HIDING NEOLIBERAL COAL BEHIND THE INDIAN POOR

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The opening up of extensive coal reserves in Central Queensland's Galilee Basin for mining and export has been strongly criticised for environmental and social reasons that will be felt for generations to come. If the proposed mines go ahead, it can lead to a blowout of Australia's carbon emissions, deplete groundwater, destroy native vegetation and endangered species, affect the traditional rights of the Wangan and Jagalingou people, and physically harm the Great Barrier Reef and its associated coastal wetlands through port expansion and increased coal traffic (Environmental Law Australia 2016). Environmental and social costs aside, financial assessments have cautioned that new Australian mines risk becoming stranded assets due to a slump in coal prices, increasing affordability of solar technology, and international momentum to reduce greenhouse emissions (Buckley and Sanzillo 2013; Dennis 2015).

Of the six Galilee Basin coal mines in an advanced stage of development, the largest two, the Carmichael and the Alpha, are owned by Indian energy corporations Adani Enterprises and GVK (the Alpha coal mine is owned in partnership with Hancock, Australia) (Rosewarne 2016). The Carmichael coal mine, which would become Australia's largest, has become the strategic and symbolic focus of a multi-pronged resistance comprising scientists and conservation groups (Elliott 2016), grassroots networks of farmers and environmentalists (Lock the Gate 2014), transnational networks advocating divestment from coal projects (350.org Australia 2015) and traditional owners opposed to coal mining on their traditional lands (Australian Brosadcasting Corporation 2015).

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At the core of Indian industrialist Gautam Adani's $16.5 billion Australian venture lies a proposal to dig six open cut and five underground mines spanning 28,000 hectares, roughly seven times the size of Sydney Harbour. A new railway line will be built to connect these coal pits to the coast (Queensland Government 2016) as well as a new coal terminal at Abbot Point port (Queensland Government 2015) to ship Adani's coal to Gujarat in India. The mine is expected to yield coal for ninety years and the company estimates it will ship 60 million tonnes of coal per year (Rolfe 2014). Most of the mined coal is intended for the Adani Enterprise's thermal plants in coastal Gujarat. To its opponents, the sheer scale of the combined impacts from the Carmichael mine, rail and port project and calculated emissions from burning its coal (Amos and Swann 2015) means it 'should never have been approved' (Waters 2015: para. 9).

Successive state and federal governments have, however, not been dissuaded from approving the Carmichael coal mine project. As claims for economic benefits loose ground and the massive environmental impact of the Carmichael mine become apparent, Australian governments have advanced the moral claim of helping India alleviate poverty through increased electricity generation to justify their actions. Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared that 'coal is good for humanity' (Massola *et al*. 2014: para. 5), disregarding its exacerbating impacts in Australia, and former Federal Resources Minister Josh Frydenberg asserted Australia's moral imperative to 'help lift hundreds of millions of people out of energy poverty' (Kelly 2015: para. 5). Such claims that make a moral case for continuing Australia's coal exports assume that private coal mining by Indian corporations will help lift millions of Indian poor out of poverty.

India, the world's fastest growing major economy, primarily depends on coal, which supplies nearly 60 per cent of its electricity (International Energy Agency [IEA] 2015). It is also dogged by energy shortages and inequality both in income and electricity distribution, with 240 million poor currently still without access to electricity (IEA 2015). India has set itself an ambitious target to double coal production by 2020 to boost electricity generation and address energy shortage (Das 2015). This demand is likely to be met through an increase both in domestic coal production and imported Australian coal mined by private Indian corporations (Rosewarne 2016).

The human, economic and political priority of providing electricity to the literally powerless millions, mostly in remote rural locations, cannot be denied. The notion of electricity use is strongly linked to overall development and the improvement of specific indicators such as child mortality, female life expectancy, and avoiding undernourishment, in the Human Development Index (Ghosh 2016). However, the claim that Adani's coal, privately mined in Australia for private electricity generation in India, will ameliorate the energy deprivation of the poor, needs to be critically examined.

The challenge of providing electricity to remote locations in India through the coal-powered central electricity grid on account of vast distances and the inability of rural populations to meet the utility's cost of extending the grid is well regarded. Electricity distribution through the central grid is largely concentrated in India's urban and industrial regions (IEA 2015). This renders the coal dependent growth scenario unlikely to lift millions of rural poor out of darkness as quickly as needed. An estimated 60 million Indians are likely to remain without electricity into 2030 under coal dominant growth scenarios (IEA 2015).

