

Biogas Potential of Indian Organic Wastes: Technologies, Challenges, and Future Prospects

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www.jrasb.com || June 2026

Date of Submission: 01-06-2026

Date of Publication: 12-06-2026

ABSTRACT

India generates enormous quantities of organic waste from agricultural activities, livestock farming, food-processing industries, municipal solid waste, and domestic kitchens. Improper disposal of these biodegradable materials contributes to greenhouse-gas emissions, groundwater contamination, odour nuisance, and land pollution, while the country simultaneously faces rising energy demand driven by urbanisation, industrial growth, and population expansion. Biogas technology offers a sustainable route to reconcile these pressures by converting biodegradable waste into renewable energy through anaerobic digestion. This review consolidates the biogas potential of the major Indian organic feedstocks — cattle dung, crop residues, kitchen waste, sewage sludge, and agro-industrial residues — and relates their physicochemical characteristics to methane yield. The four stages of anaerobic digestion (hydrolysis, acidogenesis, acetogenesis, and methanogenesis) are described, and the influence of key operational parameters (temperature, pH, carbon-to-nitrogen ratio, hydraulic retention time, and organic loading rate) on process performance is evaluated. Recent advances in pretreatment and co-digestion that enhance biodegradability and gas yield are summarised, and the principal barriers to large-scale deployment — feedstock logistics, waste segregation, capital cost, and technical capacity — are critically examined. The review concludes that India holds substantial potential for decentralised biogas generation, particularly in rural and peri-urban regions, and that the integration of improved digestion technologies, source segregation, and supportive policy can advance sustainable waste management, renewable-energy supply, and a circular economy.

Keywords- anaerobic digestion; biogas; organic waste; renewable energy; sustainable development.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is among the largest generators of organic waste in the world owing to its extensive agriculture, rapidly growing urban population, and expanding industrial base. Urban India alone produces in excess of 60 million tonnes of municipal solid waste annually, roughly half of which is biodegradable and therefore amenable to biological treatment [4], [15]. Agriculture contributes a far larger stream: about 500 million tonnes of crop residue are generated each year, a significant fraction of which is burnt in the field, causing avoidable air pollution and a loss of recoverable energy [4]. The national livestock herd, exceeding 535 million head, yields very large quantities of manure that are well suited to digestion [13], [15]. Mismanagement of these resources results in greenhouse-gas emissions, groundwater pollution, and the squandering of valuable organic carbon.

The growing demand for clean and affordable energy has intensified interest in technologies that can address waste management and energy supply simultaneously [2], [14]. Anaerobic digestion is particularly attractive in this respect because it converts organic matter into a methane-rich fuel that can be used for cooking, electricity generation, heating, and — after upgrading — as a vehicle fuel [1], [2]. Beyond energy recovery, digestion reduces waste volume, curtails uncontrolled methane release, and produces a nutrient-rich digestate suitable as a bio-fertiliser, thereby supporting circular-economy principles [3], [14]. The integrated waste-to-energy pathway underpinning these benefits is summarised in Figure 3.

This paper reviews the current status of biogas production from Indian organic wastes and examines the relevant feedstocks, process fundamentals, operational parameters, recent technological advances, persistent challenges, and future opportunities for large-scale implementation.

II. ORGANIC FEEDSTOCKS FOR BIOGAS PRODUCTION

The biogas yield achievable from a given substrate is governed primarily by its volatile-solids content, biodegradability, and carbon-to-nitrogen (C/N) balance. Representative values for the major Indian feedstocks are compiled in Table 2, and their comparative methane yields are illustrated in Figure 2.

2.1 Cattle Dung

Cattle dung is the most widely used feedstock for biogas production in India and forms the basis of the majority of household and community digesters [1], [13]. Its principal advantages are:

- Consistent year-round availability
- A well-adapted microbial inoculum
- Suitable moisture content for wet digestion
- Stable, well-buffered digestion behaviour
- Low pretreatment requirement

Cattle dung typically yields biogas containing 50–65% methane and a methane potential of about 0.20–0.25 m³ CH₄ kg⁻¹ of volatile solids (VS), making it a reliable, if moderate-yielding, substrate for rural plants [10].

