Impact and Pathways of Transitioning to Solar Energy in Rural India

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Abstract: Although India has almost reached the historic goal of universal electrification, the challenge of supplying 24x7 power for all remains. Due to the low and distributed electricity demand in rural areas and the prevailing poverty, delivering uninterrupted power to every household is a drawn-out process. Despite its growing economy, India has low conventional energy resources compared to its required energy, and can harness the huge potential of solar energy as it lies in the tropical belt. This paper analyses the impact and pathways of the transition towards solar energy in rural India. By analysing data from a successful project—named Solar Mamas—of Barefoot College International, it highlights the benefits in climate change mitigation, rural employment creation and income generation for women, and democratisation of access to energy for hundreds of communities, all while helping India meets its 2030 SDG targets.

Keywords: Rural India, Solar Energy, Barefoot College International, Solar Mama

1. Introduction

The Government of India has made extraordinary progress in electricity access by connecting every village to the grid in April 2018. By March 2019, the government had almost executed its undertaking to connect all willing rural households1 (REC, 2018). The final stage of achieving high-quality and uninterrupted power for every household is going to be a challenge that will extend well after connections have been made available (Government of India, 2017). In rural areas, the demand density is low and fragmented whereas the supply and service costs are exceedingly high: this is a deterrent for India’s state-owned distribution companies (Mukherji, 2017). Hence decentralized backup lighting and power will likely be needed for the next decade or two.2

India faces exploding demand and insufficient supply. With the expanding economy growing 6% to 6.5%3 per annum along with the population growing at a rate of 1% per annum, India’s low conventional energy4 resource cannot meet the demand. However, India can harness the huge potential of solar energy as it lies in the tropical belt and receives sunshine year around. Of the G20 countries, India is ranked fifth in Solar Power and is the only one on track to achieve its targets under the Paris Agreement.5 Due to its favourable location in the solar belt, India is one of the best recipients of solar energy with abundant availability and the initial target of 20 GW capacity for 2022 set by the Indian Government was achieved four years ahead of schedule.6

Kerosene: Even though kerosene is far from an ideal fuel, households used to depend on subsidised kerosene as a source of light and cooking fuel. Rural India has unreliable power supply—such as blackouts, and voltage surges, rationed hours of electricity available per day, hence kerosene lamps continued to remain an important backup source for lighting as they are reliable and decentralised.

Although kerosene has wide-ranging detrimental effects, kerosene is cheap and efficient and is used due to the subsidies provided by the Indian government. Injuries, poisoning, fires, and explosions cause negative externalities of consumption.1 The emission of fine particulates, carbon monoxide, nitric oxides (NOx), and sulphur dioxide when burned may diminish lung function and increase risks of asthma and cancer as a result of indoor pollution.

Continued reliance on kerosene is not a socially or economically viable option as it can lead to levels of pollutants that exceed WHO guidelines. In addition, it gives low levels of light, limiting education and income-generating opportunities. When international oil prices rose, asin 2018, the subsidy cost of kerosene to the government soared leading to budget blowouts. Finally, a quarter of all energy-related residential greenhouse gas emissions in 2013 were the result of kerosene usage.

Solar: Today solar products offer better lighting, and the ability to plug in and charge devices. Due to the recent development in the efficiency of photovoltaic cells and the technology to scale up, the solar options are cheaper than kerosene over their lifetime.

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1 https://powermin.gov.in/en/content/saubhagya
2 Based on meeting with power and regulatory sector experts in UP on November 14, 2018.
3 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-budget-renewables-idINKBN1ZV38S
4 Conventional sources of energy can be described as non-renewable sources of energy which have been used since a long time e.g. Coal, Petroleum
5 https://www.ibef.org/industry/power-sector-india.aspx
6 Subsidies involve the government paying part of the cost to the firm; this reduces the price of the good and should encourage more consumption.
7 Negative externalities occur when the consumption or production of a good causes a harmful effect to a third party.

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Pros
1) Solar energy is appropriate for India as India is the third most polluted country in the world. Solar energy does not release CO2 and other gases which pollute the environment.
2) In energy deficient country like India where the supply cannot meet the demand, where power generation is costly, solar energy is the best alternative means of power generation as it is inexhaustible.
3) As a solar energy system can be installed anywhere, a power or gas grid is not needed to get solar energy. Consequently, it is cheaper compared to other sources of energy as it has no running costs.

