

Black Diamond

by Sarah Benabou

Playing with shade and light, *The Coal Nation* explores the cultural politics of large and small-scale coal mining in India. Above all, the book highlights the dark side of coal, produced in the most marginalized areas of the country with a strong concentration of tribal communities and a complex history of informal coal mining.

Reviewed: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (ed.), *The Coal Nation: Histories, Ecologies and Politics of Coal in India*, Surrey, Ashgate, 2014, 318 pp.

Connecting daily Kolkata to Dhanbad, « the coal capital of India », the *Black Diamond Express* train deserves its name. It epitomizes the value given to this fossil fuel in a country that seeks to become rapidly a superpower. India may not have much oil or gas, but it possesses important coal deposits, primarily found in the central eastern states of Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, and Chhattisgarh. Coal is a cheap fossil fuel that meets most of India's energy requirements : it accounts for 44% of the primary energy mix, compared with under a third globally.¹ Mostly used to fire thermal power plants that produce electricity,² coal is crucial for India's energy and economic future. An estimated 240 million people, nearly 1 out of 5 Indians, do not have access to electricity. The noise of diesel backup generators all around the country is a reminder that power cuts are almost a daily occurrence and the rationing of power supply sometimes a necessity. Even though India bets big on renewable energy,³ the country is not

¹ International Energy Agency. 2015. *India Energy Outlook*. OECD/IEA: Paris.

http://www.worldenergyoutlook.org/media/weowebiste/2015/IndiaEnergyOutlook_WEO2015.pdf (consulted 31 mai 2016)

² In India, coal accounts for more than 70 % of the total electricity generation (Ibid.). Besides power generation, coal is also used for the production of steel and cement.

³ At COP21, the Indian government committed to cut the emission intensity of its economy (a ratio of CO₂ emissions per unit of GDP) by up to 35 % by 2030. If power generation continues to be dominated by coal, the government pledged to source 40 % of its electricity from renewables, especially from solar power, by 2030.

ready yet to sacrifice its coal consumption, which is expected to double by 2035 while India is already the third world's largest coal consumer.

The book edited by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, *The Coal Nation*, explores the cultural politics of India's coal dependency. Coal — and there lies the main thesis of the book — is much more than a mineral resource used to produce electricity ; it is a key engine of the building and prosperity of the nation. *The Coal Nation* is thus in line with other studies in social sciences that focus, to borrow Arjun Appadurai's expression, on the « social life of things » and notably on raw materials such as sugar that have contributed to shape modern societies.⁴ Coal mining belongs to those modern industries that have been central in colonial India, but unlike tea or jute, it has remained an icon of national pride even after Independence. Since the beginning of coal mining in the 19th century, the importance of coal has continued to grow, both in the national imaginary, as the iconography of the “black diamond” exemplifies, and in India's economy. This “coal nationalism” in India, akin to the one prevailing during the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain⁵, shows how the nation has built its ambitions on this commodity.

A brief history of coal mining in India

The representation of India as a « coal nation » is a heritage of the Raj, a contemporary by-product of colonial history. It is through coal mining, argues K. Lahiri-Dutt in her excellent introduction, that India has incorporated a number of modern values introduced by colonialism ; most notably the idea that coal is the driving force of a modern industrial economy — and of paramount importance for the sovereignty of the nation.

Up until the arrival of British colonialism, the use of coal was known but not widespread, most of the energetic needs being met by fuelwood, biomass and charcoal. « Discovered » by the East India Company in 1765, it is only one century later, with the introduction of railways, that coal started to be intensively mined. As opening a mine required low levels of technology and capital investment, notes K. Lahiri-Dutt, *zamindar* (local landowners) played an important role early on. It is also through coal mining that some tribal and oppressed caste communities began their transformation into a working class, exchanging their ploughs for picks.

After Independence in 1947, coal remained center stage in Nehru's India as a raw material and a source of energy. The growing industrial power that was India needed to produce its own steel and iron. In the 1960s, coal entered the domestic sector : electricity and coal-fired cooking ovens gradually made their way in middle-class urban households. But above all, it is the appalling living and working conditions of coal miners that left a mark on this period. In

⁴ See for instance the ground-breaking work of Sydney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, New York, Viking Penguin, 1985.

