

In an Inferno, a Devil's Bargain

[Families in one Indian township must choose between food to eat or air to breathe.]

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In the smoggy, winter light, Bokapahari village in eastern India's Jharia township looks like a bombed-out wasteland. Only a handful of families remain amid the detritus of broken homes, lifeless trees, and deep fissures in the earth that belch out a sharp, sulfuric smoke. Not far from the mostly abandoned village, on the other side of a dusty road, the fissures glow orange-red from subterranean fires that have been burning there for years. The air above the cracks shimmers with a cocktail of gases that intermittently burst into pure blue flames. Venture close enough and you can feel the throbbing heat and hear the dull roar of the fire eating away at the ground beneath. Hollowed out by the inferno, the earth sometimes caves in, swallowing animals, people, and parts of homes.

Amid this barren landscape Anita Devi is busy burning piles of coal she and her five children have scavenged from the nearby mines. She uses it to make crude lumps of coke. Once the coke is ready, Devi's husband will load his bicycle with three or four burlap sacks of it and wheel the heavy load to the "illegal" coal market a few miles away, or else go door-to-door to sell it as cooking fuel. Each sack will fetch him \$1 at most.

Devi's family is among thousands in and around Jharia that eke out a risky living scavenging coal from opencast mines or working at the scores of mafia-run "rat hole" mines that honeycomb the region. Men pushing bicycles overloaded with coal sacks, and women and children hauling baskets of coal on their heads are a fixture of the local landscape. The coal fires are part of their daily existence; they use them to boil pots of water or roast vegetables.

But of late, the fire has licked its way under villagers' homes. For the past year and a half Devi has been watching as her neighbors—unable to bear the noxious fumes and fearful of cave-ins—tear down the brick walls of their homes and move away to a government-built resettlement colony about 20 kilometers away. But Devi refuses to leave. "There might be four-story houses there [at the resettlement colony] but there's no work," she says. "We can only eat if we work, and to do that we will have to travel back here every day to find coal."

Coal has been the center of Jharia's economy since the late 1800s. The bustling rural-industrial township is part of Dhanbad district—the self-described "Coal Capital of India." Jharia sits atop one of the world's largest known reserves of high grade coking coal—coal that is used in blast furnaces to make steel. The total reserves in the Jharia coalfields, about 17 billion tons spread across 460 square kilometers, are worth \$2 trillion. But a big chunk of that is inaccessible because of raging underground fires, some of which have been burning for nearly

a hundred years. Most fires were set off by improper mining practices that led to buildup of volatile gases that ignited when exposed to air.

Since the first fire was reported in 1916, at least 37 million tons of coal have been consumed in the inferno. Opencast and slaughter mining methods, where only top-of-the-mine coal is extracted, has exacerbated the situation. Bharat Coking Coal Limited (BCCL)—the state-controlled company that took over most of the mines in the area in 1971—prefers digging humongous pits to underground mining because it's cheaper. But exposing coal seams to the air is helping the fires spread.

There are 67 fires across the coalfields—some close to the surface, others deep underground—that are blocking access to about 2 billion tons of coal. Geologists estimate that if all of that were to burn at the same average rate as today's fires, the blazes could last for another 3,800 years.

The fires have spread so far that they now threaten the lives of the 400,000 people living in urban and rural settlements around the coalfields. For those living and working right atop the fires, the threat of cave-ins is constant. One mine outside Jharia collapsed in 2006, killing 54 people. Those still on solid ground risk severe respiratory, skin, and heart problems from inhaling coal dust, ash, and toxic gases (sulfur, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide) emitted from the burning.

After decades of ineffectual efforts to control the fires, the Indian government in 2008 approved an ambitious \$1.8 billion plan to relocate the entire township to "non coal-bearing areas." Touted as "world's biggest peacetime relocation program," the project has generated opposition among people who have lived in Jharia for generations.

Mistrust of government policies runs deep. Many believe BCCL has an interest in allowing the fires to spread since this gives the company an excuse to empty out Jharia and access the rich coal reserves underneath.

"They are just waiting for the fire to enter the heart of the town", says Ashok Agarwal, executive president of the Save Jharia Coalfields Committee, a coalition of local residents who are demanding a halt to all opencast mining in the area. "Right now the town itself has no fire underneath it, but it's just a matter of time. Once the fire enters a man's home, how long will he put up a fight? For us it is a desperate situation." The coalition wants the government to instead use fire-control methods to save their land.

Underground coal fires are notoriously hard to put out. A coal fire in Centralia, PA has been burning since 1962 and has turned the place into a ghost town. In Australia, the oldest-known coal fire, Burning Mountain, has been burning for an estimated 6,000 years. But Agarwal's allegation that the government isn't really interested in saving Jharia has some weight. Local media reports have quoted a top BCCL official saying that the "most important thing" about

moving people out of the way is that it would make extracting "absolutely precious coking coal ... easier."

The Jharia relocation plan, to be completed in 12 years, is running ahead of schedule, BCCL officials say. "So far, about 12,000 families have already been shifted from the most unstable areas [including Bokapahari] to the rehabilitation site in Belgharia," says BCCL Chief Managing Director Tapas Kumar Lahiri. "Displacement is always painful, even if you live in the worst of places. ... But those who have shifted they say, 'yes we are happy today' because they are for the first time breathing fresh air. When everyone is seeing real development—here are schools, transport beyond the scope of the master plan—they are understanding that they are really being cared for by the company."

The new residents of the pilot rehabilitation colony in Belgharia, a bone-jarring hour-long ride from Jharia town, tell a different story. It appears that BCCL has managed to move only the most marginalized people—day laborers and informal coal miners who lived right by the mines and were forced to leave when the fires entered their homes. Now they have no means to feed themselves.

"We didn't want to come here because it was all jungle and there was nothing, but the fires forced us to," says Munna Chauhan, who still works gathering coal when he can catch the lone bus that makes two runs a day to Jharia. "Now our kids have to walk four kilometers to school. There's no hospital nearby. One medical ambulance comes on Saturdays for 30 minutes. Sometimes it doesn't come. There are no jobs. Here there is 20% convenience and 80% discomfort.

"We might have escaped illnesses but we are all dying of hunger," he says.

Meanwhile, back in Jharia, Anita Devi's family has enough food to live. But they are risking death to get it. □□□

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