

The politics and political possibilities of India's anti-coal struggles

Coal is the single largest contributor of global greenhouse gas emissions, making it a key focus of climate change mitigation efforts. The aggregate picture of falling global coal use however masks important differences in coal dependence across countries and regions. In India's case, an inevitable decline in coal's share in the overall energy mix in line with climate action commitments will still result in massive increases in absolute levels of coal use for thermal power generation and other industries. Meeting this demand will require a significant further expansion of domestic coal production from already high levels of growth seen in recent years. India and other industrialising countries that depend heavily on the resource have also consistently argued in climate change negotiations that a predominant emphasis on ending coal use will unfairly disadvantage their developmental trajectories.

The fragmented global consensus on 'the end of coal' has crucial implications for our understanding of widespread anti-coal struggles in countries like India. If calls for stronger climate action do not translate into rapid declines in coal extraction and mine closures in such settings, it remains unlikely that they can provide a sustained and effective basis for communities mobilising against coal mining. Yet, by contesting the development of proposed mines and further expansion of already established ones, often successfully, these struggles present perhaps the clearest challenge to the accelerating pace of domestic coal extraction and its harmful climate impacts. At the same time, interpreting such movements predominantly in relation to the climate crisis risks ignoring the diverse localised concerns around land, livelihoods and way of life of affected communities that are often implicated in them.

This thesis proposes a more expansive conceptualisation of contemporary anti-coal struggles that recognises both their increasing interlinkages with global climate politics as well as their diverse and place-based character. It draws on insights from research on ecological distribution conflicts and environmental justice movements, agrarian political economy, land and resource grabbing, and mining and extractivism, to identify relevant themes and concepts for such a broadened understanding of local mobilisations against coal extraction. These are then applied to study a specific case, of anti-coal struggles in the Mand-Raigarh coalfield in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh.

The thesis provides a detailed elaboration of how the political dynamics of local movements against coal extraction interact with wider rural transformations in mining-affected regions and the political

economy of contemporary coal extraction in India. It shows that the socially differentiated impacts of mining on affected households' livelihoods and reproduction need not undermine possibilities for meaningful opposition. In this regard, unpacking the context-specific local transformations of both land *and* labour relations can help to explain variations in the emergence and political character of such resistance. On-ground and legal mobilisations by mining-affected communities also play a crucial role in undermining the speculative profitmaking opportunities that underpin contemporary coal extraction in India and its detrimental climate impacts. Such an understanding of anti-coal struggles highlights their especially crucial role for climate action efforts in contexts like India where political and policy efforts remain firmly focused on a rapid expansion of domestic coal mining.

The particular and context-specific ways in which local concerns are incorporated by anti-coal struggles suggests the need for significant caution in interpreting them narrowly as climate-related movements. However, mobilisation strategies that acknowledge the heterogenous composition of the working class in coal mining areas, and variations in how mining-affected communities articulate climate- and environmental-related concerns, offer the potential to bring together struggles that draw on otherwise diverse perspectives to frame their challenge to fossil fuels. They can therefore provide a crucial basis for building broad-based and transformative anti-coal movements that confront the systemic character of the climate crisis.