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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Development-Induced Dispossession in Pakistan: A Study of Political Economy of Thar Coal-Power Plants, a CPEC Project under the Belt and Road Initiative**

**Raza Shahani**

Teaching Assistant, Department of Pakistan Studies, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan

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**Corresponding Author:** razashahani@gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the phenomenon of Pakistani development-induced dispossession by examining the Thar Coal Power Plants through a political economy analysis. The plants are a major power-generation initiative in China Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Basing the research on the theoretical backgrounds of the theory of accumulation by dispossession by Rosa Luxemburg and a critique on neoliberal space restructuring by David Harvey, the paper examines the convergence between global capital, state and the provincial government to support extractive development at the cost of the marginalized local people. The Thar region where the lignite coal has been found in huge abundance has seen a rapid infrastructural growth, acquisition of land, and a change in the environment. As the solution to the energy crisis in Pakistan, the coal power plants have initiated natural resources dispossession, displacement, loss of livelihoods and ecological degradation. In this study qualitative case analysis was adopted and relied on interviews, policy documents, and newspaper accounts of events to reveal the dynamics of dispossession and the socio-political forces behind this process. The analysis reveals that dispossession in Thar is not merely a byproduct of development but a structural feature of capitalist expansion under the BRI. It highlights the complicity of federal and provincial institutions in legitimizing extractive practices and the limited avenues for community resistance. The paper concludes by advocating for a more inclusive development paradigm that prioritizes environmental justice, participatory governance, and equitable resource distribution.

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**KEYWORDS** Development-Induced Dispossession, Thar Coal-Power Plants, CPEC, Belt and Road Initiative, Accumulation by Dispossession, Environmental Justice, Political Economy

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**Introduction**

Development-induced dispossession has emerged as a critical concern in the Global South, where large-scale infrastructure projects often dispossess and displace communities, disrupt ecosystems, and reconfigure local economies (Cernea, 1997; Bebbington, 2012; Shah, et. al., 2020). In Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a central node of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—has accelerated such transformations, particularly in resource-rich but socio-economically marginalized regions. Among these, the Thar Coal Power Plants stand out as emblematic of the tensions between energy development and social justice (Ain, et. al., 2024; Ali, 2020; Rahim, et. al., 2018).

The Thar Desert, located in Sindh province, is home to vast lignite coal reserves and indigenous communities whose livelihoods are intricately tied to the land (Khan & Akhtar, 2019). Since the launch of CPEC, Thar has witnessed an influx of investment,

infrastructure, and extractive activity. The coal power plants, framed as a solution to Pakistan's chronic energy shortages, have been celebrated by policymakers as a symbol of progress (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2017). However, beneath this narrative lies a complex web of dispossession, displacement, and ecological harm (Shahani, 2023).

### **Literature Review**

The theory of development-induced dispossession has acquired importance in significant development studies, mainly in contexts where infrastructure and natural resource mining projects interconnect with vulnerable people. Scholars like Cernea (1997) and Bebbington (2012) have recorded the social, economic and psychological bearings of displacement, accentuating the necessity for sharing and rights-oriented intents to development. In Pakistan, in fact, such frameworks are underutilized, specifically in the study of CPEC-connected projects.

Rosa Luxemburg's concept of acquiring wealth by dispossessing offers a means for comprehending the structural characteristic of dispossession. Luxemburg stresses that the capitalist economies need the persistent incorporation of non-capitalist lands and people to continue accumulation. This process usually involves coercion, dispossession, and the changing of communal resources into commodities. In the framework of Thar, the dispossession of land and waters for coal mining mirrors the dynamic, as local livelihoods are damaged to facilitate industrial development.

David Harvey works on Luxemburg's deep observations by situating displacement and dispossession within neo-liberal reorganization of space. He is concerned that neo-liberalism makes possible accumulation through instruments such as selling out, privatization, deregulation, and commodifying of nature. Harvey's theory of "accumulation by internal displacement and dispossession" is specifically the characteristic of the BRI, which promotes massive infrastructure schemes that often ignore local governance, environmental safeguards and ecological needs. In Thar, the connivance of provincial and central government institutions with Chinese investing companies are the prime example of the restructuring, as development is secured with minimal concern for social, environmental and ecological bearings.