India's increasing solar capacity and the Indian energy minister's articulations about reducing coal import dependency (Press Trust of India [PTI] 2016) has prompted some critics of the Carmichael project to challenge the Australian government's moral claim on the grounds of India's decreasing coal import needs (Buckley 2016). However, when viewed in light of the Indian government's contradictory positions on coal, this challenge appears weak. The Indian Government, on the one hand, speaks of reducing import dependency, and on the other, expanding its energy production through an increase in domestic and imported coal production. The most fundamental assumption of the moral claim – that India's private-coalmining-dependent model of current economic growth benefits its poor and vulnerable communities – remains uninvestigated.

Successive Indian governments have themselves claimed this same moral ground by defining climate justice in terms of India needing the carbon space to develop as a postcolonial nation (Goodman 2016). The export of large quantities of Australian coal by private Indian companies presents a pertinent transnational context to undertake three much needed interconnected analyses.

Firstly, to investigate who benefits and who misses out from India's increasing coal usage and linked rapid economic growth, bearing in mind the pervasive nature of economic and social inequalities in Indian society. Secondly, to determine the relevance of coal in the lives of some of India's poorest communities, in order to understand the true costs and benefits of privately mining and transporting unprecedented quantities of Australian coal to India, at a time of exacerbating climate change. And thirdly, to consider the range of civil society concerns over the resource intensive nature of India's current economic growth.

In this paper, I undertake such an analyses to argue that the pro-poor claim for coal is losing ground. The introduction of neoliberal economic policies and privatisation of coal mining and electricity production under existent social and economic inequalities in India has meant that many vulnerable, poor groups have continued to face displacement and pollution from these activities, while corporations have profited. There is no clear beneficiary for privately mined Indian coal. I offer a series of counter-claims emerging from India that may delegitimise the moral case for Australian coal.

The first section defines the problem of the neoliberal growth model adopted by India since the mid-1990s from the perspective of poor vulnerable communities most susceptible to loss of land and livelihoods from industrial projects including that of coal mining and electricity generation. It puts the ethical dilemma of the current growth model in perspective by underlining its difference from the first forty years of India's post-independence economic growth. It introduces two concepts, 'neoliberal coal' and 'hiding behind the poor', that together explain the conflict between coal and public interest in India's post-economic-liberalisation growth since the mid-1990s, at a time of exacerbating climate change impacts.

The second section presents two case studies that expose the contradictions in the Indian government's rhetoric and policy actions around coal mining. The first case study of private coal mining in Mahan forests in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh illustrates the conflict at the heart of the Indian state, between protecting vulnerable communities and furthering private profit through resource extraction. The case study demonstrates oppositional claims to state-private exploitation of natural resources by grassroots and civil society groups and state responses to such opposition. A second related national level case study draws attention to a fundamental clash of objectives between defining national interest as private extraction dependent growth, and preserving socio-ecological balance and democratic rights of Indians.

The discussion in the third section draws on the highlights of the case study and its resonance at the national level to elaborate on the increasingly sophisticated challenging of the neoliberal growth paradigm in Indian civil society. The coming together of local communities empowered by legal instruments, and national and transnational organisations, is pushing local livelihood and justice claims to the broader national agenda and creating opportunities for a scrutiny of whether India's national interest is served through neoliberal coal mining, energy production and economic growth. The conclusion draws on themes emerging from a civil society scrutiny of the impacts of neoliberal growth on the Indian poor to suggest counter-claims to delegitimise the moral argument for Australian coal.

The problem: who benefits and who bears the costs of coal usage under India's current growth model?

Inequality, public interest and private profit: the changing character of India's economic growth

As a postcolonial state, sovereign in its right to self-determination, India continues to assert its right to grow on the international stage. However, as a highly unequal and diverse society, both the social and ecological impacts of development, as well as its benefits, are not equally distributed amongst all sections. From its earliest post-independence economic era in the 1950s, state led large industrialisation projects such as mining and dams have displaced mostly rural, Adivasis (meaning original inhabitants; the term broadly refers to India's indigenous people) and peasant populations, many with generational associations to their lands (for example, see Padel 2016).

It is estimated that at least 60 million people have been displaced by development projects since independence (Fernandez 2008). A large majority of those displaced have not been properly rehabilitated or reabsorbed into the restructured economic geography (Sharma and Singh 2009). Another estimate (quoted in Kothari 1996: 1476-85) based on a through assessment of the dimensions of human impacts of 110 projects found that almost 50 per cent of the 1.694 million people displaced were Adivasis.

Even though civil society movements have questioned the lack of distributive justice in the decades following Indian's sovereignty, industrial development has largely been accepted as serving the greater common good. This is best captured in the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's regard for dams as the 'temples of modern India' (Khilnani 1998: 61) and his counselling villagers displaced by the Hirakud Dam 'if you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country' (Roy 1999: para. 1).

