

India's long-standing tryst with coal



BOOK REVIEW

NAVROZ K DUBASH

Writing about India's coal sector, *circa* 2017, can be both potentially rewarding and fraught. The sector has been through a turbulent few years in India, providing more than enough material for an engaging and rewarding narrative about the past. But the sector is also likely poised at the edge of a global decline, albeit a slow one, after a century and a half of dominance over the industrial landscape, which makes speculating about the future a risky prospect.

Through most of its 246 pages, Subhomoy Bhattacharjee's *India's Coal*

Story focuses on the former, to take the reader through the substantial interconnections between India's economic and political history and its quest to find, manage and use coal. This is a fascinating story in its own right, and, for the most part, ably told. But the author also tries to comment on and explain the forces that are roiling global energy and particularly coal markets and in this, perhaps inevitably given the speed of change, he is somewhat less successful.

Mr Bhattacharjee begins with an effort to draw out the main strands in a compressed opening narrative but the book's real value lies in the details. A lengthy early chapter details how energy in general but coal in particular was central to the see-saw debates over nationalisation of industries in the early post-independence period. As the book zig-zags through time, Mr Bhattacharjee unearths fascinating nuggets, such as the link between the rise of the opium

trade and the early boom period for coal, presided over by Rabindranath Tagore's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore.

Another section focuses on the actual moment of nationalisation of coal, in 1973, and the roots of the committee-based coal allocation system. The author picks up and develops the arbitrariness of this process in what is, to my mind, the most compelling chapter, "Notes from an Auditor", that traces the Comptroller and Auditor General's investigation into coal mine allocations and the subsequent court proceedings. Peppered with insights from interviews with former bureaucrats and Coal India Limited officials, the chapter describes the coal rush as companies scrambled to get in on an anticipated electricity boom in the early 2000s, and repeated failed efforts to bring in the private sector in more measured ways, notably through an auction system. Subsequent chapters deal with the drastic coal shortages of

the early 2010s, the high-level interventions and representation by industry, the tussles between the coal industry and Jairam Ramesh's ministry of environment and forests efforts to impose a "go no-go" approach and the unexpected collapse of coal prices in 2014.

In all of this the book is comprehensive and rich in detail, which is a strength. But sometimes extraneous detail gets in the way of telling the main coal story. Readers are treated to perhaps more than needed on the circumstances behind Manmohan Singh's appointment as finance minister in 1991 and to a long detour explaining the genesis of the Somali pirates (the latter in the context of ensuring the security of sea lanes for coal imports).

The author also engages the material from a conviction on the importance of coal to India's economy as also his sense that India has wasted its opportunity through flawed processes of private engagement and tolerated a slothful Coal India Limited for too long, themes that run through the book. But this perspective also leads to some blind spots.

For example, while the book is exhaustive at the macro-political and bureaucratic levels, we learn much less about the subaltern politics of coal, its distorting effects on mining communities and the growing concern around and evidence of linkages to local air pollution in the country.

In the last two chapters, the author seeks to engage with the question of coal in India's future in a fast-changing global environment. He discusses, for example, India's juggling act at the Paris climate conference, positioning the country both as a forward-looking climate-responsible power and retaining the right to use coal to power India's development. The challenge, however, is that narratives on the Indian energy landscape are changing so fast that the book already feels a little stale in its forward-looking dimension.

To be fair, this is beyond the author's control; the price of renewable energy has tumbled in the last two to three years, and government studies have emerged proclaiming far less need for coal-based power than was imagined

possible at the time of Paris. These changes have happened on the time scale of months, a challenge for any book-length study to keep up with. In the process, in the international as well as the Indian media, the pendulum seems to have swung, on a very thin evidence base and likely far too quickly, from the impossibility of a future without coal to its inevitability.

Mr Bhattacharjee's book gives us a solid platform for understanding India's long-standing tryst with coal. A reader can fruitfully pick up this book to understand this complex history. But she will need additional, and even more current, information and views to draw conclusions about India's future coal story.

The reviewer is Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research

INDIA'S COAL STORY

From Damodar to Zambezi

Subhomoy Bhattacharjee

Sage

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