

# Evolution and Growth of Chirimiri Town: A Critical Appraisal of Sustainability of Colliery Towns in 21<sup>st</sup> Century India

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## ABSTRACT

*Coal mining in India has initiated the process of urbanisation in sparsely populated interior regions of India, and most of the colliery towns of India are small in size and mono-functional in nature. Coal mining in central India was initiated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and a few small urban settlements evolved with the beginning of the collieries. Most of these colliery towns are mono-functional and still insignificant in population size.*

*On the contrary, Chirimiri has evolved into a relatively populous multi-functional town over the years. Henceforth, it is interesting to demystify the evolution process of the largest colliery town in the region. It is also worth understanding that the decline of mining towns is a common phenomenon across the globe, and the process of de-urbanisation of the Chirimiri town has already begun. However, population decline is slow, and the town is fighting hard against its inevitable fate. Unfortunately, like many small towns, Chirimiri is also a neglected town where no significant record is available about the town (not even City Development Plan). The present study attempts to describe the evolutionary history of the town systematically.*

**Keywords:** *Urbanisation, Eolution; Colliery town; Chirimiri; Sustainability.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Towns and cities have existed for over eight millennia (Tellier, 2019), but fewer than three per cent of the world's population lived in urban settlements before 1800 (Davis, 1969). The world's urban population has been surging to an unimaginable level as half of the world's population was already residing in urban areas in 2007 (UN, 2008), which had increased to 55 per cent in 2017 (UN, 2018). A substantial discrepancy in urbanisation across the globe is observed due to the variation in the historical factors responsible for urbanisation (Kasarda and Crenshaw 1991). The historical causes accountable for urbanisation have changed over time. Mining has contributed to urban evolution in many regions of the world (Eller, 1982). Many urban centres in India were evolved due to mining activities, and coal mining in India has initiated the process of urbanisation in unsettled interior regions (Avtar et al., 2019). India is dotted with many colliery towns spread across the country.

Mining settlements typically consist of purpose-built housing constructed by mining companies (Marais et al., 2018). Despite revolving around coal mining activities, these settlements are generally heterogeneous. Mining settlements and their attendant social dynamics are shown to evolve in differing ways, depending on the type of mining taking place and the length of time the mines have been in operation (Gough et al., 2019). Ever-growing energy demand has led to the evolution and development of many colliery towns (Avtar et al., 2019).

India has a long history of commercial coal mining covering nearly 250 years, starting from 1774 by M/s Sumner and Heatly of East India Company in the Raniganj Coalfield along the western bank of river Damodar. The demand for coal increased considerably about a century later due to the introduction of steam-based rail engines in India. Further, it was boosted during the I and II World Wars (MoC, 2011). Due to increasing demand, the British Government has explored new areas for coal mining, and many new colliery towns were evolved in different parts of the country. Most of them are located in relatively inaccessible interior parts of the central and east Indian states such as Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Chhattisgarh. Generally, these colliery towns are developed as subsidiary towns around a leading urban centre. However, they rarely grow as independent urban centres of significant size. Chirimiri is a typical example of a colliery town that evolved in an interior location and achieved a considerable population size.

A vast coal reserve was identified Central India, and a detailed survey of this interior area (Chirimiri-Jhilimili region) was made in the

second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. *The Geological Survey of India (GSI)* report revealed the prospects of good quality coal in this inhabited region around a small village, Kurasiya (GSI, 1913-14). A big town has evolved around an almost barren area due to coal mining.

Chirimiri is a colliery town developed in an interior location and has become an independent urban centre of about one lakh population. As per the Census 2011, Chirimiri was a Class-II town which had been town granted the status of Municipal Corporation by the Chhattisgarh Government in 2008. The town is divided into 40 wards and nine zones namely: Pondi, Koriya, Gelhapani, Dumanhill, Godaripara, Badabazar, Bartunga, Chhota Bazar and Haldibadi. Chirimiri evolved as a multi-nucleus town without a central city as these nine zones are physically separated from each other by hilly mounts and forested areas.