Empirical investigations on the Belt and Road Initiative have revealed its dual face: while it ensures connectivity, coordination and economic development, it also widens inequalities and environmental harms. Writers such as Sidaway and Woon (2017) have criticized the BRI's vertical planning and denial to the community engagement. In Pakistan, the CPEC has been publicised as a "game-changer," still its implementation has exposed deep governance difficulties, including obscure decision-making, secrecy, weak regulatory supervision, and insufficient public consultation.

The Thar Coal Power Plants have grabbed attention of journalists, academician and activists, but academic interest remains limited. The existing studies center on technical sides of coal extraction and macroeconomic benefits, often overseeing the lived examples of dispossession. This paper attempts to bridge that gap by foregrounding the grievances of the impacted communities and examining the political economy of displacement and dispossession through a robust theoretical lens.

Rosa Luxemburg's concept of primeval accumulation offers a foundational lens for comprehending the structural character of dispossession in capitalist growth. Luxemburg (1913/2003) pleads that capitalism cannot maintain itself only through production and exchange of goods in the city centers; it must uninterruptedly absorb

external lands and resources. This push for grabbing resources in the peripheral areas is violent very often, involving the striping of land, labor, and natural resources from non-capitalist populations. In the perspective of Thar, the snatching of land, minerals and water resources from the communities for coal mining reflects this reality, as local livelihoods are removed to make way for industrial expansion (Ali, 2020; Shahani, 2023).

David Harvey (2005) expanded Luxemburg's views by theorizing accumulation by displacement and dispossession as an endless feature of neo-liberal capitalism. He identified tools such as selling out, privatization, commodification of natural resources, and displacement as pivotal to contemporary capitalist sprallings. These mechanisms are obvious in the Thar Coal Power Plants, where land and minerals acquisition, environmental deprivation, and social and political marginalization have been orchestrated by state institutions, local governments and corporate actors. The unison of provincial and federal governments with Chinese companies contextualizes Harvey's thoughts of spatial reorganization, where development is sought with negligible regard for human and ecological costs (Small, 2020; Ghani & Khan, 2018).

### **Theoretical Conceptualization**

The paper draws on Rosa Luxemburg's theory of accumulation by dispossession and David Harvey's critique of neoliberal spatial restructuring. Luxemburg (1913/2003) believed that capitalist expansion would need to continuously take over non-capitalist spaces and do so, many times by use of force. Harvey (2005) further developed this concept by demonstrating that neoliberalism reorganizes space so that accumulation of capitalism would be possible and usually in terms of privatizations, deregulation and displacement. These concepts offer a manner of considering the Thar Coal Power Plants as not independent projects but at the extension of logics of global capitalism.

The theory of primitive accumulation proposed by Luxemburg provides the perspective through which one can approach the structural forms of dispossession in capitalist progress. She reasoned that capitalism cannot be satisfied with only internal production and exchange; it has to constantly absorb external areas and substance. It is a growth that is usually violent and claims the land, labor force and natural wealth of the non-capitalist societies. Framed within Thar, such a process can be traced in the appropriation of local communities' owned natural resources, land and water, which are exploited by the establishment of a coal mining industry that displaces the traditional livelihoods of people (Ali, 2020; Shahani, 2023).

Dispossession as conceptualized by Harvey (2005) is a consistent characteristic of the neoliberal capitalism. He noted the inherent processes of privatization, commodification of the nature, and displacement as the key mechanisms of spread of contemporary capitalists. Such processes have been observed in the case of the Thar Coal Power Plants which has experienced land acquisition, environmental destruction as well as marginalization of the socio-political sphere by the state and corporate players. The coordination between the provincial and federal governments and Chinese investors is a representation of the concept of Harvey on the spatial restructuring in which the development is chasing without giving consideration to social and ecological prices (Small, 2020; Ghani & Khan, 2018).

The empirical research about the Belt and Road Initiative has also revealed this dual nature of this initiative: on one hand, it is expected to bring the connectivity and economic growths; on the other hand, it deepens the inequalities and multiplies the

environmental hazards. The top-down planning and absence of engagement with the local communities in the BRI have been criticized by such scholars as Sidaway and Woon (2017). CPEC has been positioned in Pakistan as a game-changer, but its execution has shown salient issues of governance such as opacity in decision-making, inadequate regulatory authority, and insufficient consultation of populations.

### **Material and Methods**

The study employs a qualitative case study approach, combining document analysis, interviews with affected communities, and media reports. It focuses on the mechanisms of dispossession—land acquisition, mineral extraction, environmental degradation, and socio-political marginalization—and the role of state and corporate actors in legitimizing these processes. It also examines the forms of resistance that have emerged, albeit constrained by institutional and legal frameworks (Booth, 2007).

