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INDIGENOUS LANDS AND RIGHTS: AN ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF JHARKHAND'S LAND POLICY

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Abstract
Land of minerals: Jharkhand, endowed with abundant reserves of coal, iron ore, bauxite, and uranium. Being an actual owner and protecter of these mineral-rich areas, their lands are increasingly encroached upon under the guise of development and industrialization. Rapid expansion of mining companies and power plants, which have deeply affectedthe everyday lives of the primitive people - the justified residuals of the land. They constitute 26.21% of the state's total population, but the evil eyes of the capitalist powers continuously force them to move from their ancestral land, resulting in displacement and migration. These plutocracies have caused irreversible cultural disintegration – have fractured community structures, weakened indigenous governance systems, and endangered their ecological knowledge. The capital-driven conflict within human nature has led to the widespread destruction of the livelihood of the poor indigenous people who depend on natural resources for survival. Structuring on the Eco-Marxism theory, this study inspects the contention between the commercialization of nature and indigenous environmental justice in the tribal populated areas of Jharkhand. It investigates the politics of coal extraction and how it impacts the indigenous people of the region.

Keywords - Indigenous, Displacement, Migration, Plutocracy, Eco-Marxism, Environmental Justice.

Introduction

Jharkhand – a land of tribal heritage and natural wealth - is a state marked by a unique confluence of tribal heritage and abundant natural resources, located in the eastern part of the country. The land of forests, Jharkhand, resonates with both its literal meaning and its ecological significance. The state's landscape is dotted with lush forests, mineral-rich soils, an intricate network of rivers and hills. But beyond its environmental endowments, what truly defines Jharkhand's vibrant tribal population is their connectivity with the land. Jharkhand is home to over 30 recognized tribes, such as Santal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Kharia, Bhumij, and Birhor. These tribes have traditionally inhabited the forested plateaus and river valleys, forming tightly knit communities with rich oral traditions, folklore, festivals, and rituals. The believe systems of the tribal people often center around animism, worship of nature, and ancestor veneration. This state is also blessed with some of the richest deposits of natural resources in India, making it one of the most important states for the country's industrial growth. The state holds 40% of India's mineral reserves and contributes significantly to the production of coal, iron ore, copper, bauxite, mica, uranium, and other minerals. The abundance of these resources has led to the rapid development of industries, particularly mining, steel, and thermal power, with major industrial hubs in Jamshedpur, Ranchi, Bokaro, and Dhanbad. Ample private companies like Tata Steel, SAIL, and Coal India Limited have proved their durability very firmly. Despite being rich in both natural wealth and human-cultural capital, Jharkhand represents a paradox.

In *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice*, D. Pepper comments on industrial capitalism:

> Hence, Marxism emphasizes the dynamics at work in the material production processes which cause environmental degradation. It also enables us to see how attitudes to nature are shaped specifically in the capitalist development in such a way as to facilitate exploitation. First, there is large - scale physical removal of people from the land in the development phase of industrial capitalism and associated urbanization and factory-based production. This stems from a need for a surplus population to work in industry. (91)

The idea of Marxism talks about the association of environmental degradation and capitalist production, which causes the destruction of nature and leads to the displacement of the rural tribal population. Apparently, it looks like a development, but one can hardly say it is a development; it served an economic purpose: creating a pool of unemployed or underemployed workers (a "surplus population) who could be drawn into industrial work, keeping wages low and production high.

The exploitation of minerals and forests has not translated into proportional development for the local tribal population. The imbalance underscores the need for inclusive, sustainable development policies that respect the rights and knowledge systems of indigenous people while ensuring ecological balance. The tribal communities embody a way of life that is in harmony with nature, offering valuable lessons in sustainability and coexistence. At the same time, its mineral and forest wealth positions it as a key player in India's development. The challenge lies in forging a path that honors both preserving the soul of the land while responsibly harnessing its resources, only then can Jharkhand truly realize its promise as a land of prosperity, dignity, and justice for all its people.

Capitalism in Jharkhand: A Historical Overview

Jharkhand has experienced the deep and complex impact of capitalism through its colonial and post-colonial history. Capitalism, in the context of Jharkhand, is not merely an economic system but a powerful force that has reshaped landscapes, altered Indigenous ways of life, and restructured the region's socio-economic and political dynamics. A historical overview of capitalism in Jharkhand must consider the roles of colonialism, industrialization, land policies, and resource extraction.

