

Environmentalists and Renewables

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India today has a strong environmental movement. Their focus is mostly on conservation of forests and wildlife, resisting mega projects and displacement caused by them, fighting the lack of corporate environmental accountability, and prevention of vehicular and industrial pollution. Perhaps, the realization that conventional energy production is the biggest polluter has not dawned even on the greens in India. The fact that over 60% of greenhouse gas emissions is caused by burning coal to produce electricity is lost on them. As a movement, they have never strongly come out in support of development of renewables.

On the contrary, there have been few instances when they have openly come out against green sources of energy, on environmental grounds! One such critical example in India is the opposition to a 75 MW wind power project on the hilltop ridge of Bababudangiri hills in Chickmangalur district of Karnataka. The main reason was that this range forms the outer rim of

the Lakkavalli and Multodi areas in the Bhadra Wildlife Sanctuary. Another typical example of pseudo-science was the opposition of some local 'scientists' to wind turbines in Satara, on the grounds that they were responsible for scanty rainfall in the area. The proponents of this view had no real scientific evidence, but constructed enough pseudo-scientific arguments to buttress their case. Two successive expert committees appointed by the Government of Maharashtra have rejected the claim that there is a connection between scanty rainfall and wind turbines. Such incidents are pointers to the fact that besides being inherently environment-friendly, technology-wise, renewable energy sources need to also appear to be environment-friendly in the broader sense. The greens should recognize the positive socio-economic impact of renewables on rural development in the remote areas. Similarly, the renewable industry should come forward to allay such public fears and evince more social and environmental accountability.

In many European countries there has been opposition by conservationists, because wind turbines were affecting bird migration. Recently, there have been reports of large number of bats dying at wind turbine sites in the United States. In Europe and USA, they have undertaken painstaking studies to assess the causes and evolve solutions. While the renewable energy industry in India should be sincere in their commitment to the environment, the greens should come out and campaign strongly for green power development. They should realize that sustainable energy is the key to sustainable development and appreciate that in a post-fossil fuel era, we need to lead a modern life – not an archaic pre-modern existence. So a trade-off between marginal environmental impacts of renewable energy production and the need to find green sources of energy is imperative.

Renewables in India are at a critical juncture of development. The conventional sector is in deep crisis. This is the time for the greens to come out strongly in support of renewables. Conservation of nature, natural resources, the flora and fauna are essential. But such wilderness-oriented, fundamentalist, conservation philosophy should not blind us to the need for finding alternative sources of energy. The fastest growth of renewables is taking place in Europe. One of the main reasons is the active support of the European greens and the strong leadership provided by them in the European Commission. Similar sustained efforts by the green community in India, in support of renewables, would go a long way in accelerating the pace of its development. Having said that, I would urge the renewables industry to also reach out to the Indian greens and the public in more effective ways. Co-ordinated community outreach efforts would be needed. Dealing with the issues raised in a positive way, by approaching them like any fundamental business problem is a must. Grassroots campaign techniques used in many environmental movements will help. By providing local communities with balanced and scientific information – supported by a demonstrated sincere willingness to listen, educate and solve problems – will go a long way in facilitating accelerated growth of renewables. The greens and the renewable industry are in the same boat – the need to develop a sustainable future. In fact, all of us are in the same boat!