, grassroots mobilization and service delivery by RSS-affiliated organizations, like the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, have contributed to the BJP gaining Adivasi support in Chhattisgarh (Thachil 2014).

Following the creation of a non-Adivasi 'Chhattisgarhi middle class,' comprising upper castes like Rajputs and Banias, an increasing share of private capital in mining comes from within the state (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). Significant representation in successive governments, moreover, has ensured that upper-caste people, many of whom are traders and businessmen, now also command industrial capital – for example, through the ownership of power plants (Das Gupta 2019). This alliance between ruling political elites and rich upper castes has resulted in the public legitimization of extraction and state condonement of excesses by mining companies (Das Gupta 2019). A key element of this political discourse around extraction is the prominent silencing of any critical opposition of the ruling regime.

The comparatively left-of-centre Congress party has struggled to distinguish itself from the BJP. A senior Congress leader explained that it was 'unviable' for the party to oppose land acquisition for mining for fear of being labelled 'anti-development' (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). In early 2019, the newly elected Congress government nevertheless took the bold step of returning land acquired

by the previous BJP government for a Tata Steel plant to Adivasis in Bastar (CNBC-TV18 2019). The move was symbolically powerful, but the Congress government in the state reportedly continues to work with the pro-BJP Adani Group in several blocks of the coal-rich Korba district. This is hypocritical given the Congress' criticisms of previous BJP-led governments for facilitating backdoor corporate entry into environmentally sensitive regions. The state government has also permitted Adani enterprises to set up mining operations in the conflict-ridden, Adivasi-dominated Dantewada district in the south of the state (Sharma 2019). These developments strongly indicate that the Congress in Chhattisgarh is not likely to depart substantially from historically anti-tribal models of extractive development.

### **Institutional effectiveness**

Institutional effectiveness is defined here from the perspective of the extractive industry, representing the institutional might of the state in facilitating approvals and acquisitions as well as orchestrating effective compensation policies so that mining projects can take off. It is not a measure of inclusivity though it offers a clearer definition of the rights of those impacted in various ways by mining (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020).

Jharkhand's administrators were candid about the apathetic institutional functioning in their state. Many officials confirmed that during the period of political instability between 2000 and 2013, basic administrative and monitoring procedures were neglected. However, there were relative improvements after the state got its first full-term government in 2014–2019 (see Adhikari and Chhotray 2020 for more details). Jharkhand's early years were adversely affected by inexperienced political leadership and a highly conflict-ridden bureaucracy that carried forward internal squabbles that had prevailed in its parent state, Bihar. The quick turnover of politicians resulted in exceptionally high transfer rates for key bureaucrats, primarily to ensure that pliant bureaucrats oversaw high rent-yielding sectors like industry and mines (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). This was inimical to good administration.

Jharkhand inherited a lackadaisical industrial policy from Bihar, which, in the final years before its bifurcation, suffered an astonishing period of industrial decline under Laloo Prasad Yadav (Kale and Mazaheri 2014). The new state, with its high degree of political fragmentation and administrative paralysis, could not develop any new industrial policies until 2012. Indeed, there were no clear rehabilitation and resettlement policies in Jharkhand until 2015. The state's bureaucracy was grossly understaffed and notorious for its inertia. As multiple field studies continue to demonstrate, this institutional lethargy held no advantage for Adivasis facing land

dispossession; on the contrary, land acquisition and Adivasi dispossession have continued, marked by irregularities, deception, and blatant misuse of pro-tribal land laws (Sundar 2007).

Unlike Jharkhand, which inherited a debilitated industrial sector from undivided Bihar, Chhattisgarh benefitted from the legacy of a stronger public sector undertakings (PSU)-led industrial policy in Madhya Pradesh (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). Despite many challenges, its administrators succeeded in setting up a cohesive and competent team under the leadership of the first chief minister (CM), Ajit Jogi, a former Indian Administrative Service (IAS) official. They speedily divided their state administrative cadres within two years – a process that took double that time in Jharkhand – and were much more meticulous about staffing procedures, which led to fewer instances of understaffing (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). The state's institutional capacity complemented its political enthusiasm for extraction, yielding a cohesive and coherent extractive regime in the state.

Under the long BJP rule from 2003 to 2019, the Chhattisgarh government took several concerted steps to effectively institutionalize the facilitation of extraction, for example, holding high-level meetings of the State Investment Promotion Board (SIPB) and creating a digitized land records database (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). Between 2000 and 2015, Chhattisgarh signed 19 leases for coal, whereas Jharkhand signed 10. Moreover, Chhattisgarh's proactive state government regularly lobbied New Delhi to expedite central clearances, earning much appreciation from private actors who were dissatisfied with the government in Jharkhand (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). Still, Chhattisgarh is not immune to the difficulties associated with land acquisition and has faced problems getting new projects started (Rajshkhar 2012).

