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Technologies for Conversion of Plastic Waste into Fuel

Srivani E N[1], Anushree H R [2].

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Electronics and Communication engineering, S J C Institute of Technology Chikkaballapur, India, srivani1598.ece@sjcit.ac.in

[2]UG Student, Department of Electronics and Communication engineering S J C Institute of Technology Chikkaballapur, India, anushree2142@gmail.com

ABSTRACT –

The current pace of economic expansion cannot be sustained without reducing the consumption of fossil fuels like crude oil, natural gas, and coal. There exist numerous alternatives to fossil fuels, such as biomass, hydropower, and wind energy. Additionally, implementing an effective waste management strategy is crucial. The advancements and modernization in society have led to a significant rise in the production of various goods, resulting in increased waste generation. Plastics, due to their versatility and cost-effectiveness, have become a prominent material in various applications. This article outlines the current scenario of plastic consumption and aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of plastic solid waste (PSW) recycling techniques. Recycling can be categorized into primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary methods. Given that the calorific value of plastics is comparable to that of fuel, producing fuel from plastics presents a viable alternative. Therefore, the article delves into the processes of converting plastic into fuel, particularly through pyrolysis and catalytic degradation, while also briefly discussing gasification. By addressing the issues of plastic waste disposal and the dwindling supply of traditional fuels, we aim to contribute to the promotion of a sustainable environment.

Keywords: *plastic waste management; alternative fuel; pyrolysis;*

INTRODUCTION

The environment has been significantly impacted by the increase in the use of plastic products, which can be attributed to the sudden growth in living standards. Plastics have now become essential materials and their demand continues to rise due to their wide range of applications in households and industries. A large portion of waste consists of thermoplastics polymers, and this quantity is continuously increasing worldwide. Consequently, the disposal of waste plastics poses a significant environmental challenge as thermoplastics take an extensive amount of time to biodegrade.

The consumption of plastic materials is extensive and has been steadily growing due to their versatility, relatively low cost, and durability. Polyolefins, such as polyethylene and polypropylene, are among the most commonly used plastics and are widely utilized in packaging, construction, electricity and electronics, agriculture, and healthcare sectors. However, the high durability of plastics also presents a serious environmental issue when it comes to waste disposal, with landfilling being the most commonly employed method. Depending on their origins, plastic wastes can be categorized as either industrial or municipal, each requiring different management strategies due to their distinct qualities and properties.

The Indian plastic industry has experienced remarkable growth, with a growth rate of 17% which surpasses that of the global plastic industry. In 2000, India's plastic consumption was 3.2 MT, and it is projected to reach nearly 12.5 MT by 2010. According to Hindu Business Line on January 21, 2006, India is expected to become the third largest plastics consumer by 2010, following the USA and China. The significant growth in India in recent years can be attributed to the fact that one third of the population is impoverished and lacks the disposable income to consume plastics or other goods. The plastic industry does not target this segment of the population for market expansion. However, the middle class, which constitutes another third of the population, presents an opportunity for increased consumption as their aspirations can be influenced by plastic manufacturers. The rising demands of the middle class, coupled with the affordability of plastics compared to materials like glass and metal, have led to a surge in plastic consumption in recent years. The global increase in plastic consumption has resulted in a rise in waste production, posing challenges for disposal. Plastic waste has a short lifespan, with roughly 40% having a duration of less than one month. The service life of plastic products varies from 1 to 35 years depending on their application, with an average service life of 8 years in India and 14 years in Germany. This discrepancy reflects the higher usage of short-life plastic products in India, such as plastic packaging, which accounts for 42% in India compared to 27% in Germany. Plastic waste in municipal solid waste streams constitutes only 7-9% of the total waste.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) holds the title of being the largest producer of crude oil worldwide. This has greatly contributed to the socio-economic development of the country over the past four decades (Ouda et al., 2013). As a result, there has been a significant increase in population, with an annual growth rate of 3.4%, and a rapid improvement in living standards for the majority of the people. Urbanization has also seen a rise due to internal migration from rural to urban areas and the influx of expatriate workers (Nizami et al., 2015). Consequently, the demand for electricity in KSA has been growing at a rate of 5.8% from 2006 to 2010 (MEP, 2010). Currently, the peak demand for electricity stands at 55 GW, and it is projected to reach 120 GW by 2032 (KACARE, 2012). The country relies solely on fossil fuels to meet its energy needs. To address this, the Government has initiated the King Abdullah City of Atomic and Renewable Energy (KACARE) program, aimed at establishing renewable energy sources through scientific research and industrial development (Royal Decree, 2010).

