Colonizing the commons: it is jatropha now!

Enter the biofuel...

On 7 November 2006, on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of the formation of the State of Chhattisgarh in India, not far away from the capital city of Raipur, the former President, A P J Abdul Kalam planted jatropha saplings on the outskirts of the Sunderkera village and claimed that Chhattisgarh 'would be in the forefront in bio-diesel production from jatropha'. The state government had welcomed him with the slogan: 'Welcome to the Land of Jatropha!'

People's organizations and movement groups in Chhattisgarh responded very strongly in an open letter to the former President, saying, 'Rice Bowl or Land of Jatropha: the patriotic people of Chhattisgarh would decide.' ...Any reference made to Chhattisgarh as the 'land of jatropha' undermines the significance of 'rice' as the foundation of people's economy, cultural identity, and dignity and is an insult and open attack on their 'rights to life and livelihoods', the letter said.

Today, 50 m off the road to Sunderkera, jatropha saplings with visibly stunted growth behind barbed wires indicate that something has gone wrong somewhere. Chhattisgarh government's dream of becoming the first bio-diesel self-sufficient state in India has perhaps failed.

Biofuels, as they are called, got their first impetus in India in 2003, when the Planning Commission released a report showing India's great potential in a sector where Brazil and the US have taken the lead with the European Union and China fast catching up. The Indian government claimed that the biofuel-rich plants have the potential to make India an energy-secure country and help it to get over its annual requirement of 124-million tonnes of petroleum products, of which around 72% is met through imports at a cost of over 1.5-trillion rupees.[1]

Following the Planning Commission's proposed (Table 1) action programme – National Mission on Bio-diesel – Chhattisgarh moved in very quickly to cash on the hype. With a policy resolution in January 2005, the state planted jatropha saplings on 84,000 hectares of farmers' and government fallow land.[2] The state targeted to plant one million hectares with jatropha by 2012 to produce two million kilolitres of bio-diesel.

Table 1: The Planning Commission's target for bio-diesel production

Year	Diesel demand (million tonnes)	Bio-diesel @5% blending (million tonnes)	Area for 5% blending (million hectares)	Bio-diesel @10% blending (million tonnes)	Area for 10% blending (million hectares)	Bio-diesel @20% blending (million tonnes)	Area for 20% blending (million hectares)
2001/02	39.81	1.99	NA	3.98	NA	7.96	NA
2006/07	52.33	2.62	2.19	5.23	4.38	10.47	8.76
2011/12	66.90	3.35	2.79	6.69	5.58	13.38	11.19

...out go forest communities

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh, who once claimed to be using jatropha fuel for his official vehicle since May 2005, had said that his government wants to replace imported diesel with jatropha fuel in all the state-owned vehicles by 2007. 'If we plant jatropha seeds in one lakh hectares, it will be a source of livelihoods for one lakh people. But we do not intend to do this through any multinational company or private players; the government itself will carry out this project,' Raman Singh had declared.

To fulfil its ambitious target, the state gave a free hand to the FDC (Forest Development Corporation) and the FD (Forest Department) to carry out this mission. Both the

1 Small steps, big goal, *Frontline*, Volume 23 - Issue 21, 21 October–03 November 2006

2 www.cbdacg.com, website of the Chhattisgarh Biofuel Development Authority

FDC and the FD started indiscriminate planting of jatropha saplings on any land – forest or non-forest or disputed, and often forcibly – leading to blatant violations of rights of the vulnerable forest communities, dalits and tribals in the state. The state has around 40% forest cover and more than 44% of the people depend on forests for their livelihoods.

In villages of Raipur, Dhamtari, Bilaspur, Kanker, and Kawardha districts, jatropha saplings and seeds were planted often without any follow-up care and left to perish, only to be replaced in the next year with a fresh batch of saplings and seeds. In Bhumia panchayat, located only 20 km from the state capital, more than 25 acres of uncultivated and grazing land under the FD were planted up with jatropha saplings during 2006–07. The plants died and, in January 2008, new saplings were planted. According to the sarpanch, Ashis Sharma, the plants were destroyed by cattle and the FD did not take enough care to nurture the saplings. This time, the FD requested the panchayat to put up a protection fence around the new saplings.