### **State management of resistance**

There are three broad areas of difference between the extractive regimes of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh where state management of resistance is concerned. First, violent left-wing extremists or Naxals have resisted extraction in both states since the 1990s. In Jharkhand, such activity is geographically dispersed throughout the state; however, it is concentrated in a few southern districts like Bastar and Dantewada in Chhattisgarh. Both states have cracked down on extremist activity, though Chhattisgarh's notorious Salwa Judum is a testament to the state's superior institutional capacity to respond harshly. The Congress and the BJP both support this highly controversial vigilante army in Chhattisgarh. Jharkhand's own counter-response has been weaker and more diffused in contrast, although, in 2011, Operation Green Hunt led to a worrying increase in human rights violations and arrests of

Maoist 'sympathizers' (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). Many Adivasi politicians and Naxal activists are deeply complicit in the coal trade and receive patronage from political parties, which complicates things further (Kumar 2018; Shah 2006).

Second, Jharkhand has a large, active network of social movement organizations that have been campaigning for Adivasi rights to land and forest resources. The Jharkhand Mines Area Coordination Committee (JMACC), a prominent and well-connected alliance of mining-affected communities, campaigns against irregularities and corruption in extractive development processes, organizes citizen tribunals, and demands compensation. The Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM), a trade union movement from the 1970s, and the Ekta Parishad, a pan-Indian grassroots movement, have anchored civil society mobilization in the state, though both have waned over time. The Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan (CBA) agitates against coal mining, forges solidarity among smaller organizations, and is well connected beyond the state. However, public protests are extremely difficult to organize in Chhattisgarh given the state's systematic silencing of such events (Das Gupta 2019) and broader civil society mobilization is curtailed through state repression. Though arrests of peaceful civil activists take place in both states, data from the South Asia Terrorism Portal affirms that this number is higher in Chhattisgarh (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020). The rise of corporate-owned media further enables the stifling of dissent, especially in Chhattisgarh (Adhikari and Chhotray 2020)

Third, Jharkhand's many anti-dispossession movements align themselves clearly with Adivasi political parties (Kumar 2018). Prominent activists associated with JMACC and the Jharkhand Organization for Human Rights (JOHAR) have collaborated with such parties in resisting mining. A strength of Jharkhand's plural political landscape is that it is not dominated by national parties with a centralized political culture like Chhattisgarh. This has allowed local, elected political representatives to support, join, and even lead acts of resistance. Given that the national extractive imperative shows no signs of slowing down and is acquiring ever harsher overtones, these local acts are becoming increasingly significant.

### **The micro-politics of historical injustices: links with extractive regimes**

Coal companies are formidable political actors, driving many unfair practices within the coal heartlands (Chandra 2018; Lahiri-Dutt 2014). This section presents some vignettes from fieldwork carried out in 2015–2016 in the coal-rich districts of Hazaribagh in Jharkhand and Korba and Raigarh in Chhattisgarh. The focus is on understanding the dynamics around resistance while identifying links with sub-national extractive regimes.

The case of the CIL subsidiary CCL (Central Coalfields Limited) in Hazaribagh is important because it is part of an established coal history. Hazaribagh is situated in the North Karanpura Coalfield, where large-scale open-cast mining has been ongoing since the 1980s and underground mining even earlier. Planning records barely mention the profound social contestation of changing land use to accommodate extraction (Oskarsson, Lahiri-Dutt, and Wennström 2019). Regardless of official documentation, mining plans were calibrated to manage or neutralize resistance. There are no ongoing disputes against CCL in Hazaribagh, but official silence regarding past injustices is concerning.

National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), another leading PSU, has been persuading locals in Hazaribagh to give up their lands since launching operations in 2006. It claimed to use 'village mobilizers' for the purpose but faced staunch resistance. A local ex-Congress politician took up the cause on behalf of the agitating locals and accused senior district administrators and the police of being complicit in supporting malpractice. Leading anti-mining activists negotiated an acceptable rate for land sales via the office of the district collector, although the fact that the land had not been valued properly in the first place made the process harder. Conflict erupted, resulting in tragic police firing. Other planned acquisitions, also by CCL, in other parts of Jharkhand reportedly provoked massive protests as well (Yadav 2013).