The goal is to generate 54 GW of energy from various renewable sources such as nuclear, wind, solar, and waste-to-energy facilities (KACARE, 2012). The generation rate of municipal solid waste (MSW) in KSA is 15.3 Mt/y and 1.4 kg/capita/d (Nizami et al., 2015). The management of MSW falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Municipalities and Local Affairs, with local municipalities responsible for its collection and disposal in landfills or dumpsites without any material or energy recovery (Ouda et al., 2013) and later (Ouda et al., 2015). Currently, only metals and cardboards are recycled from the waste, accounting for 10-15% of the total waste (Khan and Kaneesamkandi, 2013). Many landfills in the country are nearing their capacity, leading to issues such as leachate, waste sludge, methane emissions, and odour problems. The annual requirement for landfill space is approximately 28 million m3 (Al-Humoud et al., 2004).

I. METHODOLOGY

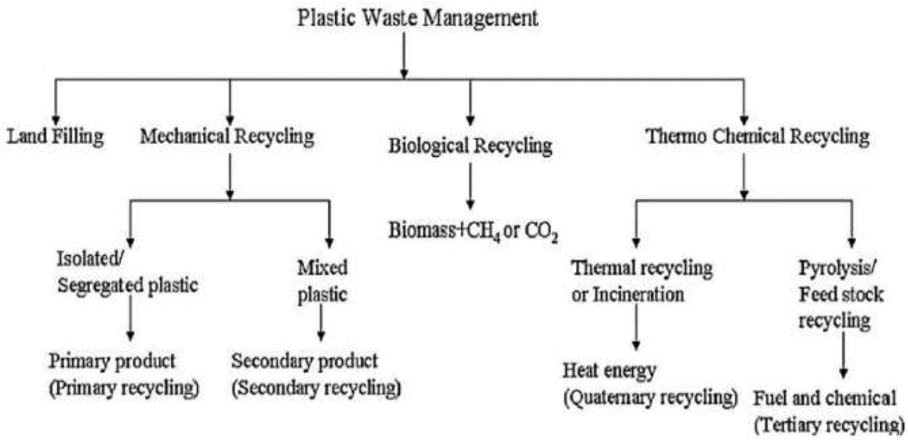

Fig 1: Block Diagram

1.1 Land filling

The majority of solid waste, particularly plastics, has been disposed of in landfills. However, due to various factors such as legislative requirements, increasing costs, the emission of harmful greenhouse gases like methane, and the slow decomposition of commonly used packaging materials, landfill disposal is no longer a favorable option. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has implemented stricter regulations for landfills, including the use of liners, groundwater monitoring, and post-closure maintenance. Nevertheless, the limited availability and high cost of landfill space, especially considering the high volume-to-weight ratio of plastic waste, make it necessary to explore alternative waste management methods as shown in Figure .

1.2 Thermal processes

This particular group of processes involves the thermal treatment of plastic waste at temperatures ranging from 400 to 800 °C in an atmosphere devoid of reactive gases. It is important to consider the high viscosity and low thermal conductivity of plastics, as these properties can hinder the efficient transfer of heat and mass. Therefore, selecting the appropriate reactor is of utmost importance. Thermal degradation typically results in a wide range of hydrocarbon products, except for certain plastics such as poly(methyl methacrylate) (PMMA), polystyrene (PS), and polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), where it is possible to recover the monomer. The most well-known thermal treatment process is the Hamburg process, which was developed by Kaminsky and his colleagues. This process utilizes a fluidized-bed reactor, depicted in Figure 2, to facilitate mass and heat transfer and maintain a uniform temperature throughout the reactor. Unlike rotary kilns, which often lead to a broader distribution of products due to temperature gradients, the Hamburg process minimizes such gradients. The process is designed for laboratory-scale operations, producing 1-2 kg/h of output. The reactor itself is a 1.5-meter-wide stainless steel tube with a height of 6.7 meters, filled with sand grains of millimeter size. Heating is achieved using a filament, and the fluidizing gas is introduced from the bottom through a steel plate distributor.

1.3 Pyrolysis

The second largest municipal waste stream in KSA is waste plastic, accounting for 17.4% by mass (Table 2). During the month of Ramadan and Zilhaj, large amounts of plastic waste are generated in KSA due to the use of disposable plastics for serving food and drinks (Abdul Aziz et al., 2007). Disposing of such waste poses operational and environmental challenges to landfills due to slow degradation rates and clogging tendencies. Conventional mechanical recycling methods like sorting, grinding, washing, and extrusion can only recycle 15-20% of all plastic waste. Pyrolysis technology is utilized to convert plastic or biomass waste into energy in the form of fuel oil and value-added products like char (Sharma et al., 2014). Pyrolysis is a tertiary recycling technique where waste plastic is thermochemically decomposed in the absence of air at temperatures up to 500 oC, resulting in liquid (fuel oil), solid (charcoal), and gaseous fractions. The fuel oil shares similar characteristics with diesel, having lower sulfur and higher cetane value (Sharma et al., 2014). However, pyrolysis of heavily contaminated raw materials can impact the yield and quality of the produced fuel oil due to contaminants like sulfur, metals, and other materials present in the plastics (Borsodi et al., 2011). If all the waste plastic (2.7 Mt/y) generated in KSA is utilized in the pyrolysis process, a total electricity generation of 1.03 TWh can be achieved (Table 5).

