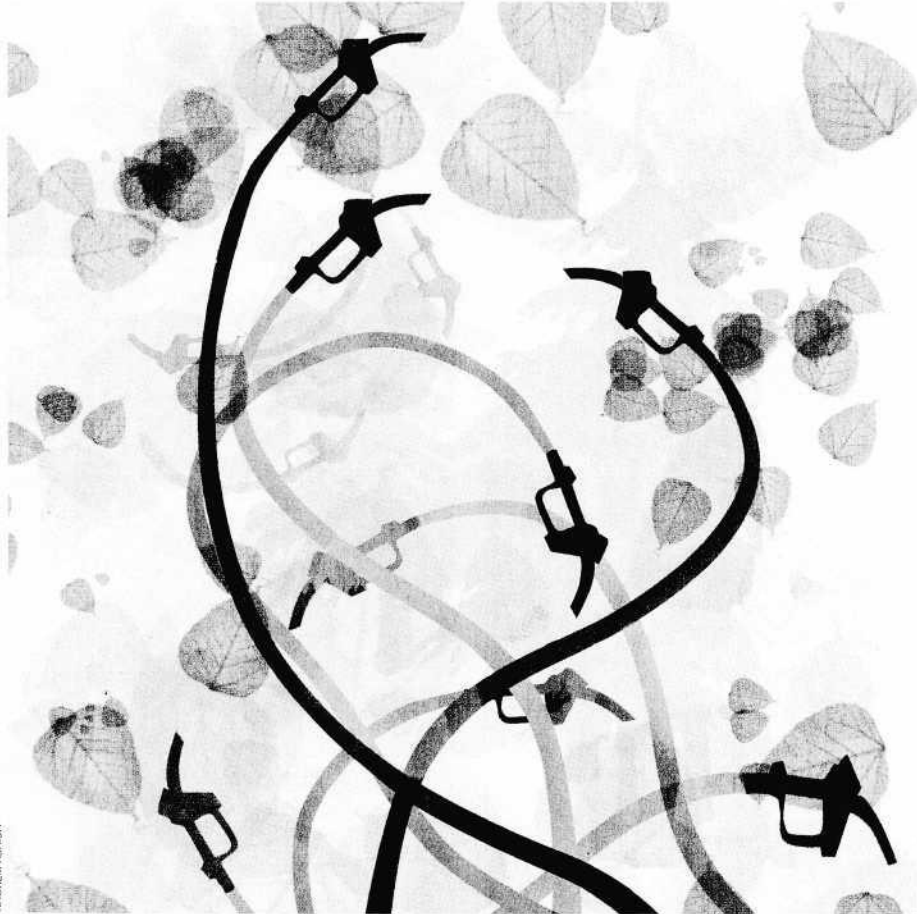


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NAOREM ASHISH

## NEED: LAND FOR OIL

The national biofuels policy will promote oil interests. But it could be at the cost of agriculture, reports **KA SHAJI**

**I**T WAS, after all, an anticlimax. On September 15, after closed door deliberations, the Union Cabinet cleared the National Policy on Biofuels, toeing the expected line: by 2017, it will be mandatory for oil companies to sell 20 percent ethanol blended petrol across the country. The policy also suggests that all Central taxes on bio-diesel be removed and biofuels be accorded 'declared goods' status, so that there is a uniform four percent VAT across the country.

On the face of it, the emphasis on increasing biofuel seems like good intentions on the part of government. Not really. The emphasis in the policy is dictated, not by any environmental concerns, but by the need of the automobile sector to keep powering ahead (see TEHELKA, August 2). Hence the stress on developing biofuels, rather than probing alternative energy for green concerns, or a policy

that actually promotes reducing consumption.

More to the point, as environmental groups explain, the diversion of scarce land for the crops used to extract biofuels, such as *Jatropha curcas*, could compromise the country's food security. Dr S Sanker of the Kerala Forest Research Institute agrees with the need to find a renewable raw material for conversion into transportation fuel, but wants a strong public vigil against the possibility that food crops will be misused to produce biofuels. "Some countries manufacture ethanol from sugarcane or cereal and blend it with petrol to reduce crude oil imports. This diverts agriculturally productive land for fuel production," he says.

Other experts point to the manner in which the diversion of corn for the production of ethanol in the US resulted in a spurt in the price of foodgrains across the world. "It must be the duty of the government not to encour-

age biofuels at the cost of foodgrain production. No foodgrain or oil-seed should be used," says environmentalist Prof T Sobindran. He says that even the use of sugarcane could lead to lower production of sugar.

Considering how ambitious the policy is, it's hard not sound an alarm. The projected demand for fuel by 2017 is 83.58 million tonnes. To achieve the targeted 20 percent blending with biofuels will mean the production of 16.72 million tonnes of biodiesel by then. That would mean a plantation area of 35 million hectares, assuming a yield of 1.6 tonnes per acre and oil recovery of 30 percent. Where is the land?

The government has suggested that only wastelands and barren areas be used in the cultivation of plants that produce biofuel. However, plantation companies are not likely to want such land. "So far, experience prompts

**Scarcity of land is the main problem. There are disputes over using farm land for other purposes**

us to reach the conclusion that companies will demand only fertile agricultural land or forest land," says Dr S Faizy, an expert, adding that there is no guarantee that plants such as *Jatropha* will grow in waste and barren lands with no access to water. "Governments are often influenced by the automobile industry, and so there is no initiative to promote judicious use of petroleum. We are not against any new energy source, but it should be less harmful than the old one," he says.

The problem centres around the scarcity of land as a resource. Dr MK Prasad, environmentalist and former vice-chancellor of Calicut University, says that already there are disputes over the use of farmland for other purposes, including industrial development. "So, diversion of farmland for biofuel could cause food shortages," he says. Even the UN Human Rights Council has said that the global biofuel initiative could jeopardise food security.

Finally, there are no studies on the long-term impact of growing plants such as *Jatropha* over tracts of land. If the surge towards biofuels possesses the potential to compromise both food security and damage land resources, it's a solution that, unless carefully handled, may prove worse than the problem. ●



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