2.2 Kitchen Waste

Kitchen waste — vegetable trimmings, fruit peels, and cooked-food residues — is highly biodegradable and rich in readily available organics, giving it excellent biogas potential [11]. Its benefits include a high volatile-solids fraction, rapid degradation, and high specific methane yield, alongside a reduction in landfill burden. Reported methane yields commonly reach 0.40–0.55 m³ CH₄ kg⁻¹ VS, substantially exceeding those of cattle dung under comparable conditions [11], [12]. The same high biodegradability, however, predisposes mono-digested kitchen waste to rapid acidification, which is one of the principal reasons it is frequently co-digested (Section 6).

2.3 Crop Residues

Agricultural residues such as rice straw, wheat straw, sugarcane bagasse, and maize stover represent a vast and largely untapped biomass resource. They are, however, lignocellulosic, comprising cellulose, hemicellulose, and lignin, and the recalcitrant lignin fraction restricts microbial access to the fermentable carbohydrates [7], [10]. As a result, crop residues generally exhibit high C/N ratios and slow hydrolysis, and usually require pretreatment (Section 5) to achieve economically attractive methane yields.

2.4 Sewage Sludge

Wastewater-treatment plants generate considerable quantities of sewage sludge whose anaerobic digestion simultaneously stabilises the solids and recovers energy [3]. The principal benefits are volume reduction, pathogen reduction, improved sludge stabilisation, and renewable-energy recovery. Because sludge has a low C/N ratio, it is an effective co-substrate for carbon-rich materials such as crop residues and food waste.

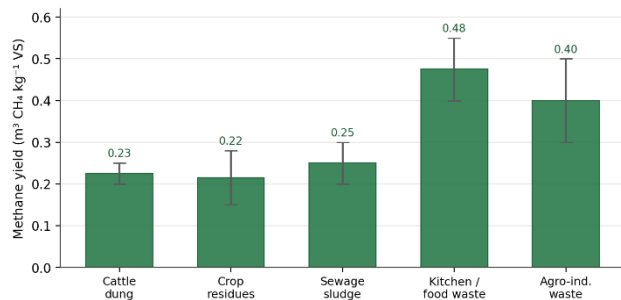


Figure 2. Indicative methane yield (biochemical methane potential) of major Indian organic feedstocks; bars show typical mean values and whiskers the reported range [10], [11], [12].

Table 2. Typical physicochemical characteristics and methane yield of major Indian feedstocks [3], [10], [11].

Feedstock	C/N ratio	Methane yield (m ³ CH ₄ kg ⁻¹ VS)	Biodegradability
Cattle dung	18–24	0.20–0.25	Moderate
Kitchen / food waste	12–20	0.40–0.55	High

Feedstock	C/N ratio	Methane yield (m ³ CH ₄ kg ⁻¹ VS)	Biodegradability
Rice straw	50–70	0.15–0.28	Low–moderate (pretreated)
Wheat straw	80–130	0.15–0.27	Low (lignin-rich)
Sewage sludge	6–16	0.20–0.30	Moderate
Agro-industrial waste	20–40	0.30–0.50	High

III. THE ANAEROBIC DIGESTION PROCESS

Anaerobic digestion is a biologically mediated process in which a consortium of bacteria and archaea converts organic matter into biogas in the absence of oxygen. It proceeds through four sequential and partially overlapping stages, shown schematically in Figure 1 [2], [7].

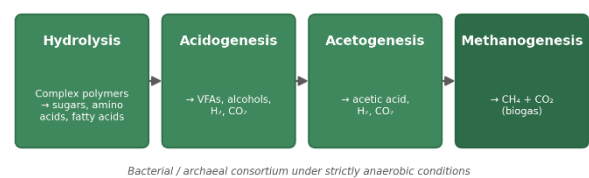


Figure 1. The four sequential stages of anaerobic digestion and their principal intermediate products.

3.1 Hydrolysis

Complex polymers — carbohydrates, proteins, and lipids — are enzymatically broken down into soluble monomers (sugars, amino acids, and long-chain fatty acids). For lignocellulosic substrates this step is typically rate-limiting and is the principal target of pretreatment [3], [7].

3.2 Acidogenesis

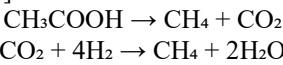
Acidogenic bacteria ferment the soluble products of hydrolysis into volatile fatty acids (VFAs), alcohols, hydrogen, and carbon dioxide.