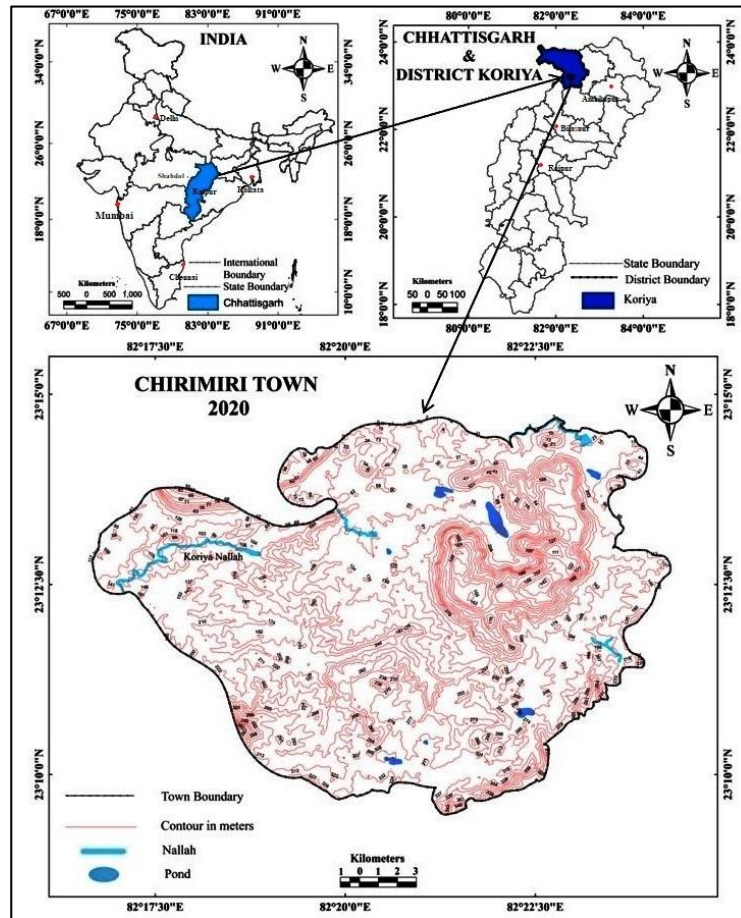
The present article is a descriptive study based on secondary data collected from various sources and compiled information based on intensive field visits. The study is woven around a few critical questions about the town's historical evolution and future, such as: How has a relatively large town evolved in an interior and inaccessible location? Why did the other urban settlements of the Chirimiri-Jhilmili Coalfield remain insignificant in size and mono-functional while Chirimiri grew significantly in size and achieved functional diversity? How the Chirimiri evolved as a multi-nucleus town in due course of time? Most importantly, what is the future of an interior-located colliery town in the 21<sup>st</sup> century globalised world?

#### CHIRIMIRI TOWN: SITE AND SITUATION

Chirimiri-Jhilmili Coalfield is a part of Central India Coalfields, located in Koriya district, Chhattisgarh. It is spread over 125 square kilometres with estimated total reserves of around 312 million tonnes. The Talchars formation bounds this coalfield on three sides except for North, where the Basalts of Deccan Trap cover the area. Chirimiri town is a colliery town located in Chirimiri-Jhilmili Coalfield area of Central Indian Coalfield (SECL, 2020).

Chirimiri is located in the Koriya district of Chhattisgarh between the geographical coordinates of 23<sup>o</sup>9'28" North to 23<sup>o</sup>14'41" North latitude and 82<sup>o</sup>16'40" East to 82<sup>o</sup>24'16" East longitudes (Fig. 1). The town is spread over 12900 hectares at an average elevation of about 600 meters above mean sea level. Chirimiri is located in the hilly area of the Chhattisgarh Plateau, where the height of different localities varies considerably. Chirimiri railway station is located in the valley (582 meters above mean sea level), one of the town's lowest points. After a steep height from the railway station Bada Bazar, Chhota Bazar, and

Fig. 1: Location and Regional Setting of Chirimiri Town



Bartunga is located in a relatively plain area of equal elevation. Haldibadi is situated in a stairs-like terrain where the height from Railway Station (lowest point) to Post Office (highest point) varies considerably. The main market and the cinema hall of Haldibadi are situated in the middle of these two extremes. Doman hill, Korea, Gelhapani, and Godaripara possess relatively higher elevations. The Chirimiri town is situated in a location with limited connectivity. The National Highway-43 originates from Gulganj in Madhya Pradesh, passes through Baikunthapur (district headquarter) and Ambikapur in Chhattisgarh, and terminates at Chaibasa in Jharkhand is the only major road network that provides inter-state connectivity to the town. Similarly, the Anuppur-Chirimiri trunk rail route is the only link available from the town. The rail route is still served only by the five *trains* (Passengers) halt in every small station located on the route.

The location inertia is readily evident as the limited north-south connectivity is available from Anuppur Railway Junction (95 km away) of Madhya Pradesh. Similarly, the East to west rail connectivity is available from Katni Junction of Madhya Pradesh, located 230 km away from Chirimiri. The nearest National Highway (NH-43) is 25 km away from the city, and limited inter-state and intra-state bus connectivity is available through private buses.

