



## The Coal Nation. Histories, Ecologies and Politics of Coal in India, edited by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt

Katja Müller

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welfare, anthropology of the state, and the history of ethnography. Together they provide an important contribution to Asian Studies.

**Markus Schleiter**

*Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany*

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Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (ed.), *The Coal Nation. Histories, Ecologies and Politics of Coal in India* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), ISBN 978 1 4724 2470 9, 318 pp., £70.00, hdbk.

*The Coal Nation* brings together 14 authors from different disciplines looking at coal production in India. They provide detailed studies of the conditions and effects of coal extraction, considering its more than one-hundred-year-old history and its potential futures. While all authors seem to agree on the importance of coal mining for the economic development of the nation, they zoom in to the different aspects that shape coal mining and consider legal conditions, ecological impacts and socio-cultural influences. The book is of prime importance not only because growth in resource extraction has become a political priority, but because mining has significant ramifications for people and the environment.

The book is divided into three sections: Justice, Legality, History; Displacement and Social Impacts; and Perspectives on Policy. It starts with a brilliant overview by Lahiri-Dutt of how coal 'energised the nation'. She introduces mines as colonial death pits, coal as a creator of a working class and as symbol of the nation. Lahiri-Dutt traces the historical development of mining since the 'modern discovery' of coal in India in the late eighteenth century, and provides statistics about the quantity, quality and potential reservoir of coal. Her survey of the colonial past of mining and current state policies is complemented by later articles. Ahmad (Chapter 13) summarises current legislation on mining, Amarendra Das (Chapter 14) explains the character of state ownership and taxation rights, and Fernandes and Bharali (Chapter 9) compile statistics on the amount of mining and its social impact in terms of displaced persons, project-affected persons, annexed land and the more recent decline of employment in the sector due to increasing mechanisation.

The first section focuses predominantly on historical conditions, with Saikia describing the difficulties of mining coal in colonial Assam (Chapter 3) and Nite focusing on the history of health and safety measures in the coalfields of Jharia (Chapter 5). Other topics are the coal trade across the India–Bangladesh border (Debojyoti Das, Chapter 4), and informal mining (Lahiri-Dutt, Chapter 2), with the authors emphasising the social injustices and political shortcomings associated with resource extraction and trade.

Coal mining as a form of social injustice provides a base topic that runs through the entire book. Even though working conditions improved slightly after the nationalisation of the mining sector in independent India, coal mines remained sites of social deprivation. While inefficiency and corruption hindered the production of sufficient amounts of fuel to meet increased demand, it is also the state-directed narrative of shortage and urgency in coal mining that has 'helped the Indian state to shed ethical values and its responsibility to the poorest citizens' (p. 20). Lahiri-Dutt and Herbert show that even with the involvement of supposedly neutral supervisory bodies such as the World Bank, those affected by projects remain at the mercy of officials and bureaucrats; the legally-required resettlement is rarely executed, and adequate compensation is not paid. Land-grabbing and the circumvention of protective legislation seem to be the rule, as evidenced by an analysis of current practices in Jharkhand

(Lahiri-Dutt, Krishnan, Ahmad, Chapter 8), Northeastern India (Fernandes, Bharali, Chapter 9) and Andhra Pradesh (Oskarsson, Chapter 10). While there are examples of partly successful protests against thermal power plants in the vicinities of wetlands (Chapter 10), the rulings of the various courts seem somewhat arbitrary, thus indicating a legal limbo or insufficient legal frameworks, since the right to acquisition can take precedence over environmental or social protections (Chapter 8).

Chapter 12, 'Gender in Coal Mining Induced Displacement and Rehabilitation in Jharkhand' by Ahmad and Lahiri-Dutt, reiterates the argument about the marginalisation caused by mining in a particularly polemical fashion. It begins with a summary of feminist-inspired Gender and Development theories to argue for a 'shift away from simplistic narratives of the negative impacts of mining on women' (p. 232). Yet the subsequent analysis of the material remains one-dimensional and is insufficiently complex. While the authors convincingly argue that the loss of woodland negatively impacts upon the safety of women who lose their places for defecation, articulation of more significant negative impacts of displacement remains extremely general, and is based on an idealised past that constructs female members of tribes as independent and empowered. Moreover, the authors fail to acknowledge that the various negative impacts, such as loss of identity and self-worth, may affect men as well and be a possible reason for the increased alcohol consumption and violence.

The articles in the multi-disciplinary book aim to provide analysis to help improve the social performance of coal production. A compelling example (Chapter 15) is Chikkatur and Sagar's list of persisting insufficiencies typical of the coal sector, formulated to provide an agenda 'Towards Better Policies'. Yet across the chapters, contradictions emerge, for instance between demands for better technology, transmission and distribution, countered by arguments about the failure of imported technologies (Chapter 6), or between a call for underground mining (Chapter 13) against promotion of open-cast mining with systematic post-mining re-filling (Chapter 7). The book shows that coal in India was and is a terrain for contentious debates.

The book is recommended to students and scholars interested in multiple perspectives on India's 'black chief'. It explores and convincingly argues that there is a need for better policies and more effective implementation of protective rights, since coal will continue to electrify the nation.

**Katja Müller**

*University of Leipzig, Germany*

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