By analyzing the Thar Coal Power Plants through a political economy lens, the paper contributes to a growing body of literature on extractivism, development, and dispossession in South Asia (Siddiqui, 2021; Hasan, 2018). It challenges the dominant narrative of development as progress and calls for a rethinking of energy policy that centers justice, sustainability, and community agency.

### **Results and Discussion**

Tharparkar, located in southeastern Sindh, is a region historically shaped by its arid ecology, pastoral livelihoods, and rich cultural heritage. For centuries, its inhabitants have practiced rain-fed agriculture and livestock rearing, adapting to the harsh desert conditions through communal resource-sharing and seasonal migration (Hasan, 2015). The region's socio-cultural fabric is deeply intertwined with its ecology, where water scarcity and land fertility dictate rhythms of life.

This historical backdrop sets the stage for a dramatic transformation that began with the discovery of vast lignite coal reserves in the 1990s. Previously being disregarded because of technological and economic limitations, the coal store became valuable within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that redefined Thar as a nineteenth-century oasis of energy production (Siddiqui, 2019). The Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company (SECMC) which partnered with Chinese companies led into the development of the open-pit mining and power generation plants changing the face of the area and administrative proceedings.

Although the state itself presented this transformation as the kind of leap forward into energy security and the modernization of the economy, the historical background is more complicated. The fact that Thar has been marginalized in national development agendas has always been an issue of concern and the recent capital and infrastructure boom have made the relationship with other parts even more lopsided. The coalfields not only signify a change of technology but a discontinuity in the ecological as well as cultural existence of a region (Mustafa & Qazi, 2007).

What can further compound this rupture is the historical neglect of Thar with regards to health, education and infrastructure in which its communities have simply become more susceptible to the shocks of how an extractive development can affect the health of people. New mining has undone all the traditional land confessional system; dissolved all the local common grazing rights; interfered with indigenous systems of governance and implemented new interests that allow corporate control of the local

system and authority at the expense of local communities (Brockington & Igoe, 2006). This knowledge of historical background is needed to understand how extensive dispossession on the Thar is.

At this basis, it is evident that there is carefully and methodically planned structure of development-induced dispossession in the governance and legal framework of the Thar Coal Power Plants. Displacement and marginalization of Thari communities are far from incidental since this comes along with the joint effect of colonialist-era legislation, neoliberal policy tools, and the shroud of institutional set-ups that can only auger well with the vested interests in extraction and not democratic transparency or social fairness (Harvey, 2003; Levien, 2013).

At the heart of such a framework is the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, an old legacy of British colonialism that remains the major legal mechanism used in Pakistan to expropriate land. The Act has given the state the right to seize land on behalf of the state of a given purpose, which is arbitrarily defined as a public one, meaning that it has been able to take land on behalf of a highway, mining sites and many other projects (Ali, 2015). This law has allowed the Sindh government to give out in Thar, thousands of acreage of common and ancestral land to corporate enterprises including the Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company (SECMC) and Shanghai Electric, frequently without considerable consultation or consent of involved populations (Memon, 2019).

Its procedural mannerisms of the Act are highly defective. Pay is estimated on old market value and does not take into consideration ecology, spiritual and cultural worth on the land. In addition, customary land tenure systems, very common in Thar and based on collective ownership and stewardship, are not recognized by the law. The extent to which it is legally invisible enables the state to declare communal lands as vacant or state-owned which makes their transfer to private developers a valid process (Borras et al., 2011). The outcome is a legal fiction that cancels the right of indigenous people and allows appropriation through dispossession.

These legalities are supported by governing mechanisms that further entrap or rather lock in the process of dispossession. They have the Sindh Coal Authority which is charged with the responsibility of monitoring coal development with minimal transparency and monitoring. It usually takes decisions in synergy with corporate partners and provincial elites at the expense of the local stakeholders and civil society actors. The Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) have been required by the 1997 Pakistan Environmental Protection Act and this has tended to involve project developers agents as consultants, which causes grave rifts regarding the lack of conflict of interest and procedural integrity (Khan, 2020). All these tests do is downplay the hazards to the environment, and do not consider community interests and are a form of a formality, rather than a measure of accountability.