#### COLLIERY TOWNS OF THE CHIRIMIRI-JHILIMILI COALFIELD

The South Eastern Coalfields Limited (SECL) has divided the central Indian Coal Field into eight coalfields. Six belong to the Chirimiri-Jhilimili Coalfield area spread in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, while the remaining two (Johila and Sohagpur) are exclusively situated in Madhya Pradesh. The Chirimiri-Jhilimili Coalfield is mainly spread over the old Sarguja district (now Surajpur, Koriya and Manendragarh-Chirimiri-Bharatpur districts) of Chhattisgarh and part of this coal field is spread in Madhya Pradesh also (mines of Anuppur district). The group covers an area of about 5,345 square kilometres (2,064 sq m) with estimated reserves of 15,613.98 million tonnes. The deposits are at a depth of 0-1200 meters (Purohit, 2016). Chirimiri is the most important town located in Chirimiri Jhilimili Coalfield area.

Chirimiri is principally a colliery town, and the evolutionary history of the town is closely associated with the account of coal mining. It is the last railway station of the trunk railway route connected to the Anuppur Railway Junction. Due to its remoteness, an automatic question arises how does such a big town evolve in an interior location? Before analysing its evolutionary history, it must be noted that it is not a small colliery town developed around a relatively big town. The Central India coalfield is dotted with many such kinds of colliery towns. Table 1 comprises the list of urban centres located in the Chirimiri-Jhilimili Coalfield area. Small size colliery towns developed around a relatively big urban centre is a feature characteristic of colliery towns of the region. Contrary to it, Chirimiri is a sizeable independent town that evolved exclusively in a remote location. The history of the evolution of Chirimiri is closely associated with the history of coal mining in the region.

The coal mining in Central Indian Coalfield began in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and Umaria was the first mine opened by Britishers in the 1880s. The only objective of the Umaria mine was to support the railway operation in Katni Railway Station (Robinson et al., 1902). Later on, after the exhaustive survey of the Central Indian Coal Field at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, an enormous potential of this coalfield area was recognised, and a trunk rail line was constructed from Anuppur

TABLE 1: URBANISATION IN CHIRMIRI-JHILMILI COALFIELD BASIN

Dist.	Town	First Enumerated	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Koroya (Chhattisgarh)	Chirimiri (M. Corp.)*	1941	10,044	-	6563	30105	53015	89,460	93,373	85317
	Manendragarh (M)	1941	5027	5478	9807	12532	19265	26326	30758	33071
	Khongapani (NP)*	1991						14297	17862	17400
	Jhagrakhand (NP)*	1941	5149	-	5745	8424	11851	13933	7504	7680
	Nai-ledri (NP)*	2011								5334
	Baikunthpur (M)	1951		2515	3262	5065	6530	8316	10077	28431
	Shivpur Charcha (M)*	1991						13404	15217	23514
Surajpur (Chhattisgarh)	Katkona (NP)	2011								4552
	Bishrampur (NP)*	1991						11313	12376	11367
	Bhatgaon (NP)*	1991						8639	8228	11204
	Surajpur (M)	1971				5296	7477	13049	16834	20189
	Premnagar (NP)	2011								4954
	Jarhi (NP)*	2011								7228
	Pratappur (NP)	2011								5635
Anuppur (Madhya Pradesh)	Bijuri(M)*	1981					9880	17009	28218	32682
	Kotma(M)*	1951		3691	-	8176	10949	21169	28487	29704
	Pasan (M)	1971				6691	15787	26060	29565	28447
	Dola (CT)*	1991						8849	10377	9273
	Badra (CT)*	2001							4756	4785
	Deohra (CT)*	2001							10840	9686
	Amarkantak (NP)	2001							7082	8416

Source: Compiled from Census data  
\*colliery town

towards Chirimiri and Ambikapur. The Chirimiri-Jhilmili coalfield area is spread over three districts, and 21 towns listed in Table 1 are located in these three districts. Out of 21 towns, 14 can be identified as Colliery towns, while the towns like Manendragarh and Baikunthpur are developed as service centres only because of coal mines. They were also colliery towns; however, their subsidiary colliery towns such as Khongapani, Jhagrakhand, Nai-ledri, Shivpur, Charcha were identified as separate towns in the later census and granted civic status by the state government. So, coal mining has a deterministic impact on the urbanisation of the Chirimiri- Jhilmili Coalfield area. However, none of the colliery towns of the Central India Coalfield flourished like Chirimiri.

Coal mining began here in 1928, and it has attracted many people in search of livelihood. The first record of the Chirimiri population was available for the 1941 Census, when 100,44 people resided in the town. Since then, the town has grown swiftly, particularly after the nationalisation of coal mines in 1972 (Sinha & Sinha, 1986). A nearby big town had served as a service centre for every new colliery town that has evolved in the Chirimiri-Jhilmili coalfield area. However, in the case of Chirimiri, no significant settlement was situated near the town. The vast coal reserve and non-availability of any service centre have become a motivational factor behind the evolution of a functionally diversified town, which later turned into the most significant urban centre of the region. On the one end, the vast coal reserve has attracted investors, and other people have sensed the opportunity for themselves in different fields such as trade and commerce, education and health. Since no alternative to these things was available in nearby areas, Chirimiri has turned into a diversified town.

