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Toy Train's eco-friendly chug ends: Bal Bhavan authorities ditch biofuel

By Divya Shekhar, ET Bureau | Jul 27, 2016, 05:01 PM IST



Bal Bhavan claims biofuel reduced efficiency of Putani Express. Makers of the biofuel, however, hold it was stopped for monetary reasons.

The ambitious biofuel project for [Jawahar Bal Bhavan's toy train](#) appears to have reached a dead-end after being launched amid much fanfare in 2012. Bal Bhavan authorities claim biofuel reduced the efficiency of [Putani Express'](#) engine. Makers of the biofuel, however, hold it was stopped abruptly for monetary reasons.

In August 2012, the Bal Bhavan and the Karnataka State Biofuel Development Board jointly inaugurated India's first green toy train to promote eco-friendly practices.

For the first time since its inauguration in 1968, the Putani Express every [Bengalurean's](#) childhood joy ride -ran with a B-20 blend of 80% diesel and 20% biofuel. The bio-fuel component was made out of honge (Indian beech tree). The experiment, if successful, was to be replicated at a larger level with KSRTC and BMTTC. It turns out that four years down the line, the experiment met with a quiet end.

"The oil was too greasy . Soot accumulation led to power loss and reduced the efficiency of the engine," said Bhavana Ramanna, Bal Bhavan's chairperson. "The train was slower than usual and the engine pick-up was also not smooth and as powerful as diesel."

Prof [KT Prasanna](#) of the [Department of Forestry and Environmental Science](#) at the University of Agricultural Sciences, which manufactured the biofuel for the train, said the blend had the same qualities as diesel and that the operational problems Bal Bhavan faced should not have arisen.

"Unless, of course, there was an error in the transesterification process (converting honge oil into fuel) from our end. Since they never brought any operational glitches to our notice, we were led to believe that the higher costs of the biofuel blend is the issue." He explained that they could not reduce the selling cost of the biofuel despite a decrease in diesel prices, owing to overhead costs of labour, chemical and catalysts.

Bal Bhavan used to order 50 litres every 10-15 days and had a monthly demand of 150 litres. "We are not operating at a commercial level, which is why costs could not go down," Prasanna explained. The last order, he said, was placed last year.

TV Ramachandra, a professor at the Centre of Ecological Studies at the Indian Institute of Science, said that the real problem lies in the corruption of the bureaucracy involved.

"Operational troubles could have been communicated to the UAS or the Bal Bhavan could have looked at other vendors," he said.

"There are so many success stories of biofuel around. The central government has also set up a biofuel taskforce to promote usage. So if this particular experiment failed, it is because bureaucrats were not receiving required "benefits" from biofuel as compared to fossil fuel."

Biofuel performance has much to do with engine maintenance. Dirt collected in the fuel filter can clog the engine, he said. Ramachandra did not rule out the possibility of the biofuel being oversaturated."UAS needs to be more open about its biofuel blending process."

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