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## When Coalfields Become Urban Frontiers

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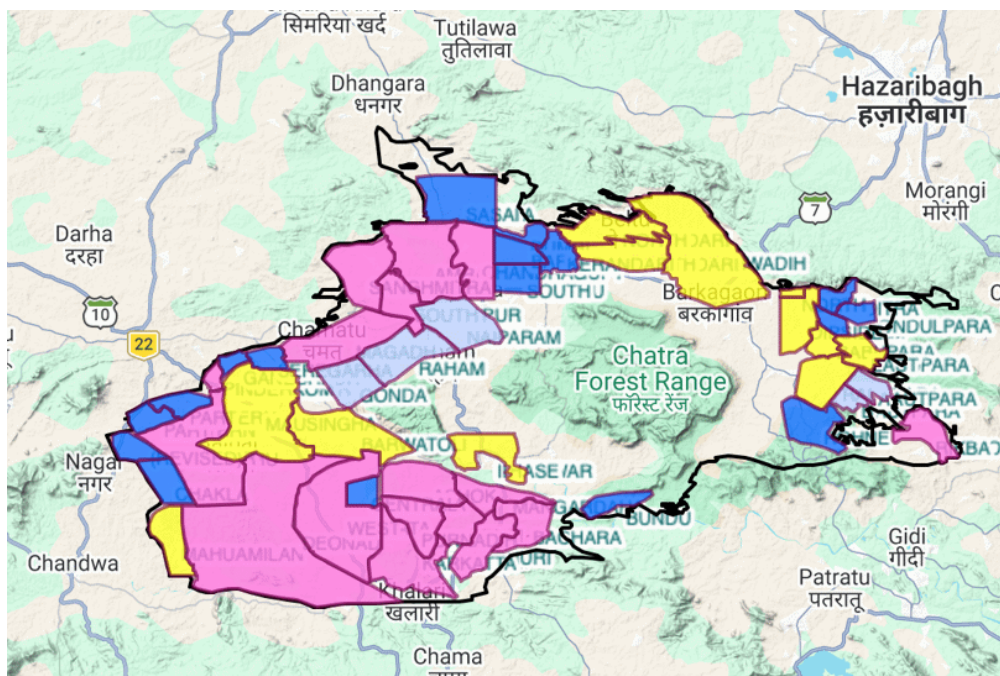
*A massive coal mining block in Jharkhand presents the contradictions of India's development trajectory and reveals how extraction can also be an urbanising process to be negotiated by locals.*

Riding towards Barkagaon, a village in a coal mining block in Jharkhand, from Hazaribagh, the district headquarters, I encountered a procession of coal-laden trucks. Soon after, a massive coal conveyor system appeared, crisscrossing above the terrain, its dull mechanical roar echoing throughout the valley. At over 23 kms long, this was one of Asia's largest coal conveyor systems, connecting mining sites to a railway evacuation point. Struck by its enormity, I told my companion, a local resident: *Barkagaon is getting industrialised.*

His response was interesting: '*Barkagaon ka shehrikan ho raha hai*', Barkagaon is urbanising. The remark expressed optimism about a growing housing rental market catering to an in-migrating workforce, was in distinct contrast to the sense of loss I heard elsewhere: '*jab sab sheher ho jaega to gaon kaha jaega*', when everything becomes a city where will the villages go?

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These contrasting perceptions reflect the tensions in the ongoing social and spatial transformation of the region around North Karanpura, a massive coalfield spread over more than 1,200 square kilometres and with reserves of around 18 billion tonnes. The idea of mining invokes images of desolate landscapes with cavernous pits. For affected communities, the churning of the earth-where once were forests, farmlands, and rural settlements- is a destructive process that must be resisted. Such, at least, are the implicit notions about extractive projects. Yet, as my companion's comment shows, we need to pay closer attention to extraction as an urbanising process, and how communities interpret and negotiate this transformation.



This transformation has three interrelated dimensions.

The first is the most readily observable: the material and physical dimension. As farmlands and village settlement are blasted, pulverised, and excavated to mine coal, destruction unfolds almost as a spectacle. However, these material practices are also generative,

gradually producing a new built environment. Most notable are the far flung sites and infrastructures directly tied to coal extraction and evacuation: the mining sites, electricity generation facility, railway siding, and the conveyor system I saw. In parallel, new settlements emerge, and existing ones grow dense along with growing markets.

In Bakargaon, a rehabilitation and resettlement colony with over 1,000 units was built for housing the displaced families. However, many families opted for additional compensation and built their own houses. Consequently, the region is now dense with multistoreyed buildings. Markets selling non-farm goods and offering services are mushrooming, they now include several bank branches, petrol pumps, garages, restaurants, and retail shops. Private schools and medical services like ultrasound facilities are flourishing, even as their quality and oversight is questionable. There is however an inherent contingency to this built environment; eventually it will all go under as the mining churn comes for it.

