

The Saturday Paper, Issue APRIL 8 – 14, 2017

Exposing Adani's environmental and labour abuses

By Vaishali Patil, an activist who fights for environmental justice and the rights of rural women in India.

‘For more than 20 years, I have worked with India's poorest and most marginalised people, helping women access basic education and defend their rights to land. In that time, I have also provided legal support for communities and biodiversity hotspots threatened by coal.

The strongest lesson I have learnt in my work is that social and economic justice are unattainable without environmental justice, and that one of the biggest barriers to social equality here in India is the coal industry.

In rural India, we are challenged daily by coal. When people think about coal power stations causing pollution, most think immediately of China. But here in India, pollution causes more than 3000 premature deaths every day – with the pollution spewed out from coal power stations one of the leading causes.

Swaths of premature deaths are just the most obvious symptom of a cancer that is destroying my homeland. From degraded lands to corruption and inequality, the coal industry is squeezing our people dry and reaping all the profits, accentuating inequalities and locking communities into a tragic cycle of poverty.

I've come face to face with some of the world's worst companies, but at the top of that list is mining giant Adani, which wants to develop one of the world's largest coalmines in Australia. The company says it is to meet a demand from India, but the communities I work with patently do not want Adani and they do not want its coal.

IS AUSTRALIA PREPARED TO LET A COMPANY RESPONSIBLE FOR SUCH BLATANT HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES BUILD ONE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST COALMINES ON YOUR SHORES?

The damage that Adani has done to our people can't be overstated. Behind Adani is a dark and disturbing history of environmental and human rights abuses. If you care about your country and the plight of India's poorest people, then you must say no to Adani's mine.

A good example of what I'm talking about can be found in the coastal town of Mundra, where I have worked. A government-commissioned committee found that Adani destroyed dozens of hectares of protected mangroves vital to local water purification. It dredged the ocean, flattened sand dunes and blocked waterways to build India's biggest cargo port, which supplies coal to its Mundra power station, one of the largest of its kind in the world.

Groundwater was left saline, a local village was flooded, and fish populations were devastated, with tragic consequences for local communities that depend on fishing and farming for their livelihoods. This was not an isolated incident.

Adani commonly uses bribery and coercion to get its way. The most high-profile case involved the then ombudsman of the state of Karnataka, investigating the broad-ranging bribery Adani used to conceal the illegal export of 7.7 million tonnes of iron ore. The investigation reported a staggering scale of bribery that included everyone from police, local politicians, customs officials and the state pollution control board.

Such is Adani's deep connection to government that the Mundra power station, India's largest thermal power plant, was approved by our elected leaders on prime agricultural land without one ever visiting the site. They chose to believe the company's assertion that the site was barren and perfectly suited for their mega coal project. Locals who relied on this prime agricultural land were given the boot with no avenue to challenge Adani.

Further down the coast, and closer to my home, is an equally disturbing story. Six years ago, an unseaworthy coal ship chartered by Adani sank off the coast of Mumbai, spilling more than 60,000 tonnes of coal into the ocean. For half a decade, Adani did nothing to clean up the mess, allowing it to destroy coastal ecosystems and devastate the local tourism industry.

These are just a few examples in a string of environmental atrocities on Adani's watch, which include pollution disasters in Zambia and land grabs in East India. But Adani's behaviour isn't exclusive to the environment. Behind their promise of local jobs and economic prosperity is an appalling record on human rights.

A Fairfax Media investigation in 2014 reported that during the construction of a luxury housing project in Gujarat, Adani used child labour and underpaid workers. Some labourers were not paid at all, while others developed cholera due to the unsanitary conditions of the housing in which they were forced to live. One 12-year-old boy told reporters he was paid less than the price of a coffee for working 12-hour days, six days a week.

At Adani's Mundra power plant, 21 workers were burnt when a hot-water pipe burst last year. Several later died from their injuries. Accidents and deaths have been reported at other Adani plants.

Australia takes workplace safety seriously. But Adani's coal will fuel more of this dangerous behaviour. Is Australia prepared to let a company responsible for such blatant human rights abuses build one of the world's largest coalmines on your shores?

As for Adani's assurances that their mine will alleviate Indian poverty, this is pure spin. Coal does not solve energy poverty; it aggravates it, ruining health and taking lives. Every day, I see the evidence in my work. Coal pollution is killing our people and will continue to rise if we continue on the current trajectory.

The claim that Australia would export cleaner coal than India might otherwise use is also nonsense. As the ABC reported this week, Adani planned to produce two kinds of coal at its Carmichael mine in Queensland. The coal to be sent to India was of the low-quality, high-ash kind. This despite your minister for resources, Matthew Canavan, implying Australia was somehow acting morally by supporting the mine:

“They will get that coal elsewhere – which they are doing right now... Generally speaking that coal is of lower quality than what we have in Queensland.”

I am tired of hearing promises by the coal industry that are never met. In India, communities are promised local jobs. These seldom eventuate, and the few that do tend to be dangerous and underpaid. The power generated by big plants does not get used by the communities that have to live with them: it is supplied to the wealthy in large cities. Meanwhile, surrounding communities bear the burden of degraded landscapes, poor health and frequent power outages.

No group bears the brunt of these inequalities harder than rural women. My organisation fights for the rights of women to own land. Yet, at the same time, Adani wields disproportionate power to take away the land that many rural women rely on for their sustenance. This is through land grabs or by polluting the surrounding landscape to an extent it is not usable.

With a country as large as India, it is no surprise that hundreds of millions of people live in the dark. Our coal-powered grid is highly inefficient, with up to 50 per cent transmission losses in some states. And it's expensive, as rising energy costs attest. We need distributed, democratically owned, renewable energy, not centralised dirty power that will be fed by Adani's coalmines in Australia.

India's politicians know this. Our energy minister, Piyush Goyal, reiterated last year our government's intention to import no more coal within two to three years. Adani's mine has a life span of 60 years. Who do they expect to use this coal when the world is moving rapidly away from fossil fuels?

Adani knows this, which explains why the company is investing so aggressively in solar, competing with China and the United States in the development of mammoth photovoltaic power stations. Its mega project in Tamil Nadu, completed in September last year, was the world's largest solar plant until China expanded one of its own in January. Adani's plant was strongly backed by our prime minister, Narendra Modi, who announced last year more than \$3 billion in state aid would be given to India's solar panel manufacturing industry, as part of a larger plan to build a booming domestic and export solar industry in India.

Adani can't have it both ways. The world is moving beyond coal. It must, too. Adani's coal is devastating India and it will devastate Australia. You can follow the world in chasing the sun and the wind or stay in the dark ages attached to dirty coal. Adani hasn't started digging in Australia yet.

The choice is yours.