

SOME LIGHT ON "COAL DISCOVERIES"*

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Ten years ago, about the time of the first general election, Mr. K. D. Malaviya and the then secretary in his Ministry, Mr. S. S. Bhatnagar, announced the discovery of a 'gold belt' in Orissa such as would, according to them, transform the economy of Orissa and also provide it with a faculty of mining engineering at Utkal University. Everyone in his senses knew that it was a hoax. So has it proved itself to be. No one now talks of gold in Orissa.

Not long after, Mr. Bhatnagar announced at a reception at Dhanbad that during the flights over Kashmir when the Baramula campaign was in progress a huge 'sulphur field' had been discovered—sulphur is one of the minerals of which India has practically no resources. Ten years after this announcement no sulphur has come from Kashmir because there is no such field in existence there. Close on the heels of the discovery of the new Klondyke in Orissa came the announcement by Mr. Malaviya of the unearthing of a new Kimberley at Majhgawan (Panna). We shall leave this subject for the present to some of our MPs to probe into. Meanwhile, the biggest of hoaxes, one which has cost the country a few crores of rupees and foreign exchange, was being hatched—the 'discovery' of coking coal in Korba (Madhya Pradesh) which was to enable the location of a million-ton steel plant in this State. Once that was done at Bhilai the truth was allowed to come out that there was no coking coal at Korba. All the coking coal has to come from Bengal and Bihar.

A short while ago, Mr. Malaviya's Ministry announced the 'discovery' of huge copper deposits at Khetri in Rajasthan, and earlier figures of analysis of 1½ per cent or so moved up to 1-1½ per cent, thus ranking these copper deposits with those of Katanga and the Rhodesias—the deposits of Chile would pale into insignificance before the discovery. But curiously enough, none seems to be interested in these deposits except Poland, as new an entrant to modern industry as India itself.

The latest of Mr. Malaviya's discoveries beats them all. The immediate background to the announcement of this new 'discovery' should be remembered which is as follows: There has been an acute shortage of coking coal of the right quality and in sufficient quantity at all the steel plants; and furnaces which had been built at Bhilai and Rourkela cannot be started for want of coke. Even as recently as last year, in spite of warnings by the steel producers, the Minister for Steel, Mines and Fuel defended the policy of the Government of India of encouraging the export of this precious coking coal. There has been no less a shortage of other qualities of coal as well. Railway operation has been seriously affected for want of coal because loco drivers are not magicians to burn stone which they are supplied with in the name of coal. Wise counsels like those of Mr. J. J. Ghandy have been advising against the erection of another steel plant at Bokaro when even the existing ones are not able to get their supply of coking coal. So Mr. Malaviya has to 'discover' the much-needed stuff to silence the Cassandras at the nick of time. Hence the timing of the new 'discovery.'

* The following appeared as a letter to the editor in *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, in the issue dated Oct. 8, 1960, and is reproduced with the kind permission of the editor.

One can only be amused at Mr. Malaviya's emphasizing the point that the newly-discovered coking coalfield is "within a stone's throw" of the proposed steel plant at Bokaro when one remembers that IISCO's Kulti works which are located right on a coking coal mine and their Burnpore works which are on the very edge of coking coal mines have both been suffering from inadequate supplies of this coal. But what is one to think of a responsible Minister who in the same interview states, first, that "these three big discoveries could provide enough coal for more and more steel plants for a pretty long time," and follows it up by the startling revelation: "We have yet to prove the quantitative dimensions of the new deposits." Or is it once again a case of Mr Malaviya deciding beforehand the quantity of coking coal that should be discovered to meet the requirements of all the steel plants, including that at Bokaro, for decades to come, and then entrusting the task of "proving the quantitative dimensions of the new deposits" to the Indian Bureau of Mines?

What Mr. Malaviya calls 'discoveries' have been known to everyone who had spent some time in the coalfields of Bengal and Bihar, and had, in fact, been discovered long before Mr. Malaviya was born. Only, in those days and down to yesterday, grade one coal could not be used in blast furnaces because coal washing was still in its infancy.

If Mr. Malaviya has any doubts, let him go through the publications of the Geological Survey of India and the reports of the geologists employed by Messrs Bird & Co.

I say all this because the Geological Survey of India, which is as much a part of Mr. Malaviya's Ministry as the Indian Bureau of Mines, was busy for five years geologically resurveying these areas and for another five years riddling them with diamond-drill holes. A fraction of the number of these holes drilled would, in the hands of competent men, have been considered more than adequate not only to make detailed estimates of the quantity of coal and its quality, but also to block out optimum size producing units, to arrive at decisions regarding which blocks to work by open cast and which by underground methods and to collect such other relevant data for safe and economical working of these units, namely, the make of water, noxious and inflammable gases, strata conditions, etc.

If after all this puncturing of these areas with bore-holes literally producing the effects of confluent smallpox and not scientific prospecting we are yet to make a beginning with the proving of the reserves under the aegis of the Bureau of Mines, are we dealing with technical organizations engaged in finding facts or executive arms of professional politicians wielding unbridled power to assist them in cooking up figures?

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