⁵ The book's title is an explicit reference to W.S. Jevons', *The Coal Question* (1865), which explores the implications of Britain's reliance on coal.

many collieries, feudal labour and production relations were still very much alive. Trade unions mobilized miners up until the mid 1960s to demand from local landlords better and regular wages, increased safety and more secure jobs. Some members of the Indian Parliament, particularly from the Communist Party of India, spoke in favour of a nationalisation of the coal mining industry. For the state, bringing coal mining under public ownership also meant securing export markets by establishing greater control over the industry.

Through debates in the Parliament, coal was raised to the rank of national treasure. The misery of the mineworkers, remembered after each and every tragedy, was seized on as an opportunity to praise not only individual sacrifice, but also the glory of the nation. Nationalisation of coal mines was phased in between 1971 and 1973, and led to the establishment in September 1975 of *Coal India Limited* (CIL), juggernaut of India's coal mining industry. Now the largest coal producer company in the world, CIL holds a quasi-monopoly on the sector, contributing to roughly 85 % of coal production of the country.

In 1993, with the liberalisation of its economy, India initiated a partial opening up of the coal industry to the private sector. Mining leases are granted to private firms, owned in most cases by Indian entrepreneurs, in order to mine coal for « captive use » only, i.e. either for power or steel production. In 2012, the « *Coalgate* » scam hit the headlines. Huge illicit financial gains were reaped by private companies, benefitting from a privileged access to high-level political figures and the lack of transparent procedures related to the allocation of coal blocks. This case in point of crony capitalism drew media attention to the social and environmental costs of coal mining. But for K. Lahiri-Dutt, the question remains whether this political scandal was able to expose the destructive nature of the coal nationalism of the Indian state.

The coal economy, at the crossroads of law and justice

Ever since colonial times, the coal bearing tracts of India and their urban belts are used as resource hinterland designed to serve the metropolitan demands for energy, argues K. Lahiri-Dutt (p. 10). She however refuses to invoke the « resource curse » thesis, that tends to reduce the complexity of observed phenomenon to a single factor — here, the presence of coal. The contributions of the book rather engage with the messy situations of these enclaves and their implications for their poorest inhabitants, who do not receive any social or economic benefits from the extraction of the black diamonds beneath their feet.

The ever growing gap between the production of and the demand for coal has led the country to revise its mining policy to attract private investment and increase the production of electricity. This acceleration does not prevent the permanence of some features that plague the

coal economy. With a fatal accident every three days in 2016,⁶ safety concerns remain for instance just as topical as ever. In these conditions, to reiterate a famous question posed by the sociologist Michael Burawoy, why do miners routinely consent to their own exploitation? Safety, as D.K. Nite argues, is not solely a technical question. It is linked to the evolution of relations between capital and labour, and daily negotiated within an industrial culture dominated by productivist imperatives but also by religious beliefs. In the 1980s, 800,000 people worked in underground mines. With economic liberalisation, purely financial cost-benefit analysis has now become the justification to close these supposedly unprofitable mines and to carry massive layoffs. The emphasis is notably put on open cast mining, a surface mining technique that requires massive amount of land.

An informed reader will not be surprised by the social consequences of the ever growing land acquisition for coal mining and processing.⁷ Just as with other « development projects » that have been more thoroughly studied in India, such as dams or national parks, the coal industry involves large-scale displacements of people (7 million for coal mining only), to whom it usually provides meager compensation for lost assets and few economic opportunities to ensure that living standards are not diminished. One of the main issues is the type of land acquired for coal mining. A prevailing characteristic is the dependence on common « waste lands », that is, land (forests, wetlands, etc.) usually owned by the state but which plays a significant role in the local economy. The rights of forest-dwelling communities to these lands, denied to them as a result of the continuance of colonial forest laws in India, even if the situation is slowly improving,⁸ means that displaced people are often not compensated for their loss. Coal-rich enclaves also suffer from the ecological and sanitary consequences of mining: ugly scars on once forested landscapes, mine subsidence, overuse of groundwater resources, air and water pollution, etc. Coal mining, insists K. Lahiri-Dutt, has further marginalized the poor, « treating them as the detritus of mining development » (p. 29).

One of the main interests of the book is the attention given to the parallel economy of coal that has developed amid the rubble. Millions of people are involved in small-scale mining activities, from the production to the distribution of coal. Men, women, and many children, so-called « coal scavengers » who risk their lives amidst toxic fumes and in the narrow galleries to sell the precious fuel on the black market. What is presented by the media as an illegal activity is considered by those involved as their fundamental right to a precarious survival. Moving away from legalistic approaches, K. Lahiri-Dutt pleads the acknowledgement of these informal mining activities that have a long and complex history. She asks, *in fine*, whether the current legal regime governing coal mining is robust enough to protect the interests of the disadvantaged citizens.

