

Envisaging Just Energy Transitions in Jharkhand: (Re)Interrogating the Politico-Economic Entanglements of the Private Regimes of Extraction and Accumulation

EKATA BAKSHI , IPSHITA BASU  AND ARUNOPOL SEAL 

One of the major concerns around in coal mining and extractive regimes more generally in India has been the role of the private sector in managing precarious labor environments through intermediation, which has deep political roots. While the state–corporate nexus is well established in the coal mining sector, we observe here that an important part of sustaining productivity and profitability from mining has been the organized intermediation of private subcontractors who work between formal and informal coal economies and between coal companies and communities. This paper seeks to historically situate the emergence of these private entities and the nature of competition between them. Additionally, it elucidates how political machinery is deployed to manage such conflicts and competition. The paper argues that while competition among different private entities occurs at the profit level, the internal conflict and its efficient political management contribute to seamless accumulation—both primitive accumulation and surplus value accumulation—within the coal economies by preventing organized labor resistance. It concludes by arguing that without a nuanced understanding of the politics of the “private” within the coal economy and its accumulative regimes, any attempt at Just Transitions will fail

EKATA BAKSHI is a Senior Research Consultant at the Policy and Development Advisory Group, New Delhi, India and a Visiting fellow at the Women’s Studies Centre, Ranchi University, Jharkhand, India. She can be reached at <ekatabakshi@gmail.com>.

IPSHITA BASU is an Associate Professor (Reader) in Global Development and Politics at the University of Westminster, London, UK. She can be reached at <basui@westminster.ac.uk>.

ARUNOPOL SEAL is a Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Westminster, London, UK. He can be reached at <a.seal@westminster.ac.uk>.

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to comprehend the multifaceted nature of exploitation, co-option, and negotiation within such regimes.

KEYWORDS: Just Energy Transition; extractive regimes; regimes of accumulation; Politics of Energy Transition; political economy of coal; private and il/legal economies; (im)possibilities of community led transitions.

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Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the debates surrounding energy transitions in India by critically analyzing the role of the “private” sector in the coal mining economy. Global attention on coal and Just Transition (JT) typically zooms in on India and China and their hunger for more coal as they strive to meet burgeoning energy needs. While the coal dependence continues and shows signs of expansion in India’s energy policies, the declining profitability of mining coal, the lukewarm response to new coal block auctioning, in general, and global pressures have also made way for a major thrust on renewable energy (RE) in recent times. This makes Renewable Energy Transitions (RET) a strong possibility in the foreseeable future. However, research from communities at the frontier of coal extraction has shown that the question of Just Energy Transitions (JET) is not just a technical choice but one that is deeply political.

The exploitative regimes associated with coal—across accumulation and extraction—have engendered and entrenched deeply unequal social, political, and economic relations in coal heartlands which will continue to impact all attempts at energy transitions. An ethical approach to Just Transitions must therefore be built on political engagement from below (Chhotray, 2024). The paper acknowledges that there are many other dimensions to the inequalities associated with coal but for the present purpose, it will focus on the aspect of livelihood of coal workers in relation to Just Transitions. Further, in trying to carefully illuminate the political aspects of livelihood transitions that cannot be simply answered through mechanisms for economic diversification and/or skilling, we seek to base our observations on the insights of ethnographic studies conducted between September and December 2023 in a coal mining area, located in North Chotanagpur Division of Jharkhand.

Jharkhand is one of the highest producers of coking coal in India,¹ yet the communities from Adivasi and Dalit backgrounds living in coal regions are amongst

¹In 2022–2023, Jharkhand produced 99.44% of total coking coal in India, mainly from the open cast mines.

the poorest and lowest ranked on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For this reason, Jharkhand has been referenced as an example of the classic “resource curse” (Chhotray, 2024; Oskarsson & Chhotray, 2021). While coal has been synonymous with India’s post-colonial industrial vision (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014), for much of its history, starting from the early 19th-century British natural resource extraction in Jharkhand, mines have been under private ownership. State laws, in particular, the land acquisition laws, have enabled mine owners to acquire land in exchange for compensatory jobs for those who could prove land ownership. In 1970, mines in Jharkhand were nationalized after decades of agitation against the labor exploitation and dispossession experienced by the communities living on (or migrating to) the coal belt in Northern Jharkhand. However, nationalization did not change the situation of local Adivasi families much. Mine owners who replaced the British private owners in the 1950s and 1960s, came from the upper-caste Bihari, Marwari, and Bengali backgrounds and under political pressure from the Bihar government tended to offer state-guaranteed remunerative jobs to North Bihar migrants. Nationalization, and therefore direct ownership, of mines by the Bihar government meant that more jobs were distributed as patronage benefits to North Bihar constituencies, while eluding the locals of Jharkhand. In this context, agitation against mines gained further momentum after nationalization. Mine agitation led by prominent leaders like A. K. Roy from Dhanbad gained the support of the Jharkhand Movement, which demanded separation from Bihar on the basis of resentment against internal colonialism and claims of being the original sons of the soil. In fact, the most radical phase of the Jharkhand Movement, which eventually led Delhi to listen to their demand for a separate state, involved “successful” economic blockades by the regional parties AJSU and JMM, which closed the transport of mines in 1992 (Basu, 2024).²

With the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, mines were gradually reopened for private ownership by the auctioning of coal blocks to private owners and leasing the coal blocks to private contractors. The process accelerated since the 2000s, when Jharkhand State was formed.³ While academic research has largely focused on two forms of private involvement in discussing coal’s extractive regimes, i.e., privatization before nationalization and the more recent privatization since neoliberal structural changes in the Indian economy in the 1990s, only a small section of research has examined another aspect of the “private sector” within coal economies—namely,

²Just 10 days of mine closure would cost India around 5 billion.

