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Solar heaters -- a greener power option

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BANGALORE: Not all is dark about power cuts. At least it's making heads turn towards the sun. Solar is not only being looked at as a greener source but something that will generate power in abundance.

While a 10-MW solar thermal power plant -- probably India's first -- is already on the cards, solar photo-voltaics (PVs) will also be used in a big way so that companies, hotels, hospitals and households can sell solar power to the grid.

Energy department principal secretary K Jairaj has given a go-ahead to the Centre for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP) to conduct a feasibility study and propose business models. CSTEP's involvement is crucial because the solar energy system is likely to be implemented next year -- if all goes well -- to reduce peak load by at least 10%.

While the study is being done, consumer interest and economic viability suggest that the current pricing system takes solar energy far from being user-friendly. Unlike Germany, which has a huge PV deployment and pays 40 to 60 Eurocents per kWh, India doesn't even have a net metering system for two-way transfer.

"We suggested both solar PV and solar thermal to the government. It has to be a combination of solar PVs and solar thermal, which is currently cheaper than solar PVs but requires a lot of land and maintenance. For Bangalore, we're trying to explore several business models," said Anshu Bharadwaj, researcher with CSTEP.

One of the business models is to ask companies, hospitals, apartments and other organizations to install roof-top PV system. Currently, there is a PV system at Max Mueller Bhavan, Indiranagar. Such institutes can sell solar power back to the grid. The current tariff is Rs 12 per kWh, and experts say this amount is too less for people to shift to solar power.

"Our market comprises only the government and exports. We're selling for Rs 600 to Rs 800 crores to the government, and companies are exporting PVs for up to Rs 400 to Rs 500 crores. There is no home market for PVs," explained T J Joseph, managing director of Anu Solar.

"Although prices have started falling for the past 10 years from Rs 180 per watt for PV cells to Rs 80, the market for solar thermal is much better and cheaper," Joseph said. "The lack of a net metering system is adding to the inconvenience."

The study will be completed in four to five months, and is likely to be put in place by next year. For a 40 x 60 sqft house, 15% of the roof area for PV panels will be roughly 30 metre square. Approximately, 2 KWs can be generated from this with an investment of Rs 3 to 4 lakh. "Among various models, two can be looked forward to: the first is institutions and households selling power to the grid, and the second is these entities consuming solar power locally, off the grid," Bharadwaj explained.

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