Green Energy, Red Zones: Land Conflicts in Rajasthan's Renewable Energy Drive

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The land allotment has been made easier under the Wind & Hybrid Energy Policy, 2019, with other incentives for companies to set up green energy projects in Rajasthan.

The projects have come up mainly in western Rajasthan, an arid zone with a lot of government land due to low population density and a pastoral influence resulting in less land for settled agriculture.

However, the villagers are not happy with the state government allotting the government ‘wastelands’ that have been used for cultivation, grazing and commons.

The discrepancies in what the revenue records show and the actual use of land act as legal loopholes for the government agencies and private companies to escape scrutiny.

For many Jaisalmer villages, livestock rearing, which was the primary source of livelihood, has been affected due to disappearing grazing lands and community ponds/tubewells.

Not just the cattle, but the endangered ‘Great Indian Bustard’ has come under threat as they get killed after colliding with windmills.

It is pertinent that a mediation mechanism like a tribunal consisting of retired judges is set up at the district level for fast and accurate conflict resolution.
The Rajasthan government has brought in several relaxations and schemes through policies like Wind & Hybrid Energy Policy, 2019, and Renewable Energy Policy 2023 to incentivise power companies to set up shop in the State. The former especially has made the availability of land easier for them through concessions and allotment of government land.

**a. Abundance of common lands for grazing & farming**

A majority of renewable projects have come up in western Rajasthan – Barmer, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Bikaner areas – as they are blessed with abundant natural resources. Interestingly, these are the regions with a large number of government lands (including commons) since they are arid with a low population density.

Historically, the people of this region depended on pastoralism and shifting cultivation. There was no concept of private property since owning land was not important as it was abundant and no regular cultivation was practised.

Therefore, despite the nationalisation and privatisation push beginning in the 1950s, animal husbandry has been an essential source of
We have been betrayed. The company people called a few of us for a meeting where they said they were going to do good things for the village and give us jobs. They didn’t just take away our cultivable land but they didn’t give us any jobs.

b. Threat to sacred forest and endangered wildlife

There have been some other special features of this unique geographic area such as Orans, which are sacred groves, preserved and managed by rural communities in Rajasthan. It has been reported that despite the Supreme Court directive in 2018, they had not been declared a deemed forest that would have given them protection from being forcibly taken for development projects as they were also recorded as a government ‘wasteland’.

This action has also led to the deaths of a critically endangered bird called the ‘Great Indian Bustard’ (GIB), which is indigenous to Rajasthan. They reside not just in Orans but in a habitat categorised as the Desert National Park, falling in the Jaisalmer and Barmer districts. The allotment of ‘government land’ for renewable energy projects close to the DNP has exposed the GIB to danger even further.

livelihood in and around the Thar desert, which resulted in the high presence of common land used for grazing, communal tube wells and ponds for the consumption by their cattle.
EMERGING ISSUES
THE IMPACT OF POLICIES ON THE GROUND

- Agricultural Tenancy Land Under Threat: Cultivators in Dawara and Nedan villages lost agricultural land due to project allocation. Their land was classified as Siwai Chak (unoccupied) and mistakenly allotted to companies.

- Common Lands Up for Grabs: Grazing land, water catchment areas, ponds, and underground storage were allotted to companies without proper surveys. These common lands were vital for communities and their loss caused hardship, especially for livestock-dependent villages.

- Land Records Inaccurate: Discrepancies in records led to fertile land cultivated for generations being classified as wasteland and allotted to projects. Villagers paid annual trespassing fees but were not given priority in land allocation.

- Harm to Sacred Groves & Wildlife: Orans (sacred groves) were bulldozed in Jaisalmer for projects. Windmills near Desert National Park killed Great Indian Bustards (GIB), the state bird. Villagers suffered from noise pollution and loss of tourism opportunities.

- Inadequate Protection: Environmentalists secured underground wiring to protect GIBs, but villagers believe more needs to be done. Windmills outside protected areas still pose a collision risk. Noise pollution from machines disrupts both human and animal life.
Consultation and consent of the village communities is highly important as it has been already noted that ‘contested claims and conflicts over vacant common lands’ are emerging that bring the societal availability of land in question.

There should be a mediation mechanism like a tribunal consisting of retired judges set up for fast and reliable conflict resolution that can save the court’s time and save villagers’ resources.

There is a need for stronger rules around common lands. Similar to what the court directed for Nedan village, a proper survey and updation of land type based on the current use should be done for all the villages complaining of forced allotments.

A revision of the DNP area as already demanded by many conservationists should be done. There should be no scope for allowing windmills close to the habitat of an endemic species of birds.

Landless villagers should be allowed and even encouraged to claim settlement over the government land they had been cultivating for many years before allotting them for power projects.

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