³The creation of Jharkhand in 2000 has been described as a consequence of, but more as a result of, narrow political bargains between the leaders in Delhi and Bihar rather than meeting the regional autonomy and self-determination demands of the original leaders of the Movement (Basu, 2024).

private operators in the upstream and downstream coal economies and those in the shadow/illegal economies of coal.

Using this as a starting point, this paper examines the private sector in the coal mining economy across the formal–informal, local–extra-local, and legal–illegal binaries. Based on four months of field research (from October 2023 to January 2024) in an open cast mine in Northwestern Jharkhand, we present our arguments. While exploring the private sector in multiple spheres, we argue that different private entities might have competing interests and may even be in conflict with each other. The “private” as a whole, however, forms an integral part of the regimes of accumulation and extraction and entrenches coal-based inequalities. In this paper, we seek to historically situate the emergence of these private entities and the nature of competition between them. Additionally, we elucidate how political machinery is deployed to manage such conflicts and competition. We argue that while competition among different private entities occurs at the profit level, the internal conflict and its efficient political management contribute to seamless accumulation—both primitive accumulation and surplus value accumulation—within the coal economies by preventing organized labor resistance. The paper concludes by arguing that without a nuanced understanding of the politics of the “private” within the coal economy and its accumulative regimes, any attempt at Just Transitions will fail to comprehend the multi-faceted nature of exploitation, co-option, and negotiation within such regimes which (will) shape the possibilities and choices of the most marginalized in the context of energy transitions.

Perspectives on the Embedded Politics of Coal Extraction

Brokering, intermediation, and informalization are some of the terms that surface when scholars characterize the social and political organization of coal economies. Taking the lens of extractive regimes, for example, Chhotray (2024) described the role of states as “broker states,” who solicited private investment in mining while dealing with local resistance through compensation and coercion, if necessary. Meanwhile, Noy (2022) discussed the role of “political brokers” in the context of intermediation between coal companies and the Adivasi communities risking displacement. Political brokers leverage their political capital (as members of the community with links to regional parties with an agitational history) to organize land deeds to secure jobs in mines. They distribute these “benefits” to those who can arrange the funds through patron–client-type relations for their own political gain. The impact of brokering, intermediation, and subcontracting is that while some upwardly mobile groups are

invested in coal regimes, particularly for managing the precarious labor environment on which they are built, there are others who are disenfranchised and have to live with continuous uncertainty and risk. Coal mining, as we discuss below, has never been profitable or efficient. It is the management of precarious labor and land that have kept it going, and over time challenges of profit and gaining efficiency through mechanization have actually increased the informal shadow economies surrounding coal extraction, while the prospects of secure formal jobs in mining have diminished.

Broadly, research has perceived the “informal” private regimes of coal in two ways. One body of research views these private operators as individuals seeking coal-based livelihoods after being displaced by mining projects. While it acknowledges the gradations among various private operators, it primarily sees these activities as people’s attempts to negotiate state-led accumulation and displacement (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014; Oskarsson, Lahiri-Dutt, & Kindo, 2024). The second body of research recognizes these private operators as part of coal’s accumulative regimes and acknowledges the gradations within this sector. It also highlights the relationship between these private operators and the local and extra-local political arrangements that support them. However, it tends to view these various private entities as organized syndicates characterized by the nexus between crime and politics to aid capitalist accumulation across formal–informal and legal–illegal divides (Singh & Harriss-White, 2019).

Our observations take the latter view (Singh & Harriss-White, 2019) further by showing how internal competition over profits between different subcontractors is politically (and socially) managed for seamless capital accumulation. We in fact argue that this internal competition helps in fracturing dissent and labor protests. The role and prospects of the marginalized informal labor force within the informal economy are determined on the basis of their vulnerability and access to different forms of capital. As people seek to establish themselves within the cartel, they compete with each other for marginally better access. The most marginalized also are forced to choose between competing factions for marginal advantages. These competing centers of power, therefore, make it difficult to organize along sharply defined group interests. Such an ecosystem, therefore, prevents the informal workforce from unionizing to express dissent, thereby facilitating unhindered extraction.

