



THE BURNING CITY OF INDIA

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Visualize a place where the very ground beneath your home could collapse or catch fire at any time where toxic smoke is not a rare event but part of daily life. This is not science fiction. This is Jharia, a mining town in Jharkhand, which was once famous for its rich deposits of high-quality coal and is now tragically known as the Burning City of India.

Beneath its surface, underground coal seam fires continue to rage relentlessly, releasing toxic gases into the air and making it one of the most dangerous places to live in India. To understand how such a disaster came to be, let's take a step back and look at its past.

Coal mining in Jharia began aggressively during the British colonial era, driven by the insatiable demand for coal during the Industrial Revolution and later for the British Empire's military and industrial needs, particularly during World War I and World War II. Back then, coal was black gold, a resource so valuable that its extraction was prioritized over human safety or environmental preservation. Mines were dug without any structural reinforcements, and after their resources were exhausted, they were simply abandoned — left open and unsealed.

This negligence, compounded by decades of over-mining and disregard for ecological balance, led to the spontaneous combustion of exposed coal seams, which slowly ignited fires underground. What began as isolated, manageable blazes gradually transformed into an uncontrollable inferno beneath the earth's surface. What might have been dismissed as a minor mishap a century ago has now evolved into a catastrophic environmental disaster, spanning more than 200 square kilometres of land.

Today, dozens of underground coal fires continue to burn tenaciously. Smoke billows out from cracks in roads, floors, and open fields. Vast patches of land have turned barren, homes collapse without warning as the ground below turns hollow, and entire neighbourhoods are being swallowed by the earth. Residents of Jharia live in perpetual danger, where stepping out means inhaling poisonous fumes and staying indoors doesn't promise safety either.

Breathing itself has become a hazard here. Respiratory issues such as chronic bronchitis, asthma, silicosis, and tuberculosis are alarmingly common not just in older residents

but in children as well, whose tender lungs grow up alongside smoke and soot. Toxic gases like carbon monoxide (CO), sulfur dioxide (SO₂), methane (CH₄), along with harmful fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀), fill the atmosphere relentlessly. The health consequences are devastating: skin diseases, persistent eye irritations, and even long-term exposure-related cancers are increasingly prevalent. And to make matters worse, access to healthcare remains scarce, burdened by financial constraints and poor infrastructure.

But the problem doesn't stop at the surface. These coal fires emit greenhouse gases such as methane and carbon dioxide year-round, contributing not only to local hazards but also to global climate change. While the world debates carbon emissions and climate policies in conference rooms, Jharia's residents have been living with the consequences for generations.

The environmental degradation here is heartbreaking. The intense underground heat and acidification have rendered the soil infertile, killing off vegetation and eliminating agricultural opportunities. The once-thriving fields have withered, leaving farmers in debt and despair, and forcing entire communities into poverty. Local water bodies and underground aquifers have been contaminated by combustion residues and toxic chemical runoff from the mines, making drinking water unsafe and unusable. Rivers and ponds dry up or turn toxic, further stressing human life and collapsing local ecosystems. Biodiversity has disappeared, and what was once fertile, life-giving land has become a bleak, smoking wasteland.

The constant land subsidence — where large sections of the ground suddenly cave in — adds yet another layer of terror to life in Jharia. Massive craters open up without warning, swallowing homes, roads, and even people. Residents live with an eerie, constant uncertainty, never knowing when the earth beneath them might collapse.

Yet, despite this dystopian reality, people continue to live here — not out of choice, but out of compulsion. Generations of families, tied to the land by history, poverty, and lack of

alternatives, remain trapped.

The government and concerned authorities, like the Jharia Rehabilitation and Development Authority (JRDA), have launched relocation and rehabilitation plans, but progress has been painfully slow, plagued by bureaucracy, logistical hurdles, and inadequate resources. For many, promises of new homes and safer settlements remain empty words, while the next generation grows up with chronic ailments, injuries, and trauma that have become a part of everyday life.

As India moves forward with ambitious plans for urban development, industrial growth, and clean energy initiatives, Jharia stands as a grim reminder of what can happen when economic greed overshadows environmental responsibility. It's not just a local tragedy but a reflection of our national and global negligence towards environmental justice.

The voices of Jharia's people deserve to be heard — not as cautionary tales, but as urgent calls for action. The Burning City of India must not be forgotten, buried under the weight of coal dust and silence. Its story should remind us that environmental disasters aren't abstract concepts or distant concerns; they are lived realities for millions of people today. And unless addressed decisively, they could be tomorrow's reality for many more.



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