

'Nothing else here': Why it's so hard for world to quit coal

November 1 2021, by Aniruddha Ghosal



An Indian laborer smiles as she takes a break from loading coal into a truck in Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in

an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP
Photo/Altaf Qadri

Every day, Raju gets on his bicycle and unwillingly pedals the world a tiny bit closer to climate catastrophe.

Every day, he straps half a dozen sacks of coal pilfered from mines—up to 200 kilograms, or 440 pounds—to the reinforced metal frame of his bike. Driving mostly at night to avoid the police and the heat, he transports the coal 16 kilometers (10 miles) to traders who pay him \$2.

Thousands of others do the same.

This has been Raju's life since he arrived in Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state in 2016; annual floods in his home region have decimated traditional farm jobs. Coal is all he has.

This is what the United Nations climate change conference in Scotland, known as COP26, is up against.

Earth desperately needs people to stop burning coal, the biggest single [source](#) of greenhouse gases, to avoid the most catastrophic impacts of climate change—including the intense flooding that has cost agricultural jobs in India. But people rely on coal. It is the world's biggest source of fuel for electric power and so many, desperate like Raju, depend on it for their very lives.

"The poor have nothing but sorrow ... but so many people, they've been saved by coal," Raju said.



Mining is in progress at an open-cast mine near Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri

Alok Sharma, the United Kingdom's president-designate of the conference, said in May that he hoped the conference would mark the moment where coal is left "in the past where it belongs."

While that may be possible for some developed nations, it is not so simple for developing countries.

They argue they should be allowed the "carbon space" to grow as developed nations have, by burning cheap fuels like coal, which is used in industrial processes such as steelmaking along with electric power generation. On average, the typical American uses 12 times more electricity than the typical Indian. There are over [27 million](#) people in India who don't have electricity at all.

Power demand in India is expected to grow faster than anywhere in the world over the next two decades as the economy grows and ever more extreme heat increases demand for air conditioning that so much the rest of the world takes for granted.



A woman is silhouetted as she carries a basket of coal scavenged from a mine near Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest

in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri

Meeting that demand will not fall to people like Raju, but to Coal India, already the world's largest miner, which aims to increase production to over 1 billion tons a year by 2024.

D.D. Ramanandan, the secretary at the Centre of Indian Trade Unions in Ranchi said that conversations of moving beyond coal were only taking place in Paris, Glasgow or New Delhi. They had hardly begun in India's coal belt. "Coal has continued for 100 years. Workers believe it will continue to do so," he said.

The consequences will be felt both globally and locally. Unless the world drastically cuts greenhouse gas emissions the planet will suffer even more extreme heat waves, erratic rainfall and destructive storms in coming years, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

And a 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change.



Indian laborers load coal into a truck in Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri

But there are roughly 300,000 people working directly with government-owned coal mines, earning fixed salaries and benefits. And there are nearly 4 million people in India whose livelihoods are directly or indirectly linked to coal, said Sandeep Pai, who studies energy security

and climate change at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

India's coal belt is dotted by industries that need the fuel, like steel and brick making. The Indian railways, country's largest employers, earns half their revenue by transporting coal, allowing it to subsidize passenger travel.

"Coal is an ecosystem," Pai said.

For people like Naresh Chauhan, 50 and his wife Rina Devi, 45, India's economic slowdown resulting from the pandemic has intensified their dependence on coal.

The two have lived in a village at the edge of the Jharia coalfield in Dhanbad all their lives. Accidental fires, some of which have been blazing for decades, have charred the ground and left it spongy. Smoke hisses from cracks in the surface near their hut. Fatal sinkholes are common.



A young woman holds a torch in her mouth as she collects coal from a mine near Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri

The couple earn \$3 a day selling four baskets of scavenged coal to traders.

Families who've lived amid coal mines for generations rarely own any land they can farm and have nowhere else to go. Naresh hopes that his son would learn to drive so that he, at least, could get away. But even that may not be enough. There's less work for the city's existing taxi drivers. Wedding parties, who in the past reserved cars to ferry guests, have shrunk. Fewer travelers come to the city than before.

"There is just coal, stone and fire. Nothing else here."

That could mean even harder times for the people in Dhanbad as the world eventually does turn away from coal. Pai says this is already happening as renewable energy gets cheaper and coal becomes less and less profitable.

India and other countries with coal-dependent regions have to diversify their economies and retrain workers, he said—both to protect the livelihoods of workers and to help speed the transition away from coal by offering new opportunities.



A truck loaded with coal drives past a stationary freight train carrying coal at Chainpur village near Hazaribagh, in eastern state of Jharkhand, Sunday, Sept. 26, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



A man climbs a steep ridge with a basket of coal scavenged from a mine near Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



A boy stands next to small pile of coal burning after scavenging from an open-cast mine near Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



Light trails are left by passing traffic as they drive past the statue of an unknown coal miner in the middle of a square in Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



Laborers load coal onto trucks for transportation near Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



Smoke hisses from the cracks in the ground as a villager holds his child in front of houses damaged due to subsidence near Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



A young woman carries a basket of coal scavenged from a mine near Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



Members of coal workers' community fetch drinking water from a pipe at a coal depot near an open-caste mine in Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



A washerman uses coal to heat up iron in Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Saturday, Sept. 25, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



Naresh Chauhan, 50, his wife Rina Devi, 45 fill sacks with coal in Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. The two have lived in a village at the edge of the Jharia coalfield in Dhanbad all their lives. The couple earn \$3 a day selling four baskets of scavenged coal to traders. For people like Chauhan and Devi, India's economic slowdown resulting from the pandemic has intensified their dependence on coal. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



Restaurants along a food street use coal hearths in Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Saturday, Sept. 25, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



Flames rise out of the fissures in the ground above coal mines in the village of Liloripathra near Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



A laborer poses for a photograph while taking a break from loading coal into a truck in Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. A 2021 Indian government study found that Jharkhand state—among the poorest in India and the state with the nation's largest coal reserves—is also the most vulnerable Indian state to climate change. Efforts to fight climate change are being held back in part because coal, the biggest single source of climate-changing gases, provides cheap electricity and supports millions of jobs. It's one of the dilemmas facing world leaders gathered in Glasgow, Scotland this week in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri



Murti Devi, who scavenges coal for living, prepares a hearth fueled by coal at a village near Dhanbad, an eastern Indian city in Jharkhand state, Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. The 32-year-old single mother of four lost the job she had all her life when the mine she worked for closed four years ago. Nothing came of the resettlement plans promised by the coal company so she, like so many others, turned to scavenging coal. On good days, she'll make a dollar. On other days, she relies on neighbors for help. "If there is coal, then we live. If there isn't any coal, then we don't live," she said. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri

Otherwise, more will end up like Murti Devi. The 32-year-old single mother of four lost the job she had all her life when the mine she worked for closed four years ago. Nothing came of the resettlement plans promised by the coal company so she, like so many others, turned to scavenging coal. On good days, she'll make a dollar. On other days,

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"If there is coal, then we live. If there isn't any coal, then we don't live," she said.

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