THE BIOFUEL HYPE IN INDIA: A PLOY TO ENTER THE FORESTS

India is sixth in the world in energy demand accounting for 3.5% of the world's total commercial energy consumption. Domestic supply can presently satisfy 22% of the demand; hence, dependence on crude oil imports ($18 billion/annum) is on the rise. So, the demand–supply gap is looming. It is argued that locally produced biofuels will reduce this gap. The Planning Commission suggested large-scale jatropha cultivation, starting with 400,000 hectares of land in the first phase, 2.5-million hectares in the second, and then extending to 13.4-million hectares.

As is evident, the jatropha mission was initiated with an eye on the ample availability of wasteland in the country along with cultivable fallow lands, barren lands, etc. There is a prevalent notion among policy-makers that large areas within forests are wastelands and any land other than dense forests (including 'degraded' forests and pastures) could be used for jatropha plantation, thereby avoiding large tracts of cultivable agricultural land.

What this argument missed was the fact that pastures and grazing lands In India are often *de facto* village commons and CPRs (common property resources), many of which form part of the larger forest landscapes and contribute to the forest communities' economy and livelihoods. There are no official estimates of CPRs in India. According to the Wasteland Atlas of India, of the total wasteland of 63.8-million hectares, cultivable wasteland amounts to 45-million hectares. A majority of this – at least 26-million hectares – comes under forest land, providing sustenance to large number of forest communities in myriad ways. The uncultivated land, excluding current fallows, covers areas classified under 'permanent pastures and grazing land' amounting to 11.8-million hectares.[a] These lands are also intrinsically linked to communities' livelihoods.

There is ample evidence worldwide that such a biofuel programme of raising monoculture jatropha plantations seriously compromises the communities' rights and entitlements over village commons, and the food security of the poor and marginalized, and alienates farmers from agriculture by corporatizing their lands and forcing compact and contract farming upon them.

On the other hand, there is no scientific evidence to prove that biofuel produced from plantations would lead to lesser emission and contribute to the process of slowing down global warming. Two studies – published in *Science* (8 February 2008) – have shown that changes in land use to produce crop-based biofuels can actually result in more greenhouse-gas emissions than burning fossil fuels. Both conclude that the resulting carbon emissions, released through decomposition or burning of biomass, create a 'carbon debt' that takes decades or even centuries to be paid back through biofuel usage. This finding negates the claims that substituting fossil fuels with biofuels would offset greenhouse-gas emissions because biofuels sequester carbon while they grow.

a National Action Programme to Combat Desertification, In the Context of UNCCD, Vol 1, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, September 2001

In Medha village of Dhamtari district, jatropha was planted on CPRs and grazing land after the rains in 2007. In June 2007, near Abhanpur in Raipur district, the panchayat of Hansda forcibly planted jatropha on 40 acres of agricultural land on which 20 dalit families depended for sustenance. A herd of cattle was let loose on the standing crops and then jatropha saplings were planted. 'They used bulldozers to destroy our crops and the land,' said Ajit Ekka, wife of Paul Routray, whose family survived on two-and-a-half acres of agricultural land.

During the second half of 2007, hundreds of tribal families, living for generations in the forests of Chhattisgarh, were displaced from their cultivable land by the FD, and jatropha was forcibly planted on those lands. 'Incidents of such forcible planting of jatropha by the FD have happened in at least five districts of Kawardha, Bilaspur, Korba, Kanker, and Rajnandgaon,' said Pravin Patel of the Tribal Welfare Society. Complaints filed by the villagers were forwarded to the Superintendent of Police of Bilaspur, the District Collector, the Divisional Forest Officer at Marwahi, and the State Human Rights Commission. Majority of these villagers belong to the Baiga community, a primitive tribal group, spread across the forest regions of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. These tribals live in extreme poverty and grow some staple food such as *kodu*, lentils, and paddy wherever they have access to cultivable lands. A large number of them get engaged in various types of manual work, like looking after someone else's cattle.

In Pendra block of Bilaspur district, the FD and local panchayats have planted around 30,000 jatropha seeds on one-and-a-half-kilometre long tract of land along the Sonari river, all of which are village commons, grazing lands and CPRs. Saplings have been forcibly planted on Bhaiyalal's (a farmer belonging to the Gond tribe) land, which his family has been cultivating for generations. A CPT (cattle protection trench) was then dug around the land, to indicate that it was now out of bounds. Villagers in Barbesan and Dongeria have similar stories. Many of the jatropha plants have not grown at all during the past two years; some had grown and leaved, but the growth did not match the expectations. Jiyalal, an activist working with the local communities, said that no discussion on jatropha ever takes place in the panchayat meetings. Only the sarpanch knows what is happening and he takes unilateral decisions, siding with the FD.

