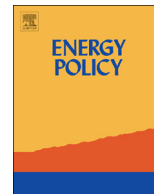




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The diverse worlds of coal in India: Energising the nation, energising livelihoods

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Argues that there are four or even five, overlapping, coal economies in India.
- These economies arise from regulatory framework that neglects livelihoods of the poor.
- Uses the diverse economy framework to explain how these different worlds function.
- Estimates formal, informal non-legal and informal illegal coal production and numbers.
- Numbers dependent on these worlds encourage rethinking of coal governance.

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ABSTRACT

Coal dominates energy production of modern India, shaping the economic and political milieu of the country and dictating its energy future. But invisible to the state's view of coal running the nation, are roles played by this commodity in the livelihoods of millions of poor who live on the coal tracts of the country. In this paper, I argue that there are four coal economies — with yet another one lurking within or following behind as a shadow — in India. Each of these economies has different meanings of coal to those who are involved in the economy, producing the 'diverse worlds' of coal. To substantiate my argument, I critically analyse official and field-based primary data within a 'diverse economies framework' to present the intricate interlinkages among these worlds. I show that the multiple coal worlds are neither tiered in a hierarchical manner, nor 'parallel' in the sense of dualism implied in a simplified formal-informal dichotomy. Rather, these worlds of coal have different actors, and their domains are ruled by different norms and values about the qualities of coal as a material commodity; yet they overlap and intersect with each other through their complex labour regimes.

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1. Introducing coal, the nation-building material of India

In India, coal is much more than just a fossil fuel, a commodity. In *The Coal Nation* (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014a), I had argued that coal is seen as key to the country's sovereignty as a nation-state, is equivalent to modernity and is crucial to considering an energy secure future for India. It raises the question: is the meaning of

coal same for the nation and the people, and what shapes these meanings? If the meanings of coal as a material commodity are not the same, then would it be possible to imagine more than one economy of coal in India? In this paper I argue that there are multiple coal economies that neither comprise separate 'tiers' nor are 'parallel' to each other. These coal economies are produced (and shaped) by the regulatory frameworks, and are intricately interlinked with local and national politics of resources and identities of overlapping domains, each drawing upon their different notions of the meanings, morality and material values of coal, and defining these meanings and values through logic that is unique to them.

To help understand these multiple economies of coal in India, I argue that coal as a mineral resource is not only a material *thing* but is co-produced by its utilitarian values of meeting the perceived needs of the Indian society at given points in time. A part of this utilitarian value is embodied in the regulatory framework

Abbreviations: BCCL, Bharat Coking Coal Limited; CCL, Central Coalfields Limited; CIL, Coal India Limited; CBAA, Coal Bearing Areas Act; CMAL, The Coal Mines Authority Limited; CMPDIL, Central Mine Planning and Design Institute Limited; ECL, Eastern Coalfields Limited; LAA, Land Acquisition Act; MCDR, Mineral Conservation and Development Rules; MCR, Mineral Concession Rules; MMDR, Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act 1957 (initially known as MMRD); MoC, Ministry of Coal; PSU, Public Sector Unit; SC, Scheduled Caste; SCCL, Singareni Collieries Company Limited; ST, Scheduled Tribe

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around coal; the plethora of laws around coal protects the legal eminence of the material resource. For example, the *Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act 1957* (MMDR) classifies coal and lignite, along with mineral oils, iron ore, copper, zinc and the atomic minerals, are 'major minerals' listed in Schedule A, which is reserved exclusively for the public sector.¹ Through the legislation, the material commodity assumes wider social, cultural and political meanings to associate itself with economic development, nationalism and nation-building, allowing the extraction of it by the State to represent a moral endeavour. However, these meanings associated with nation-building drive the state to attribute an iconic status to coal in India. Legal provisions such as the *Coal Bearing Areas (Acquisition and Development) Act 1957* (CBAA) gives coal mining priority over all other uses of land as it takes precedence over all other legislative measures in matters of mining coal. The CBAA was passed to:

"establish greater public control over the coal mining industry and its development, [and] provide for the acquisition by the state of unworked land containing coal deposits or of rights in or over such land."²

By invoking CBAA, the State can overrule tribal or indigenous communities' (Scheduled Tribes as they are known officially, or the *adivasis*) ownership of land which is non-transferable or inalienable. In coal mining, the CBAA and the Land Acquisition Act 1894 (LAA) together give the state the ultimate power of usurping any property belonging to any citizen for the extraction of coal. Since liberalisation, these laws have been utilised by private entrepreneurs to expand coal mining for thermal power production. The other law specific to coal: include the *Coal Mines (Nationalisation) Act 1973*. Again, this 1973 Act reinforces the spirit of the MMDR because, by nationalising the mines, it has firmly consigned coal to the purview of the public sector. The Act categorically states:

"no person, other than the central government or a government company or a corporation owned, managed or controlled by the central government shall carry on coal mining operation in India, in any form".³

Through these laws, coal and the nation become intimately associated, and assume the same meaning, subsuming the meanings of people, land and forests, allowing the State adopts the high moral position. The legislation meant to protect the interests of poor indigenous communities and the environment assume a less important position to this resource nationalism, implying that the

need for coal for nation-building is superior to the needs for the citizenry to claim rights over the land. Interestingly, the high moral position of the State on coal allows other actors to adopt similar positions about their rights to extract coal according to their own moral logic, creating serious confusion over who (or what acts) is right and what is wrong.

