

THE COAL PUSHERS

Philip Carter

[Driven out of their villages, their land destroyed by opencast coal mining, the Adivasis—the tribal or original people—in Jharkhand State, India turn to illegal mining to survive despite the low-paying and dangerous work.]

When Ram died in a roof collapse in an illegal coal mine in late 2006 in Jharkhand State, India, he was doing the only thing left for the survival of himself and his young wife. An Adivasi, or Indian tribal person by birth, he had seen his family's traditional source of sustenance destroyed by the advance of large-scale opencast coal mines. According to his cousin Sushila, a woman in her early thirties, "He was not a happy man. He was a farmer and used to work in the fields, but with the coming of the coal mines our jungles and farmlands reduced every day, badly affecting the village economy" (Both Ram's and Sushila's names have been changed to protect the family's identity)

The Chotanagpur Plateau which covers much of Jharkhand State is still a green and pleasant land in many places. Black water buffaloes pull wooden ploughs through the rich soil as they have done since ancient times. Low, lushly forested hill ranges divide the watersheds of the rivers which have their headwaters here, flowing onto the surrounding plains, but these rivers have become polluted due to poorly regulated mining of coal, iron ore and uranium. The Subarnarekha River, which rises in the south of Jharkhand and provides water for the states of Orissa and West Bengal, suffers from radioactive contamination from uranium mining. The Damodar River, rising in the north of Jharkhand, also flows into West Bengal; its lower reaches are badly polluted due to coal mining.

Now, as India rushes to develop its economy, mining rights have been assigned to extensive areas of the upper Damodar watershed. The coal of the North Karanpura coalfield is close beneath the surface, and a series of enormous opencast coal mines have already transformed large areas of the upper Damodar catchment beyond recognition. This is the place where Ram lived and died, an area where rock art that dates to between 5,000 and 7,000 years ago has been found. This rock art is almost identical to religious art still painted on the walls of Adivasi villages in the region today.

The Adivasi villages are in the way of the mines. Many have been destroyed and the residents displaced. Few of those displaced are fortunate enough to get jobs in the highly automated pits, and resettlement generally applies only to those who can prove they have title to their homes. Dispossessed, with the land they depended on ruined, many turn to Ram's hard and dangerous way of life, digging the remaining coal from disused mines considered no longer profitable by mining companies.

Xavier Dias is co-founder of the Bindrai Institute for Research Study and Action (BIRSA), an organisation that works on Adivasi issues in Jharkhand. According to him, the mine labourers are almost all tribal. "They are people who formerly owned lands which the mining companies threw them off. Some did get jobs with the mining company, while mining was underground and there was a

lot of manual operation. But now that mining is opencast, there are less jobs, so many people have now lost the jobs they once had in the mines.”

With their forests depleted and with no land, entire families are forced to go into abandoned mines underground, bringing the remaining coal to the surface to sell. Men and women dig the coal, children bring it up, and men take it on bicycles and haul it to town. Everyday, hundreds of these ‘coal-pushers’ can be seen on the highway into the state capital of Ranchi. For the poor people of the state, this is the only source of coal for domestic use.

According to Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, editor of *Pit Women and Others : Women Miners in Developing Countries*, coal-pushers take a load of up to 250kg to a town, on a journey that can take two days. They then sell the load for about 150 rupees (US\$3). In a paper on informal mining, Lahiri-Dutt says that, “whereas the government has hesitantly accepted participation rights of communities over forests, no such response has taken place in the mining sector.” She also points to the increased role of private capital in the mining sector as being a significant part of this problem.

When Ram died, he was working as a coal cutter earning fifty rupees per day (US\$1). The roof collapse, which was caused by water seepage, killing two men. “Ram did not have any children,” said Sushila, “but his colleague did. Four children were orphaned that day. We are afraid the police will investigate and harass the family to extort money, since the work they were doing was illegal.”

Father Tony Herbert, a Jesuit priest who works with Adivasis in Jharkhand who have been displaced by coal mining, said of the illegal mining, “We should not look at the issue and simply see it as ‘illegal’ and therefore something to be stopped. People on the edge will go to any lengths to survive, as we see from the risks they take. One solution could be to legitimise the situation, and allow village groups such as gram sabhas (village councils) or co-operatives to mine and sell the coal locally, taking advice from engineers on safety measures.”

This type of approach would require a major shift from the present worldview of both state government and companies, whose only motivation is to make Jharkhand a good place for large mining companies to invest. As long as the prevailing economic paradigm fails to include the cost of displacing entire communities, the destruction of agricultural and forest land and crucial wildlife corridors for endangered species such as the Indian tiger, as well as the indiscriminate pollution of the headwaters of several rivers vital to the surrounding lowlands, then the wealth created by coal extraction comes at too great a price. As long as the only imperative is to remove coal in a highly automated fashion with minimum labour and maximum short-term profit, it is unlikely that progress will be made. □□□