Jharkhand's extractive regime must negotiate messy and robust forces of popular resistance. The recent, qualified move by CM Soren in support of the Centre's decision to facilitate commercial coal mining is itself indicative of ideological tightrope walking. Soren asked for a brief moratorium to create a policy balance between 'societal expectations, environmental preservation, and economic growth', and became critical of the Centre when this was not granted (Soren 2020, cited in Alam 2020). However, his actions were widely denounced by the Jharkhand Janadhikar Mahasabha, a state-level coalition of peoples' organizations, which called for mass protests against the government. Presently, the Mahasabha decried the JMM-led government's effective support of the Centre and rejected the claim that any such mining investments would work in the interests of an *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) Jharkhand, or for the welfare of Adivasis, pointing to the realities of land grab.

In Chhattisgarh's Korba district, the CIL subsidiary, South Eastern Coalfields Limited (SECL), is a powerful PSU that projects a professional veneer onto messy and conflictual land acquisition. An SECL official claimed that land acquisition was peaceful, conducted without intermediaries, a means commonly favoured by private companies, but using 'young professional village mobilizers' who talked to people directly and discussed compensation and employment issues. According to an official, 'For approximately 2,000 acres of land, 1,000 jobs were offered ... despite

people being unskilled, we induct them and give them salaries as high as ₹30,000 per month.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, activists in Korba alleged that there remained many problems with land acquisition, compensation rates were arbitrary, and women were excluded from employment. Even as SECL officials emphasized that they worked in decidedly more peaceful and fairer ways than their private-sector counterparts, many junior members of the district administration and activists objected to the SECL's lack of accountability. Several believed that SECL was driven by higher-level political collusions and that it did not always cooperate with district authorities.

In Raigarh district in Chhattisgarh, Jindal Power Limited, a key private actor within the mining sector, has set up a coal-based thermal power plant in Tamnar. It has rapidly gained influence and visibility for filling gaps in critical public infrastructure, from schools to community buildings and hospitals. The police too allegedly receive favours from the company, including the use of company vehicles, as part of a known quid pro quo, earning the town the rather unflattering sobriquet of 'Jindalgarh'. However, Jindal did undergo extremely conflictual land acquisition proceedings initially.

During fieldwork in 2015–2016, activists in Korba and Raigarh described the strong pushback from the Chhattisgarh state apparatus, which was in favour of expediting clearances to allow companies to extract more quickly and without interruption. In Korba, local forest officials were reluctant to refuse forest clearances for fear of reprisals from higher-ups in the government. Referring to the provisions of the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, a senior revenue official bluntly said, 'Ultimately, you have to take the coal – these issues (meaning laws) are just obstacles.'<sup>6</sup> Together with the Forest Rights Act, 2006, PESA is an important instrument in the fight against the environmental impacts of extractive development, but it remains underutilized.

Both Korba and Raigarh are environmentally sensitive. Korba is part of the Hasdeo Arand reserve and one of the largest coal reserves in the country. In 2010, it became the subject of an intense debate between the then environment minister, Jairam Ramesh, who sought to declare the forest a 'no-go' area, and the coal ministry, in addition to the Chhattisgarh government itself; Ramesh lost the fight (*The Hindu* 2011). Adivasi groups have contested the government's 2014 decision to allow commercial mining and auction coal blocks (Choudhury 2018). In June 2020, when three coal blocks in Hasdeo Arand, including two in Korba, were included in the list of 41 coal blocks to be auctioned by the Modi government, there was public outcry,

<sup>5</sup> Field interview, Korba, April 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Field interview, Korba, April 2015.

most of all from local environmental organizations, like the Manthan Adhyayan Kendra and the Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan. The Congress-led government of Chhattisgarh joined the protests against the central government, which Jharkhand spearheaded (Jamwal 2020). The Centre responded by dropping the blocks in Hasdeo Arand but included three new mines in the Raigarh district. This move was also widely criticized, as Raigarh is considered a 'toxic hot spot', reeling from the long-term polluting effects of mining activities in and around Tamnar (Khan 2020).