The roots of capitalism in Jharkhand trace back to the British colonial period, when the British East India Company began exploiting the region's natural resources, especially forests and minerals. The Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 introduced a zamindari system that privatized tribal lands, disrupting the traditional communal ownership practiced by tribes like Santals, Mundas, and Oraons. In response, tribes organized major uprisings such as the Santal Rebellion (1855-56) and Munda Ulgulan (1899-1900) against land alienation and cultural domination. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British began systematic coal mining in Dhanbad and the Damodar Valley. Railways were introduced not for public transport but to facilitate the movement of extracted minerals to ports. These developments marked emergence of extractive capitalism, where wealth was drained from tribal territories to serve imperial interests.

After 1947, India's policies pushing toward state-led industrialization accelerated capitalist development in Jharkhand. The newly formed government saw the region's mineral wealth as key to national economic growth. Tata Steel, founded earlier in 1907 in Jamshedpur,

became a model of private industrial capitalism. Though it brought infrastructure and employment, it also deepened tribal displacement and ecological degradation. During this period, the state acquired vast tracts of tribal land under the guise of 'public purpose,' often without adequate compensation or rehabilitation, leading to massive displacements. The neoliberal phase of capitalism emphasized profit, privatization, and deregulation, which led to the mushrooming of private mining companies, weak enforcement of environmental and labor regulations, dispossession of Indigenous people through land acquisition under coercive policies, loss of traditional livelihoods, and cultural disintegration. Jharkhand's Scheduled Areas, protected under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution and Laws like the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1949), were often bypassed or violated in the name of 'development.' Tribes found themselves increasingly alienated from their ancestral land, forests, and water sources. Resistance movements like the Pathalgadi movement and anti-displacement protests in Netarhat, Kalinganagar, and Hazaribagh emerged as grassroots responses to this phase of exploitative capitalism. To envision a just future for Jharkhand benefits not just a few, but its rightful inheritors: the people of the land.

Understanding of Ecological Marxism and Capitalocene

Ecological Marxism investigates the dialectics of nature from a Marxist standpoint and encounters the concepts of conservation and sustainable development. In "Marx's Ecology in the 21st Century,'' Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster argue that "the problem of nature is really a problem of capital, as natural cycles are turned into broken linear processes geared to private accumulation" (143). Clark and Foster interpret Marx's idea of "primitive accumulation" as the ongoing expropriation of both human labor and natural resources, like forests that are turned into timber, rivers that are turned into hydroelectric power, and air that is into carbon sinks. They call this "accumulation by dispossession," where capitalist profit depends on appropriating what was once communal or ecological. They also argue that capitalist states and corporations continue the legacy of colonial ecological imperialism, where the global south is plundered for raw materials, environmental destruction disproportionately affects Indigenous and poor communities.

Ecological Marxism contends that capitalist globalization has ultimately precipitated a global ecological crisis. Proponents of this perspective argue that capitalism's mode of production – driven by the relentless pursuit of profit and expansion- is fundamentally responsible for environmental degradation. This economic model not only exacerbates the divide between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat but also fractures the relationship between humanity and nature. Human-induced climate change and increasing water scarcity threaten to trigger economic collapse and socio-political unrest, disproportionately affecting the impoverished and marginalized. In that way, human-induced slow violation reflects the protected, large-scale destruction of ecosystems occurring globally. For instance, large-scale mining, dam construction, and deforestation in regions like Jharkhand or the Amazon are justified by economic growth narratives but result in the dispossession and disempowerment of local communities which are already politically and economically marginalized and become "sacrifice zones" for the benefit of urban elites and multinational corporations. Deforestation, pollution, soil erosion, and climate change often go unnoticed by mainstream media and policymakers, yet they inflict enduring harm on vulnerable populations. The poor, indigenous peoples, and marginalized communities are frequently those who live close to nature and are most reliant on its stability, making them the first and hardest hit by its degradation. Destruction of the wealth of nature and consequences of the monopolization of land and nature for capitalist gain is the core concern of Eco-Marxism theory; they treat nature as a gift. Marx always highlights the conditions of sustainability and the

need to protect nature from any kind of possible harm for the future generations. Thomas Muntzers's statement is very relevant in this context; he talks about the developing bourgeois society. In his words, all creatures have been made into property, and all living things must also become free.

