



ASHOKA
UNIVERSITY

CENTRE FOR A
People-centric
Energy Transition

Unmade

A transition backwards



London in the 1800s was a city full of soot and smoke—it was one of the first cities to be fuelled by coal and also be choked by it. Most of its people lived on wages and this milling labour class continued to earn subsistence earnings until the end of World War II. These were lives and livelihoods that inspired literature, including the writings of Charles Dickens. As the city continued to build itself, supplies came in from several colonies of the British Empire, chief amongst which was India.

Far from this Victorian world but very much within the colonial net, lay Rajhara (Palamu district), a small forested dot on the map of Jharkhand (India), where the Bengal Coal Company began mining in 1842. Soon enough, a British district centre came up here. While today it is known as Medininagar, named after King Medini Ray of Chero Dynasty (12th century), till the year 2004, it bore the name of Daltongunj, after the soldier, administrator and anthropologist Edward Tuite Dalton who worked for the East India Company.

The images that you see here are from a ruin that started its life much later but speaks of that transformational effect that coal has always had on geographies, whether it be the financial hub of the world or the tribal belts of Jharkhand. While London got the opportunity and means to build on the riches of coal, there are many small coal towns in the global south that may never have the opportunities or resources to shape such a fate. Is Rajhara one of them?

The Rajhara coalfields were nationalised in 1973 and their ownership was transferred to Central Coalfields Limited (CCL). Till as recently as 2019, the peak capacity of the mines was 0.5 million tons per annum. The locals still swear by the quality of coal that was produced by the mines: "It is absolutely smokeless—anthracite coal." However, as per government records, the larger reserves in the area indicate a quality categorisation of G9 or non-coking coal.

The mine was first shut in 2010 due to the inundation of the mines; they were reopened in 2019 after receiving environmental clearance and then discontinued due to land acquisition and other local issues.

In the heart of the present day Rajhara locality, right opposite the CCL office lie the ruins that are pictured below. At one end lies the now abandoned hospital and at the other, the villages nearby. These residential quarters were built soon after nationalisation for the mid-level or senior employees of CCL. The original inhabitants left these residences in 2010.

(Contd.)



A man passes through the now abandoned homes of the CCL colony. Although there are families from the neighbouring villages of Pandwa and Rajhara who have moved in some of these homes, none of them wanted to speak to the documentation team.

These structures are not too far from the villages of Rajhara and Pandwa. Even today, several houses in these villages are either semi-pucca (37.3%) or kutcha (34.8%). One can imagine what a sight the housing colony must have been when it was first built in the 1970s. It was a time when only 18% of the country's villages were electrified and less than 10% had access to safe drinking water. These pucca, two-bedroom accommodations with electricity and water supply would have appeared nothing short of an oasis—an inaccessible one but an oasis nonetheless.

As the communities in the surrounding villages acknowledge, almost 75% of the households had access to free electricity when the mines were fully operational. Almost all of them had access to free piped water.

While the term 'mai-baap sarkaar' (a government that plays the part of a providing parent) may not seem the most palatable today, it was a phrase that the country's vast swathes of economically weaker sections used quite openly in the days around the nationalisation of the mines. Most people needed a mai-baap sarkaar for food, water, housing and other basic amenities. Economic growth was low and even in the following decades, while investments and growth have aided many parts of the country, the trickle down in states such as Jharkhand have been woefully meagre.

As Ram Naresh Chauhan, an assistant teacher at the Upgrade Middle School in Rajhara Colliery, highlights, "When the coal

mines were operational, the Palamu area was in full bloom. No one would think about migrating out of the region. There was direct and indirect employment. Today the situation has reversed. You cannot live here."

In the census data, the district is largely defined to be rural. Apart from agriculture and coal mining, there were very few opportunities of employment to begin with. In one of the abandoned yards, a painting on the wall reads: "Get a secure job and enjoy life."

The place and probably the presence of these houses in their prime provided that sense of security: if outsiders are coming to work in your region, things must be going well. Reality may have changed, but it is a feeling that the locals find difficult to shake off. To them, employment and a good life means operational mines. They haven't seen much else work in the region.

(Contd.)



There are around 20 homes in this colony that were originally built after the nationalisation of the mines. The mines were discontinued in 2010 and ever since most of these houses lie vacant.



Water that has seeped into the walls and taken apart the electrical wiring. As per the survey conducted by ACPET, 75% of the households had access to free electricity (provided by CCL) before discontinuation of the mines.



Many of the houses are simply falling apart due to lack of maintenance. In the nearby villages, a majority of the sampled households still live in a semi-pucca (37.3%) or kutcha (34.8%) household structure.



Life springs out of a rusted water tanker. Similar to the provisioning of free electricity, water was available for free for most of the surveyed households before discontinuation of mines in 2010. Today, the piped water supply is still provided, but only through community stand posts.