To this, is the naming of portions of Thar to be Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) scheme that has further eroded the regulatory protections. SEZs are dictated by fast-tracking approval procedures, low taxation levels, and labor and environmental laxity. These zones are marketed as settings that lure investment; however they end up functioning like legal black holes and the interests and views of corporations win over community well being (Levien, 2013). The SEZ status has allowed quick process of land acquisition and infrastructural development in Thar without proper scrutiny of environment and very little community participation.

The state involvement in the process is not neutral at all. It actively supports dispossession legally, administratively and coercively. There is repeated mention of bureaucratic opacity and the affected families have made allegations; of not being able to understand compensation procedures, inability to get access to land records and intimidation by the local officials. Land owners have in other instances, been coerced to accept sanctions under the threat of expropriation and in other instances, land owners have been left out of any compensation for lack of records or due to contradicting claims (Sultana, 2020). These are just part of a more general trend of governance that favors efficiency and investment at the expense of equity and inclusion.

To complicate matters even further, there is legal pluralism. The villages of Thar work within a system of formal and informal law, such as customary law, religious convention and state law. The lack of a harmonization of these systems leads to an ambiguity on the legal front that is mostly manipulated by influential actors. A case in point is the land ownership disputes that are judged partially and the determination is based more on political affiliation compared to merits of the case. This undermines the rule of law and erodes trust in public institutions (Ali, 2015).

Meanwhile, the securitization of development under CPEC has further constrained democratic engagement. Security forces are deployed to protect infrastructure and personnel, but their presence often intimidates local populations and suppresses dissent. Activists and community leaders face surveillance, harassment, and legal reprisals, creating a climate of fear that stifles resistance and dialogue (Booth, 2007; Jahangir, 2021). The framing of coal development as a matter of national interest and strategic security delegitimizes criticism and marginalizes alternative visions of development.

Institutional fragmentation also contributes to governance failures. Multiple agencies—ranging from the Sindh Coal Authority to the Environmental Protection Agency and district administration—operate with overlapping mandates and limited coordination. This creates bureaucratic bottlenecks and accountability gaps, allowing violations to go unaddressed and grievances to fester. Civil society organizations attempting to engage with these institutions often encounter resistance, delay, or outright dismissal (Ahmed & Jafri, 2021).

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, there are legal and institutional avenues for reform. Scholars and activists have called for the repeal or revision of the Land Acquisition Act to incorporate principles of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), recognize communal land rights, and ensure fair compensation. Strengthening environmental regulations, enhancing the autonomy of oversight bodies, and institutionalizing participatory governance mechanisms are also critical steps toward more equitable development (Siddiqui, 2021).

Ultimately, the governance and legal mechanisms of dispossession in Thar are not accidental—they are embedded in a broader political economy that prioritizes extractive growth over democratic accountability and social justice. The convergence of colonial laws, neoliberal policies, and opaque institutions creates a structural framework that enables and legitimizes the displacement of marginalized communities. Addressing these issues requires not only legal reform but also a reimagining of governance itself—one that centers transparency, participation, and the rights of those most affected by development.

Building on the governance and legal mechanisms that facilitate dispossession, the socio-economic impacts of the Thar Coal Power Plants are profound, multifaceted, and deeply embedded in the structural inequalities that characterize development-induced dispossession. While the state and corporate actors frame the coal projects as engines of national progress and regional uplift, the lived experiences of local communities reveal a starkly different reality – one marked by displacement, livelihood disruption, cultural erosion, and social fragmentation (Harvey, 2003; Levien, 2013).

Displacement is the most visible and immediate consequence of coal development in Thar. Thousands of families have been uprooted from ancestral lands to make way for mining zones, roads, and power stations. Although the Sindh government and Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company (SECMC) claim to provide compensation and resettlement facilities, field interviews and civil society reports suggest that these measures are often inadequate, delayed, or selectively implemented (Sultana, 2020). Many displaced persons report receiving partial payments, substandard housing, and limited access to basic services such as water, electricity, and sanitation. The psychological toll of displacement – loss of identity, community cohesion, and spiritual connection to the land – is rarely acknowledged in official narratives (Cernea, 1997).

