

# Biofuels – A view from India

*When biofuels emerged on the global scene, they were regarded as the final answer to our dependence on fossil fuels and our climate change concerns. But over the last couple of years, biofuels have uncovered another face – one of disaster and destruction.*

*by P.V. Satheesh*

BIOFUELS HAVE CONVERTED crop fields into fuel farms, sent food prices soaring, threatened people's food security, and have brought the spectre of corporate control over agricultural farms and community commons closer to reality.

New arguments that detail the dangers of biofuels abound. We already have the examples in Mexico where maize prices have increased by 60% since maize has been used as a biofuel crop. This has given birth to the new slogan *Crops for humans or crops for cars?* In Africa, millions of hectares of common lands and forests are being converted into biofuel plantations displacing local communities from the benefits they regularly derived from these commons. Brazil is clearing thousands of hectares of tropical Amazon forests almost on a daily basis to plant sugarcane for ethanol production. Everywhere, biodiversity on farms and forests is being replaced by monocultural plantations.

India sees itself as a big player in this arena. The argument becomes far more complex in India where the booming economy has created millions of neo-rich who live in splendid isolation from their rural fraternity, for whom their farms and commons are their

only sources of food and livelihood security. The biofuelling of these spaces will destroy whatever residual security the poor have. In addition, many Indian multinationals are looking to Africa to colonise the continent with the lure of their investments to create biofuel plantations. Like any coloniser, India supports this plan saying that Africa needs investment and jobs.

*Jatropha* plants appear to fill the core of these dreams. Large scale *jatropha* plantations on wastelands is a seductive discourse. *Jatropha* plantations are bandied as a win-win situation. The argument goes that they will green the wastelands and provide biofuels for the auto industry and livelihoods for the people. Who can fight this compelling logic?

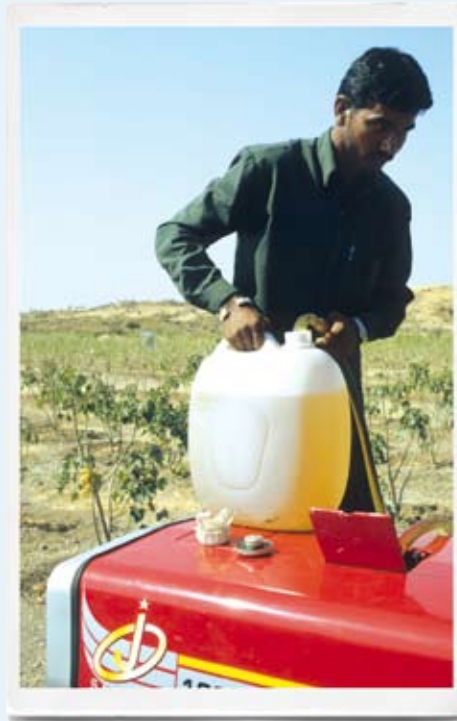
However, a deeper analysis would reveal that all the wins will stay with the rich and the poor will be confronted with a lose-lose situation. They are not the car owners, hence cheaper "envirofriendly" fuels have no meaning for them. On the other hand, they will lose their commons which give them access to a large number of food and medicinal plants, uncultivated foods, fuelwoods and fibre. Their replacement with

ecosystem-destroying *jatropha* is disastrous for them.

Genetically engineered agriculture, which the Indian government is proactively trying to spread, is likely to play a key role here. There are already reports of research being carried out to modify trees such as eucalyptus and poplar so that they will break down more easily for the pulp and paper and the emerging biofuel industries. The Norwegian–Brazilian Company *Aracruz Cellulose*, believes that genetic engineering of forest species “can bring benefits to society through sustainable development”. GE multinationals such as *Monsanto* and petroleum giants *BP* as well as other players are teaming up to reap a rich economic harvest out of this new opportunity.

On the other hand, once the auto industry and the urban middle classes get used to cheaper, “ecofriendly” fuels, they will pay for more of the same. That would turn farmlands into spaces for biofuel crops. That is when this disaster will be total. If this is to be prevented, a vigorous debate that does not get influenced by the hype and big business interests is urgently needed. Countries like China and the US, which are big petroleum users, can get carbon credits by bankrolling “green energy sources” projects (as agrofuels are euphemistically called) and evade responsibility for contributing immensely to the climate crisis. This is very evident particularly with China, which is arranging agrofuel deals, at the same time as investing heavily in its own automobile industry without even a slight change in domestic policies (e.g. regulating car engine sizes or emissions). Same is the case with India which is emerging as a new plunderer of the natural wealth of Africa.

Therefore, it is very important that voices are raised against this plunder. While all these issues surround the complexity of biofuels, it is unfortunate that there is hardly any debate on them. It is in this context that the India



Joerg Boehling / Still Pictures

Experimental farm with *jatropha* oil plant for production of biodiesel in Bhavnagar, Gujarat, India

Consultation on Agrofuels was set up. This was the first civil society debate focusing on global as well as India-specific issues in order to develop more informed understanding about biofuels in the Indian context.

**i** This article is based on the Introduction to a report of a national consultation on Biofuels in India, organised by the Deccan Development Society, in collaboration with GRAIN, which was published in February 2008. To read the statement issued visit: [www.ddsindia.com/www/biofuel\\_india.html](http://www.ddsindia.com/www/biofuel_india.html)

For more information visit [www.ddsindia.com](http://www.ddsindia.com) or [www.grain.org/agrofuels](http://www.grain.org/agrofuels)

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