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ENVIRONMENT-INDIA:
Converting Waste to Energy - Not So Green
Keya Acharya

BANGALORE, Feb 22 (IPS) - A stream of protests has hit India's Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) for sanctioning municipal waste-to-energy (MWTE) projects that are collapsing under an avalanche of incombustible wastes.

"The technology of converting waste to energy from purely organic wastes through bio-methanation is working successfully in many small, private projects in India. But our city municipalities are indifferent to segregation and hence unable to provide sufficient combustible matter," says Almitra Patel who heads a committee on solid waste appointed by India's Supreme Court in 2000.

Patel, an engineer with a degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) was handed the job against a petition she made on the lack of measures taken by municipalities to dispose garbage safely.

According to her, Indian garbage contains more moisture and construction debris than 'western garbage' and is therefore better suited to composting, which provides multiple benefits and is a cheaper alternative on the current land-space being used for infrastructure-intensive and exorbitant foreign projects.

"The Indian taxpayer is already hugely burdened by government

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grants given to such inherently uneconomic waste-to-electricity schemes," said Patel in an IPS interview. "The grant amount itself is enough to set up at least double the amount of compost sites."

The MNRE grants approximately 340,000 to 680,000 US dollars per Mw of renewable energy as incentive to industry, attracting several foreign and national companies.

The Washington-based Global Environment Facility provided 5.5 million US dollars in 1994, used mainly for consultancies and technologies, in promoting waste-to-energy projects. Several western countries are now encouraging their industries to set up municipal waste-to-energy plants in India.

In 1985, the New Delhi municipality spent between 4.5m to 9.96 million US dollars employing Danish firm Volund Milijontechnik in the Timarpur area for a waste-to-energy plant which collapsed in 21 days due to the machinery's inability to handle the high content of sand and debris.

Timarpur has yet again become controversial with an Indian investment bank, Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services Ltd., setting up the Timarpur Waste Management Company to generate 6 Mw of electricity through biomass gasification with a 20 percent grant, and two others in southern Andhra Pradesh state. Both plants have reportedly recently shut down.

Delhi-based Gopal Krishna of the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives says the project is now incorrectly trying to earn carbon credits through the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol. "As per the Kyoto Protocol itself, waste incineration is a greenhouse gas emitter," he says.

In Lucknow, capital of northern Uttar Pradesh state, a 5-Mw waste-to-energy project designed to handle 200-300 tonnes of municipal waste per day, set up at a cost of 18 million dollars, besides a

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government subsidy of 3.3 million dollars "has literally gone down the drain," says Krishna.

"Since 1994, 33 MWTE proposals using three million dollars as subsidy were non-starters; and 2 out of three projects begun for generating 17.6 Mw in (the cities of) Delhi, Lucknow, Vijayawada and Hyderabad, are failures," says Patel.

Only one of at least seven MWTE projects is currently in working condition in the country, even while several more in various cities countrywide are on the anvil.

Both non-government organisations (NGOs) and experts attribute India's impracticable MWTE ventures to the financial grants taken from public taxpayers' money and given them by the government. Companies jump in for the potential profits due to financial offsets from grants.

"After one deducts the energy needed to pre-sort wastes, operate a plant, dry the digester slurry, treat the effluent and transport the wastes off-site, an MWTE unit may well consume more energy than it produces," explains Patel.

"That is why such plants need massive subsidies and artificially high buy-back prices to make a profit," she says.

Patel has now taken these failures to court, seeking to 'freeze' the government financial grant for such projects, on numerous counts of impracticability.

The ministry has refuted Patel's charges on the grounds that India needs multiple solutions to waste disposal, especially renewable energy ones. "Freezing of subsidies will hamper the development of MWTE projects at great cost to the environment," says the ministry in its response.



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The court is yet to give its verdict.

Patel says she is not trying to kill renewable technologies, but only the subsidy granted them by the government. "If MWTE projects of this nature are going to be promoted, then providing subsidy for waste-segregation, since the composition of the garbage is causing problems, is far more viable."

Patel is not the only one protesting. A band of civic groups are also campaigning against India's use of obsolete incineration technologies for converting municipal waste to energy.

"It is well-documented that waste incineration, including waste pelletisation, pyrolysis and gasification, produce dioxins, furans and other persistent health pollutants," says Gopal Krishna. "Yet, the government continues to promote such technologies."

In 2005-06, the well-known The Energy Research Institute (TERI) sought to promote incinerative refuse-derived fuel technology, but Krishna says the organisation admitted that its techno-economic feasibility is not established.

"With no markets for waste-incinerative technology abroad, foreign companies are trying to push the technology into South Asia", says Patel.

Since 2001, local communities and NGOs have stopped municipal waste to energy projects using incineration technologies in Kanpur, Bhopal, Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi and Jaipur. (END/2007)

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