Cons
1) Solar energy cannot be generated during the night or during inclement weather, requiring large batteries and inverters to store energy for use during such times. This can make the upfront cost of a solar system prohibitive.
2) The land space required to install solar panels is quite large and cannot be used for other purposes, and may be riddled with land rights issues as other such projects have been in India. Though decentralised rooftop solar systems do not suffer from these drawbacks.
3) The amount of energy produced is quite low relative to other forms of energy for a given surface area. Efficiency in solar panels is simply the measurement of energy output in a given surface area; the more efficient a panel the less space it takes up; however, it is more expensive. The energy density for solar energy that produces electricity is particularly low.
4) Currently there is no good way to manage/recycle solar panels that have reached the end of their life, thus causing environmental issues.

Subsidies
Due to these health and environmental issues, the Government of India eliminated the subsidies for the consumption of kerosene through India’s Public Distribution System (PDS). High kerosene consumption is used to account for 15 percent of global consumption (Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2013) as seen in Figure 1.

In 2018-19, the government of India spent USD 1.2 billion on kerosene, 9% of all fossil fuel subsidies in the country. While energy subsidies are vital for increasing energy access and poverty reduction, they are also often improperly focussed, providing disproportionate benefits to the richest customers, and having no place in a world shifting to low-carbon sources of energy to combat climate changes. However, the kerosene subsidy system distribution had deep failings and it was estimated that close to 50 percent of subsidized kerosene that was allocated to households “leaked” in the process of distribution through the “black market”, theft and adulteration, at a substantial cost to public finances (Clarke, 2014).

While kerosene use and the current system of kerosene subsidy distribution were highly problematic, where the penetration of grid electricity is limited (in particular remote rural areas) off-grid solar applications can effectively replace kerosene to light homes leading to significant environmental benefits. Solar applications provide clean, cost-effective, reliable, and powerful and lighting to households.

In April 2019, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy entreated the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas to deflect part of the kerosene and cooking gas subsidy building towards solar options. The research by IISD shows that public resources are fluctuating; kerosene subsidies fell from USD 7.7 billion in the fiscal year 2014 to USD 0.9 billion in the fiscal year 2019 (Bridle et al, 2020), while major new policies on solar irrigation and solar rooftop photovoltaic products were announced in February 2021.

In remote areas, solar products such as lanterns, home systems, and mini-grids provide backup power. By shifting the subsidies from kerosene to off-grid solar photovoltaic products the energy transition for underprivileged households can be financed. However, most households are dependent on kerosene as their primary source of lighting (if unelectrified) or as a coping strategy during outages. Switching to solar significantly reduced the fiscal and household expenditure: solar products are now inexpensive than kerosene over the lifespan of the technology. Table 1 shows that, once the upfront costs of solar products are stretched over two years and government subsidies for kerosene are taken into account, solar products result in savings compared to kerosene lamps. The net cost of the exchange is the amount the government could save by switching support to these technologies. Furthermore, the government would save the losses from fuel diversion and budget blowouts caused by unpredictable oil prices.

### Table 1: Cost comparison of solar products with subsidized kerosene (INR per month per household)^1^2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Units</th>
<th>Solar lantern**</th>
<th>Solar home system**</th>
<th>Solar microgrid%^</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical Parameters</td>
<td>Watts</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solar panel capacity</td>
<td>One 1.1W LED; 100 lumens</td>
<td>Two 2.4W LED; 440 lumens</td>
<td>Two 2.4W LED; 440 lumens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting capability</td>
<td>One 1.1W LED; 100 lumens</td>
<td>Two 2.4W LED; 440 lumens</td>
<td>Two 2.4W LED; 440 lumens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battery capability</td>
<td>3.7V, 2.2Ah</td>
<td>12V; 12V; 7.2Ah</td>
<td>12V; 400Ah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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**Figure 1:** Total quantified energy subsidies, FY 2014–FY 2020 (INR crore, real 2020)^10^
communities. This programme is a catalyst to create employment for women, by boosting their income and providing self-reliant solutions for village communities while working toward several of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.

