

# Energy Empowerment - the Story of Bijli and Dharnai

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It was a cloudy, grey and rainy morning in Dharnai, Bihar. A small classroom was buzzing with local villagers. Banners were on display and a microphone was arranged for announcements. Slowly and steadily the crowd gathered inside the room. People were chatting amongst themselves using words like 'line', 'bijli' (electricity) and 'light' frequently.

Boys, men and children walked into the classroom, and started occupying the seats. The women were missing for a while, and the sabha wouldn't begin without their participation. The women arrived with the children, and soon enough there was an eagerness in the room to know what was going to happen.

Curious members of the village eagerly waited for the program to begin. A few gentlemen were seated at the front of the classroom. The head of the village, Mukhiya declared that Greenpeace along with CEEDS (Centre for Environment and Energy Development) and BASIX are going to launch a unique energy project in Dharnai.

Shortly afterwards, Greenpeace announced, "Dharnai is going to be electrified using a solar powered microgrid soon". A sudden applause erupted in the room. 'Bijli' evoked mixed reactions from the people of Dharnai. The idea of electricity has various connotations for the people present in the Gram Sabha. The microgrid will electrify the village through clean and sustainable energy using locally available resources. The speech was followed by Greenpeace asking for approval of the villagers to establish the project. Instantly all the members in the classroom raised their hands in excitement and approval with a big "yes"!

The signatures and thumb prints of all the members at the Gram Sabha were collected as an official approval to the project. Several villagers were curious to know how this project will take shape, and how it is going to benefit them. And is it really going to provide the village with electricity, they wondered? Something they haven't received in ages. Some members of the village shared their thoughts with Greenpeace.

Beena Devi, who attended the Gram Sabha meet said, "Our children will be able to study, get educated, and overall we will be able to live a better life!"

Gopal Prasad Chandra Bansi, owner of Balti (bucket) factory, has suffered immense financial losses due to the energy crisis in Dharnai. His workshop which runs solely on diesel generators manufactures several iron objects like cupboards, buckets and boxes. Since the prices of diesel have shot up significantly, he could not bear the cost of running his factory, and was forced to shut down. He now waits for electricity to illuminate the village, so that he can restart his business.

A young post graduate in Geography, Anil Kumar Shashi was hopeful after the Gram Sabha. He mentioned that he has limited work opportunity because of the perennial lack of electricity, and if he had access to power supply, he would be living a better life.



*Why Dharnai, and why now?*

The village of Dharnai has not received electricity for over 30 years. Lack of power has stunted the growth of Dharnai to a very large extent. Health care is limited and it's extremely difficult to establish new models of medical services in the absence of constant power supply. Additionally, using any form of electrical appliance or equipment requires diesel powered generators. This essentially means that access to electricity is highly limited, and only affordable to the economically affluent class who can bear the rising cost of diesel. One of the key drivers for this project is - energy access, which is a big and unsolved issue in India. For most villages like Dharnai, in Bihar getting energy for the most basic purpose is an everyday struggle.

Greenpeace along with its partners BASIX and CEEDS is laying down the foundations of a de-centralised solar powered microgrid to provide energy access in rural Bihar. The social, cultural, economic demographic of the cluster village of Dharnai is ideal for setting up a microgrid and can create a replicable model in the coming years. Growing concern on increasing carbon emissions, effects of climate change on agricultural land and the absence of an efficient power distribution network collectively make Dharnai as a perfect example for the model of universal energy access through clean and sustainable solar energy.

Dharnai stands at the crossroads of energy empowerment. And Bijli will finally make its way into the little quiet corners of this village.

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