Coal is found abundantly in India compared to the other major fuel sources of oil and natural gas (Martin 2015). It served as the resource backbone of India's post independence development, primarily to build and strengthen public sector industries (Ghosh 2016). The role of coal, both as a symbol of national development by virtue of its ability to provide cheap access to electricity, and as the primary driver of India's growth engine, has remained uncontested by successive governments. Recently, a Supreme Court judge summed up the significance of coal to India's future:

> Coal is king and paramount Lord of industry is an old saying in the industrial world. Industrial greatness has been built upon coal by many countries. In India, coal is the most important indigenous energy resource and remains the dominant fuel for power generation and many industrial applications (Supreme Court 2014: para. 2).

The state's role in promoting coal-led industrial development that benefits the urban elite, and middle classes, has forced large-scale displacement and restructured the lives of subsistence populations. The state has excused this tension, arguing that the lack of economic and distributive justice from coal powered energy production is a necessary sacrifice to the national interest. However, India's rapid growth in the last two decades fails even this selective definition of public interest.

Through structural reforms to the economy over a period of time starting in the early 1990s, the Indian state allied itself with transnational and domestic private capital to make its policies conducive to greater economic growth. This, in effect, redefined the role of the Indian state through the dismantling of much of the industrial licensing system and allowing private companies to operate in industries previously controlled by state run enterprises (Nielsen 2010). More and more activities, including the acquisition of land by governments for profit making private companies (Reddy and Reddy 2007) and the setting up of special economic zones, have been brought under the purview of India's neoliberal development.

Therefore, in post economic-liberalisation India, the state started acquiring a growing proportion of land from peasants or native dwellers for private industrial uses including coal mining and energy generation. The policy changes in the early 1990s were followed by the setting up of super-sized power generation projects, often with foreign companies as primary promoters or major collaborators (Ahmed 2010). In an already industrialised and coal-rich region such as Singrauli in Madhya Pradesh (further discussed as a separate case study under the third section), these policy changes implied the possibility of a third wave of development-related-displacements from land acquisitions for private coal mining and power generation projects (Dokuzovic 2012). The five new designated super-projects in the Singrauli district require an estimated 10,000 acres of land (Sharma and Singh 2009: 65).

When the state facilitates land acquisition for the expansion of private mining operations, acting as a 'land broker', it exposes its bias towards large corporations (Levien 2011: 71) as opposed to affected communities, raising fundamental questions of social justice. Civil society groups have questioned the 'public purpose' of many developmental projects proposed and executed by the private sector, or even by the state where the benefits clearly go to private corporations. The sanctioned special economic zones around the country, regions where national laws are suspended to apparently allow full play to the free market, have become the core target of activists' criticism of governments failing to actually deliver for the public interest (Sharma and Singh 2009).

Discrepancies between the expectations and results from India's neoliberal policies became evident within a decade of economic reform. Nowhere did this gap emerge more clearly than in the western state of Gujarat. Gujarat's growth story under Chief Minister Narendra Modi (who later went on to become India's Prime Minister) has been hailed as the poster child of neoliberal economic development in India, albeit at a significant social cost (Rajagopal 2010; Roy 2016: 82). Gujarat clocked the highest GDP of all Indian states by concentrating large investments in resource extraction and thereby generating short-term profits. This pattern of concentrated investment, largely in resource extraction by big corporations, neglected vital sectors such as agriculture. It also failed to improve social and developmental indicators (Jaffrelot 2015).

India’s high rate of economic growth has been found not to lead to a corresponding reduction of poverty (Harriss *et al*. 2010: 38-60). Precariously balanced on a narrow alliance of economic and political elites (Kohli 2007: 113), India’s version of economic reforms has essentially reoriented the state’s behaviour in favour particularly of domestic private corporations interested in minerals exploitation (Oskarsson 2015). The privileges made available to Adani Enterprises under the Narendra Modi government in Gujarat (Nayar, Mukherjee and Arora 2014) is a glaring example of this nexus between India’s economic and political elites. The company acquired land cheaply from the government for its port at Mundra and special economic zone; it later sold significant portions of this land to other companies at hundreds of times the cost value (Nayar, Mukherjee and Arora 2014).

Critics of India’s neoliberal development argue that the necessary collusion between state and big capital has resulted in new forms of accumulation by dispossession of subaltern groups that are inherent to neoliberal developments (Da Costa 2007; Nielsen 2010; Barnes 2014). The nature of this growth dilutes the ‘public interest’ claim over India’s development in the absence of a clear public beneficiary and the presence of a significant private beneficiary.

