

Cutting carbon from the ground up! A comparative ethnography of anti-coal activism in India and Australia

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of
Doctor of Philosophy under the supervision of
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January 2021

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Ruchira Talukdar declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Date: 08/01/2021

Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor Prof. James Goodman and my co-supervisor Prof. Devleena Ghosh for their guidance and encouragement through the four years of my PhD journey. I feel grateful for their knowledge and vision that has helped me to shape what began as a mere idea into a rigorous comparison of environmental activism in India and Australia.

The commitment of activists and land-defenders in India and Australia, some of whom I have had the opportunity to interview for this thesis, never ceases to inspire me. Both countries have experienced shrinkage in democratic freedoms over the last four years. The courage of friends and colleagues in both movements has deepened my own commitment to this thesis. This thesis is dedicated to them.

I feel fortunate to be part of the UTS Climate Justice Research Centre (CJRC). I want to particularly thank Prof. Heidi Norman, whose subject Aboriginal Political History opened up my mind to the similarity of land struggles in Australia and India and deepened the comparative possibilities for this thesis. I am thankful for the Faculty of Arts and Social Science's support, and especially want to acknowledge Assoc. Professor Bhuva Narayan's care and availability for PhD students.

My understanding has been enriched through discussion with scholars and researchers on climate and Indigenous justice in India, Australia, and the United States. I want to particularly thank Prof. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt for her encouragement and many discussions on my research. The Global Atlas of Environmental Justice serves as an inspiration for my topic, and I have benefitted from the discussions with Brototi Roy from that project.

Getting through this thesis would not have been possible without the support of friends and family. Lastly, I want to acknowledge accredited editors Dr. Terry Fitzgerald and Peter Farmer for their editorial assistance in the final stages of this thesis.

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Acronyms

ALP – Australian Labor Party

BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party

CAG – Comptroller and Auditor General

CBA – Coal Bearing Area

CEA – Central Electricity Authority

CSE – Centre for Science and Environment

CPR – Centre for Policy Research

GHG - Greenhouse gas

NGOs – Environmental non-governmental organisations

EPBC – Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

FRA – Forest Rights Act 2006

IEA – International Energy Agency

LNP – Liberal National Party (Queensland)

MCG – Mackay Conservation Group

MSS – Mahan Sangharsh Samiti

NAPCC – National Action Plan for Climate Change

NAPM – National Association of People’s Movements

NDA – National Democratic Alliance (India).

NDC – Nationally determined contribution

NMP – National Minerals Policy

NTA – Native Title Act 1993

NTPC – National Thermal Power Corporation (Ltd.)

PESA – Panchayat Extension to Schedule Areas Act 1996

MOEF – Ministry of Environment and Forests

UNFCCC – United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

UPA – United Progressive Alliance (India)

W&J – Wangan and Jagalingou (traditional owners from Central Queensland)

Abstract

In 2009 the United Nations Climate Summit in Copenhagen failed to arrive at a definite pathway for future Green House Gas emissions reductions. The failure prompted a shift in global climate activism towards a direct politics of stopping fossil fuel extraction at source. Based on ethnographic research into anti-coal resistances in Australia and India during this time period, this thesis investigates whether this strategic turn signals the emergence of a new environmentalism. The thesis seeks to understand how and whether earlier environmentalisms have been transformed through new activisms to 'keep coal in ground', and whether a common ground can be conceptualised across two disparate contexts of environmentalism such as Australia and India through this new approach.

The thesis finds that Australian environmentalism was re-constituted as an anti-coal climate movement through a decade-long build-up in regions affected by coal mining. It now includes diverse narrative ranging from local environmental effects to climate change. Alliances between environmentalists, farmers and indigenous native titleholders now hold the potential to recast environmental narratives through a new relational politics. From 2014, the Carmichael coalmine in Central Queensland was opposed by a strategic alliance between the Wangan and Jagalingou traditional owners, Australia's largest environmental mobilisation, and local farmers. The movement could not stop the coal mine. It exposed coal's power over Australian politics, and coal became Australia's embodiment of climate change.

In India, the narrative of the environmentalism of the poor, of a rightful share of natural resources, has been recast in a new language of rights over forests through progressive legislations passed in 2006. From 2012, an alliance of forest-dependent communities and Greenpeace India resisted coal mining in Singrauli in central India, a region with the highest national concentration of coalmines and power plants in the country. The movement's narrative of forest rights and success

in stopping the coalmine signified a form of 'democracy on the ground' for India's ecosystems dependent communities, and against the history of Singrauli's industrial development, which dispossessed local communities. The proposed coalmine had been at the centre of 'Coalgate', a large government corruption scandal that exposed 'crony-capitalism' in India. When the state sought to define Greenpeace as a national security threat (for seeking to halt the coalmine), a civil society solidarity campaign supported the anti-coal activism as a critical assertion of democracy.

The Indian and Australian cases of anti-coal activism in this thesis demonstrate material and socio-political differences that are characteristic of a North-South divide, and distinct modes of environmental activism that are characteristic of North-South differences in environmental activism. But they also indicate similar patterns of power of the coal sector over governments, and its effects on environmental governance and democracy. Together, they signify a global outlook of an environmental activism focussed on stopping coal-extraction, which is representative and inclusive of differences. A common ground between these two anti-coal movements can be achieved by finding solidarity between the varieties of human and environmental justice concerns that now find common cause with climate justice.