

Central policy choking viable green fuel option

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Kolkata: The Mamata Banerjee government does not want to burden the common man by increasing bus fares. But the ever-increasing input cost, particularly the steady rise in diesel price, is making operation of buses unviable. So, isn't there a way out? There is, say experts. The government can strike a balance by opting for renewable sources of energy, particularly biofuel or coal bed methane (CBM) like CNG, they point out.

Biodiesel produced from vegetable oilseeds, which can be mixed with diesel at the depot level without using any technology, would have neutralized the price-pinch of fuel. However, two major biodiesel-producing units in Bengal with an installed capacity of 500 tonnes per day are essentially idle for more than a year. Over the last few years, not even 3% of their capacity has been utilized, thanks to wrong policy of the Centre, said automobile emission consultant Soumendra Ghosh.

"Even today, biodiesel can be sold at one rupee less than the current price of diesel. It needs no subsidy. Currently, a litre of diesel is subsidized by Rs 16. This is bleeding the national exchequer. Biodiesel could have been a great breather for the government as well as people of this country," said Biodiesel Association of India (BDAD) president Sandeep Chaturvedi.



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Worse, the price of diesel might rise further, which might pose a greater threat to the public transport system. Since the price of crude oil is predicted to exceed \$200 a barrel, the focus is bound to shift to biodiesel. But in the prevailing situation, the biodiesel industry is not prepared to gear up for that sudden hike in demand. There must be a roadmap which can enhance

production step-by-step to reach the 20% blending of biodiesel with diesel. The current installed capacity can only manage 3% blending, Chaturvedi added.

Despite receiving an excellent feedback from government agencies like CTC and Fire Brigade, our unit has remained idle for over a year as production of biodiesel in small quantities makes no sense. Moreover, we were barred from selling the product by the ministry of petroleum," said Aditya Agarwal, Emami Group director. Emami Biotech has the highest capacity of biodiesel production in eastern India.

Similarly, another viable fuel option is CNG. "The huge quantity of coal bed methane (CBM) available at Asansol-Raniganj coal belt area might have solved the price-crisis of the city effectively. But there has not been any positive step to make this CNG available in the city. The government only has to be a facilitator by leasing any of the long unused industrial pipelines to bring CNG to the city," said transport economist Atanu Baidya.

An official of Great Eastern Energy Corporation, which is extracting CNG from the coal belt, said they can sell CNG at an attractive price if the government encourages them to. "If CNG is made available, transport operators will be happy not to raise fares. Fuel prices are bleeding the operators," said Ghosh.