A simple fact can explain this idea in a better way. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the average size of the town in this coalfield area was 15,788 people per town, while the average size of colliery town (excluding Chirimiri) was a mere 9,695 persons per town. Table 1 indicates that it has grown six times higher than the average urban settlement and about ten times higher than the average colliery town within a few decades. Before the recent population decline, Chirimiri was larger than Shahdol and almost equal to Ambikapur (Census of India, 2001 & 2011). Shahdol is the largest service centre in the Central India Coalfield (Sohagpur Region), while Ambikapur is the largest service centre in North Chhattisgarh Plateau (Fig. 1). Both have multiple location advantages due to extensive central location and road-rail connectivity. However, despite locational inertia, the Chirimiri has successfully competed with them in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and these cities have never served as the service centre of Chirimiri.

The Chirimiri has adopted a self-sustaining model of development where everything required for the town's survival was available in the town (except foodgrain). Chirimiri was quite contrary to the functionally over-dependent colliery town that evolved in the region. The Chirimiri town is a Primate city in the Chirimiri-Jhilimili Coalfield region as it has more than twice the population of Manendragarh, the second most populated town in the region (Table 1). Therefore, it is worth demystifying the journey of a town that has achieved prominence despite all odds.

#### THE BEGINNING AND NOMENCLATURE

The town has evolved over almost a barren land. It has gone through many phases in its evolutionary history. Chirimiri has vast coal reserves that have attracted the Britishers to initiate mining to exploit the potential. The town is located at the eastern edge of Central India Coalfield, where a vast coal reserve is available within 1200 meters below the surface. During British rule, coal prospecting was carried out in the first half of the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This survey revealed the availability of abundant coal in the Chirimiri, Korba, and Manendragarh areas. Later first coal mine was opened in Manendragarh (earlier called Karimati) in 1927. A year later, in 1928, a coal mining operation was started in Chirimiri by W.M. Pitt (GSI, 1930). A railway line was laid from Anuppur to Bijuri and extended to Chirimiri in 1931. Until the railway line was laid, the coal dispatch ran from the bullock cart to Bijuri. To the northeast of the railway station was Khurasiya Colliery, the first mine to become operational in the town (SECL, 2020).

There are many fascinating aspects associated with the name of Chirimiri town and its internal parts (zones and *dafai*). This coal-rich area has many stairs and rams, which was initially called as *Chhedi-Medi* (छेडी-मेडी) by local peoples. Later, the British called it Chedi-Medi (चेडी-मेडी), which turned into Chirimiri or Chirmiri due to difficulties associated with the pronunciation. The city has two official names used interchangeably very frequently; for instance, the post office is called Chirimiri, and the railway station is labelled Chirmiri. Older people still use the name Chirmiri; however, most of the official records are stuck with the name Chirimiri which is also used in the title of this study.

#### EVOLVED INTO A MULTI-CULTURAL TOWN

Migrants from West Bengal and Odisha are the town's earliest settlers and the largest sub-groups. The *Bang Samaj* and *Utkal Samaj* played a significant role in shaping the cultural tradition of the Chirimiri town. Shri B. B. Lahiri (Bibhuti Bhushan Lahiri), popularly known



as *Dadu Lahiri*, has played a significant role in the economic and cultural development of the town. He was an engineer by profession who arrived in the Chirimiri as a contractor and became the most noteworthy personality due to his visionary works. He had started the Lahiri Secondary School (in 1948) and Lahiri college (1953). The Lahiri College is the third oldest college in the Chhattisgarh state that has turned into the most recognised higher education institution in the Central Coalfields Region and Old Sarguja District. Students from Bilaspur, Shahdol, and Ambikapur used to go there to pursue higher education. He was instrumental in opening the railway track, cinema hall, and creation of Kali Bari Temple. A Bengali-pattern Durga festival and became popular here due to the initial influence of the Bengali community. It is celebrated by all communities and turned into the most important social gathering in the town. The *Utkal Samaj* (Odiya Community) has preserved its culture by constructing the Jagannath temple in Pondi. All communities had contributed to the construction of the Jagannath temple.