From public interest to neoliberal; the changing character of India’s coal and coal-powered electricity production

Till the end of the 1970s coal mining in India was solely a state preserve, driven through the state controlled Coal India Limited (CIL) that was synonymous with ‘public interest’ (Lahiri-Dutt *et al*. 2012). Coal India limited has seven wholly owned coal producing subsidiaries and is the world’s largest coal producer (Ghosh 2016). In 2003 the Indian government announced its mission of ‘Power to all by 2012’ (Shahi 2003), and this ostensibly necessitated the ramping up of India’s coal production.

In 2004, the Ministry of Coal broke with the tradition of keeping coal mining as a state preserve by inviting private companies to tender for the allocation of coalblocks around the country (Rosewarne 2016). Coal dependence for India’s high economic growth has driven policy changes to allow both private corporations to enter coal mining as well as to import coal to meet India's growing demands. Coal India Chairman and Managing Director, S Narsingh Rao has indicated that both domestic areas under mining and imports are likely to increase to meet India's growing electricity demands (Saikia 2012).

India's electricity sector has undergone a parallel process of opening up to the private sector in a bid to boost power generation. The bulk of electricity in India is still produced by state owned enterprises, with most thermal power capacity being controlled by the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) (Rosewarne 2016). However, the privatisation of this sector in line with the overall restructuring of India's economic policies will see Indian corporate giants, most notably Adani, Reliance Power and Tata Power, produce a greater proportion of electricity (Rosewarne 2016).

When coal mining and electricity production is undertaken privately, the concerns of the poor are sacrificed for the interests of private capital. In this system, captive collieries, owned and operated by corporations, yield coal for electricity generation in private thermal power plants, which is then sold to meet India's energy demand. Private companies stand to profit from the constantly rising demand for thermal energy in India, producing what can be called 'neoliberal coal' (Lahiri-Dutt 2016: 205).

Coal from the Carmichael mine in Queensland, to be mined and transported to India largely for usage at Adani Enterprises' captive thermal plants in Gujarat, will produce electricity that will be sold in the market. The rural poor in India who are mostly unconnected to the electricity grid, are least likely to benefit from this 'neoliberal coal'.

However, under India's neoliberal economic policies, government rhetoric equating coal, the primary source of electricity, to national development, effectively defines private coal mining and energy production as indispensable to India's economic security and national interest (Lahiri-Dutt 2016). Owing to the long-established centrality of coal in India's developmental discourse, private corporations such as Adani Enterprises now enjoy the status of serving India's national interest through coal mining and the generation of coal-fired electricity, ostensibly for the purposes of lifting millions out of poverty.

Hiding the emissions of the Indian rich behind the Indian poor

An innovative survey by Greenpeace India (2007) joined the dots between the pervasive distributive inequality across India's various economic classes and its implications for their respective carbon footprints. The survey found that the average carbon emissions of India's richest consumer class was 4.5 times that of the poorest class, and three times that of average household emissions. Demonstrating that the significantly larger carbon emissions of a relatively small wealthy class (1 per cent of the population) lies hidden behind the minuscule emissions of the 823 million poor (figures as of 2007), keeping India's per capita emissions to one of the world's lowest (Indian Network for Climate Change Assessment 2010:48; Government of India [GOI] 2012), the report argued for the application of the 'common but differentiated responsibility' (CBDR) principle for carbon emissions reduction within India, by finding ways for the upper 150 million to reduce their emissions (Ananthapadmanabhan *et al*. 2007).

Demonstrating the linkage between distributive injustice and climate injustice, the report argued that the Indian poor, who are forced to settle in marginal or vulnerable areas, and lack the resources to adapt to rising temperatures, increasing natural disasters and increasing tropical diseases, are most vulnerable to climate change which they have played no role in creating (Ananthapadmanabhan *et al*. 2007). Published in the lead up to the 2007 United Nations Climate Summit in Bali, the report was designed to generate public and policy debates about India formally adopting emissions reduction targets and decarbonising is growth.

India's climate policy, subsequently articulated in the 'Climate Action Plan' in the lead up to the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen, prioritised maintaining national growth rates at 8 per cent per annum with protecting the poor and vulnerable sections of society through an inclusive and substantial development strategy, sensitive to 'climate change' as the chief principle on which this growth will be founded (GOI 2008:2). From the perspective of the widening inequality between the Indian rich and poor since India's neoliberal, coal-intensive economic growth, it is evident that successive Indian governments have hidden the carbon intensity of its high-consumption classes behind its rhetoric of inclusive development for the Indian poor.

