

# **Trends in Energy Consumption in Postcolonial India**

## **A Comparative Historical Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses trends in energy consumption in postcolonial India in comparative historical perspective. The UN estimate on world energy consumption for 1952 includes estimates for both commercial energy and non-commercial energy. By linking it to the IEA estimates on energy consumption from the 1970s, we can observe a rough world trend and changes in the relative importance between commercial energy (mostly fossil fuels consisting of coal, oil, natural gas and electricity as secondary energy) and non-commercial energy (mostly biomass energy consisting of timber and charcoal but including crop residues and animal dung: Only a small proportion of this has been commercialized) for the last sixty years or so.

We find that India followed Asia's general trend in the sense that a rapid increase in energy consumption was accompanied by the increase of the share of fossil fuels, first coal but increasingly accompanied by the imports of oil, while the absolute level of consumption of biomass energy simultaneously increased and sustained a significant proportion of the country's energy consumption. Biomass energy consumption per capita also increased. The extensive use of biomass energy during industrialization is an important historical characteristic of Asian growth economies, including those in East Asia and Southeast Asia, while most Western countries used a much larger proportion of fossil fuels at a similar stage of development (in England in the middle of the nineteenth century and by the early twentieth century in most countries in Western Europe and the United States). The paper discusses the implications of India's changing patterns of energy use for its long-term path of economic development and sustainability.