iJRASET
International Journal For Research in
Applied Science and Engineering Technology

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 13 Issue: VII Month of publication: July 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2025.73180

International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 13 Issue VII July 2025- Available at www.ijraset.com

Biodiesel Production from Castor Oil: A Sustainable Alternative to Conventional Diesel Fuel

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Abstract: The escalating demand for energy, coupled with the depletion of non-renewable fossil fuels and environmental concerns, has driven the exploration of renewable energy sources. Biodiesel, derived from renewable feedstocks such as vegetable oils and animal fats, offers a promising alternative to petroleum-based diesel. This study investigates the production of biodiesel from castor oil (Ricinus communis), a non-edible oil source, through the transesterification process. The research examines the physical and chemical properties of castor oil-derived biodiesel, its production methodology, and its environmental and economic benefits. Results indicate that biodiesel from castor oil exhibits favorable characteristics, including a high flash point and reduced emissions, making it a viable substitute for conventional diesel fuel.
Key words: fossil fuels, transesterification, castor oil, Petroleum, biodiesel

I. INTRODUCTION

The invention of the wheel marked a turning point in human civilization, and the subsequent development of transportation systems has relied heavily on energy sources.

Historically, animal-powered vehicles dominated until the advent of the steam engine in the 18th century, which introduced a new era of mechanized transport. Today, diesel fuel, derived from crude petroleum, powers a significant portion of commercial vehicles. However, its non-renewable nature and environmental drawbacks, such as high hydrocarbon and sulfur emissions, necessitate the search for sustainable alternatives.

India, a country heavily reliant on imported petroleum (70% of its needs), faces significant economic and energy security challenges. With an annual expenditure of approximately 90,000 crore rupees on crude oil imports, the development of biofuels like biodiesel is a strategic priority. Biodiesel, produced from renewable sources such as castor oil, offers a pathway to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and utilize non-edible resources effectively. This paper explores the potential of castor oil as a feedstock for biodiesel production, detailing its extraction, processing, and performance characteristics.

II. CASTOR OIL AS A FEEDSTOCK

A. Botanical and Agronomic Characteristics

Castor (Ricinus communis), a member of the Euphorbiaceae family, is a hardy plant native to India, where it is known by ancient Sanskrit names such as "Eranda." It thrives in tropical and subtropical climates and can grow in diverse conditions, including low-rainfall areas and wastelands. The plant’s resilience, disease tolerance, and ability to grow on marginal lands make it an attractive candidate for biodiesel production. Castor seeds contain 30–40% oil, which is non-edible due to the presence of toxic compounds like ricin, ensuring it does not compete with food resources.

B. Cultivation Practices

Castor cultivation involves sowing seeds either directly in the field or in nurseries, followed by transplantation after 1.5 months. The plant requires a growing season of at least 140 days and performs best in well-drained, medium-textured soils under irrigation. Fertilization with nitrogen (90–135 kg/ha), phosphorus (37–56 kg/ha), and potassium (15–19 kg/ha) enhances seed yield, which ranges from 0.25 to 12 tons per hectare starting from the second year. Harvesting occurs when the spiny capsules dry and split, releasing the seeds.

C. Oil Extraction

Castor oil is extracted from seeds using mechanical pressing or decoction methods. In the mechanical process, seeds are crushed and pressed using screw or hydraulic presses, yielding approximately 1 liter of oil from 3.5 kg of seeds. The oil is then filtered and purified to remove impurities. The oil content of castor seeds (35–37%) is lower than that of other oil-bearing materials like copra (65–68%) or palm kernel (45–50%), but its non-edible nature and availability make it a sustainable choice.

