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# India looks to the sun for ambitious surge in green power

Jeremy Page in Delhi

For centuries Hindus have revered the sun god, Surya, as a source of health and prosperity, building lavish temples and holding festivals in his honour across a country with more than 300 days of sunshine a year.

Now India is putting its faith in the sun in a more literal sense by revealing what experts describe as the world's most ambitious plan to develop solar energy over the next three or four decades.

Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister, will chair a meeting today to decide whether to approve a National Solar Mission designed to curb India's carbon emissions and ease its crippling power shortages. It proposes boosting India's solar power generation capacity from almost zero to 20 gigawatts (20 billion watts) by 2020, 100GW by 2030 and 200GW by 2050, according to a draft seen by *The Times*. The entire world can generate about 14GW of solar power today.

India's plan also proposes reducing the price of solar power to the same level as that from fossil fuels by 2020, according to the draft, dated April 29. Solar power in India currently costs about 15 rupees (20p) per kWh, compared with an average 3.5 rupees per kWh for electricity from the national grid, which is largely produced by coal-fired thermal power plants.

Other targets include forcing all government buildings to have solar panels by 2012 and developing micro-financing to encourage 20 million households to install solar lighting by 2020. The plan also outlines a system — similar to Germany's — of paying households for any surplus power from solar panels fed back into the grid.

To achieve these and other goals, the mission proposes that the Government invest 920 billion rupees (£11.5 billion) in developing, manufacturing and installing solar technology over the next 30 years.

The mission is primarily designed to improve India's energy security as it has abundant supplies of coal — the dirtiest of the fossil fuels — but has to import 70 per cent of its crude oil and half its natural gas. It is also meant to ease a chronic power shortage that has left 400 million Indians without electricity, causes daily blackouts in cities, and represents one of the biggest obstacles to economic growth.

India now has the capacity to produce 150GW — less than a fifth of China's — and demand outstripped supply by 9.5 per cent between 2008-09, and by 13.8 per cent during peak hours, according to the Power Ministry. Indian officials also hope that the mission will help to ease the pressure from Western governments at international talks for a new UN climate pact in December.

Environmental campaigners have welcomed the plan, saying that solar energy is India's most realistic alternative power source, as it does not have the space for large wind plants. Siddharth Pathak, chief climate change campaigner for Greenpeace in India, said: "India's putting a very strong argument in front of developed countries that it has huge potential for renewable energy." However, some government officials remain sceptical about risking so much money on new technology, rather than spending it on providing all Indians with electricity from conventional sources.



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