Another important effect is livelihood disruption. Traditionally the economy of Thar depends upon livestock rearing, rain-fed crops and handicrafts. These activities are not only economic – they are cultural activities based in ecological blending and social relations. The eradication of the pastoral economy by turning the grazing land into mining areas has destroyed the pastoral way of life, and peoples have to discard centuries-long traditions. The availability of fodder and water to livestock has become a problem, leading to more losses of livestock, and agricultural outputs are also decreased because of the loss of soil fertility or the lack of water (Mustafa & Qazi, 2007). Consequently, the resultant effect is the forced entry of many residents into vulnerable employment sectors where they become daily-paid wage earners either in building (construction), transport or unofficial services. The jobs are typically low paid and usually seasonal and lack social protections, which puts an employee at risk of exploitation and economic insecurity (Borras et al., 2011).

These aspects of livelihood disruption are especially gendered. Traditionally, women in Thar have been the main protagonists of the work in agriculture, maintenance of livestock, water supply and craft manufacturing. These roles have been diminished by displacement and ecological degradation, which has put more strain on women in their households, and barred them access to any formal employment. Change in household due to subsistence to wage employment has also meant that men move to cities in search of employment and women are left to shoulder most of the burden of childcare and resources. Besides, the disappearance of the communal areas and cultural traditions has reduced their social circles and support systems leaving women more isolated and susceptible (Shiva, 1989; Sultana, 2020).

The coal projects have also stretched education and health services. The new wave of labor and machines as well as infrastructure has strained the local amenities, whereby replaced and further pollution has introduced new health concerns. There have been increases in respiratory diseases, skin disease, and reproductive diseases, especially in the young and old populace (Khan, 2020). Clinics are poorly staffed and equipped and most of these people have to travel great distances to receive basic care. Not only are there no solutions in health in the form of specific health interventions and epidemiologic studies, but there is an overall disregard of the field of health in development planning.

Education has also been a victim since school attendance has been reduced by displacement, lack of economic resources and stress in the environment. The displaced children usually experience an unwarranted school disruption, language difficulty, and stigma, and poor schooling experience that affect their future (Hasan, 2015).

Another long-term implication of these disposessions in the name of development in Thar is cultural erosion. Displacement does not only ruin economic activities, but it also destroys social and spiritual practices. Shrines, temples and holy places entering into mining areas have been removed or destroyed, and this breaks down the connection with the land. Dynamic activities as community rites, festivals, and oral traditions have been disrupted causing the loss of cultural continuity and identity. These types of intangible losses are superfluous to the homogenizing logic of development and this becomes something that culture then becomes a footnote in the project design (Escobar, 1995). To indigenous communities, indigenous ways of knowing and being are rooted in the land and thus such violations amount to a form of epistemic violence, a destruction of ways of knowing and being which does not correspond to capitalistic sensibility (Scott, 1998).

The other effect of coal development is its social fragmentation. Labor migration and displacement have changed the form of the communities, the kinship ties, collective decisions become weak. The resettlement colonies usually have families of different villages, castes and religious orientations which result in quarrels and suspicion. The decline of the traditional forms of governance (like village councils and groups of elders) has left locals with no leadership structure, which, in its turn, is most frequently occupied by outside players who cannot be considered completely legitimate. This division compromises the community resilience and solidarity, which complicates the mobilization with regard to dispossession or collective bargaining with government (Levien, 2013).

In spite of these predicaments, communities in the Thar are still showing resilience and flexibility. Others have started cooperatives to conserve traditional crafts and others do advocacy to seek higher remuneration, services and environmental safeguards. The women have formed groups to meet their health and educational needs and the youth groups have also relied on social media to sensitize and create unity. These initiatives are an alternative to how these people are marginalized by the system; in a passive view of development, these represent a rejection of complacency and tacit submission and an assertion in agency and dignity (Ghimire, 2001; Sultana, 2020).

But the structural character of the dispossession restrains the extent of such movements. So long as there is no systematic change, no legalization of land ownership, people participation, equity in resource allocation, the socio-economic recovery will be an illusion. Such coal projects at Thar can be described by David Harvey (2003) where the notion of accumulation by dispossession has been discussed, whereby the development activities become source of redistribution or appropriations of wealth and power of the marginalized societies towards corporations and the governments. The socio-economic effects have not been unintentional but are part and parcel of the design and logic of extractive development.

To sum up, socio-economic implications of the Thar Coal Power Plants are extensive and well-established. These are not separate factors such as displacement, livelihood disruption, gendered burdens, health crisis, cultural erosion, and social fragmentation, although they are not alone, but part of a greater process of dispossession.