3.3 Acetogenesis

Acetogenic microorganisms convert the VFAs and alcohols into acetic acid, hydrogen, and carbon dioxide, the direct precursors of methane.

3.4 Methanogenesis

Methanogenic archaea generate methane by two principal routes — acetoclastic cleavage of acetic acid and hydrogenotrophic reduction of carbon dioxide [2]:



This stage governs the final methane concentration and hence biogas quality.

IV. OPERATIONAL PARAMETERS AFFECTING BIOGAS PRODUCTION

Process performance is sensitive to several interacting operating variables; recommended ranges and the consequences of deviation are summarised in Table 3.

4.1 Temperature

Temperature strongly influences microbial activity. Mesophilic digestion (30–40°C) is most common in India because it is stable and inexpensive to maintain, whereas thermophilic digestion (50–60°C) offers faster kinetics and better pathogen kill at the cost of higher energy input and greater sensitivity to inhibition [2], [8].

4.2 pH

Methanogenic activity is optimal in the near-neutral range of pH 6.8–7.2. Accumulation of VFAs depresses pH and can inhibit methanogenesis, which is why adequate buffering capacity is essential [8].

4.3 Carbon-to-Nitrogen Ratio

A balanced carbon-to-nitrogen (C/N) ratio of approximately 20:1 to 30:1 supports healthy microbial growth. Excess carbon limits the rate of conversion, whereas excess nitrogen can lead to ammonia toxicity; blending complementary feedstocks is the usual means of achieving this balance [8], [10].

4.4 Hydraulic Retention Time

Hydraulic retention time (HRT) is the mean period for which substrate remains in the digester, typically 20–40 days for wet mesophilic systems. Longer retention generally improves the extent of organic-matter degradation but reduces volumetric throughput [8].

4.5 Organic Loading Rate

Organic loading rate (OLR) expresses the mass of volatile solids fed per unit digester volume per day, generally 1–4 kg VS m⁻³ d⁻¹. Overloading causes VFA accumulation and souring, whereas under-loading wastes reactor capacity [3].

Table 3. Recommended operating ranges for key anaerobic-digestion parameters [3], [8].

Parameter	Recommended range	Effect of deviation
Temperature (mesophilic)	30–40°C	Lower T slows kinetics; instability outside range
Temperature (thermophilic)	50–60°C	Faster but inhibition-prone; higher energy demand
pH	6.8–7.2	Acidification inhibits methanogens
C/N ratio	20–30	Ammonia toxicity (low) or carbon limitation (high)
Hydraulic retention time	20–40 days	Short HRT lowers degradation efficiency
Organic loading rate	1–4 kg VS m ⁻³ d ⁻¹	Overloading causes VFA build-up and souring

PRETREATMENT TECHNOLOGIES

Pretreatment disrupts the structure of recalcitrant substrates, increases the surface area available to microorganisms, and accelerates hydrolysis, thereby raising biodegradability and methane yield [7], [10].

5.1 Physical Pretreatment

Mechanical methods such as grinding, milling, and shredding reduce particle size and expose a larger surface for microbial attack.

5.2 Thermal Pretreatment

Heating disrupts cell structures and solubilises organics, giving faster hydrolysis, increased methane yield, and reduced pathogen content, particularly for sludge and lignocellulosic feedstocks [3].

5.3 Chemical Pretreatment

Alkalis and acids — commonly sodium hydroxide, calcium hydroxide, and sulphuric acid — cleave lignocellulosic linkages and improve cellulose accessibility, though reagent cost and downstream neutralisation must be managed [7].

5.4 Biological Pretreatment

Microbial or enzymatic treatment degrades complex polymers before digestion. It is environmentally benign and energy-efficient but slower than physical or chemical routes [11].

V. CO-DIGESTION STRATEGIES

Co-digestion is the simultaneous digestion of two or more complementary substrates, and is one of the most effective means of improving process stability and yield [12]. Pairing a nitrogen-rich material with a carbon-rich one balances the C/N ratio, dilutes inhibitors, and improves buffering. Typical Indian combinations include kitchen waste with cattle dung, crop residues with animal manure, and sewage sludge with food waste

The reported benefits are an improved nutrient balance, enhanced microbial activity, greater buffering capacity, and higher methane yield; optimised co-digestion commonly raises methane production by 20–40% relative to mono-digestion [12], [6]. The qualitative trade-offs between the major feedstocks that motivate these pairings are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative performance of major feedstocks for biogas production.