These examples illustrate that Chhattisgarh has a network of activists soldiering on against coal mining. Fieldwork also revealed some differences in the intensity of resistance against the public SECL versus the private Jindal – the latter was considerably more charged. Where private companies are concerned, the already watered down notion of 'public interest', widely evoked in state-led acquisition processes, takes a further knocking (Levien 2013). Activists interviewed in Raigarh provided vivid accounts of the shooting of a prominent local activist, which even led to unverified allegations of a company-sponsored contract killing. Public-sector companies like SECL faced resistance, too, but it was admittedly much tamer; in Korba, activists mainly took to filing public interest litigation (PIL) and Right to Information (RTI) requests. Moreover, as a company representative put it, these protests 'had not caused any disruption!'<sup>7</sup>

The irony was that according to SECL, Korba, one of three districts in north Chhattisgarh where the Hasdeo Arand forest is situated, and which has seen sustained Adivasi opposition, was one of the 'easiest places in the country in which to acquire land'.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, neither party had a local elected representative who was willing to support any act of resistance; indeed, a lone BJP politician in Korba was marginalized within his party for raising issues of compensation and employment. These dynamics attest to conditions in the broader extractive regime of Chhattisgarh, where a unified pro-extraction political discourse, combined with a relatively cohesive political command over the institutional apparatus, enables forceful state pushback against resistance. In Jharkhand, the extractive regime is marked by a complicated public, political position on mining issues versus Adivasi lands and rights. While its highly inept state machinery has become better at targeting protestors – especially under the BJP's rule from 2014 to 2019 – the extractive regime here still needs to contend with the plural, vibrant forces of Adivasi political resistance. Importantly, as this chapter has discussed, activism in Jharkhand often has the support of Adivasi political parties, a critical variable that is missing in Chhattisgarh.

<sup>7</sup> Field Interview, Korba, April 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Field Interview, Korba, April 2015.

### **Analysis: extractive regimes and implications for a just transition**

The preceding analysis demonstrates that understanding the extractive regimes of these coal-producing states is necessary to grasp the prospects of bargaining and resistance in ongoing and new frontiers of coal mining. In this section, I turn to the implications of extractive regimes for the prospects of a just energy transition.

Coal communities that bear the historical brunt of extraction also risk re-victimization during an energy transition. If coal mines are rendered unprofitable and close down, as is already happening in Ramgarh district in Jharkhand, then there will be direct implications for workers' livelihoods (Bhushan, Banerjee, Agarawal 2020). Macro-analysts are circumspect about the overall labour impacts of the coal transition on the grounds and estimate that employment creation/decline in the coal industry will range from +79,000 to -40,000 by 2030 compared to today, whereas coal-rich states will produce around 45 million new entrants to the labour market by 2030 (Spencer et al. 2018). In other words, we cannot look to the coal sector to accommodate the labour needs of the coal heartlands. However, contrary to the notion that extractive regimes would, therefore, matter less, this chapter argues that they continue to be deeply significant to what lies ahead.

Soren recently said, 'We are mindful that coal will reduce over time, and therefore, we have to plan for a *post-coal* future. As Jharkhand is rich in other natural resources, we are diversifying our economy and promoting tourism, forest, agro-based industries, and the service sectors' (IANS 2020, emphasis mine). Chhattisgarh's state-run power distribution company announced in 2019 that it will not build any more coal-fired power plants; NTPC's 1,600 megawatt (MW) power plant in Raigarh would meet half of the state's needs and be the last such plant in the state (Rathi and Singh 2019). Besides, both states are committed to investing in renewables, especially large-scale solar power plants, as part of their perceived sub-national duty to contribute to ambitious national goals (Mazumdar 2015). In line with this strategy, in 2019, Chhattisgarh allocated almost 400 hectares of land for a solar project in Rajnandgaon district.

Scholars report chilling similarities in the dynamics of land acquisition and dispossession in RE projects and coal mining, although their distinctive modalities merit systematic examination. Solar projects are deemed more suitable for the coal heartlands as compared with wind (Pai et al. 2020). However, solar projects are responsible for the creation of a precariat, given the largely 'jobless growth' of solar projects elsewhere, which offer far fewer prospects for formal employment compared to the CIL during its heyday. The spread of coercive and extra-legal practices such as enclosure, land grab, and divestment of the commons has been noted in 'green'



energy-related land acquisitions across India (Stock and Birkenholtz 2019; Yenneti, Day, and Golubchikov 2016). Moreover, the alliance of state and corporate interests that drives solar and wind projects in India 'downplays the narratives of dispossession, treating people and their livelihoods resources as worthy of sacrifice for the sake of societally beneficial green energy transitions' (Yenneti, Day, and Golubchikov 2016, 13). Poor people, who are most dependent on the commons, will disproportionately bear the cost of RE development, just like in the case of coal mining. The governance of large solar projects in the coal heartlands is still not well understood and, indeed, presents a new area for urgent, critical research.