Coal mining and resistance in the Mahan forests, Singrauli, Madhya Pradesh, India: a case study

Also known as the energy capital of India, the Singrauli region in the central India state of Madhya Pradesh supplies 10 per cent of the country's coal. Two waves of large scale industrial development – first for the Gobind Reservoir and Rihand Dam in the 1960s, and then the super thermal power projects in the 1980s – led to the loss of sustenance and lands for close to 14,000 families, with only 4,523 out of them getting regular jobs from the industrial projects (Sharma and Singh 2009). The rich coal reserves in the region invited the possibility of a third wave of displacement after 2006, with proposed private coal mining and thermal power generation projects estimated to affect the future of over 4,000 families (Sharma and Singh 2009).

In 2006 the Ministry of Coal allocated the captive Mahan coal-block in the Singrauli district of Madhya Pradesh to a private corporation, the Mahan Coal Ltd, a joint venture between Essar and Hindalco listed in the London Stock Exchange (Kohli 2012; Kohli *et al*. 2012). The Mahan coal block is located in deep forests that fall within the catchment of the Mahan river, support the livelihoods of several forest communities, and are considered one of the oldest Sal tree forests of Asia (Kohli 2013). Estimated to provide coal for only 14 years, the 1000 hectares open cut coal mine in Mahan would have cleared over 500,000 trees, destabilised the watershed of the Rihand reservoir, exacerbated the ecological degradation of the region, and jeopardised the livelihoods of 54 forest dependent villages (Padel 2016).

Grassroots opposition to proposed coal mining and state violation of people's rights

The affected communities started coming together to express their concerns at the potential threat to their predominantly forest-based lives and livelihoods. One such account from Ramadhar Saket (village Amelia, District Singrauli), said:

> Every year during the Mahua[1] season I shut down my house in Amelia village and come and stay in the Mahan forests for about a month to collect Mahua, which I sell for Rs. 17-20 / kilo. We also collect other forest produce like tendu leaves, chironji, harra, bamboo, mushroom etc, but we are now hearing that these forests will be given to the company for mining coal. If the government gives away these forests we have no other means to live and we will not even get any compensation because we have no rights over these forests (Kohli *et al*. 2012: 4).

They asserted their historical and legal rights to the Mahan forests through the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, (hereafter referred to as FRA) 2006. Enacted by the Indian Parliament in response to a sustained, national mobilisation by forest dwelling communities (Kumar and Kerr 2012), the FRA sought to redress the historical injustice of state-owned forests over native forest-dependent communities by recognising their individual and community-based rights over forestlands (GOI 2006). The preamble to this landmark legislation acknowledged that the rights of India's native, forest-dwelling, indigenous communities and other traditional forest dwellers 'were not adequately recognised in the consolidation of state forests during the colonial period as well as in independent India resulting in historical injustice'. The preamble to the Act went even further in stating that such communities were 'integral to the survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem'.

Affected villagers in Singrauli argued that clearances should not be granted until the process of recognising their 'Individual Forest Rights' (IFRs) and 'Community Forest Rights' (CFRs) under the FRA had been completed (Kohli *et al*. 2012). The residents of eleven affected villages came together to form the grassroots resistance movement called the Mahan Sangharsh Samiti (MSS), and with support from other local groups and the transnational group Greenpeace, the resistance campaign eventually extended to the state capital of Bhopal and the national capital of New Delhi. The interactions of the affected communities with the state

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[1] The Mahua tree is considered sacred amongst several Adivasi communities and found abundantly in the central, forested parts of India that coincides with a large Adivasi population. The yellow Mahua flowers serve as a source of food. Collecting and selling Mahua flowers in the late Spring period of March-April constitutes a significant off-season income source for a large number of subsistence farming Adivasi households (Sareen 2016).

were however dogged by intimidation that exposed the state's corporate bias (*Indian Express* 2014). The communities were also tricked by the state government into a denial of choice to decide for or against mining through village council referendums as stipulated in the FRA.

Gram Sabhas or village assemblies mandated under this landmark legislation are the only officially recognised spaces for Adivasi and forest dwelling people to participate in state-decision-making around mining on their lands (Chowdhury 2016). As per Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) circular (2009) issued to all state governments, Gram Sabha consent is a must before forest lands are diverted for non-forest use (such as coal mining); such diversion also cannot take place unless both individual and community claims have been finalised.

These provisions can prove to be a double-edged sword. Under obligation to abide by the FRA's provisions, state governments have often been found to forge village council resolutions to clear the path for lucrative mining (Chowdhury 2016). In the case of the Mahan coal block, the state government of Madhya Pradesh came in for criticism from the centre when it was found to have conducted a referendum without the knowledge of the entire community in which most signatures were found to have been forged (Ghatwai 2015).

