

It's Internal 'Colonialism'

Garga Chatterjee

India was supposed to be a democratic federal union. The daily debasing of that compact goes largely unnoticed among the chattering classes and policy makers. The states in India have long been reduced to impoverished alms-seekers—mass leaders from its great provinces prostrating daily in front of federal bureaucrats and policy-makers who represent no one. This is nothing short of disturbing, to say the least and cannot be a good sign of health in a democracy.

Why are states forever standing with the begging bowl in front of the centre? It is not that the city of Delhi knows any secret formula to grow money in the manicured gardens near the North and South block. This false opulence comes from the constitutional provisions by which the centre grabs most of the revenues that are produced in the states. The centre has also awarded itself the right to grab the revenues from the pre-existing wealth of the states, namely their minerals and other subterranean resources. It is from this wealth gathered from distant lands that the 'National Capital Region' or British-built Delhi awards itself with infrastructure and services that other parts of India can only dream of or can only pay for by the traditional Indian method known as toiling hard to earn one's own bread.

Except Maharashtra, all the other coal-producing states are poverty stricken—near about fifty percent of the people in these states living even below the Montek-line, mockingly known as the poverty line. This includes West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. These also include some of the most impoverished zones of the Indian Union, where contractors, mining mafia, government officials and goons rule the roost as a dehumanized and starving populace looks on. What the centre gives as coal royalty to these states is a pittance. Delhi siphons that off through its channels keeping the states impoverished. The states have repeatedly asked for the coal royalties to be increased. Such requests have fallen on deaf ears—coal is lucrative and the thief knows that. Geography books in India inform students that West Bengal and Jharkhand have coal deposits. What it does not inform is that the coal does not belong to them. They are more like encroachers on the land under which there is coal deposit—the centre throws some spare change at these beggar-states as it makes off with the loot. While nationalisation of prime resources is indeed a positive step, the divorcing of the fruits of the bounty from the very people in whose areas these were found goes against all elements of distributive justice.

In such a scenario, honourable Shriprakash Jaiswal, the coal minister sitting in Delhi's Shastri Bhavan, has given West Bengal a few pearls of wisdom. He has suggested that work be stopped at the almost-completed Bengal Aerotropolis project at Andal near Durgapur as coal was locked under those lands. This ambitious project, which is projected to make Andal a major air-cargo hub of South and South-east Asia, has been a project longtime in the making. Similar

clamours from the centre a few years ago had made the West Bengal government take the drastic step of reducing the project area by 400 acres so that certain areas with purportedly rich coal deposits are left out. From minister Jaiswal's recent pronouncements it seems that the Sultans of Delhi want more as coal is a national property and hence, projects should not come up on coal-bearing land so that mining activities are affected.

It seems that having coal, or other mineral deposits, is like having a curse. Dongria Kondh people of Orissa and Gond people of Chhattisgarh know it too well as the central paramilitaries effectively suspend the fundamental rights of the citizen in these places to uphold the rights of multinational mineral magnates to plunder and run. Equally bad is the scenario of states like West Bengal. The centre will not increase royalties on coal. At the same time, it is threatening to throw a spanner into a major potential employment and revenue-generating project in the state. The coal is national, but the revenue loss is West Bengal's. The coal is a national resource, but land in West Bengal will be quarantined for such purposes without reasonable compensation to West Bengal. If a respectful relationship between the Union centre and the mineral-bearing states are to evolve, the central government might want to make the states equal partners in decision-making as well as royalty and revenue sharing. It is rather short-sighted to expect that West Bengal and Jharkhand will forever pay for Commonwealth Games and white elephant infrastructure in Delhi while its own people starve. The expression of sharp discontent and dogged resistance by Balochi nationalists on very similar matters of natural resource exploitation by Islamabad is a sub-continental example. One expects that Delhi will learn from its neighbour—that uncompensated exploitation of a province's resources is unjust, that a functioning union needs co-operating partners, not imperious masters and sulking servants. □□□