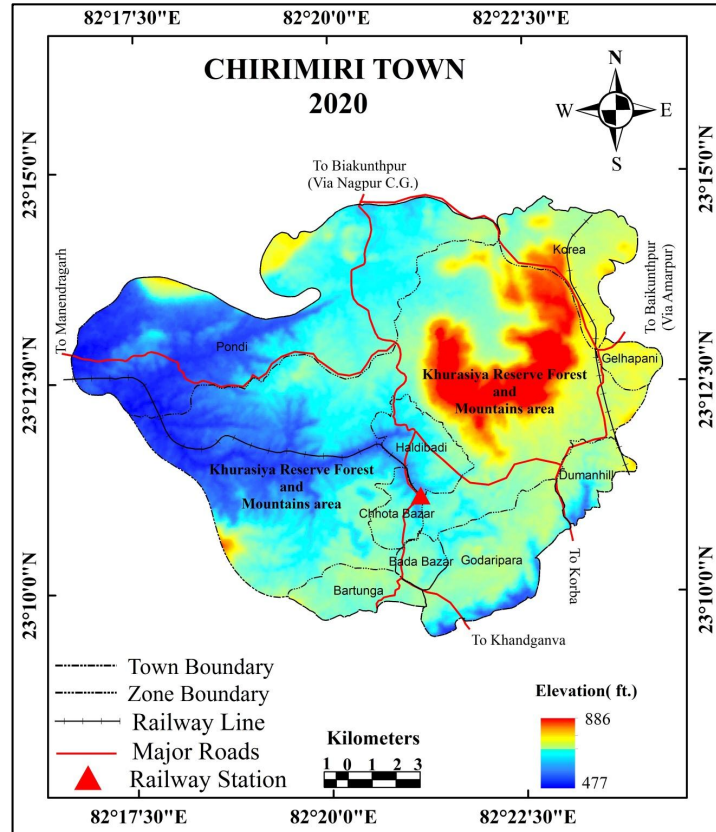
Migrants had also arrived from Andhra Pradesh, Poorvanchal (both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar), Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and others parts of the country. One can find the people of every region of India in a small town. People proudly called the city 'Mini India'. It has become an excellent melting point of different cultures, and acceptance of the multi-cultural identity without the slightest hesitation is the core cultural value of the town.

#### EVOLUTION AS A MULTI-NUCLEUS TOWN

Before exploring the town's history, one most fascinating fact about the town needs to be mentioned is that it is not like a typical town with a single nucleus with or without adjoining outgrowth. Chirimiri is a distinct town with multiple nuclei without a central city (core). More importantly, these nuclei are physically separated from each other (Fig. 2). The town has evolved during different periods due to the opening of new coal mines, and to explore the history of Chirimiri town, one has to understand the evolution of multi-nuclearity. However, it is difficult to identify the exact process of evolution as the settlements (both houses and road network) were shifted consistently due to the opening of new mines and the conversion of underground mines into opencast mines. The evolution of different zones is described in subsequent paragraphs.

- 1. Kurasiya – the Lost World of Chirimiri:** One of the oldest settlements of Chirimiri town was evolved around a village known as Kurasiya. The first lease of the colliery in the princely

Fig. 2: Zones of Chirimiri Town



Source: Compiled by authors.

state of Korea was awarded to Banshilal Abirchand, who took over W.M. Pitt and began excavation work in Kurasiya Colliery. Sometime later, Khurasiya Colliery was leased to Tata. Many people still call the adjacent area of Kurasia Colliery as Tata. Before its evacuation, due to the initiation of opencast mining, the Kurasiya used to be the most populated nucleus of the Chirimiri town.

Kurasiya colliery was located about one km away from the railway station. There used to be a quarry office; a mini car repairing shed, a powerhouse, and later a coal handling plant near *Muhada* in the same order. The rest house of Kurasia colliery was located near Kalibadi Temple. The densely populated settlement around Kurasia mines was known as Number 10 *Dafai*. Coal from Kurasia mines was discharged through locos.

Later on, everything surrounding Kurasia colliery was destroyed after the initiation of opening-cast mining at the same place. Although the destruction of cultural features such as roads and buildings is commonly evident in the town, large-scale destruction and resettlement observed in Kurasiya have never been evident. In Kurasiya, everything was destroyed, and a new road was constructed for newly opened opencast mines. The entire population of Kurasiya was shifted to B-type quarters in Godaripara, Ekta Nagar and Azad Nagar.

- 2. Pondi:** In 1946, the collieries at Sajapahad and Pondi were opened by Birla and Sardar Inder Singh, respectively. At that time, Sajapahad was called as Pure Chirmiri and Pondi as West Chirmiri. Sajapahad was an exclusive mining area, and people working there were used to live in Pondi. In common parlance, these names are still prevalent. Sajapahad colliery was collapsed in 1968, and its ruins are still visible. However, the precise location of the old mine is difficult to identify. Mines of Sajapahad and West Chirmiri collieries located in Pondi are closed, and their employees were shifted to NCPH Colliery in 1968. At present, the Sajapahad area is a village-like settlement that forms ward number 1 of the Chirimiri Municipal Corporation under the Pondi zone.

The office of the General Manager (GM office), the Municipal Corporation, and the office of the Life Insurance of India (LIC office) are located in Pondi, which is evolving as the city's administrative centre. In recent times many private offices and educational institutes were also attracted to Pondi mainly because of the flat terrain, a rare commodity in the town. Apart from it, the coal reserve of adjoining mines is already exhausted, and the flat terrain of Pondi is located outside the coal reserve area. Henceforth, the Pondi area is free from the fear of evacuation and attracted higher private sector investment in recent years.