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The second dimension is of rural socio-economic relations, which are straining under the spatial churn. As the regional economy shifts to mining from agriculture, livelihoods once structured by seasonal cycles are transformed into rigidly time-bound work regimes, so much so that '*dipty*' (duty) has become commonplace in local lexicon.

These urbanising socio-economic relations are qualified by two structural aspects. First, employment opportunities in the mining economy are both limited and precarious, contrary to state-led narratives of coal extraction as a source of employment in these underdeveloped regions. Second, this precarity is more complex than suggested by simplified narrative of change from farmer to company worker.

Unlike state-run miner Coal India, which historically has offered both employment and monetary compensation to land losers, NTPC-also state run, which is building a massive coal-fired power plant in the region- formally provides only monetary compensation, of Rs 24 lakhs per acre of acquired land. Operating through a mine developer and operator model, it has almost fully outsourced extraction work to a private enterprise.

Outsourcing, however, does not end here. A chain of subcontracting deeply fragments employer-employee relations. This intersects with the emergence of an entrepreneurial class from within the affected community. This class invests the compensation sum-and at times even takes loans-to acquire earth moving machinery like excavators, loaders, and trucks, which they operate through their own labour or through hired labour. Both employment and entrepreneurship are mediated by opaque networks of power. Many community members perceive that influential and powerful authority figures, from local panchayat representatives to MLAs and MPs, and from block level bureaucrats to the deputy commissioner, divert opportunities to favoured individuals.

This brings out the third and most obscure dimension of this urbanising transformation: its politics and governance. This obscurity stems from failure, deliberate or otherwise, to formally acknowledge and plan for these transformations, linked to the varying governance and political objectives across the scale. The central government, with its priorities to meet national energy and industrial needs, conceives North Karanpura primarily as a reserve of coal to be extracted. Exercising eminent domain to acquire rights to coal bearing land, it has delegated extraction to corporates, public and private.

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For the local communities the most prominent response has been to resist this top-down extraction imperative. A common slogan in the region is '*jaan denge par jameen nahi denge*', we will give up our lives but not our land. The district administration plays an intermediary role facilitating the company in extraction and community members often complain that the *prashasan* serves corporate interests rather than those of the locals. The predominance of this narrative of unified resistance, however, obscures the complex and fragmented political dynamics at play.

Three key points allow us a closer look at how extraction proceeds despite resistance, the nature of the politics in this transformation, and the broader consequences for democracy and equity in the pursuit of development.

One, while resistance is more prominent, there are a variety of responses from within this heterogeneous rural community. Several families gave their land readily in the early stages of the project, and some individuals collaborated with the company, often to facilitate land acquisition. Such actors are frequently labelled as *dalaals* (brokers) of the company. Leaders in resistance movements-

often the local elites including large landholders, panchayat leaders, and MLAs-are sometimes perceived as playing a dual role: publicly protesting against the projects while covertly facilitating them and distributing emerging opportunities through patronage networks. Despite widespread awareness of such dynamics, the larger community struggles to access this network.

Second, considered broadly, the politics of resistance has a strong collectivising appeal of preserving a shared rural way of life against the dramatic changes and uncertainty induced by the extraction imperative. Resistance, however, has given way to negotiation for better compensation, focusing on the land-losing *raiya* (titled land holder). Coupled with the emergence of covert patronage networks, the politics becomes increasingly fragmented. Resistance is also geographically fragmented across villages falling in different coal block projects. The predominance of this fragmented politics of preservation forecloses a more forward-looking political mobilisation centred on claims to the broader, evolving regional space shaped by extraction.

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Finally, these dynamics reveals both the pitfalls and potential for democracy in the transformation of India's resource peripheries. The primacy of the coal extraction imperative of the central government and the ways in which the extraction economy is operating exclude small and marginal landholders and landless villagers who form the majority of the affected communities. Corporate authority over these urbanising forces undermines rural local governance.

Approaching these changes through the lens of urbanising processes foregrounds the social and spatial aspects of the ongoing transformations and the right of the people to shape the emerging space. However, this perspective needs to go beyond conventional understandings of urban governance as a post-hoc reclassification of settlements accompanied by provisioning of utilities and other services. Instead, it calls for a more proactive and democratic planning framework and innovative institutions that address the specific dynamics of extraction induced urbanisation.

North Karanpura offers a window into the contradictions of India's development trajectory, where the imperatives of energy security and industrial and infrastructural growth are pursued through spatial transformations that remain politically under-articulated. The challenge is not only to mitigate the harms of extraction but to inclusively and democratically govern the forms of urbanisation it produces.

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