As Budhu Ram of Baridih described, 'Local forest officials, usually forest guards and the deputy ranger, accompanied by the sarpanch, come with a big herd of cattle, and simply let them loose on our crops. The crops are trampled upon, and destroyed. Subsequently, non-tribals and/or members of a more dominant tribal community forcibly plant jatropha saplings on that particular land.'

This is precisely what happened in Baigatola of Baridih village on 7 August 2007. The sarpanch, Bedinbai Neti, accompanied by some upper-caste Thakurs, the forest beat-guard, a few powerful Gond tribals, and 400 heads of cattle, descended on the cultivable land of the Baigas, destroying their *kodu* crop. The whole area was then planted up with jatropha saplings. It is, of course, a different story that the Baigas fought back, uprooted the jatropha saplings and filed a complaint with the local police. But the Baigas and dalits in other villages were not so lucky. Protesting villagers in Belgahona, Konochara, Mithtu Nawagaon were beaten up by forest guards and arrested by the police.

The story repeats itself in the forests of Kanker and Bastar districts. According to Ratneshwar Nath of Paribartan, an NGO working among the tribals of Kanker and Bastar districts, at least 355 families of 27 villages were affected and displaced by the forcible planting of jatropha on their lands. 'More than 1700 acres of land cultivated by the tribals for generations have been taken away from them for planting jatropha,' Ratneshwar said. 'Forest officials and the administration across four forest divisions in Kanker and Bastar are terrorizing the villagers for the past six/seven months,' he added.

In Ghota village, forest officials forcibly planted jatropha saplings on 50 acres of land under cultivation and erected a CPT. The local forest guard told Hiru Ram, Jai Singh, Fateh Singh, Mohan Singh, and Bihari Singh whose lands were taken away, 'The CPT indicates that these lands no longer belong to them.' In fact, access to Bihari Singh's own house was cut off since it is surrounded from all sides by the CPT. In this village, jatropha has also been planted on a huge chunk of CPR land. The villagers have been threatened by the beat-guard against reclaiming these lands. In Narayanpur, 35 villagers were arrested by the police for uprooting jatropha saplings in a bid to reclaim their lands.

As Alok Shukla of Abhyaranya Panchayat, a platform of forest communities in Chhattisgarh struggling against displacement from national parks and sanctuaries, analyses, 'It is not that the FD here is simply over-zealous to plant jatropha on as much land as they could lay their hands on, it is much more insidious and planned. The

tribal and dalit forest-dwellers in Chhattisgarh are in possession of these lands for generations; their ancestors and forefathers have been living on these lands and cultivating subsistence crops. But, they were never given any land entitlements even though there were bitter struggles for rights over forest lands.'

Since the enactment of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, these forest-dependent communities have been repeatedly harassed by the FD, evicted from their own lands, their standing crops destroyed, because they were termed 'encroachers on the FD land'. Now that the Indian Parliament passed the Scheduled Tribe and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act in December 2006, the FD is using the weapon of jatropha plantation to grab as much cultivable forest land as possible before the Act is notified, citing that these people are encroachers of forest land. 'Such incidents are happening in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan too,' Alok further informed.

Confronting the state and corporate aggression

It is evident that the Government of India's ambitious bio-diesel programme and its aggressive promotion of jatropha have serious economic and ecological implications.

Starting from the Planning Commission of India to the Ministries of Rural Development, Agriculture, New and Renewable Energy Resources; the state governments and their agencies, the FD in particular; the industry lobby; the public and private players; the global majors—all are collaborating in promoting jatropha without caring for a serious assessment of its impact on the rural population, farmers, forest dwellers, tribals, and dalits. Instead, they are all dreaming of the 'green gold'... since all this ultimately just leads to profits for a few, as if they only matter.