- 3. Koriya:** This zone is named after the Koriya Colliery that operated here. The nomenclature of Koriya is associated with Koriya Riyasat of the region, which was instrumental in the opening up of the coal mines in the town. The Koriya mine was closed in the late 1990s as the coal reserve was exhausted. The population has declined considerably subsequently.
- 4. Godaripara:** This northern-eastern nucleus of the town is characterised by old colliery quarters built for labourers engaged at Kurasiya mines. Most of the old quarters of this

area are depleted and captured by local residents (non-colliery workers). New colonies (B-type quarters) were developed in Godaropara for the old residents of Kurasiya.

5. **Gelhapani:** The mining in Gelhapani was initiated by Karamchand Thapar in 1946. It was known as North Chirimiri Colliery. The mines of Gelhapani had closed almost more than two decades ago. It is located in the peripheral area and lost all its glory in time. It is the least populous area of the town, and less than three percent of the town's population resides in this zone (Table 2). In a recent demarcation of wards boundaries, the number of wards in this zone has reduced from two to one, which will reflect in the next census. The survey for open cast mining was conducted but never implemented due to its proximity to the forest area (Laxman Jharia forest).
6. **Haldibari:** Around 1941, coal mining began at Pondri Hill by Manikchand B. Dadabhai, which came to be called New Chirimiri Pondri Hill Colliery or NCPH Colliery. Presently, this area is known as Haldibadi. The name Haldibadi was given after the initiation of the post office. Earlier only Amanala and the surrounding area were collectively called Haldibari; later on, the entire Pondri Hill area became famous as Haldibari. However, Pondri Hill is still used occasionally in government records, such as election polling booths. Compared to other zones and proximity to Railway Station, its centrality has played a significant role in its emergence as the most populous and prosperous zone of Chirimri town. Table 2 indicates that more than 20 per cent of the town's population resides in Haldibari.

Before the commencement of the railway station, Pachpedi and Gudiya *Dafai* were essential settlements of the Chirimiri town. From 1928 and 1931, when bullock carts were used for coal transportation, the route passed through Pachpedi and Gudiya *Dafai*. Now Pachpedi and Gudiya *Dafai* have been evacuated due to Haldibadi opencast mines.

Haldobadi developed rapidly after establishing the Railway Station and got prominence after the evacuation of Kurasiya. During World War II, the demand for coal increased significantly as the war materials were sent through railways; the mode of transportation was mainly dependent on coal. At that time, steam engines dominated rail transport, so the British Government promoted coal mining. The coal of the Northern Chirimiri colliery came through the ropeway sliding built

near the railway station. Houses of the labour class working in Northern Chirimiri settled on the hill mound near the ropeway sliding. A natural water source locally known as *Turrah* (natural water spring) exists here. Before the commencement of the modern piped water supply, the entire population of Haldibadi was dependent on the same *Turrah*. The *Turrah* still supplies water to many households for their daily needs. During the water crisis, which is a commonly observed phenomenon during the summer, the same *Turrah* supplies water to a larger population of the Haldibari.

The labour houses of Haldibadi located near the hills of the Chirimiri Railway Station are mostly depleted and pathetic. Many of the residents of these households are dependent on the informal trade of coal stolen from loaded railway racks and sold in the local market. People (mainly women and children) directly engaged in this illegal trade are probably economically most vulnerable.

TABLE 2: ZONE WISE POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS OF CHIRIMIRI TOWN

Zone No	Zone Name	Population		Wards included in the Zone	
		No.	Share (%)	Total	Ward No.
1	Pondi	12152	14.24	06	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2	Koriya	6849	8.03	03	6,7, 8
3	Gelhapani	2436	2.86	02	9
4	Haldibari	17317	20.30	08	10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18
5	Chhota Bazar	10465	12.27	05	19,20, 21, 22, 23
6	Baratunga	4569	5.36	02	24, 25
7	Godaripara	15213	17.83	06	26,27, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34
8	Bada Bazar	3666	4.30	02	28,29
9	Dumanhill	12650	14.83	06	35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40
	<b>Total</b>	<b>85317</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>40</b>	-

Source: Compiled from Census of India, 2011.

7. **Chhota Bazar:** One of the oldest collieries of the town was situated in the Chhota Bazar. Mining in Chirimiri was started here in 1928 (same year mining began in Kurasiya), although the

core mining area and settlement later shifted to Kurasiya. Very few people know that in the beginning, the term Chirimiri was used for the Chhota Bazar area only. Later the term Chirimiri was designated for the whole town, and each nucleus received a separate identity. Fire in the underground mine of Chhota Bazar has forced the authorities to close the mining operation from this end. The Muhada and entire mining operations of this coal block were shifted to Baratunga. This zone is located in proximity to Kurasiya and is the oldest surviving nucleus of the town. The oldest schools in the town Guchchi School (established in the 1930s), Lahiri School, Govt. Lahiri College are situated in this area. Some oldest (mostly abandoned) bungalows are also situated in the hilly area of Chhota Bazar. One of the bungalows belongs to Shri V.B. Lahidi, the real architect of town. The majority of the present residents of the Chhota Bazar area are non-colliery workers engaged chiefly in the informal sector.

