Resisting the colonizer's energy: the struggle for autonomy of indigenous communities in Central-Eastern India

In today's world, energy drives civilization. However, the relationship between energy and economic development presents a paradox that underlies many socio-political issues. Energy influences existing power structures within society, politics, and culture, dictating who produces, owns, and also who is marginalized.

Energy is not merely an economic issue linked to power generation, nor is it simply about distribution systems to facilitate consumption. The concern is what energy signifies for a community rooted in a particular landscape, as it is intricately connected to their food, livelihood, health, and communal practices, often their struggle for rights, dignity, and autonomy. This article explores these nuances within the Indian context.

We focus on the ancient forest landscape of Rajmahal Hill, rising from the River Ganga, as well as its lower valleys and plains, which extend across the states of Jharkhand and West Bengal in Central-Eastern India. This area is home to several indigenous communities, including the Santhals, Oraons, and Pahariyas.

They have a long and often bloody history of struggles for land, forests and, nature, dating back to pre-colonial times. (1)

During the colonial era, these forest communities have continued their struggles against invasion and dispossession orchestrated by colonial forces through ecological and demographic shifts. In 1765, the British East India Company secured the Diwani, or governance rights, marking the beginning of direct revenue collection from the region. A few years later, the Company introduced a new and notorious tenurial system called the Permanent Settlement, which delegated authority and the collection of land revenues from indigenous lands and forests to a newly created class of large landlords known as zamindars. The system destroyed the ecology and the lives of indigenous communities, mostly swidden cultivators, in favour of sedentary or ‘settled’ agriculture. (2) However, the rugged forested terrain of the upper hill area of Rajmahal was largely unsuitable for such agricultural expansion. In the Rajmahal Hills, the aboriginal Pahariyas were semi-nomadic and often practising what is locally known as Jum (swidden cultivation). (3) They were independent and resistant to external control. The colonial rulers found it exceedingly hard to tame them, often branding them as criminals and barbarians. (4)

By the early 19th century, to pacify the region, the British administration designated an area called Damin-i-Koh, for Santhal settlement. These Santhals, migrants from other parts of Jharkhand and West Bengal, were brought to Damin-i-Koh to clear forests and become farmers. (5) While creating tension between the Pahariyas and the Santhals, the colonizers confined the people to settlements while freeing up their ancestral territories for more colonizing activities, such as large-scale agriculture at the time.

After the first independence struggle in India, in 1857, the pressure on tribal lands intensified, as

colonial expansion continued apace. Even the Santhal settlements were invaded by the British. The situation led to small and big uprisings, and the colonial state tried new policies to quell the unrest. It introduced several judicial and administrative changes, which provided the tribal people with more secure tenurial systems and protection against land grabs by non-tribals. (6) Besides, the colonial government declared a considerable part of the Central-East and Central Indian heartland as “excluded territories”, which meant, at least on paper, that the state wouldn’t interfere in the day-to-day affairs of the communities.

Despite reforms, tribal autonomy remained under constant threat. Land-grabbing continued, also after India’s independence in 1947. In the name of 'national interest,' gigantic infrastructure, industry, and energy projects, such as large dams, thermal power stations, and mining operations, have been constructed, encroaching on forests, agricultural lands, and communal lands throughout the country.

Land, Energy and Community: The Scenario Today

The Global Order has changed in the 21st century; nevertheless, in the shared landscape of Jharkhand, Bengal, and Bihar, the age-old struggle of tribal people to defend their land and lives from external threats continues.

In **Godda district**, for example, local landholders faced criminal charges when they protested and initiated legal actions against displacement for the construction of the Godda Thermal Power Plant. In 2016, the Adani Group sought approval for this 1,600 MW thermal power plant. By 2017, 917 acres (371 hectares) were secured, affecting many villages, and by 2023, the first phase was operational at 800 MW. This project, the first with Special Economic Zone status, aimed to export electricity to Bangladesh. However, the Adani Group can now also sell the electricity domestically.(7)

In 2008, police fired on a peaceful tribal protest in **Dumka district** against a 1,000 MW coal plant owned by the Sanjiv Goenka Group, injuring several participants and arresting others. (8)

In West Bengal's **Birbhum district**, an extension of the Rajmahal Hills’s area, the Deocha-Pachami-Dewanganj-Harisingha coal mining project, a ?12,000-crore ($1.45 billion USD) initiative that is set to displace almost 18,000 people, has sparked fierce protests. Despite promises of compensation, landowners refuse to relocate, demanding fair treatment. Since 2019, protests led by tribal and local communities have halted mining by revealing that the autonomous village councils of the tribal and Dalit communities were not consulted during the land acquisition and rehabilitation processes. (9) (10)

While more projects boom, they heighten the tension between ecological destruction and the dispossession of people. In this contested landscape, the promise of development, which thrives on increasing energy demand, faces strong resistance from local communities, as in the case of the communities in the Rajmahal Hills. (11)

Landscape Regeneration by communities in the Rajmahal Hills

The Pahariya community, along with the Santhals and other tribal communities settled in the Rajmahal Hills area, has long relied on natural springs located on hilltops for their water needs. However, in recent years, severe deforestation has led to the drying up of these springs, causing acute water scarcity in most hilltop villages.

