



Coal Block Allocation - Scuttling the voices of people and the environment

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On June 18, the Prime Minister launched the auction of 41 coal blocks for commercial mining with no end-use or pricing restriction, giving a free hand to private players from India and abroad to come and plunder natural resources for the economic benefit of a few corporates. The government is executing the diabolical bartering of some of the largest and contiguous stretches of tropical forests in India for an estimated Rs.33,000 crore over the next five to seven years. The coal blocks put up in the first round of auction are - nine blocks each in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha; three in Maharashtra, and eleven in Madhya Pradesh. Forests are capable of providing 23 per cent of the climate mitigation needed before 2030 to keep global temperature rise below 2°C as part of the Paris Agreement. Non-timber forest produce has an estimated annual economic value of Rs.20,000 crore and is a vital source of livelihood for millions of people and contributes to the green economy, and millions of people in these five states completely depend on these forests for their survival. However, all these facts do not seem to matter to those taking such decisions.

Out of the 41 coal mines for commercial mining, the majority of the sites come under Schedule V areas. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) (PESA) Act, 1996, applicable in Schedule V areas, mandates that village-level gram sabhas be consulted before any developmental or commercial project. The gram-sabhas were not consulted and the due process under PESA Act was not followed before the announcement of the auctioning of these 41 coal blocks. This act of the Ministry of Coal directly undermines the due process of law under the PESA Act and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs seems to have been kept out even though it has direct jurisdiction over these lands and its inhabitants. The auction seems to be in violation of national and international laws. The Biological Diversity (BD) Act, 2002 and the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 together provide protection to the species and the ecosystems from exploitation and abuse. India is a signatory to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), 2007 under which indigenous people have the right to Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) backed self-determination prior to any project affecting their culture, land, and resources. The International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) provides for Right to Self Determination, Natural Wealth and Resources, Preservation of Culture, and Adequate Standard of Living. India, by choosing coal as its main driver of the economy for the post COVID-19 economic recovery, has violated these agreements and codes and has blatantly chosen to deny indigenous communities their rights. By opting for coal led economic growth, the government is decimating the centuries-old forests, its inhabitants, and the way of life of the tribal communities that revolve around the forest.

As per the Indian constitution, the land is a state subject, and the Centre cannot go ahead without support from the states. In a federal structure of governance, the Centre is expected to move ahead after consultation and approval of the states and it works on a consensus model. More importantly, the land we are talking about here is pristine forest land with FRA and PESA provisions applicable. If implemented correctly, community rights under FRA would have made it impossible to proceed with this auction. The tribal communities who inhabit these lands wield the true power to decide the fate of their land



and their lives. The state governments of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and West Bengal have questioned this decision of the central government and mentioned that this is against the spirit of 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat'. Nine gram sabhas from the affected areas in Chhattisgarh have written to the Prime Minister calling for a total ban on mining in the Hasdeo Arand forests. They have accused the central government of violating constitutional safeguards for the tribal population as well as biodiversity, and of going against the spirit of 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat' or self-reliant India.



A stretch of Hasdeo Arand Forest in Chhattisgarh. Photo Courtesy of PARI Network

As mentioned before, forests are capable of providing 23 per cent of the climate mitigation needed before 2030. This can only be achieved by conserving our centuries-old existing forest and not by symbolic tree plantation and monoculture based afforestation schemes that are being promoted today. Beyond their role in carbon sequestration, forests have another crucial role in local climate regulation. This is achieved by ground shading and water transpiration. For every hundred litres of water a tree transpires, a cooling equivalent of seventy kilowatt-hours of electricity (the equivalent of running two central air conditioning units for a day) is provided. Many trees together transpire more water each day and thus can provide a cooling effect over wide areas. On the contrary, deforestation can increase the local air temperature by 1°C and increase the daily temperature variation by almost 2°C.

These forests are home to keystone species like tigers, elephants and bears. Tigers and elephants are known to migrate long distances in search of food and mate. Opening up their home to coal mining by private players from India and abroad will push back India's conservation effort by a few decades, and these majestic species will move an inch closer



to extinction. Species like Bengal tiger, Asian elephant, wild buffalo, and swamp deer are on the endangered list according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. In choosing the capitalist ideals of economic growth and expansion over a more balanced limited growth and sustenance model, the government is pushing millions into oblivion. The tribal communities living in these forests live in harmony with its wild inhabitants and these forests also act as providers of food, medicine and material for these communities.

Coal is the material for which the communities will be displaced and the forests will be destroyed. Apart from the problems listed above, coal as a fuel is the prime driver of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Coal-fired power plants account for over 80 per cent of mercury emissions, 60 per cent of the particulate matter (PM) emissions, 45 per cent of the sulphur dioxide (SO₂) emissions, and 30 per cent of the oxides of nitrogen (NO_x) emissions. Coal miners, coal-fired power plant workers, people living around coal mines, and coal-fired power plants are the worst affected. The employment promises of the coal sector are capricious with most locals finding employment as casual labour in the mining sector and in the construction phase of power plants, after which it is downhill for the locals with no jobs and forced to live in an environment where there is air, water and soil pollution every single day.

Opposition to choosing coal for the future in a post-pandemic economic recovery has come from the Secretary-General of the UN Mr Antonio Guterres when he remarked "We cannot go back to the way it was and simply recreate the systems that have aggravated the crisis. We need to build back better with more sustainable, inclusive, gender-equal societies and economies." Back home in India, coal workers are protesting the privatisation of coal, and Mr Jairam Ramesh, Member of Parliament in Rajya Sabha, has termed this event 'triple disastrous' saying that the first disaster was the heavy environmental cost of mining and transporting coal, the second disaster would be loss of extremely dense forests cover meaning a loss of critical carbon sink, while third will be public health disaster, which will be aggravated due to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Various organisations, activists and researchers, including the current author, have voiced their concerns against the coal block auction. The very first comprehensive report "Assessment of Climate Change over the Indian Region" from the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), warns of doubling of the length of heatwaves and a four-fold increase in its frequency in India by 2100. According to this report, the temperature in India is expected to rise by 4.4°C, and the present actions will only accelerate our journey to climate change-induced hara-kiri. We'll be going further down the disaster path by unilaterally taking decisions that seem to favour a few industries at the cost of the environment and millions of livelihoods. It is important to start acting as the 'climate leader' that we claim to be.