Eco-justice and Indigenous Knowledge: In the context of Jharkhand

Eco-justice, or ecological justice, emphasizes the interconnectedness of social and environmental justice. It recognizes that the exploitation of natural resources often leads to the marginalization of vulnerable communities, particularly Indigenous peoples. In the context of Jharkhand – a state in eastern India with a significant Adivasi (tribal) population and rich biodiversity – eco-justice and Indigenous knowledge form a critical axis for sustainable development, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship.

Indigenous knowledge in Jharkhand is an intricate system passed down through generations via oral traditions, rituals, and practical activities. It includes sustainable agricultural techniques like shifting cultivation (kurukh), the use of herbal medicine, and conservation practices such as sacred groves (sarna). These groves are often protected forest patches dedicated to ancestral spirits and deities and act as micro-reserves of biodiversity. Despite their sustainable practices, Adivasi communities in Jharkhand have faced significant ecological injustices. The post-colonial model of development – driven by mining, deforestation, and industrialization - has often displaced indigenous people, disrupted their way of life, and degraded the environment. The extraction of coal, iron ore, and bauxite has led to large-scale deforestation, air and water pollution, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods. One of the most prominent examples is the displacement caused by mining projects in areas like Hazaribagh, Ranchi, and Sighbhum. The tribal populations were often relocated without adequate compensation or rehabilitation. In addition, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006, though progressive in theory, has seen weak implementation in Jharkhand, with many indigenous families still lacking formal rights over their ancestral lands.

Resistance movements in Jharkhand – such as the Pathalgadi movement and protests upon land acquisition laws - are not merely political but deeply ecological. These movements are rooted in the idea that Indigenous communities must have sovereignty over their land, water, and forests. They challenge state policies that prioritize extractive industries over ecological sustainability and community well-being.

Achieving eco-justice in Jharkhand requires a paradigm shift that respects and incorporates Indigenous knowledge into mainstream environmental governance. This means strengthening the implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) 1996 and the FRA, which grant self-governance and land rights to tribal communities.

Recognizing traditional ecological knowledge as a legitimate and valuable science in environmental policy, education, and conservation programs, supporting community-led forest management and sustainable agriculture through government schemes and NGOs, promoting participatory decision- making that gives Indigenous communities a voice in developmental planning need to be encouraged and actualized with immediate effect. John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark wrote in their article "The Expropriation of Nature", where they state Karl Marx's discussion on Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations thus:

> It is not the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic [tool-mediated] conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their

> appropriation of nature, which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process,
>
> but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and their existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relations of wage labor and capital. (44)

The connection between humans and nature doesn't need to be explained; it's the default. How humans got separated from nature should be explained, this separation reaches its fullest form under capitalism, where capitalist power dominates nature through tools and labors.

In Jharkhand, eco-justice cannot be achieved without recognizing the central role of Indigenous Knowledge and rights. The state's Adivasi communities offer time-tested models of ecological balance, sustainability, and coexistence. Rather than viewing them as obstacles to development, policymakers must see them as partners in reimaging a just, inclusive, and sustainable future.

Present scenario of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh

A coal-rich area Gondalpara of Jharkhand was signed away by the Adani Enterprises, without local people's consent. The government asserts this mining venture as a move towards energy security and India's development. The land has already been sold to the mining company: Adani- 513 hectors, including-40% of forest land and another 40% of tenancy land. Now the agriculture-dependent villagers have resolved to fight for their slice of land in the dust – laden district of Hazaribagh. According to them, there are many scattered communities who lost land and livelihood. This incident in Gondalpara represents a critical flashpoint in India's development model, where energy through coal extraction directly threatens food security for farming communities and tribal land rights.

The Preamble to the Jharkhand Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy, 2008, observes that with more than 55% as Scheduled areas under the Fifth Schedule, the region's natural resource wealth has historically benefited everyone except the tribal people of Jharkhand. The displacement in Nagdi village happened in 2023, as one village after the other was consumed by NTPC's expanding mine and its buffer zones.