The communities experienced the harmful impacts of this:*“Due to high water scarcity and*

deforestation, people from the villages were suffering from a lack of food and nutrition - that grim situation made us do something with our efforts and labour", said Subasini Soren, an indigenous woman activist from the area. She added: "Not just food, the bigger question was how can we protect our Jungles and water sources, because without them we can't survive". Sunita Paharia from Bodopahar village said in agitation, "The people outside wouldn't understand the gravity of the water issue. The trees and people both were dying here".

To address the crisis in that landscape, a collaborative initiative was launched in 2018. This initiative, spearheaded by the local group Jharkhand Vikas Parishad (JVP), began in Nipania village. With strong backing from JVP's young volunteers and local youth, residents actively participated in regular meetings to ensure effective participatory planning. (12) Sunita described: *"At first we didn't have a larger idea. Anyway, we started gathering people in the Gram Sabha, our autonomous village council. Then, a resolution was passed. We tried to work in a way that all people of the community can own it and autonomy can be realized".*

Subasini added: *"Women participated mostly in the whole process. Actually, from the very core, they could realize what it means to have no water. They decided that they would together bring water from distant sources for their families and domestic animals — it was their crisis in the first place, and they brought the changes radically".*

Partha Dey, a social activist from West Bengal who is assisting the community in this issue, also said: *"Initially, the whole initiative is essential to understand the type of socio-political autonomy necessary for empowering communities in issues such as energy and food, and to consider how this translates to grassroots individuals more engaged and taking ownership of the work".*

The landscape restoration efforts targeted the ridge areas of the hilltop to enhance the recharge of subsurface water in the valleys. Installing water pipelines from distant springs provided immediate relief and rekindled hope among the people.

Damu Paharia from Bodopahar village said, "*When we started working on one Catchment area, people from other villages were inspired. They also called a Gram Sabha meeting to start similar work on other catchment areas."* Along with the Sarunala Catchment, various tributaries of Bansloi River were considered. The initiative eventually expanded to include 75 villages of the Paharia and Santhal communities. The villagers gradually adopted traditional soil and water conservation methods — stone walls, check dams, gully plugs, and ponds.

According to Damu, in the villages of the lower catchment area, people have also deepened existing ponds and water bodies, and dug new lakes to preserve water from the upper area during every monsoon. Sujit Choudhury, a trained geologist and engineer deeply engaged in the technical aspects of the watershed restoration work, said: "We broke down the Bansloi River Catchment into micro-watersheds like the one for Sarunala. Villagers from each watershed took care of their local areas. This grassroots process of tending land and water was the key in this whole effort".

"When the water channels began to fill and the fields became slightly moist, we initiated a plantation drive for native vegetables, fruits, and other trees. Additionally, we started collecting seeds, which the young girls and boys used to create seed balls. They then dispersed these seed balls within the deforested areas near the traditional forest boundary. After the season's first rain, the locality witnessed the germination, and now those plants are growing", describing such a transformation, Subasini became very excited.

Sunita also said, *“Now we can grow more crops, can take a bath as we wish, and our cattle can also live comfortably. We have more paddy, corn and daals(lentil, gram) in our fields. This is a big change for us.*” Thus, the villagers’ sustained efforts gradually restored the local hydrological cycle and ecosystem, enhancing life and livelihoods. Damu said: *“We monitor the water channels, we take care of it, and not only that, we also make more people aware through rallies and meetings”.* Youth leadership became a driving force, organizing events like farmers’ meetings, archery and football matches, and the popular Jal Jatra (watershed awareness) rally. Their active engagement drew the attention, further strengthening the initiative. (13)

Again, Subasini explains: “Now the people are using their traditional crop rotation methods. They are growing – Dhan (paddy), Til, Tisi, Sarsho (all three oil seeds) etc. They consume it and sell the surplus to the haat (local market)”.

