

Looking for Salvation?

CHEAP OIL IS HISTORY. SO IS stability in global oil market. But America and Europe are in no mood to curtail their oil consumption. They are seriously trying to tackle the problem of 'addiction to oil', not by kicking the habit, but by guzzling biofuels instead.

The hard fact is that these so-called 'carbon-neutral' fuels—biodiesels or bioethanols—are not really 'carbon-neutral'. Burning biofuels simply sends back into the atmosphere carbondioxide that the plants took out when they were growing in the field. Thus the crisis of CO₂ emission vis-a-vis global warming remains.

Multinationls are in biodiesel business in a big way. In other words third world countries have no respite from being haunted by the insecurity they feel every now and then because of fluctuating oil market behaviour. Whether they like it or not poor developing countries will be forced to feed the voracious appetites of rich countries for biofuels instead of their own hungry masses, and suffer the devastation of their natural forest and biodiversity.

In truth America and Europe need virgin soil to extensively cultivate biofuel plants to tide over the impending fuel crisis. As a result the next phase of colonisation—rather neo-colonisation—has begun. Oil transnationals are looking to the third world to satisfy their addiction : the land is there for the taking as is cheap labour, and the environmental damages of large plantations, biofuels extraction and refining can all be outsourced, exactly as they were in the extraction of crude oil.

Companies dealing with biodiesel have set their sights on countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia and the pacific, where they can procure raw material at competitive prices.

The government of India announced a national biodiesel purchase policy in October 2005, offering a support price of Rs 25 per litre for jatropha oil and planning to bring one million hectare of land under jatropha cultivation to supply blended diesel in next five years.

As the popularity of biodiesel is expanding exponentially, it is likely that they will begin to occupy primary or secondary forested areas, as has happened with the Soya plantations in some Latin American countries. The defence of biodiesel seems to be getting blurred with contradicting scientific reports. It looks increasingly likely that biofuel is a net contributor of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. As regards the benefits to the producers of the biofuel crops, these can be extremely negative.

Fuel in any form is not clean. If biofuel is the next frontier of oil business, peasants in third world countries are going to lose their land further. Already the UK-based DI Oils—a biodiesel firm—has plantations totalling 267,000 hectare in China, Madagascar, South Africa, India and the Phillipines and intends to expand to 9 million

hectare. Replacing fossil fuel by biofuel does not mean much to poor developing countries—it is a new menace they will have to confront for years to come.

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