BURNING COAL: TRADEGY AT GANSHADIH UNTOLD STORY (OR) FIELD NOTE (FINAL)

Long before the sun rises, the women and girls of Ganshadih begin the first of countless treks down a steep and narrow switchback into the open pit mine to scavenge chunks of coal, which they carry back to the surface in baskets balanced atop their heads. It is too dark to photograph when I arrive at the Jharia Coalfield at 4:15 a.m., but already they are at work. So, too are the heavy machines that bite into the sides of the mine.

The scavengers move gracefully, purposefully, between and around shovels and loaders that could easily crush them, their ghostly figures illuminated every now and then by headlight beams. The machinery operators know to watch out for the people. This dance has been going on a long time.

The women step carefully with practiced strides to avoid the fissures that run like fingers through the scarred and blackened ground. In the bright light of day, heat waves shimmering above the cracks are the only warning of the danger beneath. In the dark, though, the fissures are terrifyingly apparent, glowing yellow and orange with the flames of the fire burning deep in the earth.

The fire has been burning for a hundred years. To be more precise, dozens of fires are burning throughout the Jharia Coalfields, a half-hour drive southwest of Dhanbad in India’s Jharkhand province. Dhanbad is the region’s largest city and one of India’s most important coal trading centers. The region’s vast coalfields spread across about 108 square miles and are India's main source of the prized bituminous coal used to fire steel mill blast furnaces.

In the early 1970s, authorities documented 77 fires in the massive coalfield operated by the state-controlled Coal India and its subsidiary, Bharat Coking Coal Limited (BCCL). In the 40 years since, several projects have been undertaken to control and extinguish the fires and relocate entire villages with only limited success. *The Hindu* newspaper reported in 2015 that BCCL estimated that the coal fires had destroyed 37 million tonnes of coal and continued to prevent the company from mining another 2 billion tonnes worth an estimated $220 billion.

Beyond the economics and lost coal, the fires have taken a horrific toll on both the environment and the people who live perilously close to the ever-widening mines. The ground is a charred wasteland, too hot and poisonous for anything to grow. Noxious fumes and greenhouse gases rise from the fissures; the stench of burning sulfur hangs in the air. People complain of respiratory problems, skin diseases, and other ailments. Fissures open without warning to swallow entire houses, sadly sometimes with their residents inside.

The tiny village of Ganshadih sits on the edge of the Alkusha mine in the BCCL complex. About 50 people live here in a cluster of brightly painted houses, the closest homes no more than 100 yards from the edge of the mine. The women and the girls do most of the work -- carrying the coal, dumping the coal into large piles, and burning those piles to make charcoal, which they bag and sell in the local markets. Small children sit before piles of coal, and use brass hammers to break large pieces into smaller ones. Even in the midst of all this filth––their hands and feet are black with coal dust––the women and girls are dressed beautifully in colorful saris and jewelry. They laugh and chat and sing as they climb the switchbacks, balancing baskets that weigh 40 pounds or more.

I see only one man carrying coal with the women and a few teenage boys and men tending the fires, though there are many men just hanging around the village. Mostly, the women and girls do the heavy lifting.

The impending hundredth anniversary of the first coal fire at the Jharia field brought a flurry of press coverage for the plight of the residents near the mines and an announcement from India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 of new and more aggressive plans to combat the fires and relocate up to 100,000 people near the mines. Since then, however, little has changed for the people who live above the inferno.