Energy-drive development versus the struggle for autonomy

According to Subasini, the village lacks adequate electricity and other amenities that we often consider indicators of development. Interestingly, Jharkhand is the largest coal producer in India. (14) According to records from the Central Electricity Authority on the installed capacity of states, Jharkhand had a total installed capacity of 4,556.42 MW as of November 2021. Of this, the majority,4,250 MW, comes from thermal sources, while a smaller portion, approximately 300 MW, is generated from non-thermal sources. (15)

Partha expresses his angst: “On one side, the government promotes private plantations, including company-owned afforestation, in Jharkhand. On the other hand, they construct roads, buildings, and even concrete latrines for community development. Ironically, people struggle to use these facilities in areas without groundwater or other water sources. Alongside large four-lane highways, extensive mining operations, and dams are being constructed. Does this ‘development’ at all serve local communities? How does this energy-driven development foster real grassroots autonomy where communities and their forests can survive?”.

Mithilesh Kumar, a veteran activist working on community forest governance and tribal rights in Jharkhand, explained the complex situation, saying: “From the mines, coal is going straight to the thermal power plants, which generate electricity, but who benefits? The tribal areas in Jharkhand suffer from this nexus; moreover, they often lack access to electricity. The bigger challenge is that people suffer from contaminated drinking water and poor health wherever open-cast mining occurs. The environment also degrades, and wild animals move elsewhere. People are forced to rely on single crop agriculture, they have no access to forest food and fishing due to the desertification of the place”.

This raises the core questions of food, nutrition, and health, in the context of what energy, or its accelerated production, means to a community. And, the answer can be found in Subasini's voice. She emphasizes: “But, we have created all that means the development to us, to the tribal communities – the Jungles, Water, Food and Culture – by our labour and love”. Mithilesh also resonates: “They can live without electricity but not without their smile and contentment braided with their culture and forests – without bringing back the forest and water, the community will not survive. If anything, the tribal people strive for the struggle, which can only establish autonomy over their land and society”.

Damu agrees with what Sunita says: *"People need to consider what they truly want; they shouldn’t rely solely on schemes or incentives. Here, we do not depend on electricity or solar power for*

irrigation. Since the time of our ancestors, we have relied on rain and rivers, and we must rekindle that connection. We need to listen to nature. Our agriculture depends on this understanding. We must rebuild the village with a focus on our relationship with the land, water, and air. These elements mean everything to us and help us grow our food and live happily".

Subasini's fierce voice continues: *"When I recently visited the Mining sites around, I saw that coal is being extracted by bulldozing the jungles and agricultural lands, displacing the communities, not only the people, but also their cultures and histories. And, the State tries to convince us that the energy is for our development! But they fool us. They can give us cellphones and other digital gadgets to make us delusional about what we need to survive on this earth"*. Here, she concludes, with the same old question: *"This energy, taxing our lives, our forests, is for whom? Is it for those who can sell it for profit and push us just to engulf ourselves in a flashydigital world of fools?".*

From Jharkhand to the farthest corner of the globe, the aggressive policies to promote mining for electricity generation is leading to the depletion of natural resources threatening communities' very existence. The cycle continues without regard for the communities' inherent diversity, cultural history, and ecology. The Rajmahal story that we briefly presented here signals a rupture in this cycle; on the one hand it rejects the colonial concept of energy, by rejecting extractivism and land grab, while on the other it situates energy in a communal space, by linking it with restoration of forests, watersheds and generation of food. For the heavily colonized, scarred and long-ravaged landscape of the Rajmahal hills, this offers another worldview altogether—of commons, socio-political autonomy and grassroots democracy.

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(1) Across histories, ecologies, and spaces, indigenous peoples in India have continued to defend their forests, particularly in Central and Central-Eastern India, which comprises the present-day provinces of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. Among these, Jharkhand stands out for its history of forest struggles, dating back to the pre-colonial times when tribal kings and chieftains fought fiercely against the formidable Mughal Army, in Ghosh, S, (2006). Reinventing Forest Commons. Unpublished Research Paper.

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(4) Radhakrishna, M, (2001). Dishonoured By History: 'Criminal Tribes' and British Colonial Policy, Orient Longman, Hyderabad

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(6) At the time, the situation led to small and big uprisings, and the colonial state tried new policies to quell the unrest. Under pressure, the British Crown introduced several judicial and administrative changes, for instance, the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act, 1908, and the recognition of customary systems such as the Mundari Khunt Katti, both of which provided the tribal people with more secure tenurial systems and protection against land grabs by non-tribals Ghosh, S. (2010). The struggle for Indian forest. South Asian Journal 28, Lahore.

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