We also argue that this is not only about the crime–politics nexus. It is about how regimes of mineral extraction are built on graded subordination (of castes and tribes) and how economic incentives and political dynamics come together for elites. For such forms of political management, transition to any other form of energy production is likely to see reproduction of the forms of domination and social organization that

currently operate making any homogeneous imagination of community and community-based action toward Just Transitions extremely difficult to organize, if not impossible. Hence, as we discuss below, attending to how stakeholders (including elites and non-elites) are organized through the management of violence and social order in an economic context (that intentionally crosses between formal and informal spheres) helps us understand what are the stakes involved for/against Just Transition. Our conceptual approach is built in part on the typology of North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) of the “natural state”—a context where a closed group of elites limit the possibility of violence (in the form of labor/indigenous agitation) by politically managing the economy to create privileged interests.⁴

Coal, Primitive Accumulation, and the Natural State in Operation

Coal extraction and production in India have a violent history, particularly regarding labor practices during the colonial era. This brutal labor exploitation was essential to the profitability of coal mining, which was initially not a lucrative endeavor. Despite being highlighted in nationalist agendas and speeches by leaders, the deplorable conditions of coal workers persisted for about 25 years after India gained independence. In 1973–1974, coal was nationalized, marking a shift which was purportedly to eliminate this violent history and usher in labor reforms. However, within 15 years, the increased labor wage and safety standards, along with coal’s labor-intensive nature, began to challenge profitability. Efforts to make public sector coal enterprises more efficient led to downsizing and increased mechanization. Although mass retrenchments did not occur, new recruitments were halted except for compensatory employment in the cases where families could establish their displacement from lands that they could prove ownerships over. From the 1990s, formality in labor engagement became narrowly defined, leading to the expansion of ancillary, informal, and illicit coal economies. Furthermore, coal dependency was accentuated as other

⁴North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) distinguished between two forms of social order—the natural state and the open access state. The former, “natural state,” operates in extractive regimes, where elite interests (of those who have a stake in the coal economy) are managed. In the “natural state,” elites—members of the dominant coalition—agree to respect each other’s privileges, including property rights and access to resources and activities. By limiting access to these privileges to members of the dominant coalition, elites create credible incentives to cooperate rather than fight among themselves. Because elites know that violence will reduce their own rents, they have incentives not to fight. Furthermore, each elite understands that other elites face similar incentives. In this way, the political system of a natural state manipulates the economic system to produce rents that then secure political order. Natural states limit the ability of individuals to form organizations. Open access states, in contrast, have institutional arrangement for managing violence, and political representation is based on legitimation and support of the broadest majority. Rents are also pursued, but they are disciplined by open competition for all.

sources of livelihoods, such as agriculture and collection of forest produce, disintegrated with land loss, fragmentation of community land rights, and ecological damage.

Introduction of labor norms in the formal sector had little impact on the engagements in the informal sectors, which perpetuated precarious working conditions. These conditions worsened from the 1990s with the private sector's re-entry into coal mining. While new recruitments occurred, most work contracts at lower levels remained precarious, though formal, while executives enjoyed greater job security. These mechanisms particularly impacted historically marginalized groups in coal-bearing states like Jharkhand, where lands, resources, and livelihoods were appropriated for mining without adequate compensation.

These changes took place in the backdrop of changes in demand for energy in India. In the immediate post-nationalization period, the demand for coal for thermal power generation rose. Whereas, its demand from the automobile industry and railways declined, as they transitioned from steam to diesel and petroleum engines. To address declining demand from traditional sectors and the rising demand for energy, coal production shifted entirely toward thermal power generation. Open cast mining, more ecologically damaging than underground mining, became the dominant method to support this particular kind of growing need. This shift aggravated mining's ecological and social impacts, transforming landscapes and rendering traditional livelihoods—agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and live-stock rearing—impossible. With the support of the successive state governments, coal mine owners could continue to use the legal clause of Eminent Domain (ED) to supersede the protective measures of ownership vested in indigenous land tenancy laws in Jharkhand.⁵ This doctrine allowed the state to expropriate private lands for national interests like energy production, often without fair compensation or rehabilitation, disenfranchising historically marginalized Adivasis and Dalits tied to their ancestral lands.

Meanwhile, in the 1980s, mechanization of coal mining operations further transformed the industry. Mechanized operations required fewer workers, making compensatory job promises for displaced individuals nearly obsolete. Coal India Limited and its subsidiaries, including Central Coalfields Limited (CCL) in Jharkhand, initially provided some employment opportunities to the displaced. However,

⁵The principle of ED vests the sovereign ownership of all land and natural resources to the state, and this was mobilized to acquire land for mining purposes largely through two legal instruments: first, the Coal Bearing Areas Act 1957 (CBAA) and second, the Land Acquisition Act 1894 (LAA). The principle allowed the state to supersede the provisions of Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA) and Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act (SPTA).

increasing mechanization reduced the need for labor-intensive methods, limiting compensatory employment.

Additionally, classifying energy production from coal as an essential commodity required coal mining companies to sell coal to power plants, like the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), at subsidized rates, affecting profitability despite rising thermal power demand. The obligation to provide subsidized coal, combined with the rising costs of mechanized production and compensation requirements, strained coal companies financially. By the late 1980s and 1990s, entities like CCL became financial liabilities for the state. To mitigate losses, coal companies intensified exploitative practices, reducing compensatory employment and favoring mechanized production. Larger operational tasks were outsourced to private firms with advanced mining capabilities, further reducing the scope for securing coal-based formal employment for the marginalized displaced local populations. The mandate to meet national energy needs also reduced coal allocated to road-cum-rail sales, which were initially intended to provide local employment.