8. **Baratunga:** 'Bara' means extensive or superior, and 'Tung' means mountain peak. The mountainous area of southern Chirimiri is Baratunga, whose friction had become Bartunga. Bartunga resembles a vast mountain that gives meaning to this name. The village of Bhandardei is situated at the bottom of Bartunga hill, and no further connectivity is available from that hilly area. Many opencast mines characterise this southern part (nucleus) of the town. Due to these opencast mines, the old roads of Baratunga were eradicated, and new roads are still under construction. Henceforth, the connectivity between Bartunga is from the rest of the town is severely affected. A branch of the State Bank of India (SBI) and Delhi Public School (DPS) sponsored by SECL is located in Bartunga. However, limited commercial activities have been developed here due to its remoteness.

Bhandardei village is located in the proximity of Bartunga, and both share a joint polling booth located in Bartunga. It is essential to mention that the revenue record of Chirimiri is recorded in the name of Bhandardei.

9. **Badabazar:** It is a small but one of the prominent areas of the town as the primary market of the town is located here. A weekly market is assembled here every Tuesday. Bada Bazar area is dominated by business community households. The majority of Jain, Sikh and Sindhi communities' houses are located here. It was a highly flourishing area when the Kurasiya

was a prime settlement of the town. After the evacuation of Kurasiya, the prominence of Bada Bazar has reduced considerably. It is observed that the evacuation of Kurasiya has led to the changes in the functioning style of the business community of the Bada Bazar. They have reacted differently to the same situation; first, some have shifted their home and business from the Bada Bazar to Haldibari. Second, many of them still reside in Bada Bazar and operate their business in Haldibari. Third, few of them are still operating the business in the Bada Bazar area. The wholesale business has never shifted from Bada Bazar, so despite all these negative factors, it remains a prominent market area of the town. It is worth understanding that only retailers have shifted from Bada Bazar to Haldibadi while wholesalers remain intact on their old premises; hence the Bada Bazar area has never lost its relevance as a marketplace. The health centre of the state government and guest house of SECL is also situated in the Bada Bazar. It is also the terminal point of city buses.

- 10. Dumanhill:** Earlier, the Sonamani mine was operated from the Dumanhill area and workers of Sonamani mines used to reside here. Later Sonamani mine was closed as the coal reserves were exhausted, and labourers working there were shifted to other mines in the town. In 1981, Kendriya Vidyalaya Chirimiri started its operation from Dumanhill area. It is a diverse area with a reasonable population of colliery and non-colliery workers.

#### CURRENT SCENARIO AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

As discussed earlier in this study, the evolution of Chirimiri is directly linked with the availability of a vast reserve of coal. Non-availability of any other town in the nearby area has motivated the people to bring the functional diversity required for survival. Furthermore, locational inertia (limited connectivity with other cities) has made it self-sustaining. From the beginning, every adversity has worked in favour of the city. However, close observation of the towns' economy indicates that many favourable factors have also turned into negative in the recent past.

The secret to the prosperity of the Chirimiri lies below the earth's surface. Coal mining is the main contributor to the city's economy. All the built structures of the town rest above the coal reserves and may need to be demolished if required. However, this coal reserve has choked any viable investment in property by common people, and the majority

of the built structure is *ad-hoc*. One of the main hurdles in creating a viable city for the future is the non-availability of residential land and the lack of residential quarters for permanent residents and migrants. The residential problem is the most widely discussed issue that has remained unsolved.

Many of the SECL residential quarters (called *Dafai* or Colony) built for coal mine workers are characterised by illegal occupancy. The pathetic condition of quarters has led to illicit occupancy as many workers are unwilling to live there. Henceforth, these quarters are captured by local residents (non-colliery workers). These illegal occupants have invested some resources in renovation and are enjoying the government quarters and facilities without additional costs. The fear of evacuation has much impact on the residential structure of the town as the investment in private housing is minimum. These illegally occupied SECL quarters provide a viable and socially acceptable solution to the housing shortage in the town. It is not easy for new residents to find a suitable house for rent, but there is a high possibility of getting a SECL quarter if they are willing to do so. In the last few years, a mass retirement from SECL has increased illegal occupancy in vacant quarters of vacant SECL. It is evident everywhere in the town and well known to everyone, including SECL officials. It may be a technically illegal but socially acceptable practice that provides alternative housing facilities at a lower cost. However, due to the non-availability of land for new construction, the new migrants find it difficult to survive in the town for a long time. The town's survival in the future greatly depends on the solution to land-related issues. The active participation of SECL in public welfare may solve the problem that has been pending for many decades.

