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Waste to or of energy?

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*Picture for representational purpose only***By Melvin Mathew**

Environmentalists criticise Waste-to-Energy (WTE) plant opening in state

A Waste-to-Energy (WTE) plant for Karnataka is expected to be opened by May this year. The project is being implemented by the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) and Karnataka Power Corporation Limited (KPCL).

The first-of-a-kind plant will come up in Bidadi and the work is nearly completed. According to BBMP officials, the WTE plant will generate 11.5 MW of power and has the capacity to process 600 tonnes of RDF material. The civic body will supply the required RDF for running the plant. The project is being implemented at the cost of Rs 260 crore and each department has to bear Rs 130 crore.

For setting up the plant, 150 acres of land in Bidadi will be utilised. The plant was initially proposed in 2013 by private players. Despite multiple proposals, the plan failed to take off. Now, the government is implementing the project in a bid to attract more private players. With over 800-1,000 tonnes of waste being generated every day, more plants are expected to come up.

The WTE plant was also announced in the recent BBMP budget and was expected to start early in 2023. The move will also reduce the dependence on landfill sites. In 2020, Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa laid the foundation for the plant.

However, environmentalists expressed concerns about the futility of the exercise. Noted environmentalist Dr TV Ramachandra from Centre for Ecological Science and Centre for Sustainable Technologies, Indian Institute of Science, noted that the composition of Indian waste is 60-70 per cent.

“As per Solid Waste Management Rules and the Supreme Court Order, waste segregation should have happened and there is no question of mixed waste. Our Indian waste is largely organic. The organic fraction should be converted into biogas or manure. Even 30-40 per cent of waste consisting of paper and plastic has reusable value. With high organic content, the WTE plants won't be viable,” he stated. A similar mistake happened with Gayatri industries and history is being repeated, he said, adding that this is a waste of taxpayer's money.

Ramachandra also said that running such a plant will increase particulate matter and dioxins in the air.

Another SWM activist, V Ram Prasad, noted that such a project can only be viable within 600-800 tonnes of RDF per day. “Usually, 10 per cent of waste is expected to be inert and refuse waste. Estimating that Bengaluru generates about 6,000 tonnes per day, 600 tonnes is the fair capacity for running a WTE plant. But beyond that, it only points to mixed waste coming in through solid waste.”

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– TV Ramachandra, environmentalist

He said that the technology utilised should have a proven track record as WTE plants have failed in many places.

He said this plant should avoid using technology that has not worked in other cities.

Agencies giving technical approval must also ensure the working status of the plants. “Citizens in the area should be made aware and remain alert for malfunctioning of the unit,” he added.