The legal maneuvers of land acquisition alienated and displaced Adivasis of Jharkhand from their land and facilitated the operation of public enterprises such as CIL and, later, private mines through amendments of the Nationalisation of Coal Mines Act 1973 which allowed private captive mines to operate on CIL-acquired lands (Lahiri-Dutt, Krishnan, & Ahmad, 2012). Lands acquired by public enterprises such as CIL through LAA (Land Acquisition Act) and CBAA (Coal Bearing Areas Act) were not compensated for those households who did not have ownership papers or the landless Scheduled Caste (SC) communities who had been traditionally living on *Gair majurwa* (GM) *Khas*⁶ land, empowered through customary (Khutkatti) rights or through the permission of the Gram Sabha. The enterprises also did not compensate for resources that were otherwise utilized by the communities for their subsistence such as grazing land, community forest, and school premises which were present on *GM Aam* land. Such cost-effective strategies were further facilitated through narrow definitions of the terms of compensation and an absence of a package for rehabilitation of livelihoods. Additionally, Jharkhand State's policy for developing land banks and estates for industrial development clearly demonstrated the state's willingness to be a facilitator for land acquisition by private players.

⁶*Gair majurwa* literally means deedless land, i.e., land that is not officially recorded and does not have legal ownership. Those living on or cultivating this land may have *de-facto* ownership although such customary ownership is not recognized by the company that takes over the land for mining (see, for more details, <https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/gair-majurwa>).

Progressively as the mining sector evolved in Jharkhand, two simultaneous maneuvers were executed: On the one hand, cohorts of dispossessed, vulnerable populations were created through primitive accumulation by the state and, on the other, opportunities for the emerging vulnerable population in the formal private sector were stifled through dilution of labor laws, mechanization, and further layers of subcontracting of mining operations. This created an acutely marginalized population with no livelihood opportunities or dependent securities, who were coerced to work for survival in the illegal sphere of the quasi-public and private coal sectors. The contexts in which they worked, lived, and sought dependent security in the face of continuing uncertainties and risks, were regimes of primitive accumulation—land possessed from residents and allocated for capital accumulation, while residents themselves survived on the surplus value of their labor.

Devoid of formal social protection, the affected communities needed to constantly negotiate for the much required legal immunity for gathering, aggregating, and trading illegally mined coal from politically aligned power brokers of the region. Given that permission for gathering illegal coal is negotiated according to the capital and power of different stakeholders involved, the illegal sphere of coal reaffirmed embedded caste and ethnic hierarchies as well as engendered new strata of power within the dispossessed population. In negotiating within this sphere, people relied on their existing capital to strive for better returns. New attributes, such as brute muscle power and the strength of kinship networks, emerged as the forms of capital that could be harnessed for better rewards. This both reaffirmed old hierarchies within the community and allowed for the emergence of new ones.

As illegal coal was mined by the most vulnerable section of the displaced population, the surplus value generated through their labor power was appropriated by those who occupied the relatively higher strata of power as profit. However, the surplus value was further differentiated as per the degree of political power wielded by the power brokers who occupied the upper hierarchies of the illegal economy of coal. Political alignments played a crucial role as power brokers attempted to hold on to their positions by maintaining a monopoly over the means of violence. Additionally, as the surplus value generated through illegally mined coal remained unaccounted on legal records, it was utilized for various activities which aided accumulation of political power and nexus other than personal accumulation of the power brokers. Hence, the illegal economy of coal thrived due to political support and the illegal economy in turn sustained accumulation of political power.

The formal sector, on the other hand, indirectly justified and facilitated the operation of the illicit sector through participation and corruption. The involvement of

private industry in coal was driven not only by the licit economy but also by the profitability of the illicit sector. Similarly, informal, ancillary forms bridged the formal and illegal, drawing on both for survival. The interplay between licit and illicit economies made coal a focal point of political negotiations, where communities were fractured, and power brokers were foisted through political maneuvering to facilitate land acquisitions and smooth coal operations (Noy, 2022). These actors were rewarded with increased shares of the profits, largely in the illicit sphere. Thus, actors operated across both domains to consolidate power and rewards.

Those most adversely incorporated within these extractive regimes continued to operate within them because, for them, it was the only option that provided a “simulacra of order” and certainty (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2013).

Twin Dynamics of Uneven Compensation and Informalization of Coal Economies

Our research focuses on an open cast mining project in the North Shrirampura coalfields.⁷

The coalfield spans 1,230 km² and includes parts of Ranchi, Chatra, Hazaribagh, and Latehar Districts. This coalfield is critical for understanding the social and ecological impacts of coal dependency due to its location in the Upper Damodar River Valley, a vital water system for thousands of villages and industrial complexes in Jharkhand and West Bengal. The North Shrirampura coalfields hold 14 billion tons of coal, 9% of India’s reserves, predominantly the non-coking coal. Most of the planned mining blocks are yet untouched, with 23 new blocks potentially affecting 269 villages and 75,000 ha (hectares) of land, rich in natural resources and home to indigenous Adivasis and Dalits. Multiple mining projects across decades have been sunk in the North Shrirampura coalfields since the 1980s. The particular geographical context of our research features notable mining projects like the Prospect⁸ Open Cast Project and Axis Open Cast Project, known for their technological advancements and coal production for thermal power and iron extraction. These projects, starting in the 1990s, have displaced many villages, including Barwa, Makardaha, Mahuadih, and Pharsa. Pharsa, in particular, illustrates the intricate interplay of formal and informal economies in the region.

Figure 1 presents the timeline of the evolution of the open cast mine.

⁷Name of coal field as well as associated geographies has been changed for the purpose of this article.