Data Description
In India, Barefoot college gathered data across seven states: Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Manipur, Bihar, Karnataka, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh. This programme impacted 7000 households wherein 140 solar mamas electrified about 50 houses each. This randomized data is for a baseline survey of 690 households in 2017-18 and an end-line survey in 2019-20 of 695 households. As demonstrated in the table below the savings for kerosene is 110 per month or 1320 annually. The investment was Rs 15000 per for one home solar lighting system which comprised of a 40W solar panel on the roof, a battery of 40Ah, 4 LED lamps of 4W and wire of 30 m (to facilitate cooking in the night), and a charge controller of 12W.

At a community level, the contributions were maintained by the Village Electrical and Environment Committee (VEEC). The money collected was stored in the revolving fund. One area in the village is identified where a 300 W solar panel is installed. This Rural Electronic Workshop (REW) is used at a community level for various reasons: studying, sewing, weaving, etc. In addition to encouraging the use of solar energy, it cultivated a sense of community ownership of the solar energy system, educated the women and facilitated the long-term care of the system.

This data was collected from 2017-2020 by a grant from various donors which promotes the solar mama programme and education. The survey comprised over 70 questions and captured details like the family size and social category, in addition to changes in health and economic indicators, the impact can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively. The difference between the baseline and the end line findings is displayed in the tables and figures below. Table 2 shows the reduction of the average consumption and expenditure for energy and lighting. Table 3 highlights the long-term fringe benefits concerning Literacy and health.

3. Analysis

Household Use

Table 2: Average Use and Expenditure for Energy and Lighting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Energy and Lighting</th>
<th>Average Use in 2017(hours per month per family)</th>
<th>Average Use in 2020(hours per month per family)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kerosene (used for cooking and lighting)</td>
<td>3.899</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candle</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battery Torch</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerosene (used for cooking and lighting)</td>
<td>Rs 109.90</td>
<td>Rs 0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Data Study in India

The Solar Mamas Programme
Since 1984, the Barefoot Solar Department of India train illiterate and semi-literate women from marginalized villages around the world to become Solar Mamas. These Solar engineers are taught practical skills in solar electrification. Once trained for a period of 6 months, Solar Mamas return to their villages with skills and equipment to electrify at least 50 homes each and to repair and maintain the unit. Furthermore, the Solar Sakhi programme trains women for 3 months to become entrepreneurs to create their own markets and sales networks for Renewable Energy product distribution that will cover mid-range to last-mile communities. This programme is a catalyst to create employment for women, by boosting their income and providing self-reliant solutions for village communities while working toward several of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.
Rose by Rs1 average monthly income in their communities, this is depicted in Table 4. The rise in income creates opportunities and opens doors that can significantly enhance the lives of women, their families, and their communities, this is depicted in Table 4. The rise in average monthly income is shown in Figures 3 and 4 – it rose by Rs1,000 per month in a rural household.

Table 3: Additional Benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Light Increase</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usage of Kerosene lamp outside the home</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usage of Solar light lamps outside the home</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and Health</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>1.7 hrs per day</td>
<td>2.4 hrs per day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone Charging at own Home</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
<td>94.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light Source Brightness</td>
<td>10.43%</td>
<td>95.68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Economic Indicators and Women’s Empowerment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Indicators</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stitching</td>
<td>6.09%</td>
<td>40.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaving</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>46.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Livelihood Skills and opportunities (Average Income)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>54.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Empowerment</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-Making Ability</td>
<td>56.67%</td>
<td>78.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank Account</td>
<td>68.26%</td>
<td>91.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
<td>85.76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Economic Indicators 2017-2020

Figure 3: Average Monthly Income in Different 2017-2020

4. Policy Recommendations

The removal of the kerosene subsidy has reduced the fiscal expenditure in the budget. These savings can be redirected towards the upfront capital cost of solar systems. Additionally, these savings could be used for training solar engineers and making them self-reliant. A few recommendations are highlighted below:

1) **Awareness** — knowledge of a product or service from experience, peer influence, vendor suggestion, an NGO program, or a government campaign: Through various government campaigns such as mass media, radio, state allowed manufacturer stalls, the awareness for solar products can be raised. In Bihar, where the average family size is large, the magnification of solar savings must be highlighted whereas, in Jharkhand, the price sensitivity should be showcased due to the prevalent black market. As the villagers are more influenced by personal relationships, positive success stories from neighbouring villages need to be broadcast to build credibility. In the case of Solar Mamas, it was the collective experience, as women tend to influence and support other women in a similar situation.

