

India backs solar as Paris climate talks loom

September 29 2015, by Annie Banerji



Construction takes place at Roha Dyechem solar plant in Bhadla, some 225 km north of Jodhpur, in the western Indian state of Rajasthan

Under a blistering sun, workers install a sea of solar panels in a north Indian desert as part of the government's clean energy push — and its trump card at upcoming climate change talks in Paris.

After years of betting big on highly polluting coal, India is under huge pressure to commit to cutting carbon emissions ahead of the major meet aimed at forging a global climate pact.

But the world's third largest emitter argues the burden should lie with

industrialised countries, which have been accused of hypocrisy in heaping demands on poorer nations.

Instead, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government is banking on increasing solar capacity fivefold to help cut crippling blackouts and bring power to 300 million Indians currently living without.

The government is expected to hike its [renewable energy](#) targets again on Thursday night when it becomes the last major economy to release its pledges for the Paris talks.

A cornerstone of its [climate change policy](#), the solar plans come even as India boosts coal production to meet its growing needs, ignoring calls to slash its dependence on fossil fuels.

With its year-round sunshine, barren plains and low-cost labour, the northern desert state of Rajasthan lies at the heart of Modi's renewable energy ambitions.

"Solar gives you a steady income, steady return. Here the main raw material is the sun," Ramakant Tibrewala, chairman of Roha Dyechem, a local company making food colours which has jumped on the solar bandwagon.

After investing 800 million rupees (\$12 million), Tibrewala has built 67 glistening rows of panels in a Rajasthan solar park, shared with four other local companies and spread over 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres).

Tibrewala said he expects to be connected to India's main grid in the coming weeks, producing 25 megawatts of power, and hopes to see a return in several years.

\$100 billion needed



Ramakant Tibrewala, chairman of Roha Dyechem, poses for a photo during an interview at the under-construction Roha Dyechem solar plant, in Bhadla, some 225 km north of Jodhpur, in the western Indian state of Rajasthan

With the cost of manufacturing panels falling and consumer demand rising, foreign firms are also turning to India. Japan's SoftBank, US-based SunEdison and China giant Trina Solar have all pledged investments in recent months

But much more money is needed to reach the government's current goal of 100,000 megawatts of solar power by 2022, up from 20,000 at the moment. Modi, a green energy enthusiast who helped create solar parks in his home state of Gujarat, has called for \$100 billion in investment.

His government has pledged to smooth the path in a country known for its infuriating levels of red tape, as well as providing tax breaks and other

incentives for interested companies.

"We do need money," Upendra Tripathy, the top official in the new and renewable energy ministry, told AFP.

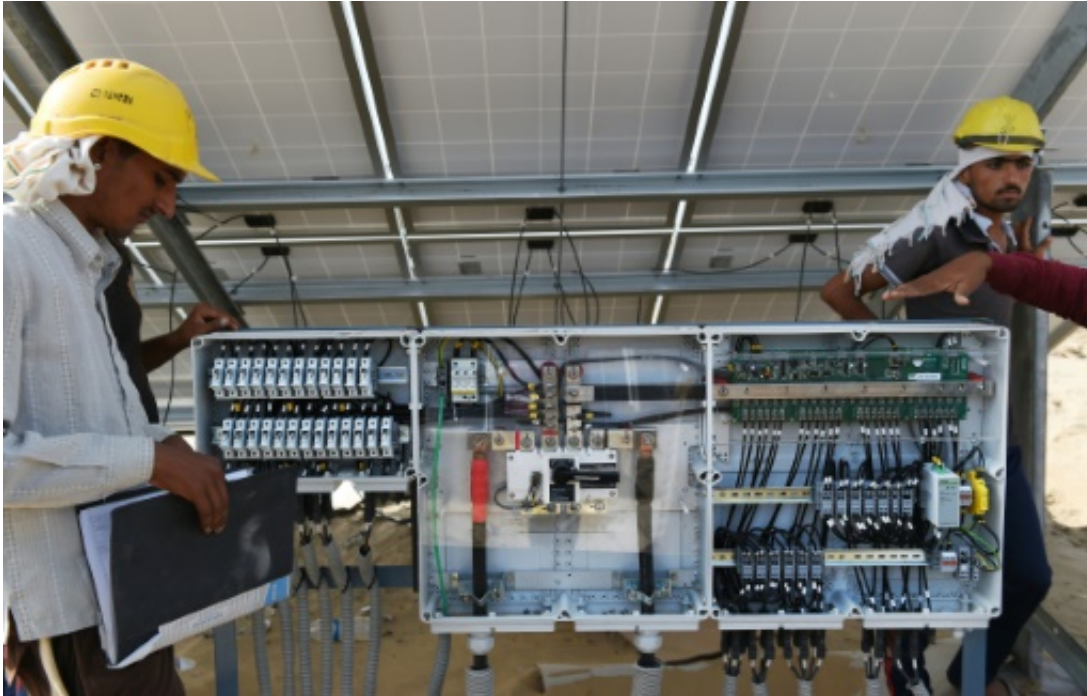
Tripathy denied the government was under international pressure to transform its energy sector, saying instead the "whole world" was impressed by India's ambitions.

"On its own, it (the government) thinks it is good for the globe. And it thinks it is good for the country," he said.

'Catastrophic' coal

But even as India hikes up solar power, the government has vowed to double [coal production](#) by 2020 to one billion tonnes to meet the needs of its burgeoning economy, which grew by seven percent in the first quarter, matching China.

India, which sits on the world's fifth largest coal reserves, already relies on coal-fired power stations for 60 percent of its electricity.



Engineers check wires to solar panels at the under-construction Roha Dyechem solar plant in Bhadla, some 225 km north of Jodhpur, in the western Indian state of Rajasthan

After storming to victory at elections last May, Modi pledged to bring electricity to the millions of poor who are not connected to the country's over-stretched power grid.

Experts warn India's continuing dependence on coal will be environmentally devastating, and call for a cap on emissions which are blamed for climate change.

"For a growing country like India, which will be requiring enormous amounts of energy in the coming years... to base its primary resource on coal is going to be catastrophic, not only for India but also for the world," said Krishnan Pallassana, India director of the nonprofit Climate Group.

Modi came under pressure over the issue during his trip to the US for the ongoing UN General Assembly.



An engineer installs a solar panel at the under-construction Roha Dyechem solar plant in Bhadla, some 225 km north of Jodhpur, in the western Indian state of Rajasthan

But the premier told a forum that the focus should be "climate justice" rather than climate action, saying rich countries should help poorer ones which suffer the most from rising sea levels and droughts blamed on global warming.

US President Barack Obama, who piled pressure on Modi during his visit to New Delhi in January, urged world leaders on Sunday to step up efforts for a "strong" climate agreement at the year-end talks.

But Modi has said India will not be forced into committing to a timeline on curbing emissions.

"Developed countries must share clean technology, provide financial assistance to the developing world to combat [climate change](#)," Modi said at a September meeting of developing countries in Delhi.

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