⁸Names of coal mining projects have been changed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

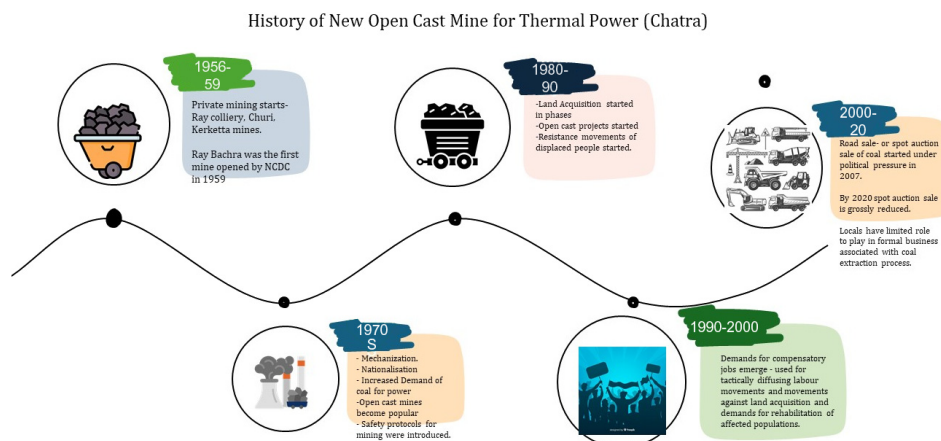


Fig. 1. Timeline for the evolution of coal mining in India.

The Axis Project in North Shrirampura coalfields began in the mid-1980s, under the management of Central Coalfields Limited, a subsidiary of Coal India Limited. It wasn't until 1994 that rehabilitation plans were formulated, and these plans were significantly revised in 2008 to align with the national policies on displacement and rehabilitation in India. A key aspect of these rehabilitation policies was the provision of cash compensation for fixed assets, such as houses and fruit trees, but only when displaced individuals could provide undisputed legal claims over these resources. However, common property resources, such as forests, streams, and wildlife, were not considered "owned assets," and thus, no compensation was provided for these, despite their significant role in the livelihoods of local communities prior to the advent of mining.⁹

Compensation issues also included unevenness in disbursement, reliance on bureaucracy and documentation, and gender disparities. The Axis OCP CCL attempted to mitigate protests against land acquisition and displacement by offering jobs to displaced households, with employment opportunities based on land ownership and education levels. Households with larger landholdings benefited more, creating disparities between those with and without jobs. For households with smaller land holdings, only certain adult male members gained formal employment while the others did not, creating significant disparities within the families. On the other hand, jobs were often informally sold when households did not have enough members as compared to the number of employment opportunities assigned to them. Certain families with members in formal

⁹For a detailed history of a coalfield in a contiguous geography with a similar history, readers can refer to [Bennett and McDowell \(2012\)](#).

employment had been able to use such opportunities to develop supplementary sources of income such as buying trucks to transport coal. Certain other families which did not have adult male members to avail the employment opportunities in lieu of land tried to defer the availing of such opportunities, so that their children could claim the opportunities when they became adults but such ambitions did not come to fruition. Additionally, compensation was only disbursed when ownership could be unequivocally proven. Many people lacked necessary documentation due to colonial legacies of record-keeping, low literacy levels, and tenuous claims on land. Those who had settled on common lands (*Gair majurwa*) were not considered as eligible for compensation. Women, who engaged in agricultural labor, were not given employment opportunities as they were not considered landowners. They often relied on forests for their livelihoods, which were severely impacted by mining. However, women received minimal compensation for their losses and became dependent on the incomes of male household members.

The uneven compensation regimes and the almost complete loss of former livelihoods led to various survival strategies, primarily within the informal economy, extending to the shadow and illegal economies of coal. The protests birthed a cadre of local leaders who wielded control over work allocations, particularly under road sale provisions aimed at providing income avenues for those without formal employment opportunities due to land displacement. These leaders, leveraging their influence, evolved into significant power brokers, accumulating capital that enabled them to dominate coal transportation through truck ownership. However, loading and sorting operations ceased by official decree around 2019, disproportionately affecting women who relied on these activities for income. In the cases where male family members could provide financial support, displaced women often refrained from seeking alternative employment. Further, in Chatra, the privatization of operations led to heightened security measures in coal dumping yards and closed mine areas. Consequently, commercial scavenging of coal dwindled significantly in the region. Any coal that was scavenged and could evade stringent surveillance by the security guards, primarily served household consumption or fueled small-scale enterprises like restaurants, tea shops, and laundries reliant on coal as a raw material.

Leveraging Coal Dependency: The Embedded Politics of “Managing” Compensation at the Household Level

In this section, we aim to further unravel the complexities across the multiple border crossings of the formal and informal realms, engaging in both licit and illicit

activities. The stories of individuals we have selected to discuss below reveal the nature of intermediation at the household level. In a context where licit–illicit and formal–informal spheres of coal extraction are organized through a closed group of stakeholders, managing a precarious labor environment, families hedge their influence across these sectors. Compensatory jobs are one entry point to formal mining. In fact, the vignettes we discuss below show how compensatory jobs in coal mining are not solely important for the job security or remuneration they potentially offer to a household that has given up land. Rather, they offer an entry into the private elite coalition that runs coal extraction regimes at the local level. The vignettes we discuss below are of households who are relatively more affluent and had the social and political connections to leverage their influence across coal’s formal and informal sectors.