Feedstock	Methane yield potential	Availability	Pretreatment requirement
Cattle dung	Medium	High	Low

Feedstock	Methane yield potential	Availability	Pretreatment requirement
Kitchen waste	High	High	Low
Crop residues	Medium	Very high	High
Sewage sludge	Medium	Moderate	Low
Food-processing waste	High	Moderate	Medium

VI. CURRENT STATUS OF BIOGAS DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

India has launched several programmes to promote biogas adoption, coordinated largely by the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy [15]. Major initiatives include:

- National Biogas and Manure Management Programme (NBMMP)
- Sustainable Alternative Towards Affordable Transportation (SATAT)
- GOBARDhan (Galvanizing Organic Bio-Agro Resources Dhan) initiative
- Waste-to-energy projects under the National Bioenergy Programme

Collectively these schemes aim to increase renewable-energy generation, improve waste management, strengthen rural livelihoods, and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. The SATAT scheme in particular targets the production of compressed biogas (CBG) by upgrading raw biogas to vehicle-grade fuel [15], [16]. Despite measurable progress, a large share of the technical potential remains untapped.

VII. CHALLENGES IN BIOGAS PRODUCTION

Several interlinked barriers continue to limit large-scale deployment [13], [14]:

8.1 Feedstock Collection

Collection and transport systems for dispersed organic waste remain underdeveloped in many regions, raising logistics costs.

8.2 Poor Waste Segregation

Mixed waste streams lower digestion efficiency, increase processing costs, and contaminate the digestate.

8.3 High Initial Investment

Construction and equipment impose significant capital costs that deter small operators in the absence of financing or subsidy.

8.4 Technical Expertise

Limited operator training frequently leads to sub-optimal performance and premature plant failure.

8.5 Seasonal Variation

Crop residues are generated seasonally, creating feedstock-supply fluctuations that complicate steady-state operation.

VIII. FUTURE PROSPECTS

The outlook for biogas in India is promising, with several developments poised to improve performance and economics [14], [16]: smart, sensor-based monitoring; Internet-of-Things (IoT) digester control; advanced pretreatment; biogas upgrading to biomethane; and expanded compressed-biogas (CBG) applications. Decentralised, community-scale plants can deliver reliable energy to rural areas while reducing pollution, and tighter integration with circular-economy principles can convert waste into valuable products in support of national renewable-energy targets. The complete pathway from feedstock to energy and bio-fertiliser is depicted in Figure 3.

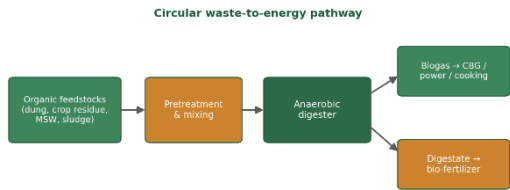


Figure 3. Circular waste-to-energy pathway integrating biogas recovery and digestate valorisation.

IX. CONCLUSION

India possesses immense potential for biogas production owing to the abundance of organic waste from agricultural, domestic, industrial, and municipal sources. Anaerobic digestion addresses waste management and renewable-energy supply simultaneously, and feedstocks such as cattle dung, kitchen waste, crop residues, and sewage sludge show significant methane potential when operated under optimal conditions. Advances in pretreatment and co-digestion have further improved productivity and process stability. Nevertheless, challenges related to feedstock logistics, waste segregation, capital cost, and technical capacity continue to constrain adoption. Strengthening policy support, expanding decentralised systems, and promoting technological innovation can substantially enhance India's renewable-energy capacity and environmental sustainability, positioning biogas as a key element of the country's transition toward a circular economy and a low-carbon future [14].

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors thank the Department of Civil Engineering, Sharda School of Engineering and Technology, Sharda University, Greater Noida, for academic guidance and research support, and gratefully acknowledge Dr. Dayanand Sharma for his supervision and encouragement throughout the study.

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