Most of the houses or quarters as they are known were two-room units with a kitchen, verandah and toilet.



A broken part of a wash basin lies on the yard of one of the homes. Majority of the households in the villages nearby still defecate in the open. Reasons cited for the same included: lack of maintenance of the toilets, no supply of water in toilets and persisting habits.



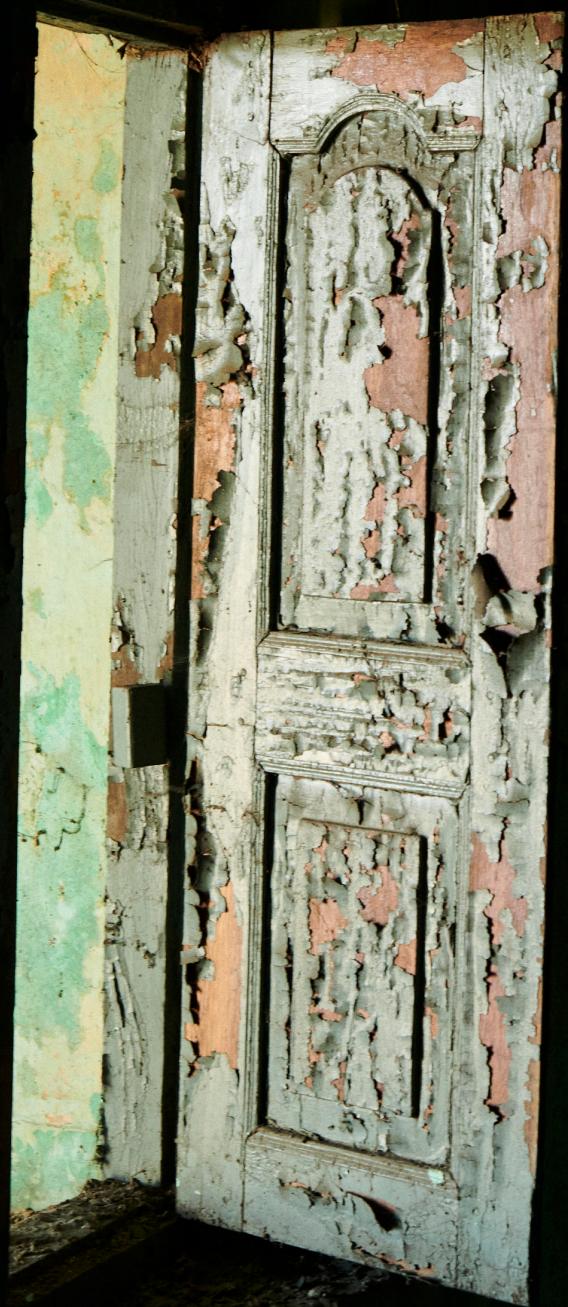
The hull of an ambassador car:
a favoured vehicle in the 1980s,
known for its ability to take the
rough and tumble on Indian roads.



A yard of an abandoned house with shrubs growing wild. The red structure in front probably held a Tulsi or sacred basil in the distant past.



Many of the doors seem to have been pulled out from these structures- one can also see the drainages lines that have now caved in.



Water and sunlight peeling away the window pane gently out of its place.



The interior of one of the abandoned houses



Some houses still offer shelter to families. One can notice the make-shift window on the right and one of the residents in the distant background.



सुरक्षितकाम किजिए,
जीवनका आनंद लिजिए।



The writing on the wall, "Get a secure job
and enjoy life."

The coal-based cities of the global north and many coal townships transitioned out of that identity a long time ago. They moved to new sources of energy; and as manufacturing and services evolved, people had new ways to make their lives secure. To many in this region and in the neighbouring state of Bihar, government jobs are the safest way to access stability in life—the assumption being that the teflon foil of government provisions can never fall off. CCL is a subsidiary of Coal India Limited (CIL), an undertaking of the Government of India, and perhaps that idea of an enduring provider persists.

London and many capitals of the global north benefitted vastly from the flow of capital from what were then colonies of the British, French and various other dominions. India was, of course, the jewel in the crown of the British Empire. As this jewel builds its multiple pathways of energy transition and abides by its commitments to the Paris Climate Agreement, the question is how does it do that while making sure that the process is most just to the people on the ground. How does it make sure that its people's livelihoods remain secure and their aspirations do not end up in ruins? Coal is still abundant in India and to abandon it in order to move in a new direction comes at a huge cost. Could there be a transition fund that aims specifically at these mining communities? Could the countries most responsible for necessitating this path of transition fund it?

As one passes the abandoned hull of an Ambassador car, one can almost taste the rust. Ruin is also a state of transition. But does it need to be so?

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