These vignettes about few prototypical characters within the coal economy of North Shrirampura coalfields of Chatra District demonstrate political and economic arrangements which underpin each other forming what has been described as *intreccio* (Harriss-White & Singh, 2019). Concomitantly, extending the boundaries of existing research, we also seek to embed these relationships in the social–historical context of the respective coal mines. We seek to emphasize how social–historical arrangements were harnessed to buttress capital accumulation within the coal economies while being simultaneously reshaped by the needs of such accumulation.

The stakeholder map in Figure 2 depicts the stakeholders involved in the formal and informal economies surrounding the open cast mine.

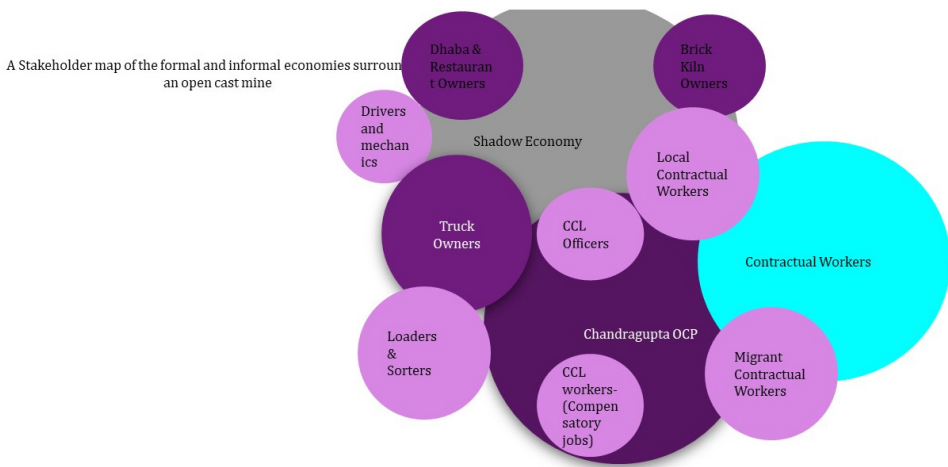


Fig. 2. Stakeholder map.

Leveraging Compensatory Jobs for Social and Political Capital: RB's Story

In Axis OCP, we begin by following RB, a member of a family deeply entrenched in the trucking industry, hailing from a partially displaced village. RB's family belonged to the local dominant caste and was traditionally a part of the landed gentry. Their land holdings were large enough to provide compensatory jobs across two generations. Thus, both RB's parental generation as well as his elder brother had a formal job with the CCL. While lacking formal employment himself, RB benefited from his brother's occupation, which granted him access to various advantages that fortified the family's collective agency. Their strategic collaboration reflects a meticulously negotiated division of labor: RB oversaw the family's illicit ventures, while his brother maintained formal ties with institutions like CCL, ensuring a veneer of respectability and access to influential networks. This symbiotic relationship not only bolstered the family's financial leverage but also solidified their influence within the local community. Moreover, their substantial land holdings served as a cornerstone of their power, facilitating negotiations and providing financial sustenance during adversities.

Formal employment provided them with economic security. However, the acquired lands were not immediately used by CCL for digging mining pits. RB's family continued to use the already acquired lands to accrue capital through farming. Economic security coupled with their status as members of a numerically preponderant caste allowed them to stage anti-mine protests to further strengthen their claims as important political actors. To pacify their claims, RB's family was co-opted with the circuits of power brokers within the coal economy. This provided RB's family the opportunity to gain a contract to transport coal from CCL mines. Such an opportunity allowed RB and his family members to gain from the illegal economy of coal as they had the power to transport the illegally mined coals outside the mines. Eventually, RB strengthened his influence to become a leader of the truck association. Additionally, he used his brother's influence as a formal CCL worker to have influence over the trade union.

Given that the trade unions played a crucial role in transporting illegal coal as well as in arbitrating compensation-related matters, RB and his family consolidated power from multiple dimensions to secure their position within the coal economy. Given the illegal nature of such economies, RB and his family needed political patronage to sustain power over other stakeholders. Political patronage had a high cost which RB and his family paid from the profit accrued through exploiting cheap labor of members of relatively more vulnerable groups working in the lower strata of the

illegal coal economy. Apart from the rent, political patrons expect power brokers such as RB to maintain disciplined production across ranks to ensure that proceeds from the illegal economy of coal continue without any turmoil.

At the strata of the political parties, such unaccounted proceeds of profit allowed them to concentrate political power and hence leaders of political parties competed to gain control over power brokers such as RB. Sometimes, political leaders buy their allegiance through arm twisting power brokers such as RB into submission and at other times, they further incentivize them by agreeing to provide political immunity at relatively lower rents. Often they use a combination of both.

