



The path forward requires deliberate, well-planned interventions. Comprehensive assessments of socio-economic realities, inclusive community engagement, and tailored transition plans are essential. Policymakers must prioritise raising awareness about the impending changes and involving local communities in shaping solutions.

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By Maitri Singh

Stepping into the depths of a coal mine, one cannot ignore the stories of labour, and transformation that writ large on its black walls – the veins of these walls carry stories of those who toiled in its darkness. Echoes from Smita Sahay’s poem ‘Light, Again’ come to life: *Coal dust preserves within my cells / an agony that would otherwise be homeless. / These mines are my inheritance, / as they were for my ancestors. / My spine shivers as I step in./ Above the horizon still bleeds. / Why do the living exhume pitch black ghosts? / Whose tribe was this now fossilized into coal? / What do we live for? What does one die for?*

For centuries, coal has been the backbone of industrial progress that has powered economies and fuelled livelihoods. But in the backdrop of present-day’s environmental concerns and the push for sustainability redefine global priorities, the coal ecosystem stands at a critical crossroads. The once-indispensable industry now faces scrutiny as subjects like climate change, health, and Just Transition comes to the forefront.

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Last November, I visited some of Jharkhand’s oldest underground and over-pit coal mines in Bokaro. My visit was part of a research project understanding “Coal Dependency” and “Economic Diversification” in coal-dependent regions like Bokaro and Ramgarh for Jharkhand’s Just Transition. These terms are at the heart of today’s discussions on navigating the shift from fossil fuels to cleaner energy sources without leaving communities behind.

Just Transition

Just Transition, a concept born in the 1970s labour movement, focuses on ensuring that workers affected by this shift are supported with new opportunities, education, and protections. Originally proposed by activist Tony Mazzocchi as a “Superfund for Workers,” the idea evolved to encompass the broader societal changes needed to transition to a low-carbon economy while addressing social



The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines 'Just Transition' as greening the economy in a way that is fair and inclusive, creating decent work opportunities while ensuring no one is left behind. In coal-reliant regions like Bokaro and Ramgarh, this means understanding and addressing the web of dependencies tied to coal, as the coal ecosystem not only fuels electricity but also sustains livelihoods, education, and local economies. But what happens when the very foundation of this ecosystem begins to crumble under the weight of today's environmental imperatives and economic realities?

In India, the paradox is striking. While the government has committed to ambitious renewable energy targets – 50 per cent power generation from renewables by 2030 and net-zero emissions by 2070 – coal remains indispensable in the short term. Plans to nearly double coal production by 2030 reflect the urgency to meet rising energy demands. However, this reliance on coal raises pressing questions about the future of coal-dependent communities: Will they be equipped to transition to new economic models? Can they see a future beyond coal?

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Coal Dependency

Over a nine months stay in Bokaro, I encountered the realities of coal dependency. Towering piles of coal, roads coated with black dust, and the sight of coal scavengers struggling under the weight of their loads painted a decent picture of the industry's dominance. As I stood there inhaling the coal-laden air, many questions struck me including how can a region so inherently dependent on coal ever move away from it?

Our study aimed to understand the socio-economic dependencies on coal at the district level. This meant asking critical questions: How do mine closures affect communities? What sectors could drive economic diversification? And, how aware are local residents and enterprises of the impending transition?

The findings revealed that while many households depended on coal for cooking fuel, electricity, and employment, yet most were unaware of the looming coal phase-down. For those near coal mines, awareness was higher, but the prospects of mine closures elicited fear and uncertainty. Migration, job losses, and declining local economies were also common concerns.

The informal coal economy often overlooked in policy discussions, also emerged as a critical area of our focus. The informal coal workers that scavenge coal from mines for resale, rely on this precarious livelihood. A potential coal phase-down would devastate these workers, which could possibly lead to unemployment and increased crime in the region.

Coal encompasses everything in these regions. As a trade union member aptly put it, “Coal is the sole power here, be it in politics, industry, or livelihood.”

Induced Economy

Interviews with local stakeholders revealed a complex set of perspectives. While Trade union members and activists had long been engaged in discussions about Just Transition, even organising grassroots initiatives like the “Conference of Panchayats” to raise awareness about climate change and the need for economic diversification. Others, however, were less informed, considering coal as irreplaceable.

Additionally, the “1:20 ratio” – the idea that every coal job supports 20 other people – showed the far-reaching impact of coal on local economies. For instance, the closure of Kargali Washery led to widespread unemployment, with shopkeepers and small businesses bearing the brunt. This is a result of induced economy, in which workers’ spending sustains local businesses like markets and services. During my visit to a market near a closed mine in Ramgarh, vendors expressed their disappointment over the economic downturn caused by the closure. “The market’s vibrancy disappears,” one shop owner explained. Yet, amidst these challenges, there was also optimism. Many local residents expressed a desire to expand their businesses or explore new business ventures.

During the study, infrastructure development, skill mapping, and targeted training programs emerged as critical components of a successful transition. However, barriers such as bureaucratic

The environmental toll of coal dependency is another pressing concern of the locals. Pollution from coal mines affects air quality, water resources, and public health. One local stakeholder emphasised the need for environmentally sustainable alternatives: “The government can start anything that benefits us, but it should not pollute our environment further.”

Critical Juncture

Reflecting on my fieldwork, I grappled with the enormity of the challenge: Could Jharkhand realistically transition away from coal? What would happen to informal workers and their families? Why hasn't the state developed comprehensive plans to address these issues?

The slow pace of action and the persistent demand for coal signals the troubling question- How will this transition unfold, and who will bear the brunt of it?

For some, coal represents progress and hope, that powers the nation and fills the energy gap until renewable alternatives take hold. For others, it is a reminder of the environmental crises we seek to escape. This paradox of progress and peril holds the complexity of transitioning away from coal. It's not just about replacing one energy source with another; it is about reimagining livelihoods, economies, and futures.

The path forward requires deliberate, well-planned interventions. Comprehensive assessments of socio-economic realities, inclusive community engagement, and regionally tailored transition plans are essential. Policymakers must prioritise raising awareness about the impending changes and involving local communities in shaping solutions. Only then can we ensure that no one is left behind in the shift to a cleaner, more sustainable future.

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