Indian government's approval process: exposing corporate bias in national interest

While the full extent of state-corporate nexus in responding to coal mining opposition in the Mahan forests was becoming obvious, an even bigger clash of priorities over the Mahan (and adjoining Chhatrasal) coalblocks between the coal and environment ministries of the Manmohan Singh led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) central government started to make news headlines.

The Mahan forest mining block was first designated a 'no-go' zone for coal mining in 2009 as per joint criterion developed by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) and Ministry of Coal (MoC) (Kohli 2011; Kohli *et al*. 2012). The environment minister Jairam Ramesh confessed to constant pressure from the ministry of coal for approvals to be granted at Mahan since Essar and Hindalco had already invested in the setting up of the thermal power plants for the 'captive mines'. He indicated that the MoEF's Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) had advised against the approval of coal mining in Mahan to protect its rich forests and the rights of forest dwelling and Adivasi communities (MoEF 2011).

In 2011, a high level Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) was set up with a mandate of suggesting solutions for regulatory hurdles to mining and industrial projects. The Mahan mining matter had to be finally handed to the EGoM for a decision, which approved coal mining in Mahan and Chhatrasal on the basis of 36 conditions in October 2012 (Kohli 2013). The overturning of the MoEF's decision by the EGoM proved that the national government was willing to sacrifice the socio-environmental objectives of one of its critical ministries (MoEF) for the pursuit of rapid coal extraction, even after a decision had been made (Kohli 2013).

The Mahan coal mining conflict however took a fortunate turn for the community in early 2014, when the Supreme Court of India, in its judgement on the UPA government's coal block allocation scam, cancelled 214 (out of 218) coal mining sites including Mahan that had been 'illegally' and 'arbitrarily' allocated to private companies since 1993 without following due process of competitive auctioning (Rajagopal 2014). The Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party that came to power nationally with an overwhelming majority in 2014 subsequently dropped the Mahan coal block from the auction list, citing the environment ministry's recommendations to keep it off limits (Times News Network 2015), bringing the immediate threat of mining in one of the oldest and continuous stretches of Sal tree forests in Asia to a halt.

The Modi government ended a four-year dispute over the fate of one of the oldest Sal forests and the communities it supported. However it inadvertently triggered a strong public debate over the definition of national interest and the rights of dissenting voices (to coal minig) when it cracked down on the transnational group Greenpeace, closely involved with the community resistance to coal mining in the Mahan forests. This is covered in the second case study.

Defining and policing national interest under Narendra Modi's Indian government

Based on recommendations of an allegedly leaked report by the Intelligence Bureau (2014), a newly elected Narendra Modi government, taking its first step to fast-track development (Ranjan 2014), cancelled the registration of as many as 9000 non governmental organisations (NGOs) that received funding from sources outside India on the basis that they did not comply with the Indian tax codes (Kaushal 2015). Greenpeace India was singled out on the grounds that it posed a 'risk to India's national economic security' on account of it's anti-coal-mining campaigning activities in the Mahan forests (Rowlatt 2015). The crackdown included freezing its international funding, revoking its licence to operate in India (Associated Press 2015) and preventing activist Priya Pillai, involved with the Mahan resistance, from travelling to London to appear before a British cross-Parliamentary enquiry on violation of indigenous rights and access to land in Singrauli (Mathur 2015).

These incidents occurred in the first year of the Narendra Modi government and put the spotlight on the state of India's democracy in light of its growth model and its constant demands for more coal. The Supreme Court ruled that the right of free speech and expression 'necessarily includes the right to criticise and dissent' (Justice Shakdher quoted in Mathur 2015: para. 2). Public commentary questioned the 'breakneck industrialisation' by private corporations at the heart of India's ambitious growth and its deleterious effects on communities, ecology and climate change (Jose 2015).

In the midst of a growing scrutiny of the impacts of India's two decades of high economic growth, the Modi government also sought to weaken existing environmental protections (Nayar 2016) and reduce environmental clearance timeframes for mining projects to a record low of 100 days (PTI 2016b). To put this timeframe into perspective, between 1982 and 1999, the environment ministry used to take an average of five years to give full clearance to a proposal for coal mining; between 2000 and 2004 under the BJP, the time taken fell to three years; under the UPA again (2004 to 2009) it first fell to 17 months and then (2009 to 2014) to 11 months (Rajshekhar 2012). The Modi government publicised the 'unlocking' of Rs 10 trillion worth of investments through the clearance of 2000 projects in two years as an achievement (PTI 2016a) but failed to substantiate the claim of 'one million new jobs' being created from these clearances (Dutt 2016: para. 4).