One Foot in Politics and the Other in the Economy of Coal: The Story of DB

Among our research participants, DB was another critical character who demonstrated how large kinship networks with large landholdings of certain families and communities allowed them to establish control over the contested coal-driven economy of the region. DB's family occupied a critical position with over 30 members being CCL employees. All his family members received jobs as part of compensation and they all worked together to consolidate power on both the formal and the informal economies of coal in the region. On the informal sphere, DB's position as an elder member of a large family allowed him to hold sway across Pharsa and adjacent villages. On the formal end of the spectrum, he was a labor union leader and had the power to negotiate terms of business with CCL officers. Having his foot in both formal and informal spheres allowed him the advantage to control resources and cash flows. Given he was such a powerful figure, certain political parties wanted to control him. He was brought under the police radar mostly to make him feel vulnerable and seek political immunity from powerful political parties by shifting his allegiance to them.

Power brokers such as RB and DB on their end also competed with other power brokers by capitalizing on their political patronage to put other power brokers out of competition. Sometimes, they also formed syndicates to resist other political parties from completely overhauling their influence over the entire illegal coal economy. Given the extremely unstable and contested nature of the illegal coal economy, synchronized syndicated operations seldom formed, unlike the imagination of a monopolized mafia. This instability allowed for an uninterrupted accumulation of capital across the processes of primitive accumulation and surplus value production.

The proceeds of such accumulation, as [Singh and Harriss-White \(2019\)](#) indicated, are often shared by power brokers and stakeholders of the informal economy of coal such as bureaucrats, elected public representatives, and coal mafias who also

constitute the governments at both the national as well as regional levels. Hence, the question of adopting JET particularly through de-carbonization policies by the central and the state governments often becomes a tricky question, i.e., an elephant in the policy room which no one wants to address. While illegal coal continues to nourish regional political parties (Singh & Harriss-White, 2019) and bureaucrats associated with the public sector companies who extract coal, Just Energy Transitions policies clearly become self-annihilatory ones for such parties to sustain their funding for maintaining political authority. Hence, on the forefront such parties often foreground coal as an important resource that supports the labor and livelihoods of people of the region and resist international development banks as well as rolling out of JET mechanisms. On the other hand, the national-level parties who are capable of funding themselves through larger corporate nexus often attempt to destabilize the funding sources of the regional parties through co-opting important power brokers within the cartel and only notionally rolling out JET measures without making any commitments toward reducing the nation's energy dependence on coal. However, as international pressure continues to mount and the imminent crisis of depleting coal deposits continues to grow, in the near future the central government would consider phasing out coal. In such a scenario, sections of communities that have been deeply fragmented by the politico-economic nexus that extracts surplus from coal mining, are likely to be extremely unequally positioned to negotiate with such transitions. Power hierarchies within communities are likely to affect the possibility of upholding any common agenda. On the other hand, the politico-economic nexus is likely to manipulate any move toward transitions to maintain and profit from the existing inequalities albeit in a modified form.

The Agenda of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Energy Transitions: Limitations of the Just Transitions Measures in Jharkhand

Energy transition debates picked up pace since India started participating in the COP. India laid out its nationally intended goals in the Paris Climate Conference (2015) and emphasized on transitioning from fossil fuel-based energy sources toward more renewable sources of energy. Without committing to any form of closure of the fossil fuel-based energy sourcing, India shared its intention of prioritizing hydropower generation. Since then, energy transition partnerships have become an important topic of discussion in the G7 summits. The questions of “justice” associated with such energy transition and who will bear the collateral cost of such energy transition were

also discussed and deliberated in the G7 summits. However, the definition of justice has for the longest time remained an issue of severe contention. Like all other developmental programs, Just Energy Transitions Partnerships (JETPs) seem to disacknowledge context-specific histories of the populations who are associated with fossil fuel-based economies, particularly coal in the context of Jharkhand.

Various development banks have attempted to forge JETPs with different state and central governments in South and Southeast Asia. In the context of Jharkhand, which is one of the key producers of coal in India, various development banks have prospected for initiating JETPs. However, the state governments and the central government have demonstrated little interest in such prospecting projects. Such disinterest to initiate Just Transitions measures stems from various interdependent conditions which outline the JETPs. [Pai \(2021\)](#), [Bhushan and Banerjee \(2023\)](#), and [Mukherjee and Sharan \(2023\)](#) have outlined few operational roadblocks for the implementation of JETPs—such as JETPs offering loan-based support to the states to initiate alternative green livelihoods for affected populations and to initiate energy-producing systems. Such loans keep the states indebted; particularly for the Global South states which have large coal deposits, it becomes counterintuitive for them to stop the extraction of natural resources that would give them high economic revenue, and instead they need to incur debts to transition out of it for a “Western definition” of a global cause. In short, they are unwilling to sacrifice their own opportunity of growth on the grounds that the planetary crisis has largely been caused by the West ([Dubash, 2012](#); [Raghunandan, 2012](#)).

Apart from these, JETPs do not pay adequate attention to the history of the most vulnerable communities who would be affected if energy transition measures are initiated. As [Pandey and Sharma \(2021\)](#) have mentioned, energy transition measures and even discussions on energy justice largely focus on the distributional and procedural aspects of energy justice and do not pay attention to the specific perspective of the marginalized communities who are embedded within the coal-based economies. In other words, such measures lack a recognition of people’s own relational understanding of their identities and their agendas shaped by such identities. To achieve Just Energy Transitions, it is crucial to examine how individuals and social groups mobilize specific social, cultural, and political identities to counteract the asymmetrical arrangements they find themselves in, thereby ensuring recognition-based justice. Simultaneously, such recognition also demands that we acknowledge these very strategies of survival and negotiation which entrench people within the existing structures of power making it difficult for them to exit systems that are inimical to their interests. The paper thus by foregrounding the history of such coal-dependent

communities in the contexts such as Jharkhand, largely seeks to open up a hitherto neglected aspect of discussion on energy justice, i.e., to understand and foreground the rationale of the coal-dependent communities to participate and function within a system that has historically harmed, exploited, and fragmented them—making it difficult for them to rally under a unified cause.