2) **Acceptance - Quality, Capacity and Access**: The experiences of the villagers with regards to reliability, performance and failures will determine the retention of the solar appliances. The solar systems’ ability to meet household needs such as 24x7 lighting, mobile phone charging, appliance use, and improved reliability as against grid electricity, will help with acceptance. These benefits of solar systems in remote areas should be clearly demonstrated at community meetings to establish credibility of these products.

3) **Financial Barriers**: As the upfront one-time costs are excessive, it would be prudent if the funds saved from the kerosene subsidy could be repurposed towards helping manufacturers and low-income consumers. By reallocating saved subsidies towards building a fresh ecosystem for decentralised solar products and subsidising the capital cost of ownership, the government will be able to facilitate a shift towards a sustainable source of energy without the entire burden of the energy transition having to be borne by rural consumers.

**Manufacturers**: By having policies promoting domestic production and by lowering the interest rates, providing tax rebates, or introducing...
longer-duration repayments on solar loans, the manufacturers can be encouraged. They can then be mandated to pass on the cost-savings to consumers. The government should sensitize local bank officials of the various business models of solar enterprises so that they are trained to see solar enterprises as bankable enterprises. **Customers:** The money saved from the subsidy should be used to finance 60-80% of the capital costs to jumpstart the process of owning such systems as running and maintenance costs are negligible. By decentralizing solar power, and reducing solar tariffs from ~Rs. 7.36/kWh (US 10 cents/kWh) in FY15 to Rs. 1.99/kWh (US 3.57 cents/kWh) in FY20 they can encourage a large-scale transition to solar energy in rural areas.

4) **Lack of Skilled Workers and After-Sales Service:** The government should demand accountability from the solar manufacturers who are the recipients of the loans, and simultaneously train the women in the villages to become technical engineers and service agents. For the women not earning before, this opportunity would lead to more disposable income, in addition to the increased income from other activities (Table 4). For the manufacturers, the government should enforce minimum standards for after-sales service. This would build a financially sustainable ecosystem in the absence of kerosene.

5. Conclusion

There is significant experimental evidence highlighting that the adoption of solar energy can indeed be successful and that given enough time, every village can learn to gain electricity. The apparent advantages of solar energy are highlighted in health, finances, climate change and in bridging the digital divide. In the short-term, the perception of safety in the household and community, improved air quality, longer study time and night schools, increase in businesses and economic activity, and social activity are the benefits whereas the benefits in the long term are improved health and hygiene, comfort and convenience, increased household income and education opportunities. A positive externality of solar adoption is the use of LPG cylinders for cooking, where 80 million cylinders were distributed to deprived households as households will move away from kerosene which is also used as a cooking fuel in tandem to using it as a lighting source. Women’s empowerment, deforestation and reduced carbon emissions make this a worthwhile change.

The Solar Mamas programme empowers women who come from some of the deprived, most marginalized, climate-devastated places on our planet by exploiting their high accommodative intelligence. Their ability to act competently in adverse circumstances makes them most proficient at leveraging technological tools (yet another amazing equalizer) to transform their lives. Apart from becoming role models for their families, these girls have become leaders tackling the climate change issues head-on in the persistent pursuit of sustainable development. This beneficial community model is prevalent in a few countries and can be replicated in other developing countries to create solar communities that are financially sustainable, and able to grow and improve their renewable energy. Moreover, the thriving community focuses on women’s empowerment and gender equality, and environmental stewardship. And overall, the improved quality of life in social, economic and educational areas. All in all, it is a signature initiative of social entrepreneurship that makes the Barefoot model sustainable and self-reliant.

With new and more affordable solar technologies moving to a sustainable form of energy has never been easier. Awareness needs to be paired with financial incentives to merge into the existing system and in achieving successful widespread adoption and reform of the existing fossil fuel economy.

References