They are losses that cannot simply be repaid or even countered by Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) programs and other similar efforts, but by actually reconsidering development, focusing on justice, equality, and community engagement. It is only after all that the promise of progress can be reconciled with the facts of those who pay the costs.

Continuing the discussion of socio-economic outcomes, the environmental effects of the Thar Coal Power Plants are not only direct and non-indicative, but redefine the ecology of the region as well as the health environment of the locals. Tharparkar is a region which has experienced weak desert ecosystem and biodiversity, however currently, wildlife is experiencing the domino effect of environmental destabilization following open-pit mining, being burned of coal, and infrastructure building. These shifts are not incidental side-effects, they are the heart of the logic of the extractive development, whose leaders are more interested in energy production, rather than some ecological sustainability and social well-being of the communities (Harvey, 2003).

Open-pit mineral mining has entailed the transfer of large amounts of top soil, plants, and natural habitats. The land-clearing procedure removes the organic covering of land, therefore subjecting the land to erosion and desertification. The native vegetation like *Prosopis cineraria* and *Capparis decidua* who are essential contribution in soil hold-tight as well as remedial local drug are going away quickly (Martinez-Alier, 2002). Loss of these species not only poses a threat to biodiversity but also destroys traditional ecological knowledge system which has supported Thari communities throughout their lives. The habitats of wildlife have been isolated so that certain species like desert foxes, peacocks, and reptiles, have been displaced. Interruption of the food chains and the breeding areas has the spillover effect on the ecological balance. Moreover, the construction of roads, pipelines, and power stations has introduced noise pollution and human encroachment into previously undisturbed areas, further stressing the local fauna (Shiva, 1989).

Water scarcity, already a chronic issue in Thar due to its arid climate, has been exacerbated by mining operations. Coal extraction and power generation require substantial water for cooling, dust suppression, and slurry transport. This water is often sourced from deep aquifers or diverted from community wells, leading to the depletion of groundwater reserves and increased salinity (Mustafa & Qazi, 2007). The Sindh government's decision to construct pipelines from the Indus River Left Bank Outfall Drain to supply water to the coal plants has sparked controversy, as it redirects water from agricultural and domestic use to industrial consumption (Khan, 2020). Field reports indicate that water contamination is widespread. Heavy metals such as arsenic, mercury, and lead – byproducts of coal combustion – have leached into surface and groundwater sources. Residents report changes in water color, taste, and odor, with many experiencing gastrointestinal illnesses, skin rashes, and reproductive health issues (Sultana, 2020). Women and children, traditionally responsible for water collection, now travel longer distances and face increased physical strain and exposure to pollutants.

Air pollution is one of the most visible and harmful consequences of coal-based energy production. The combustion of lignite coal releases particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and volatile organic compounds. These pollutants contribute to smog formation, acid rain, and respiratory illnesses. In villages near the mining sites, residents report a sharp rise in asthma, bronchitis, chronic cough, and eye irritation (Khan, 2020). The vulnerable groups are children and the aged. What is lacking in Thar are monitoring stations on the quality of air, which enables one to track the level of

pollution in an orderly manner and prevent the depreciation of the environment. Besides, there are no protective appliances and recognition among staff and the population that enhances the risk of exposure. The end result is a state of inquiry at the level of public health, which is still underrepresented and tackled by business and governmental influences inadequately.

The Thar health infrastructure is not prepared at all to absorb the consequence of coal development in the environment. Clinics are either under resource or understaffed and in many cases, located very distant to any affected community. Although SECMC and the Sindh government have put up some health facilities in the form of corporate social responsibility programs, they lack wide scope and accessibility. Since many inhabitants are forced to commute to Mithi, the Tharparkar district headquarters or Hyderabad, another well-developed but far-flung district to seek specialized treatment, they have to pay both monetary and transportation costs (Hasan, 2015). Epidemiological research and health surveillance chains are also lacking to monitor trends in diseases that are related to the environmental exposure. This failure to take action by institutions is an indicator of the failure of wider governance that neglects the inclusion of health impact assessment and community consultation in the development planning. This discrepancy between what happens to the environment and what happens to human health indicates the technocratic approach to the extractive governance structured in such a way that optics of energy production are favored over human health (Escobar, 1995).