Such baseless scaling down of timeframes indicates an intensification of the Indian state's corporate-biased approach in dealing with communities likely to be affected by mining. These moves also pose the possibility of significant conflicts with the objectives of the landmark FRA, which is helping to generate democratic forces of dissent against coal mining on the ground. The Forest Rights Act (2006) transformed forest governance in response to strong and sustained grassroots calls for democratic management (Kumar and Kerr 2012). Hundred-days-short clearance windows do not provide the necessary time for following due processes regarding community claims and village assembly decisions, and push state governments further in the direction of sabotaging transparent decision making for the sake of mining revenues from corporations. They also open up possibilities of increasing conflicts between the state-corporate interests on the one hand, and grassroots movements, human rights and environmental groups on the other.

The case of coal extraction in the Mahan forests of Singrauli district, Madhya Pradesh, therefore, through a range of related events, reveals the depths of favouritism towards private capital in coal mining in the neoliberal Indian state. The linked issue of crackdown on the right to dissent coal mining demonstrates the effectiveness of an interconnected web of counter-claims, from the ground up to the national level, which is challenging the idea of coal-intensive rapid economic growth at the expense of India's vulnerable communities. The next section considers the factors underpinning the increasing questioning of rampant private coal mining in India and its relevance to the Australian civil society resistance to the Carmichael coal mine in Queensland.

Hiding neoliberal coal behind the poor? An emerging conversation in India

After nearly two decades of neoliberal growth, some of the direct and indirect costs of India's current development model started surfacing, triggering debates about corporate bias and the erosion of public interest in the pursuit of a coal-fuelled high rate of economic growth.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India (2012) estimated the official loss to the Indian exchequer from the coal block allocation scam, popularly known as 'Coalgate', to be Rs 1,860 billion (Mehdudia 2012) or approximately 37 billion in Australian Dollars. In the meantime, costs of ecological degradation caused by two decades of concentrated industrialisation emerged; it was found that the cost of ecological and social damage from degraded environments is as high as India's current annual growth (Kothari 2013). In the meantime, the Gujarat model of growth (discussed in the first section) lost its sheen in the face of emerging evidence of skewed development across sectors, and a failure to meet social and developmental indicators.

Meanwhile, the landmark Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 created the opportunity for long marginalised communities to assert their historic rights over forestlands in a democratic manner, making the stories of their resistance to private mining corporations the centre of global attention. Using the village assembly provisions of the FRA, the Dongria Kondh Adivasis in eastern Odisha vetoed (in 2013) bauxite mining on their sacred mountain by Vedanta Resources Limited (for example, see Tatpati, Kothari and Mishra 2016). This was hailed as the most powerful example of democracy in action since the Act's implementation (Kothari 2016). The success of the Dongria Kondh created a positive ripple effect amongst forest dependent communities. Several other resistances to mining including that at Mahan have since then used the FRA to agitate against mining encroachments and assert their forest rights.

As a weapon for on-the-ground democracy (Kothari 2016), the FRA conflicts with the revenue seeking interests of the state that 'brokers' land acquisition for mining by private corporations, often causing state governments to violate legal provisions. In the case of the remote Dongria Kondhs, the Odisha government has sought to annul the 2013 village council resolutions against bauxite mining (Chowdhury 2016a), and in the case of the community near the Mahan forests, as discussed earlier, the state resorted to forgery to enable mining.

The Intelligence Bureau (2014) report, prepared during the UPA government's time, but allegedly leaked and acted upon by the Modi government, warned 'NGOs are stalling new mines, power plants, genetically modified food and mega industrial projects'. It also claimed that collectively such NGOs drag down India's GDP growth by 2-3 per cent annually but failed to substantiate how it arrived at the figures (Subramanian 2015). It was debated and criticised in Indian civil society for 'hindering the democratic process' and failing to 'serve the public interest' (Sarma 2014).

The report and the Modi government's actions make it evident why Greenpeace became a primary target, and what national interest in India stands for under neoliberal economic policies. First, equating coal burning to climate injustice for the Indian poor through ‘Hiding behind the Poor’ (Ananthapadmanabhan *et al*. 2007) and consequently helping poor communities near the Mahan coal block to organise themselves to resist coal mining (Niyogy 2015), they have challenged the moral argument for India’s coal-led national growth (see discussion of India’s Climate Action Plan in the first section) and demonstrated it to be discriminatory towards rather than inclusive of the Indian poor.

The discriminatory nature of India’s current economic growth is evident through a deepening urban and rural divide and finally, across rich and poor zones in the Indian geography, with India’s coal mining areas statistically still the country’s poorest, falling deficient on standard development indicators of availability of food and clean drinking water, employment and human rights (for example, see Padel 2012, Centre for Science and Environment 2008). Activist Priya Pillai involved with the Mahan resistance stated Greenpeace’s objective as ‘bringing out the true cost of coal, which is not just economic, but also environmental, social and spiritual’ (Niyogy 2015). It is in the interest of India’s high economic growth rate to not only disregard the environmental, social and spiritual costs of coal, but to justify such costs on account of the very communities that are worst affected: the Indian poor.