The location inertia, which has helped the town to become a self-sustained place, has choked further diversification. It has not attracted the capital required for further diversification of the economy.

Many unfavourable factors such as mass level displacement due to opencast mining and lack of diversification of the economy (hugely dependent on the income of colliery workers) are responsible for it. However, people are well aware of the declining population trends, the decline in the per capita income of colliery workers, and the trickling down of the capital towards the large urban centres. The diversification of the economy is essentially required to save the city.

Due to immense pressure from local citizens, the city was granted the status of Municipal Corporation in 2003, and a new *tehsil* named after the town was established in 2018. In August 2021, the state



government created a new district named after the town (the exact name is Manendrgarh-Chirimiri-Bharatpur). The town can be developed as an administrative centre in the future. The town already has many higher education institutions such as a college (recently promoted as PG college), nursing college, and ITI. It has a reasonably large hospital governed by SECL (Regional Hospital, Godripara) and dedicated mainly (but not solely) to colliery workers and a separate government hospital for ordinary people at Bada Bazar. The town can become a vibrant city despite locational inertia.

### SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The road to survival for the towns seems grim, and the population decline may be inevitable in the present scenario. However, a few steps can help the authority prevent the further decline of the town. Some of the suggestions are listed below:

1. The long-awaited demand of local citizens, politicians, and social workers is that permanent land rights should be granted for the wasteland (where coal is exhausted). To date, no significant progress has been made on this issue despite all the efforts made by every concerned stakeholder. If SECL can transfer this land to develop the built-up area through private investment, it can initiate a chain reaction in the city economy.
2. The residential area can be enhanced by filling an empty open cast mining area. However, it may be applicable only in a few places around Haldibari. It has limited applicability to other open cast mine areas as they are located in an almost barren land.
3. It is estimated that the city has enough coal reserves available for the next 30 to 50 years. However, the recruitment of permanent labour in SECL is almost seized, negatively affecting the city's economy. The mining by private companies through machines has adversely affected the city economy. Despite all hurdles, this model of privatisation needs revision. The extra income of the colliery employee is the 'real fuel' that drives the town's economic growth. The decline in the number of employees and their replacement with machines may lead the city towards a slow and painful death.
4. The city has worked as the service centre for the nearby rural areas in higher education. From the 1950s to 1990s the, Lahiri College was the most reputed higher educational institution in the region. However, it has now become a model to study

how an institution has deteriorated due to persistent negligence and short-sightedness. The numerical strength of the college has also declined due to lack of diversification in due course of time. The whole education model needs revision which may require a painful surgery of the complete system. Nevertheless, if it is done, its past glory can be achieved.

5. Most importantly, a colliery town requires a different insight. It can not be adequately understood through the experience of other cities. Similarly, it can not revive through any approach applicable to other cities. All the stakeholders need a flexible but firm approach to develop the town as a sustainable city that can accommodate itself to the ongoing changes and if it requires some flexibility in existing laws and rules that need to be incorporated.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

A vast reserve of coal was discovered in the border area of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A large reserve of coal near the subsurface attracted massive investment from Britishers and private investors. The interior location and huge coal reserve led to the evolution of an independent town which became the region's largest urban centre. A growing population and local demands for various services have led to functional diversity and further population growth. It must be noted that all the colliery towns of the region remained insignificant in terms of population size and functional diversity because they were well connected with the other towns and availed services from nearby towns. However, the locational inertia and lack of connectivity became a bliss in the case of Chirimiri. The geographical factors which seemed negative for the development of the town became favourable in due course of time. However, it appears that the town had already achieved its peak, and the process of decline began. The location inertia that favoured the development of Chirimiri as a colliery town in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century turned negative in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Ambikapur, Shahdol, and Bilaspur (Cities at the terminal point of Central India Coalfield) are growing very fast in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century because of their location on the main route and their role as administrative towns. Even more, every town in the Central Coal Field Region is growing, but the population of the Chirimiri has declined, and the road to survival seems grim. Once again, the city needs a visionary person like V. B. Lahiri who is imaginary enough to understand the future needs, intelligent enough to plan, and a successful entrepreneur to bring investment.

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**APPENDIX - I**

**List of Abbreviations**

CDP	City Development Plan
DPS	Delhi Public School
GM	General Manager
GSI	Geological Survey of India
ITI	Industrial Training Institute
LIC	Life Insurance of India
MoC	Ministry of Coal
NCPH	New Chirimiri Pondri Hill Colliery
SADA	Special Area Development Authority
SBI	State Bank of India
SECL	South Eastern Coalfields Limited
UN	United States