The implication of the climate with coal development in Thar is intense. The construction of coal-fired power plants contributes to some of the highest amount of emission of green house gases such as carbon dioxide and methane. They ratchet up the global climate change and compromise the commitments of Pakistan to the Paris agreement. Even locally, there are the threats of rising temperatures, irregular rainfall, and desertification, which undermine the viability of agriculture and adequate water at higher levels of the Thar communities (Siddiqui, 2019). To add to this, there are long-term risks of coal ash disposal, acid mine drainage, and subsidence of the land that pose long term risks to the environment and the health of the people. These are usually phenomena that are not always visible and slow moving and it will always be tricky to solve them using traditional framework of policies. Nixon (2011) calls this a type of harm that is protracted, dispersed but those who perpetrate it deny it the attention it requires because disasters that are full of spectacular entertainment attract support.

That the environmental degradation in Thar is not purely technical problem; it is a matter of justice. Lopsided environmental burdens indicate organized trends of marginalization through which the burden of development incurs on the indigenous and lower-caste populations and does not bring any gain. Lack of participation in environmental decision-making amount to a procedural injustice and the health effects and ecological well being are substantive injustices (Schlosberg, 2007). Addressing these challenges requires a paradigm shift in development planning. Environmental impact assessments must be democratized, health infrastructure must be strengthened, and ecological restoration must be prioritized. Most importantly, the voices of affected communities must be centered in policy discourse, recognizing their knowledge, agency, and rights.

Continuing from the environmental and health crises, despite the scale of dispossession, communities in Thar have not remained passive. Resistance has taken multiple forms, from legal challenges to grassroots mobilization. Local activists have filed petitions in the Sindh High Court, demanding transparency in land acquisition and

environmental assessments. While some cases have stalled, they have succeeded in drawing public attention to the injustices of extractive development (Sultana, 2020).

Civil society organizations, including the Thar Foundation and Pakistan Fisher Folk Forum, have played key roles in documenting impacts and advocating for rights (Wolf, 2019; Raza & Qureshi, 2022). The economic model underpinning the Thar coal projects reflects a form of enclave development, where infrastructure and services are designed to serve corporate and state interests rather than the surrounding communities. This model exacerbates existing inequalities and deepens socio-economic exclusion.

Local businesses and laborers struggle to compete with large contractors and imported labor. Informal economies—such as livestock herding, handicrafts, and seasonal agriculture—have been disrupted without viable alternatives. The influx of non-local workers has also led to inflation in housing and food prices, further marginalizing Thari residents. Women, in particular, face compounded challenges: loss of livelihood, increased domestic burdens, and reduced mobility due to social and environmental stressors (Sultana, 2022).

The absence of inclusive benefit-sharing mechanisms widens these inequalities. Community Development Agreements (CDAs), which could institutionalize local participation and resource allocation, are either absent or poorly implemented. In the absence of official avenues of redressal of grievances, people have to wade through paper work and political connects.

Based on structural critique of development induced dispossession, the human cost of coal development can be revealed through empirical accounts based on Thar. One of the residents of Islamkot, one of the major cities of the district Tharparkar was interviewed by Thar Environmental Action Network (TEAN), and he complained: “They took our lands, gave us money we did not understand, and now we are nothing.” Our animals are perishing, our children falling ill and the water is poisoned” (TEAN, 2021). Another of the village inhabitants said: We had been guaranteed jobs and schools. Rather than to receive dust and illness we were met by foreigners who ‘do not even speak our language’ (Ahmed & Jafri, 2021).

These testimonies are contesting the celebratory discourses propagated by the state and corporate players. They point to the incompatibility between official development rhetoric and realities. The concerns of local communities which are hardly ever heard out in policy forums can be a valuable source of information about what is actually wrong with the current development paradigm. What are especially strong are the testimonies of women. One female elder shared: “We used to gather under the NEEM tree to sing and pray. Now the tree is gone, and the songs have no place” (Sultana, 2022). Such accounts underscore the cultural and emotional dimensions of dispossession, which are often overlooked in technical assessments. Youth voices also reflect disillusionment. Many young Tharis express frustration over broken promises of education and employment. With limited opportunities and deteriorating living conditions, migration to urban centers becomes a reluctant necessity. This brain drain further weakens community resilience and continuity.

Despite the challenges, resistance has emerged in Thar. Civil society organizations, local activists, and community elders have mobilized to document violations, raise awareness, and demand accountability. The Thar Environmental Action Network (TEAN) has played a pivotal role in organizing protests, publishing reports,

and facilitating legal challenges (TEAN, 2021). Moreover, protests have taken various forms – from sit-ins and marches to social media campaigns and petitions. Women have led many of these efforts, asserting their agency in the face of patriarchal and corporate structures. Cultural resistance, through songs, storytelling, and art, has also become a powerful tool for reclaiming identity and memory.

