



Coal in India

“The black hole of coal” ([August 4th](#)) correctly argues that fossil fuels will persist in India. But India is likely to burn far less coal in the future than anticipated because it is building fewer plants. Credible estimates from just two years ago suggested India would build 243GW of new coal capacity. However, as your article notes, in fact 48GW, or one-fifth the earlier projected capacity, is in the construction pipeline. Government planners think this should be sufficient for India’s needs until 2027. Also, private investors are less interested in coal plants.

This does not mean that coal use will cease overnight in India. But a necessary first step is to stop building new plants. India appears to be reaching this point faster than anyone thought likely a few years ago, and consequently will lock into less coal capacity.

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* You offered an alarming account of the harm caused by coal in India. However, not all fossil fuels are created equal and you overlooked the considerable economic, environmental and social opportunities afforded by a combination of natural gas and renewables.

Air pollution is killing 2.5m people in India each year. Displacing coal with natural gas is already reducing pollution, in power generation and industry, but also by replacing biomass in homes and substituting oil in the transport system. This will be increasingly important as 300m people move to cities in India over the next 25 years.

Natural gas is also playing a critical role supporting India's commitment to the Paris accord, emitting around half the greenhouse-gas emissions compared with coal when used to generate electricity. The flexibility of natural gas will also help India meet its commendable renewable-energy target, providing reliable support for the integration of an increasing share of variable wind and solar generation at lowest cost.

Even as new coal-fired power stations are being built, the average utilisation of existing coal-fired plants is decreasing, down 10% in the past four years. This raises the ugly prospect of stranded investments, an unwelcome economic risk as the country endeavours to lift 200m people out of energy poverty.

Natural gas is also helping to fuel India's rapid economic growth. India's Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board is targeting a fuel mix with a 20% share of natural gas by 2025, up from 6.5% today. It will require strong leadership to put in place the regulations and infrastructure to receive, transport and distribute the required natural gas, but India has the opportunity to lead in the transition to a cleaner energy system in Asia.

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