The lungs of Chhattisgarh: 170,000 hectares or 1700 sq km (65.6 sq miles) are totally affected by the Adani Group. The village of Hariharpur in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh stands at the threshold of two clashing realities - one forged by nature over millennia, the other carved by human ambition in mere decades. To the east lies the Parsa East Kete Basan (PEKB) open-cast coal mine, operated by the Adani Group since 2013. Its vast, desolate grey stretches consume the land like a slow-moving wound, spewing dust, noise, and coal trucks that rumble through the region day and night. The mine has already displaced local Adivasi communities, disrupted traditional livelihoods, and scarred the ecosystem. Caught in between are the residents of Hariharpur, mostly belonging to tribal communities like Gond and Oraon, who now face the erosion of their ancestral land, identity, and way of life. The forest offers them sustenance, medicine, and spiritual meaning, while the mine threatens to turn that legacy into a fading memory. What unfolds here is not just a conflict over land but a deeper battle between two worldviews- one rooted in extraction and profit, the other in coexistence and respect for the earth. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, Radhika Balakrishnan, and Nesar Ahmad wrote in an article named "Land Acquisition and Dispossession: Private Coal Companies in Jharkhand" thus-

> The proposed Draft Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Bill 2011 provides for sharing 26% of the profit of coal and lignite mining and amounts equal to the

> royalty in the case of other majority minerals mined. Instead of an easy one stop shop, developing the elaborate framework would require an extended time for agreement - making and consent – seeking processes. No mining project should go ahead without the consent of tribals and poor landowners; they should have the right to refuse a project. Unless they have the right key, no situation could be truly "win-win". The proposed LARR Bill 2011 makes it mandatory to take the consent of the affected population only in this case of land being acquired for private companies and for public-private partnership projects. (44)

The concerned bill ensures that mining-affected communities are often coming from tribal groups and poor landowners where they get a direct share of the economic benefits however these economic benefits may not fully compensate for cultural, social, and ecological losses. To practice the Bill the policymakers always want a simple "one-stop" clearance process for mining, but most of the time it would require a long, complicated system for: negotiating agreements and getting consent from local stakeholders, often this could slowdown project approval.

The issue of land acquisition for coal mining activities and adequate compensation for the deprived families has been a concern for a long time. The rehabilitation process for displaced families on Gair-Mazrua land in Jharkhand has encountered multifaceted challenges. The absence of valid documentation for tenant land claims has led to demands for both house and land compensation, exacerbated by inadequate records and delayed land authentication by the government department. Building a consensus among villagers for the finalization of a rehabilitation site is hindered by disputes over employment claims surpassing established norms, creating internal familial conflicts. Now, to expedite the resolution of pending and under-process cases, CCL (Central Coalfields Limited) has implemented several key measures. They are actively collaborating with applicants, state government authorities, and village representatives to secure any missing documentation related to employment proposals, ensuring a comprehensive record. Rehabilitation and resettlement benefits are provided by the CCL officials to the land losers. To oversee the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the rehabilitation action plan, multiple monitoring groups have been established within the project areas. CCL maintains ongoing communication with affected villagers, engaging in negotiation with affected villagers, engaging in negotiations aimed at mutually agreeable solutions, thereby demonstrating a commitment to resolving these pending cases.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the slow ecological destruction by the various coal mine companies and other mining companies in Jharkhand and confirms the human-human conflict between the capitalist power and the affected Indigenous people. The eco-Marxism analysis of Jharkhand's land policy reveals a deep-rooted tension between state-led developmental agendas and the ecological, cultural, and spiritual relationship that Indigenous communities hold with their land. Successive colonial and post-colonial policies have prioritized extractive industries over environmental sustainability and indigenous rights, leading to large-scale deforestation, displacement, and cultural erosion.

Resistance movements across Jharkhand – whether legal, cultural, or grassroots- illustrate that Adivasi struggles are not merely about reclaiming land but about asserting alternative worldviews rooted in ecological justice and self-determination. To move towards a just and sustainable future, land policy in Jharkhand must shift away from exploitative development

models and instead be guided by indigenous ecological ethics, community consent, and the constitutional guarantees of tribal autonomy. Only by centering indigenous voices and values in land governance can Jharkhand move toward an environmentally just and socially equitable model of development.

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