⁶ <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/after-jharkhand-toll-2016-one-of-deadliest-years-for-mine-workers-4456477/>

⁷ The book however does not address the issue of social movements and armed struggles (Maoist insurrections in the « red corridor ») linked to coal mining.

⁸ A key piece of forest legislation, passed in 2006, now acknowledges the right of forest-dwelling communities to land and other resources, but its implementation is fraught with problems.

Through dense descriptions, it is the Sophoclesian tandem of law and justice that is here at stake. Coal nationalism in India rests on a politico-legal arsenal which mirrors the primacy given to this resource. India is the only country that can boast a separate ministry for coal. In the name of the public interest, the piece of legislation that gives the government the right to acquire land for coal mining takes precedence over all other legal or constitutional provisions meant to protect the interests of the poor and the environment. The figure of what the anthropologist Shalini Randeria has coined the « cunning state » shines through the many contributions that delve into the formal and informal strategies used by the state and private firms to lay their hands on the coal deposits.

The situation becomes yet more complex when the book reminds us that coal mining in India is not limited to public sector enterprises and private companies involved in captive coal mining. Four North-eastern states are considered as tribal autonomous regions under the Constitution: here, the residents own the minerals that lie under their land. In a captivating contribution, D. Das explores the case of coal mining in Meghalaya, where a coal boom began in the late 1970s with considerable social and environmental implications. This state is home to thousands of unregulated hand-dug « rat-hole » mines, where coal is extracted by migrant workers from Bangladesh and Nepal, on behalf of a local tribal elite. D. Das argues that this situation is embedded in the history of patronage that was legitimised by the colonial and post-colonial state, which translates nowadays into an increasing privatisation of community land and its concentration in few hands.

Beyond the coal « curse »

Given India's growing demand for energy, coal is here to stay, at least for the decades to come. A question traverses the book: can this activity stop being developed at the expense of the poorest ? The eventual divestment of the nationalised coal mining industry is clearly on the horizon, leaving unanswered the issue of the future of the thousands of people sustaining a living from illegal coal mining. K. Lahiri-Dutt straightaway dismisses what she considers as impractical solutions: on the one hand, a moratorium on coal mining, and on the other, the full opening up of the coal sector to private investment. The neoliberal approach favouring a self-regulation via corporate social responsibility is considered irrelevant given the structure of coal entrepreneurship in India: besides large public enterprises that at best dispense philanthropic paternalism, the reality of the market is a multitude of competing small coal mining leases.

K. Lahiri-Dutt rather insists on the urgency of completing land reform and revising old laws that are at odds with some of the constitutional protections provided to the weaker groups of society like scheduled tribes and castes. On a more radical note, K. Lahiri-Dutt proposes a

new paradigm, « mineral ownership for people » (p. 176), that she however develops from the predictable angle of a call for more « participation » and for the « co-management » of mineral resources.⁹ As indicated in D. Das's chapter on Meghalaya, which insists on the development of a « tribal » microcapitalism as cruel as the one prevailing in the colonial past, the devolution of power at the local level as well as « participatory » approaches face the same problems of manipulation and cunning as those observed at higher scales. The reader will thus find a useful complement in other scholarly works which approach more ethnographically the complexity and heterogeneity of subaltern groups, for instance in Gérard Heuzé's volume. Against the hegemonic argument of modernization, *The Coal Nation* nonetheless offers a precious counter-narrative.

Going further:

- Appadurai, Arjun, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Londres, Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Burawoy, Michael, *Manufacturing Consent : Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Heuzé, Gérard, *Ouvriers d'un autre monde : L'exemple des Travailleurs de la Mine dans l'Inde Contemporaine*, Paris, Éditions de la MSH, 1989.
- Mintz, Sydney W., *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, New York, Viking Penguin, 1985.
- Randeria, Shalini, « Cunning States and Unaccountable International Institutions: Legal Plurality, Social Movements and Rights of Local Communities to Common Property Resources », *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 44, n°1, 2003, p. 27-60.
- Bollywood movie *Kaala Patthar* (1979), by Yash Chopra, inspired by a true mining tragedy.

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⁹ This type of institutional arrangement, such as « joint forest management », has shown its limits in India.