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Oil from a Wasteland - The Jatropha Project in India – Part 2

The research project for jatropha diesel is still in the early stages, but the initial scepticism of the Indian farmers is giving way to hope for "diesel fields".

Jatropha is an uneatable agrestal plant. Farmers use jatropha hedges to protect their plantations from grazing animals.

Can diesel fuel be “cultivated”?

The jatropha project is still in its startup phase, and the villagers are still not absolutely convinced that it will be a success. But the agricultural experts from the Central Salt & Marine Chemicals Research Institute (CSMCRI) in Bhavnagar are paying the villagers for their work, and the village chief, or sarpanch, thinks the project is a good thing and has leased five hectares of common land to the researchers for the project.

The residents of Chorvadla find employment and some extra opportunity to earn money at the poving grounds.

What's more, last year's jatropha plantings are doing well. The seedlings have obviously taken up the struggle for survival and have grown into hip-high bushes that are actually bearing their first crop of oilseeds. And this is the harvest that the agricultural researchers are interested in.

Jatropha seeds, which are about the size of a hazelnut, yield large amounts of oil. That's no news to the farmers of Chorvadla, because these bushes grow wild all over India. However, traditional wisdom keeps them from using this plant as food, because the seeds, though rich in oil and protein, are poisonous. They can't even be used as animal feed, nor can any other parts of the bush. That's why farmers in many regions of India use jatropha hedges to protect their crops from freely grazing domestic animals. Even goats, who nibble on any growing things within their reach, leave jatropha bushes alone.



The uneatable seeds of the jatropha bush can be used to produce oil.

But the experts from Bhavnagar have explained to the villagers that they intend to use the oil from the jatropha bushes in their laboratories to create a new kind of fuel called “biodiesel.” The people of Chorvadla still need to get comfortable with the idea that diesel fuel can be “cultivated,” but they understand one thing very clearly: They can use jatropha plants as a source of extra earnings.

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