In presenting coal as a 'more than material commodity', my argument draws upon the ongoing debates in human geography, enlivened in particular by Ingold, 2007; Castree, 1995; Richardson and Weszkalnys, (2014) and their views of things and commodities as co-constituted by nature and humans. Like other material things, coal traverses complex social and political spaces in its journey from being a material thing to being a resource, and then turns into a commodity; one can say that the material is created and re-created by those who use it in different ways. In the process, coal acquires meaning and assumes utility through its interactions with human society. To explain these diverse worlds of coal, I use here the framework proposed by Gibson-Graham, (2006, p. 71) which argues that an economy can be seen as being organised by transactions, labour and enterprise, each of which has alternative components to those generally subject to mainstream analyses that focus purely on formal market transactions, paid labour (waged and salaried) and capitalist enterprise. In particular, I explore what she describes as 'novel economic "positivities"' in articulating the politics of energy scarcity and crisis, following her, where she observes (2006: xxxiv):

'Any contemporary economic politics confronts an existing object: an economy produced, through particular modes of representation and calculation, as a bounded sphere whose internal mechanisms and exchanges separate it from other social processes. This economy is not simply an ideological concept susceptible to intellectual debunking, but a materialization that participates in organising the practices and processes that surround it, while at the same time being formatted and maintained by them.'

Therefore, unless we fracture and dislocate India's coal economy, it remains an impossible task to recognise the diverse economies that remain hidden within it. In this paper, I will not only reveal four or five different coal production regimes and their sizes, but also touch upon the different 'rules' – the organising practices and processes – of these economies. The use of the analytical framework is justified by coal's deep and extensive influence in India, and by the extent and nature of these economies. The influence is clear from the fact that India is host to a separate Ministry for coal, probably the only one in the contemporary era, and unparalleled in human history except in industrial revolution Britain. With a dedicated Ministry of Coal, coal obviously occupies pride of place in contemporary India, shaping the nation's energy future and influencing its economic and political milieu. The material acquires meaning and assumes utility through its interactions with Indian society, and the haze of coal smoke writes the capital-labour and capital-nature relations as they unfold in India. Within this context, it is possible to consider coal as something produced as much by the human society as by nature.

What constitutes the multiple coal economies of India? I argue that the state-owned enterprise, Coal India Limited represents the 'national coal' economy; the private entrepreneur-owned collieries producing coal that is captive to power plants represent 'neo-liberal coal' economy; the non-legal small-scale mines in India's northeast produce 'statecraft coal'; and last but not the least, the innumerable poor, spread throughout India's coal-bearing tracts illegally produce 'subsistence coal'. Each of these economies has different labour regimes, and varying degrees of formal recognition that give rise to confusion over they are really four or five (or

¹ Originally, it was the Mines and Minerals (Regulation and Development Act 1957 (MMRD), but the Act was revised on 20 December 1999, presumably to attribute somewhat greater prominence to development than to regulation. The MMDR classifies all minerals into two categories – major and minor – according to their strategic and military importance. Coal and lignite, along with mineral oils, iron ore, copper, zinc and the atomic minerals, are major minerals listed in Schedule A, which is reserved exclusively for the public sector. See <http://mines.gov.in/policy/printmrdnew.html> accessed on 17 December 2012. Important supplementary rules are the Mineral Concession Rules 1960 (MCR) and the Mineral Conservation and Development Rules 1988 (MCDR). The MCR outline the procedures and conditions for obtaining a Prospecting Licence or Mining Lease, whereas the MCDR prescribe guidelines for environmentally responsible requirements. The MMDR, stipulates prior approval of the Government of India before the grant or renewal of mineral concessions for minerals specified in Schedule 1 of the Act. Presently, 23 minerals are included in Schedule 1; of these 11 are atomic minerals, coal and lignite are fossil fuels and the remaining ten are metallic ores and industrial commodities. Schedule B lists minor minerals, which the private sector is permitted to mine along with the public sector.

² The full text of CBAA is downloadable from <http://www.coal.nic.in/cba-act.pdf> (viewed on 17 March 2013).

³ See the full Act in see <http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/72652/> (accessed on 17 January 2013).

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