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‘Our energy, our rights’: National extraction legacies and contested energy justice futures in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Energy poverty remains an enduring challenge in Bangladesh, with 41 million people lacking electricity. Foreign states, corporations, and financial institutions have historically shaped the form and terms of the country's energy system, which is predominantly fossil fuel based. Shifting geographies of energy extraction and processing continue to reflect this past and influence current national energy debates in Bangladesh. The Rampal coal-fired energy project, a joint initiative with India, exemplifies these tensions. Opposition to the Rampal plant, proposed in the ecologically sensitive Sundarbans region, and other controversial energy extraction and processing projects led some activists and impacted stakeholders to promote the idea of “our energy, our rights.” The articulation of an energy rights discourse asserts that Bangladesh should extract and control national energy resources in a manner that respects rights and provides the basis for analyzing the energy justice landscape in the nation and beyond. The rights discourse rejects the nation's legacy of poor energy decisions, and the associated realities of energy poverty. Contributing to emerging ideas around the geographies of energy justice, this research paper explores the practical application by activists and stakeholders of rights discourses to contested energy projects in Bangladesh. It shows how distributional energy justice activism critiques the historical political economy of economic liberalization and energy exploitation in the country and centers the rights concerns of energy poverty while also considering climate change vulnerabilities.

1. Introduction

“Since it is a matter of national sovereignty, what can be done by Bangladesh to control its fuels? We all know that the structure of countries like Bangladesh is really weak, and of course corrupted. The government does not depend on the country's people. Even, the opposition party depends on the foreign or other factors except people's support. Hence, the foreign corporations get their chance to enter the country” (*Saki*, participant in BRAC Workshop 2015)

“Human rights versus environmental rights (*adhikar*¹). [The two] have to be seen as connected and not one or the other. They cannot be separated” (Rampal area resident, 2015).

“There are many alternatives for power generation, but there is no alternative for the Sundarbans” (*Mustafa*, participant in BRAC Workshop 2015)

The proposed Rampal coal-fired thermal plant is a 1320 MW facility being constructed next to the world's largest mangrove forest in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Sundarbans eco-region in the south of

Bangladesh. It exemplifies the contested nature of energy procurement, processing, and access in Bangladesh. In response to Rampal and other controversial energy extraction and processing projects, Bangladesh activists and communities promote the discourse of “our energy, our rights” (Rampal area activist, 2015). This approach asserts that Bangladesh should extract and control national energy resources in a manner that respects rights and claims energy as collective national resources, rather than the historical process of energy for foreign appropriation or internal domination, as noted in the activist and impacted stakeholder quotes above. Bangladesh activist demands that national systems for energy procurement be better aligned with rights mirror efforts to promote energy justice across several different spatial scales.

Notions of energy rights contest the status quo of local, national, or international domination of energy systems. Drawing from social movement contributions, geographers propose energy justice framing to explore how stakeholders and activists express and contest inequalities associated with the energy system [1,2]. Acknowledging human agency and the challenges associated with sustaining social movements over time, this framing explores how activists determine appropriate

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¹ The original three quotes were in Bengali and translated to English. Rights in this context is translated from the Bengali word, *adhikar*.

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forms of collective action and how they translate injustices into symbols, identities, and discourses of protest [3]. Viewing energy systems as embedded in political, social, and economic processes, an energy justice framing enables activists to craft meanings and narratives that respond to and emerge from these iterative processes, while potentially proposing alternatives ([4]: 2). The energy justice frame provides structure for investigating perceived injustices, while also questioning the costs and benefits of uneven energy processes.

With inspiration from the influential environmental justice field [5–7], energy justice examines the uneven distributional politics of energy infrastructure and access to electricity. Energy justice emphasizes efforts to ensure the equitable distribution of benefits and costs associated with energy services across and within nations [47]. Furthermore, energy justice probes where injustices occur in energy systems, and which populations are disproportionately disadvantaged by these inequities [8]. A noted area for empirical energy justice research, the distributional approach centers on injustices associated with both the siting of energy infrastructure and access to energy [8]. Distributional claims of energy injustice prove powerful tactics to garner public support to critique market-driven infrastructure pursuits [9]. This area of enquiry addresses both energy production and consumption, acknowledging that inequities can occur throughout the energy system. Achieving energy justice in this context is not only about a more equitable distribution of energy goods and bads, but also about addressing uneven electricity access.

The research represented in this paper responds to recent calls for the use of social science methods and tools, including field research and interviews, to study the multi-faceted impacts of energy extraction, processing, and access [10]. While there is a proliferation of energy justice literature focused on American or European case studies [1,11,4], the topic remains underexplored in the Bangladesh context. Contributing a new geographical perspective to this literature, this paper provides insight into the political economy of energy justice inspired by activism in Bangladesh and by drawing from the energy justice framing and distributional justice perspectives. It expands existing scholarship by exploring the intersection of energy justice and rights, and by detailing the historical and contemporary elements of Bangladesh energy access through an examination of the proposed Rampal coal plant.