If jatropha continues to spread in this rapid manner, there are serious risks of creating a battle between food and fuel that will leave the poor and hungry in developing countries at the mercy of rapidly rising prices for food, land, and water.[3]

In India, nobody bats an eyelid, mesmerized by the 'growth' glitz. Succumbing to industry and corporate pressure, the government has sent a draft National Biofuel Policy to the Group of Ministers in the Cabinet, headed by the agriculture minister, Sharad Pawar, for approval.[4]

It is with this concern that a group of NGOs, movements, peoples organizations, and individuals from different parts of India initiated the first ever civil-society debate on biofuel in India during 3–4 December 2007 in a National Consultation on *Biofuels in India: Will they deliver, or destroy?*, held in Pataspur village of Medak district in Andhra Pradesh.

The Consultation stressed on the fact that indigenous peoples, pastoralists, small farmers, and tribal communities all across India have a holistic view of life that is reflected in their interaction with the living world, which, in turn, provides for all their needs of food, cure, fuel, fodder, and energy. In a statement issued at the end of the Consultation the participants declared, 'We believe that the promotion of large-scale corporate-sponsored biofuels (agro-fuels) in the garb of improving energy security is yet another form of not only physically destroying the above, but also a psychological assault perpetrating the idea that farming as our peoples have done it is no longer good or tenable...'

'Rural and forest communities [...] say that there is no such thing as wastelands. Most of these lands are grazing lands, common pastures, degraded forests, and also lands of small and marginal communities. They not only support a multitude of livelihoods but also have a critical ecological role. This is where the government and corporations are pushing for *their* fuels, displacing thousands of peoples...'

'We are convinced that agro-fuels are no way of tackling climate change but a way of further supporting the current consumptive paradigm that is *the source* of the climate-change crisis. What also needs to be reversed is the advertising and propaganda that encourage peoples to consume more and more! Also the large *farm-to-food* model that promotes chemical agriculture, mechanized operations adding unnecessary *food miles*, and wasteful packaging, not only adds to the problem of climate change but erodes our bio-diverse traditions. The food-retail revolution that we are poised on would only

3 IPSnews.net, February 6, 2008

4 *The Financial Express*, 1 February 2008

aggravate the situation. Without changing all this, any one renewable energy law or policy will not address the concerns. What needs to be genuinely reversed is the mindless *development* that is being hankered after...'

'We reject any pseudo-*solutions* that are thrown upon us from outside, that too touted as clean and green, which they are not. We neither asked for *agro*-fuels as they are being propagated with such speed and on such scale, nor do we believe that they offer solutions for our real problems...'

– *Souparna Lahiri*

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Carbon trading interferes with positive solutions to global warming

On India's Bhilangana river, local farmers run a finely-tuned terraced irrigation system that provides them with rice, wheat, mustard, fruits, and vegetables. This ingenious – extremely low-carbon system of agriculture – is threatened by a new hydroelectric project designed to help power India's heavy industry. Villagers may have to leave the valley, losing not only their livelihoods but also their knowledge of a uniquely sustainable modern technology.

Is carbon trading a step towards providing solutions to global warming? If yes, why does it then destroy villagers' already established knowledge and practices that restrict carbon emissions in the first place? It is rather supporting the hydropower company, which has hired consultants to argue that their dam will result in fewer carbon emissions than would have been the case if it had not been built. The firm plans to sell the resulting carbon emission rights to polluting companies in Europe.

The example is typical of the way carbon markets are undermining positive approaches to climate change everywhere. The bulk of carbon credit sales under the Kyoto Protocol benefit chemical, iron and steel, oil and gas, electricity, and other companies committed to a fossil-fuel-intensive future, but not communities, organizations, or firms working to overcome fossil addiction.

In California, the environmental justice movement opposes carbon trading as a 'charade to continue business as usual'. One reason: carbon trading would help facilitate the construction of 21 new fossil-fuel-fired power plants there. Local activists want the money to be spent instead on building a green economy that would provide new jobs for the poorer communities that now suffer the most from fossil-fuel pollution.

Carbon trading obscures the real solutions to global warming. Chicago derivatives trader and economics professor Richard Sandor – one of the architects of carbon trading – claims, for instance, that forests in less industrialized countries can be saved from 'slash and burn' agriculture by turning them into production zones for carbon credits.

More experienced observers of the plantation, dam, logging, and oil industries know, however, that such forests are threatened not principally by poor farmers, but by precisely the type of land grab that Sandor advocates. Saving forests – and their moderating effects on climate – means respecting local people's needs, not trying to evict them or turn them into workers on a carbon production line.

– *Larry Lohmann*

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For more on forests and carbon trading, see <www.wrm.org.uy>