

Does India have a right to burn fossil fuels?

Chalking out a greener path to development will help India rather than arguing for more coal production



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There has been quite a lot of debate on India's dependence on coal against the backdrop of the Conference of the Parties (COP26) meeting. While the coal lobbyists may have obvious interests in continuing that dependence, it comes as a surprise when the progressive circles also provide theories to justify this. Despite the Environment Minister adopting a similar position on the eve of the COP26, the Government of India has, for the first time, made a commitment to achieve the net zero target by 2070. It remains to be seen whether the government will indeed walk the talk since the experience on this count (or other issues) does not necessarily inspire that confidence.

The crux of the theoretical argument is that India needs to develop, and development requires energy. However, since India has neither historically emitted nor currently emits carbon anywhere close to what the global North has, or does, in per capita terms, it has no reason to commit to declining dependence on coal, at least in the near future. If anything, the argument goes, it should ask for a higher and fairer share in the global carbon budget. There is no doubt that this carbon budget framework is an excellent tool to understand global injustice but to move from there to our 'right to burn' is a big leap. It is like arguing that since India was colonised, it has a right to do the same and stopping the country from doing that is injustice.

For development, do the countries in the global South necessarily need to increase their share in the global carbon budget? Thankfully the answer is 'no' and it does not come at the cost of development, even in the limited sense as development is defined generally.

The question of development

One, there is no doubt that economic development requires energy but that does not translate into energy by burning coal. If there are other clean



A couple fills sacks with coal at the edge of the Jharia coalfield in Dhanbad, Jharkhand. ■ AP

er forms of energy available, why persist on the usage of coal? Normally the argument in favour of coal is on account of its cost, reliability and domestic availability. Recent data show that the levelised cost of electricity from renewable energy sources like solar (photovoltaic), hydro and onshore wind has been declining sharply over the last decade and is already less than fossil fuel-based electricity generation. On reliability, frontier renewable energy technologies have managed to address the question of variability of such sources to a large extent and, with technological progress, it seems to be changing for the better. As for the easy domestic availability of coal, it is a myth. According to the Ministry of Coal, India's net coal import went up from ₹782.6 billion in 2011-12 to ₹1,155.0 billion in 2020-21. India is among the largest importers of coal in the world, whereas it has no dearth of solar energy.

Two, why should the global South be aping the North in the development model it wants to follow? During the debates of post-colonial development in the Third World, there were two significant issues under discussion – control over technology

and choice of techniques to address the issue of surplus labour. India didn't quite resolve the two issues in its attempts of import-substituting industrialisation which worsened during the post-reform period. But it can address both today. The abundance of renewable natural resources in the tropical climate can give India a head start in this competitive world of technology. South-South collaborations can help India avoid the usual patterns of trade between the North and the South, where the former controls technology and the latter merely provides inputs. And the high-employment trajectory that the green path entails vis-à-vis the fossil fuel sector may help address the issue of surplus labour, even if partially. Such a path could additionally provide decentralised access to clean energy to the poor and the marginalised, including in remote regions of India. So, it simultaneously addresses the issues of employment, technology, energy poverty and self-reliance.

Types of injustice

Three, the framework of addressing global injustice in terms of a carbon budget is quite limiting in its scope in

more ways than one. Such an injustice is not at the level of the nation-states alone; there is such injustice between the rich and the poor within nations and between humans and non-human species. A progressive position on justice would take these injustices into account instead of narrowly focusing on the framework of nation-states. Moreover, it's a double whammy of injustice for the global South when it comes to climate change. Not only is it not primarily responsible, but the global South, especially its poor, will unduly bear the effect of climate change because of its tropical climate and high population density along the coastal lines. So, arguing for more coal is like shooting oneself in the foot. It is true that mitigation from the South alone will not make the difference required to stop this catastrophe but burning more coal will not necessarily solve the problem either.

But none of this answers how the wrongs of the past will be righted, the basic premise we started with. We have argued in this very newspaper that one of the ways in which this can be done is by making the global North pay for the energy transition in the South. Chalking out an independent, greener path to development may create conditions for such negotiations and give the South the moral high ground to force the North to come to the table, like South Africa did at Glasgow. The current lack of action against climate change both in the North and South has been maintained by dividing the working classes of these two regions – the North justifying operating coal mines since the South continues to emit more and the South negotiating for a higher share in carbon budget based on the past emissions of the North. This is a deadlock. The need of the hour is a global progressive agenda that does not pit the working class of the North against the South but the working people of the world as a whole resisting the global ruling elite in its aggressive and dangerous model of competitive emissions. Even if one is pessimistic about this path of righting the wrongs of the past, at the very least, it is better than the status quo.

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