This research draws from a larger project examining the political ecology of energy poverty, energy justice, and rights in communities experiencing the impacts of energy extraction and anthropogenic climate change. Ethnographic fieldwork in 2015 included interviews and participant observation in Bangladesh's capital city, Dhaka, and the area around the Rampal plant in the Khulna district. Unstructured questions were used with the acknowledgement that this approach allows respondents to bring up ideas or discourses not anticipated by the researcher, while deepening the context for the issue [12].

Interviews with fence-line stakeholders, activists, and academics illuminated historical and contemporary energy justice considerations. Those interviewed included some representatives of the broader coalition articulating energy justice concerns in Bangladesh. Key groups and parties involved in the energy struggle include, *Krishi Jomi Roksha Sangram Samity* (The Association for the Protection of Agricultural Land), the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power, and Ports (noted as the National Committee below), *Jamadir Andolan*, academics, university students, former freedom fighters (during the War of Liberation from West Pakistan), aspiring politicians, and political parties (including the Communist Party of Bangladesh, *Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal*, Workers Party, and *Ganosanghati Andolon*). A textual analysis of historical and contemporary literature, government policies, Wiki Leaks documents, and newspaper articles complemented fieldwork. This literature contextualizes ethnographic findings in the broader political and energy landscape. Additionally, participation in a public workshop on energy concerns at BRAC University in Dhaka heightened awareness of the broader energy

landscape in Bangladesh, which is vital to an understanding of the contemporary status of calls for energy justice and rights in the nation.

This paper commences with an exploration of justice framing and distributional rights in relation to energy processes. It then examines how contemporary energy extraction and processing entanglements in Bangladesh reflect a history of foreign state, corporate, and financial institution interference. The section charts how the political economy of energy exploitation and economic liberalization reveal a series of projects and programs that exacerbated the nation's limited access to affordable and consistent sources of energy. The paper then charts how activists contest the Rampal coal project as emblematic of efforts to subvert the social, environmental, and energy needs of the people of Bangladesh. The role of Bangladesh's larger neighbor, India, in the Rampal project adds regional complexity to the distributional burdens detailed nationally. In conclusion, the rights and energy poverty implications of these everyday realities provide the opportunity to explore the potential for energy justice-oriented political and activist protest.

2. Powering justice and rights

Energy challenges are multi-fold, including stakeholder exclusion from decision-making, lack of regular access to energy, exposure to the health and ecological externalities associated with the energy system and associated climate change considerations. In certain cases, individuals and communities intersectionally bear the injustice of all these challenges. Fuller and McCauley [4] detail how energy justice frames are critical to the long-term contestation of grievances related to local and global energy extraction, processing, access, distribution, and climate change concerns. Despite the linked nature of many of these concerns, the authors note that there is little multi-scalar activism encompassing the intersectional concerns of income inequality, low carbon alternatives, and procedural and distributional equity. Given this, the case from Bangladesh detailed here is noteworthy because activists contest energy injustices from a range of scales- from critiques of persistent energy poverty, to the rejection of the ecological costs of coal mining and processing, to climate change concerns.

The articulation of rights is also fundamental to the framing of energy injustice in Bangladesh. In concert with increasing discussions on energy justice are considerations of the rights implications of energy procurement and processing [13]. The rights framework in the discourse of energy justice is multifold and a range of energy projects in Bangladesh are responsible for the denial of basic rights, while maximizing production and profit [49]. For example, energy processes may result in social, health, and environmental injustices experienced by communities in both extraction and processing sites. Energy extraction and conversion processes may enable rights violations: there are, for example, documented cases where private security firms are used to protect corporate energy investments. Drawing from an energy infrastructure case study in Ghana, Ablo and Asamoah [14] note that limited stakeholder involvement in the acquisition and compensation processes led to land disenfranchisement and associated vulnerabilities for displaced farmers.

These abuses are not foreign to Bangladesh. Gardner ([49], p. 199) details the Bibiyana natural gas extraction efforts in the Duniyapur area (eastern Bangladesh), where corporate social responsibility officers reported that “cultural awareness” might help smooth tensions in the nearby villages. Instead, the government deployed armed police forces to accompany Chevron, Unocal, and government officials who worked in the area. Community stakeholders perceived this approach as coercive and threatening. The violations of rights in regard to the relationship between companies and locals have not only become contentious, but even deadly as evidenced through the recent protests against the proposed Phulbari coal mine in northwestern Bangladesh [15].

Energy poverty and energy access, particularly in developing countries, are critical to rights. Bradbrook and Gardam ([16], p. 400)

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