Historically, situating and acknowledging the perspectives of the coal-dependent communities across illegal–legal and formal–informal binaries can help policymakers understand, first, how a large number of such coal-dependent communities are part of an informal, illicit, and often illegal economy within which they were coercively incorporated due to a long history of alienation from agricultural land, forest, and other formal livelihood options. Such vulnerable populations were largely incorporated into laboring roles with varying degrees of risks. Second, history contextualizes how such illegal economies were operated through regional elites (often based on their traditional caste hierarchy) who form cartels to congeal and sustain their political authority over the region. Third, one must understand how such cartels often blend along with the state apparatus to demonstrate their monopoly over violence which enabled them to historically exploit the vulnerabilities (such as traditional caste-based hierarchies and vulnerabilities) of certain groups of population to produce role-specific hierarchies within the informal economy of coal. The securities of life and livelihood of such communities are tied to the performance of their roles within the illicit economy and over the years, such marginalized communities have accrued specific capitals to negotiate and navigate the terms of performance of their roles within the economy.

Over the years, as generations of such marginalized groups have worked within the growing informal economy of coal, they have become increasingly embedded within its circuits of operations. Adherence to their roles ensures survival within an otherwise violent economy. JETPs and even some critical scholars have largely failed to recognize these embedded relationships of the communities and have mistakenly read such community participation in the informal and illegal coal economy simply as an act of resistance to the state to claim control over their resources. However, as we read into the regional histories, it becomes clear that the operation of extractive and accumulative regimes has deeply fragmented communities working in coal-based economies. For the most marginalized sections within such communities, participation in coal-based economies, particularly of the illegal kind, is an act of survival that simultaneously reinforces their marginalization and they cannot enter or exit the cartel at will. At the same time, the privileged within such communities have been systematically foisted to control dissent and ensure unhindered accumulation, even as these sections continue to compete against each other for relative privilege. The

“community” in the case of coal-based economies is not homogeneous and their identities and agendas are specific to the kind of space they have carved out for themselves in the economy and the kinds of capital they have access to. It is a politics of survival itself that makes it difficult for coal-dependent communities to embrace possible alternative jobs. They do not trust the legal/formal frameworks of security to provide them with the protection when historically they have been exploited by the nexus between such formal frameworks and illegal networks. Additionally, over the years they have only accrued capital to navigate and negotiate within an illegal economy and would be disadvantaged if they become dependent on a system which they do not know how to negotiate with. Hence, Just Transitions efforts have largely lacked popular support in the contexts such as Jharkhand.


Conclusion


For a critical understanding of justice in post-coal contexts, it is essential to grasp the entire spectrum of historical injustices and those evolving with changing extractive regimes. In this context, justice could not merely be redistributive; it has to address and respond to injustices entrenched across the licit-illicit binaries. Unified community voices facilitating community-led Just Transitions in such a context are a grossly romanticized imagination that collapses into a benign understanding of a victimized community. It does not adequately address the complexities of power of the illegal coal economy which is constructed through the forced complicity of certain sections of the community with extra-local political patrons. Only when we take into consideration the regimes of capital accumulation across the licit and the illicit, the hierarchies they entrench, and the mechanisms that sustain them, we will be able to adequately politicize the question of sustainable just developmental initiatives such as energy transitions.

Our effort in this paper has been to highlight how coal regimes at the local level can be characterized as the natural state (North, Wallis, and Weingast, 2009). Few elites control and limit access to the extractive regime, by managing the potential of violence (including their own capacity for violence). However, this “simulacra of order” is not derived in the mafia way—with one don eliciting loyalty and fear from others who work in the syndicate. Such representations have been popularized in films but elude the complexities of political management where the stakes and stakeholders are different, competing and certainly lacking trust for each other. What they share, however, is a common incentive for profit in what we have seen as an extremely

precarious labor environment. Thus, while other works have searched for the seeds of agitation (Oskarsson *et al.*, 2024) in an Adivasi landscape or seen the crime–politics nexus as its most dominant feature, we focus on how vested interests work through a tightly managed system. This is not based on loyalty but on leveraging—influence, agitational capacity, muscle, and money—in ways that are competitive but intended to maintain privileged access for those in power. It is important to remember in such a context that while there are inequalities within communities and certain privileged sections within them, their interests are ultimately subservient to larger national-level circuits of political–economic power. Such circuits actively encourage and gain from the competition between regional centers of power, as the internal competition keeps them in check and dependent on larger centers of power for security and protection. Knowing the nature of how domination is operationalized is our first step here to understand the relations of justification that subordinate groups find themselves in. These “relations,” which we discuss in a successive paper, are key to understanding the politics of justification, or the bottom-up engagements of resistance and resilience that should be the entry point to envisioning the “just” in Just Transition.

ORCID

Ekata Bakshi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8363-0037>

Ipshita Basu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1961-1568>

Arunopol Seal  <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0499-5109>

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