

Biomass Energy Systems, Proceedings of the International Conference  
New Delhi. 1996.

Publishing the proceedings of a conference is now a routine affair. I wish someone through the economics of this routine and Find out the cost-benefit ratio. Among all the renewable resources, time is, in my perception, the least renewable. Time spent is gone forever. The job of editors in such publications is enviable, but I feel there is need for using more-modern information technology to make better use of such conferences. Some thing on this later.

The book gives some information on every aspect of the subject and to that extent it is very useful. But searching for the good stuff is difficult, because there is also a lot of less useful or even mediocre material. This makes the editor's job difficult, he has to include every paper presented at the conference, which have-their own economic priorities. The other problem is there arc papers of diverse subjects, from purely academic to those that describe the commercial performance of a plant and some only giving a concept or rather a desire.

The introduction to most papers spend a lot of space on the importance of biomass, energy and so on; these are repetitions in almost every paper, and I wish there was a way to eliminate these in the publication. The biomass, supply and demand and policy issues take up the major part of the book, almost one third. I found this the least interesting and could find no new issues.

The depressing fact, not a reflection on the organizers of the conference or this book, is that in the last 20 years, the progress as seen by the papers has been negligible. The section on biomass processing and liquid fuels is an example. From this point of view, the section on municipal solid wastes is refreshing. It shows much more change, relatively. It is said to find that the few papers that give actual data from a commercial plant operating in India are based on imported technology. Worse still, 'developing countries would require not only foreign technology but also foreign investment'. (K. C. Khandelwal, MNES, p. 308). D. V. Kulkarni gives a paper on power generation from municipal solid wastes, through biomethanation. The paper is delightfully vague in saying how far the plant he describes has been erected and is performing.

The paper by M. Sen and R. K. Datta of Burn Standard Co. Ltd. is better. It describes pilot scale experience on cylindrical traditional digesters working on low total solids (10%) and then gives the performance on plug flow type horizontal digesters with total solids of 30-35%. Again the paper does not say explicitly the size of the pilot scale operation but uses terms like 'This approach leads to the use of a biodigester of 200 cu m volume to handle 50 tons/day of OFMSW for producing 300 kW of electricity'. Does this mean the earlier results are lab scale and this will be the pilot plant? Annexure to the paper describes 700 kg (per 6-7 hours?) for 5 kW plant. Hopefully this pilot plant is running routinely.

The biomethanation of prehydrolysate liquor plant, operated for at least one year commercially, is new but similar to the technology for sugar factory wastes, already reported by the same company - Western Paces, elsewhere. This is the foreign technology that is operating in India.

I recall the comments of Richard Feynman. 'For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for Nature cannot be fooled.' This is probably relevant to our situation as well.

Now to the question I raised at the beginning can we not use modern information technology for such conferences and make the work more efficient and at lesser costs? I feel it can be used and I am making the following specific suggestions.

1. Like poster sessions in some of the seminars, a few multi-media computers should be set up at the conference site, and participants should be encouraged to make multimedia presentations on these. The presentations will be far better than the slide and talk presentations with their constraints on time and failures in slide/OH projectors, etc. Even key video shots can be included in such presentations.
2. The main papers should also be multimedia presentations on the computer, but projected on to a big screen. (Alternatively, a cheaper alternative is to connect multiple monitors at different locations, as we do for loudspeakers). Not only can such presentations be brief and precisely timed but they also communicate better.
3. The main papers, as also poster sessions will have live discussions.
4. The editing and publication job becomes easier, faster and less expensive. The papers are already on the computer, along with pictures, video, etc. The editors and DTP men will take over and combine the total information in HTML (giving the so to say live' cross-references). This will take much less time than the usual 1-2 years delay between the conference and the publication of the proceedings.
5. Finally, these proceedings should not be published as paper editions, but as CDs. Those who want paper editions can get prints from the CDs at any library.

The above will not only save time, money and paper but also the invisible cost of unsold volumes, taking up space and then given away as complimentary copies. The CDs are not only easier to use and store and communicate better, but are also easily distributed and stored. The CD costs have come down so drastically that today it is possible to write them as per order and not necessarily printed in 500 lots.

Unless we start using the IT to make our work more efficient, we will have the same stereo type conferences and publication ritual for decades.

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