



An Ancillary Life

*Of generations that bear the cross of
an abandoned mine*

It's early morning in Pandwa village. The chulhas are lit and the smoke in the air is thin but ever-present. While some adults are preparing to leave for Medininagar or Daltongunj for a possible daily wage work, others are off to the new private coal mine.

Gouri Devi is 65 years old and her gait remains furtive. On her way to the railway tracks, she passes a few children playing in the dust. Probably the school is shut again on account of the absentee teacher. As she walks towards the now discontinued coal mine, she is reminded of her days as a casual wagon loader with the CCL. Her husband too worked as a loader. Thankfully, in her long tenure with the coal company, she never met with an accident and hence the habit of physical labour remains.

As she reaches the tracks, she crouches close to the ground and, in her tokri, starts gathering coal dust.

The honk from the bus stand is incessant. Birender Ram is used to these sounds, but he gets particularly irritated this morning. He hasn't slept well. His wife is unwell—probably schizophrenic or that's what he understands from the diagnosis given by the doctor at the government hospital in Daltongunj. The medicines that are available at the dispensary are of no help any more. He understands medicines—after all he was a pharmacist, 45 years ago.

For now, he prepares the chulha at the dhaba. The customers should start streaming in any moment now. It is almost time for the early arrivals from Raigarh and Delhi. He goads Chandan to hurry up—the dhaba nearby has already prepared its sabzi and dal. Chandan is still cutting and dicing. Birender's son is almost the same age as Chandan but not as skilled in the kitchen. He currently works as a daily-wage labourer. Together, Birender and his son manage to save around Rs 5,000 a year. It is almost half of what he alone could save a few years ago.

Could it have been different had he gone to another city after Dalmianagar shut down in the 80s? Could it have been different had the mines in Rajhara not shut? His reverie breaks. A customer has walked in asking for "ek glass chai!"



Gauri Devi, a resident of Pandwa village, has been making goliyas for as long as she remembers. It serves her as a cooking fuel through the year.

Gouri Devi hurries up. It's almost time for the train to come. She also has to pick up the chai-patti from Narmadeshwar's kirana store, arrange for the gobar to mix with the coal dust to produce the goliya and cook food for her family.

She must rush back. Her five children do not live far from her. While they did send all of them to school, the economic opportunities in the region never amounted to much. Two of her sons are daily-wage labourers and her two daughters are married and looking after their families. One of her sons lost a leg in an accident at work. They have helped him set up a meat shop.

On her way back, she once again crosses past the children playing outside. She wonders if their fate would be any different.

The dhaba is bustling now. The batch of lunch that was cooked is almost over. Soon they will have to begin preparations for the evening. He looks at the sack of coal. Was it all they had? Or did someone pick up a few pieces?

The price of coal has almost doubled in the past few years. It has hit all their earnings. While they have revised the prices at the dhaba, competition is stiff. With the coal mines shutting down, small road-side eateries, or thelas, have mushroomed

all over. He remembers the time when one of them at the dhaba could just go to Rajhara to pick up coal. The supply matched their meagre earnings.

At 72, he cannot think of following the trail of migrants—both seasonal and permanent—moving out of the city. His ailing wife needs care. His daughter and son do not want to leave them behind.

In the afternoon sun, as the buses file in and out, the reflection from their shiny metallic bodies keeps streaming into the dhaba. Glimmering, paan-stained near the footboard, and leaving behind the town with much promise.

It is early morning in Medininagar/ Daltonganj and the area around the bus stand is already abuzz. The chulha is being fired up at one of the dhabas nearby. It is early morning in Medininagar/ Daltonganj and the area around the bus stand is already abuzz. The chulha is being fired up at one of the dhabas nearby.



Narmadeshwar hands her the sachet of tea that Gouri was looking for. There is a man sitting in the awning interviewing Narmadeshwar and some other local lads about their 'town'.

"Raunak! Poora raunak hua karta tha. This whole place used to be truly alive back then.", says one of them.

She couldn't agree more. Even the kirana store used to stock up so many more things. She never tried those things, but they were good to look at, to aspire to—someday she would have tried them all...

The sun is up. There is barely any shade here anymore—it used to be a tree-lined avenue, a little oasis. The little road of promises where cars and outsiders didn't just pass through—they lived.

There are many in her village who keep migrating seasonally for one construction site or another. Her son too had travelled once or twice. She feels guilty at times: did they make the right choice to continue living in Rajhara? Should they have made a different choice for the sake of their children?

Just then, she hears the sound of the train from a distance. Is it possible that something else, something entirely new could arrive in their region? Something which could shape a new way of life?

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72-year-old Birender Ram is the one who fires the coal at the dhaba every morning. He has lived many lives, moving from his native village to Dehri-on-Sone to finally Palamu. His family of four lives with him in the city.





Goliya- a combination of coal dust and cow-dung or gobar is a unique way of utilising coal dust. Users of the low- cost cooking fuel share that depending on the quality of the dust, the goliya can generate low to medium amount of smoke. The job of making them is usually left to women who make substantial numbers in the summer months and store them for monsoons as well as winter.

Chandan Kumar is young but he has already worked at quite a few dhabas . Like all commercial kitchens, the chopping and dicing begins early.





At the adjacent dhaba, food is almost ready. The smell of the cooked sabzi is a mix of charred spices, coal and a familiarity that oddly feels home like. Two customers have just walked in. The cook and the maalik sure hope that others too are drawn in.



The competition is stiff. There are many dhabas as well as thelas that serve breakfast, lunch, dinner and some snacks.



A dhaba doubling up its resources in order to be ready on time.

Their supplier of coal comes from the Rajhara area. It is implied that the person selling to them is probably a rat miner. "The coal has become expensive over time. It is just difficult to access it. While earlier one could get it for Rs 5/ kilo, today you have to shell out Rs10 or 12 even." says, Birender Ram.





The stream of customers come from the bus stand nearby. There are buses to everywhere- Delhi, Kolkata, Raigarh, Lucknow and Bhopal- destinations where the local populace goes to get work. Ever since the mines in the region were discontinued, the outward migration has greatly increased.



Narmadeshwar Mehta has been running his shop in the region of Rajhara for more than 30 years. His shop has weathered all the changes in the region. Today he stocks far less goods than he used to since there are simply lesser people and less wealth to serve. As per him, the 'Raunak', that lively quality is gone.



A view of the railway tracks that carry the coal output for the private collieries in the region.

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