Nevertheless, the space for dissent is shrinking. Activists face intimidation, surveillance, and legal harassment. Community leaders are often co-opted through patronage or silenced through threats. The securitization of development under CPEC has created an environment where resistance is framed as subversion, and democratic engagement is curtailed (Booth, 2007; Jahangir, 2021). In response, legal reforms are urgently needed to protect the rights of affected communities. The Land Acquisition Act must be replaced with legislation that recognizes communal land rights and ensures free, prior, and informed consent (Ali, 2020). Environmental regulations must be strengthened, with independent oversight and community involvement. Regulatory bodies such as Sindh Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) must be empowered and insulated from political interference (Ahmed & Jafri, 2021).

Furthermore, participatory governance is essential. Thari communities must have representation in decision-making bodies related to resource management, project oversight, and benefit-sharing. Mechanisms such as Community Development Authority (CDAs) and local oversight councils can institutionalize accountability and inclusion. Development must be reframed as capability expansion, following Amartya Sen's (1999) model, rather than GDP growth alone. In addition, energy policy must also be decentralized and equitable. Renewable energy sources such as solar and wind, abundant in Thar, offer alternatives that are less destructive and more inclusive (Khan & Sattar, 2021). Community-owned energy cooperatives can ensure that benefits remain local and democratic.

Equally important, cultural preservation must be integral to development. Thar's oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and spiritual practices are assets – not obstacles. Development must nurture these forms of life, not erase them (Scott, 1998; Martinez-Alier, 2002). Accountability must be institutionalized through independent oversight, legal safeguards, and civil society engagement. Ultimately, the Thar Coal Power Plants exemplify the contradictions of capitalist development under the Belt and Road Initiative. They illuminate how development, when divorced from justice, becomes a form of violence. By foregrounding the experiences of Thari communities and engaging critically with theoretical frameworks, this case study calls for a development paradigm that honors human dignity, ecological balance, and democratic values.

Indeed, the desert may be dry, but its people are not voiceless. Their struggle is a testament to the enduring quest for justice in the face of dispossession. Their knowledge, resilience, and aspirations offer pathways to development that are rooted in dignity, sustainability, and cultural continuity.

## Conclusion

An in-depth political economy study of the coal-fired power generation plants set up under the development scheme of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a main project initiated under the vastest construction project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the district Tharparkar of Sindh clarifies that the economic development is being pursued on the cost of the local communities. The analysis made under the theoretical

concepts of Rosa Luxemburg and Harvey, the study reveals that how the global capital invited, facilitated and shared by the federal and the provincial governments build a nexus to extract the natural resources for their own benefit as a colonial practice at a large scale dispossession and displacement of the already disowned and downtrodden peripheral communities, included are the massive side effects of environmental degradation, ground water table lowering, health crises, socio-political negative impacts, and much more. The nexus built between the global capital, federal and the provincial governments to divest the local communities of Tharparkar of their natural wealth as a narrative of national development should be interrogated and justice is rendered to the dispossessed, displaced and excluded people.

### **Recommendations**

- First of all, a naked transparency is urgently required. All the terms and conditions of the project should be honestly made public, especially shared with the indigenous communities. This step will enhance the transparency and the accountability.
- The power plants should be installed and operated on the shared bases. The local communities from whose land the coal is being extracted should be given ownership rights. This way, the income generated from these power plants should dually be shared with the local communities. The ownership of the plants should be in the name of the local people to prevent the exploitation of their natural resources.
- Environmental protection mechanisms should be placed. The burning of coal has been polluting the environment to the detriment of the locals. The poisonous emissions should be reduced to the possible minimum level and the liquid chemical should be properly managed.
- With the instant effect, the indigenization projects should be launched. The local children and the adults should be patronized to be sent abroad to study as how to operate these power plants. This way, within short period of time the local people should undertake the operational duties of the power plants.
- Moreover, the alternative energy sources also should be tapped. The renewable energy sources should be installed to decrease the dependency on the coal burning power plants for energy needs.
- The strong civil society consisting of the local people should be established and oriented to put up the stiff resistance to the dispossessing and displacing practices. Awareness trainings should be arranged for the local people as how to prevent the exploitation and the side effects of the projects.

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