It has been argued that in context of the deepening climate crisis, what is considered impossible today may swiftly become a priority on the political agenda tomorrow (Goodman 2016). China’s drop in coal usage looms large on the Indian horizon as a policy approach that must be embraced sooner rather than later. The public scrutiny of coal-dependent growth impacts on the Indian poor, and legal-democratic resistances to coal mining in forestlands can help to keep the agenda of decarbonising India’s growth alive till the issue gathers critical mass and translates into rapid policy action.

Going far beyond the economic rationale against coal mining in the Galilee Basin, the multi-pronged Indian civil society arguments against coal mining for private profit, that uphold the concerns of India’s vulnerable communities, provide fresh bases for countering the obsolete moral claims of the Australian government.

They help in avoiding the trap of ‘national versus per capita emissions’ debates that can paralyse climate change dialogue between developed and developing countries, especially two countries as distinctly different as Australia and India. Australia’s per capita coal consumption is the world's highest, and consequently its per capita emissions one of the world's largest. With far less economic inequality than India, these statistics point glaringly to the high consumptive lifestyles of average Australians as well as the nation's extreme coal dependency for electricity.

On the other hand, even though India is the world's third highest emitter, it has one of the world's lowest per capita emissions, in which the growing emissions of its higher economic classes remain buried under the deprived millions who live without electricity. Calling out on government positions that hide the emissions of the affluent, and the environmental and social costs of coal behind the Indian poor, these claims provide humane and inclusive perspectives for transnational policy and public debates on coal and climate change.

Conclusion

Since independence, India has asserted its right to grow by putting its millions of poor in the foreground. At the 1972 United Nations Conference on Human Environment (UNCHE) in Stockholm, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi famously argued, 'Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters?' (Gandhi 1975: 193). Coal, as a cheap source of electricity, has enjoyed a position of unquestioned significance in India's industrial development through the decades. However, with the opening up of India's economy to private and foreign investment, and the entry of private corporations into coal mining and power generation, the public interest in India's economic growth became questionable. Poor communities, and more specifically Adivasi and native forest-dwelling populations, have historically been the most vulnerable to loss (of land and livelihoods) and derived the least benefits from coal mining and related developments. Their losses have been amplified in the last 25 years of India's ambitious growth journey. This period in the history of India's economic growth has been characterised by new forms of dispossession and exploitation, as well as new forms of resistance (Barnes 2014: 4).

India's continuing neoliberal growth will involve expanded coal extraction from forested indigenous environments within India and the private exploitation of extensive offshore coal reserves such as in Australia. The strengthening of economic relations between India and

Australia over the last few years is aimed at extending Indian energy security through imported private coal (Rosewarne 2016). The close relationship is reflected in federal and state government support for the Carmichael coal mine despite concerted civil society opposition and native title claims by traditional owners. The shared economic interest is also reflected in the pro-poor argument for coal; the Indian government's tried and tested argument for growth in order to lift millions out of poverty has now been articulated by an Australian Prime Minister and Queensland Premiere, as well as the right-wing think tank the Institute of Public Affairs.

However, as the emerging public debate in India indicates, the pro-poor argument for coal mining is losing its moral basis due to the changed nature of economic growth, increased community resistance with the help of legal instruments, and a deepening awareness of the impacts of coal mining and climate change on vulnerable communities. This presents an opportunity for the civil society debates across India and Australia to converge and call on governments to stop hiding private profits, carbon emissions and ecological degradation behind the Indian poor.

A converged Australian-Indian public scrutiny of the rhetoric of the coal industry and governments can argue that the Indian poor are the most vulnerable to immediate (loss of land and livelihoods and pollution) and long-term (climate change) impacts of coal-powered electricity generation. Neoliberal coal-led rapid economic growth in India has proven not to be in their best interest. Building the argument further, such a scrutiny can claim that climate change impacts on the land-based livelihoods of the Indian poor and the country's primary drinking water supplies from the Himalayan glaciers, along with impacts on Australian icons such as the Great Barrier Reef, pose a moral challenge for Australians and higher income Indians, whose consumptive lifestyles directly benefit from coal-intensive neoliberal growth. Finally, a genuine energy security dialogue between India and Australia that keeps the interests of both future generations and the Indian poor at heart, must put affordable, decentralised and decarbonised energy sources front and centre.

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