While both states are courting private investors for RE and facilitate land acquisition, Jharkhand will almost certainly engage more widely with political representatives and activists than Chhattisgarh. There may be greater tolerance of dissent in Jharkhand, just as with coal mining so far. Extractive regimes at the sub-national level will play a massive part in determining the political character of any transition away from coal and its prospects of fairness. Whether such a transition is bottom-up or top-down will follow on from extant regimes. The hallmark of a bottom-up transition is the creation of a political space for broad-based consultations with actors and networks advocating for the rights of victimized groups.

Indeed, to achieve a just transition, there needs to be a broader societal dialogue on labour; indeed, Western countries like Germany and Poland have attempted to do this in their transitions.<sup>9</sup> As not all coal workers in India are unionized, or even informally organized, engaging with civil society networks – like the JMACC in Jharkhand and the CBA in Chhattisgarh, among many others – becomes essential. The networks' historical sensitivity to and perspectives on changing dynamics in local resource dependence and livelihoods make them invaluable partners in steering the transition. While it is hard to imagine the successful formation of such partnerships in the upper-caste-dominated state-corporate alliance in Chhattisgarh, there is still hope for progressive spaces and opportunity in Jharkhand.

But there is a need for caution. Jharkhand's extractive regime is notorious for bureaucratic apathy and proclivity for fragmentation and rent-seeking, which have historically impeded the formulation of coherent policies around resettlement and compensation. These are likely to remain problems. Another important possibility is that neither state, despite significant differences in their extractive regimes, will effectively challenge corporate practices, either public or private. The fieldwork vignettes presented earlier confirm that coal companies exercise considerable

<sup>9</sup> A spokesperson for the European Trade Union Confederation made this point at a webinar discussing the 'Just transition in India' on 9 December 2020.

political sway, either through collusion with the local state, or even against its wishes, when higher-level political support exists. These dynamics are unlikely to change with RE projects; somewhat predictably, given the 'big capital' nature of investments, many of the same private actors leading the privatization of coal in 'new geographies' are also heavily invested in wind and solar projects (Oskarsson et al. 2021). Recent research also suggests that future CIL reconfigurations, driven by the anticipated decline in coal consumption by thermal power plants, will involve new forms of greenfield development, potential land acquisition, and public-private partnerships with domestic and foreign actors (Rajshekhkar 2021).

There are also important transformations underway, in terms of both pacification and protests across India, and these will shape the prospects of just transitions in both extractive regimes. With privatization, decreased labour intensity, and greater labour informalization, both coal and RE projects will need land and not labour, requiring a reconfiguring of relationships with local communities. Kale (2020, 1213) argues that private companies are increasingly relying on corporate social responsibility (CSR) to manage, discipline, and pacify local communities. Protest movements also reflect Adivasis' increased discontent with compensation and jobs and, indeed, 'compensatory jobs for dispossession' have become a source of stratification within Adivasi communities (Noy 2020, 388). There are, however, worrying signs that NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and protest movements that limit themselves to demanding better land prices or settlement packages are the ones that are likely to survive the might of a repressive extractive regime (Das Gupta [2019] reports on this in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, and there are no doubt others). One of the greatest issues associated with a just transition is whether there will be any space to question the highly inequitable modes of capitalist expansion that are reconfiguring the frontiers of extraction.

## Conclusion

This chapter addresses difficult questions concerning a just transition when viewed from the vantage point of the coal heartlands. Communities at the coal frontiers have borne the nested injustices of coal mining and energy poverty and now face an uncertain future given the overall future of coal in India. The chapter demonstrates that current strategies for facilitating a just transition from coal, like retraining workers or filling gaps in employment through RE development, are extremely limited. Energy transitions involve the reconfiguration of social practices and political power. By drawing attention to extractive regimes, which clearly drive injustices and limit prospects for fairness in coal-mining areas, and by arguing that

the switch to RE projects needs to be viewed as a continuum that unfolds within the same extractive regimes, this chapter makes a potentially novel contribution to the growing critical scholarship on just transitions. Looking ahead, given the increased privatization of extractive industries, the role of sub-national states is only set to grow in importance. There will be ever new temptations to attract investments, both domestic and foreign, and further imperatives for oppression. While both extractive regimes in the coal heartlands may be increasingly intolerant of resistance, with some important differences between them, just transition advocates must demand bottom-up political engagement with the multiple actors and networks that agitate for justice in coal mining today. Indeed, this may be the only hope in resisting novel frontiers of injustice among historically disadvantaged lands and their peoples.

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