ADVANTAGES

- Waste Minimization: It aids in decreasing the volume of plastic waste disposed of in landfills or oceans, thereby lessening environmental contamination.
- Energy Generation: It offers a substitute energy supply, lessening reliance on fossil fuels.
- Material Recycling: It enables the repurposing of plastic resources that would otherwise be thrown away, enhancing resource effectiveness.
- Economic Growth: It fosters the development of fresh industries and employment opportunities in the recycling and energy fields.
- Greenhouse Gas Emission Reduction: It plays a role in reducing carbon footprint by lowering greenhouse gas emissions in comparison to conventional fossil fuel extraction and refining methods.

II. APPLICATIONS

- Energy Generation: Plastic waste can be transformed into fuel that has the potential to generate electricity or serve as a direct energy source for heating and powering industrial processes.
- Transportation Fuel: By refining plastic waste, it can be converted into substitutes for diesel or gasoline, which are suitable for use in vehicles. This helps decrease dependence on traditional fossil fuels.
- Industrial Use: The fuel derived from plastic waste can be effectively utilized in various industrial applications, including boilers, furnaces, and kilns.
- Off-Grid Solutions: In regions where access to conventional energy sources is limited, fuel derived from plastic waste can offer an alternative energy solution for cooking and heating purposes.
- Waste Management: The conversion of plastic waste into fuel presents a sustainable approach to managing plastic waste, thereby reducing the environmental impact associated with landfilling or incineration.

III. RESULT

The transformation of plastic waste into fuel provides a versatile solution with a wide range of applications in various sectors. Primarily, the resulting synthetic fuel can be utilized as a sustainable energy source, serving the needs of electricity generation, transportation, and industrial processes. By acting as a substitute for conventional fossil fuels, it aids in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the mitigation of environmental pollution. Furthermore, the utilization of fuel derived from plastic waste offers opportunities for decentralized energy solutions, particularly in areas without access to traditional energy sources. Additionally, this conversion process addresses the issue of plastic waste management, aligning with the principles of a circular economy and promoting resource efficiency and waste reduction. In conclusion, the benefits of converting plastic waste into fuel extend beyond energy generation, encompassing environmental stewardship, economic viability, and societal advantages.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the most recent data, there has been a consistent increase in the consumption and cost of petroleum oil, despite a temporary decline in demand growth caused by the global financial crisis. The International Energy Outlook 2008 reveals that the world's daily consumption of petroleum oil is 84 million barrels, while that of natural gas is 19 million barrels oil equivalent. As a result, the available oil and gas reserves can only last for another 43 and 167 years, respectively. Despite this, the demand for plastics remains high due to its wide range of applications, leading to an increase in plastic waste. However, it is possible to treat the vast amount of plastic waste generated using a well-designed method to create substitutes for fossil fuels. This method must be environmentally friendly and cost-effective. Therefore, developing a process that can convert waste plastic into hydrocarbon fuel would provide a more affordable alternative to petroleum, without releasing harmful pollutants. This approach would also address the issue of hazardous plastic waste and reduce the need for crude oil imports. While mechanical recycling is a commonly used method in many countries, catalytic pyrolysis of plastic into fuel is gaining popularity due to its efficiency. Furthermore, this method would not only create a substitute for fossil fuels but also serve as an alternative source of energy. Given the depletion of non-renewable energy sources like fossil fuels, it is crucial to enhance this technique, which will shape the future of the plastics recycling industry.

V. FUTURE SCOPE

Numerous research efforts have been undertaken in the field of catalytic pyrolysis of plastics, utilizing various catalysts and operating conditions. However, there are several challenges that need to be addressed in the near future. These include scaling up the process, minimizing waste handling costs and production costs, and optimizing the production of gasoline range products from different plastic mixtures or waste materials.

To tackle these issues, several tasks need to be accomplished. Firstly, it is crucial to establish standards for the process and products of post-consumer recycled plastics. This should involve adopting advanced pyrolysis technologies based on the findings of research and development in this field. The design of the pyrolysis reactor should be suitable for handling mixed waste plastics and be applicable to both small and medium-scale production.

Secondly, scientists should focus on exploring the recycling and pyrolysis of waste polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and optimizing the operational conditions of pyrolysis to minimize the generation of toxic substances such as dioxins and PCBs.

Thirdly, there is a need to study and develop a novel and more efficient catalyst for the pyrolysis process. This catalyst should be cost-effective, readily available on a commercial scale, and capable of being regenerated.

Furthermore, integrating the process through pinch analysis can help reduce capital investment and operating costs, thereby improving the economic viability of the overall process.

Lastly, it is essential to explore a more sophisticated mechanism for catalytic pyrolysis to further enhance the efficiency of the process.

Overall, addressing these tasks and challenges will contribute to the advancement of catalytic pyrolysis technology and its potential for sustainable plastic waste management.

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