III. BIODIESEL PRODUCTION METHODOLOGY

A. Transesterification Process

Biodiesel is produced from castor oil via transesterification, a chemical reaction where triglycerides in the oil react with an alcohol (typically methanol) in the presence of a catalyst to form fatty acid methyl esters (biodiesel) and glycerol. The reaction is represented as follows:

Triglyceride + 3 Methanol → 3 Methyl Esters + Glycerol

In this study, sodium hydroxide (NaOH) was used as the catalyst due to its cost-effectiveness and efficiency. The process involves the following steps:

1) Filtration and Dehydration: Castor oil is filtered to remove solid particles and heated to 100–130°C to eliminate water content, preventing soap formation during the reaction.
2) Catalyst Preparation: NaOH is dissolved in methanol to form sodium methoxide, with a molar ratio of alcohol to oil maintained at 6:1 for optimal yield.
3) Reaction: The sodium methoxide is mixed with preheated oil (60°C) and stirred for 15–20 minutes, followed by refluxing at 60–70°C for 1 hour.
4) Separation: The mixture is allowed to settle, separating into an upper biodiesel layer and a lower glycerol layer, which is drained off.
5) Washing and Drying: The biodiesel is washed with warm distilled water to remove residual catalyst and glycerol, then dried to obtain the final product.

B. Key Parameters

The efficiency of transesterification depends on factors such as the free fatty acid (FFA) content (<1% to avoid soap formation), reaction temperature (60–70°C to prevent methanol loss), and catalyst concentration. The process yields approximately 98% biodiesel by weight under optimal conditions.

IV. PROPERTIES OF CASTOR OIL-DERIVED BIODIESEL

The physical and chemical properties of castor oil, its methyl ester (biodiesel), and conventional diesel fuel were analyzed and compared (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of Fuel Properties

Property	Castor Oil	Biodiesel (Methyl Ester)	Diesel Fuel
Specific Gravity	0.9781	0.907	0.8383
Kinematic Viscosity (cSt at 40°C)	50	13.5	2.07
Flash Point (°C)	340	130	50
Pour Point (°C)	-	Below 18	-
Calorific Value (cal/g)	-	8130	10170

1) Specific Gravity: Biodiesel (0.907) is slightly denser than diesel (0.8383), requiring blending from the top to ensure uniformity.
2) Viscosity: The viscosity of biodiesel (13.5 cSt) is higher than that of diesel (2.07 cSt) but significantly lower than that of raw castor oil (50 cSt), improving its flow characteristics.
3) Flash Point: Biodiesel's higher flash point (130°C) compared to diesel (50°C) enhances storage and handling safety.
4) Calorific Value: Biodiesel's energy content (8130 cal/g) is lower than diesel's (10170 cal/g), reflecting a trade-off for its environmental benefits.

V. ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

A. Emission Profile

Biodiesel from castor oil significantly reduces emissions compared to conventional diesel. Tests show reductions of 68% in total unburned hydrocarbons, 44% in carbon monoxide, and 40% in particulate matter for pure biodiesel (B100). Sulfur emissions are virtually eliminated, and the ozone-forming potential of hydrocarbons is reduced by nearly 50%. However, nitrogen oxide (NOx) emissions may increase by 6%, though this can be mitigated through engine optimization.

B. Economic Viability

The production cost of biodiesel from castor oil is estimated at 19.52 Rs/kg (16.59 Rs/L), factoring in seed collection, oil extraction, and by-product credits (e.g., glycerol and oil cake). Blending 5% biodiesel with diesel could save India approximately $4,000 annually, reducing the economic burden of petroleum imports.

VI. DISCUSSION

Castor oil-derived biodiesel offers a renewable, biodegradable, and non-toxic alternative to diesel fuel. Its production leverages wastelands and non-edible resources, aligning with sustainability goals. The higher flash point and reduced emissions enhance its safety and environmental profile, though challenges such as higher viscosity and NOx emissions require further research and engine modifications. Economically, biodiesel production can bolster energy security and generate rural employment through castor cultivation.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that castor oil is a viable feedstock for biodiesel production, offering a sustainable solution to India's energy and environmental challenges. Its favorable properties, coupled with the potential for large-scale cultivation, position it as a key player in the transition to renewable fuels. Future research should focus on optimizing production processes and engine performance to maximize its adoption.

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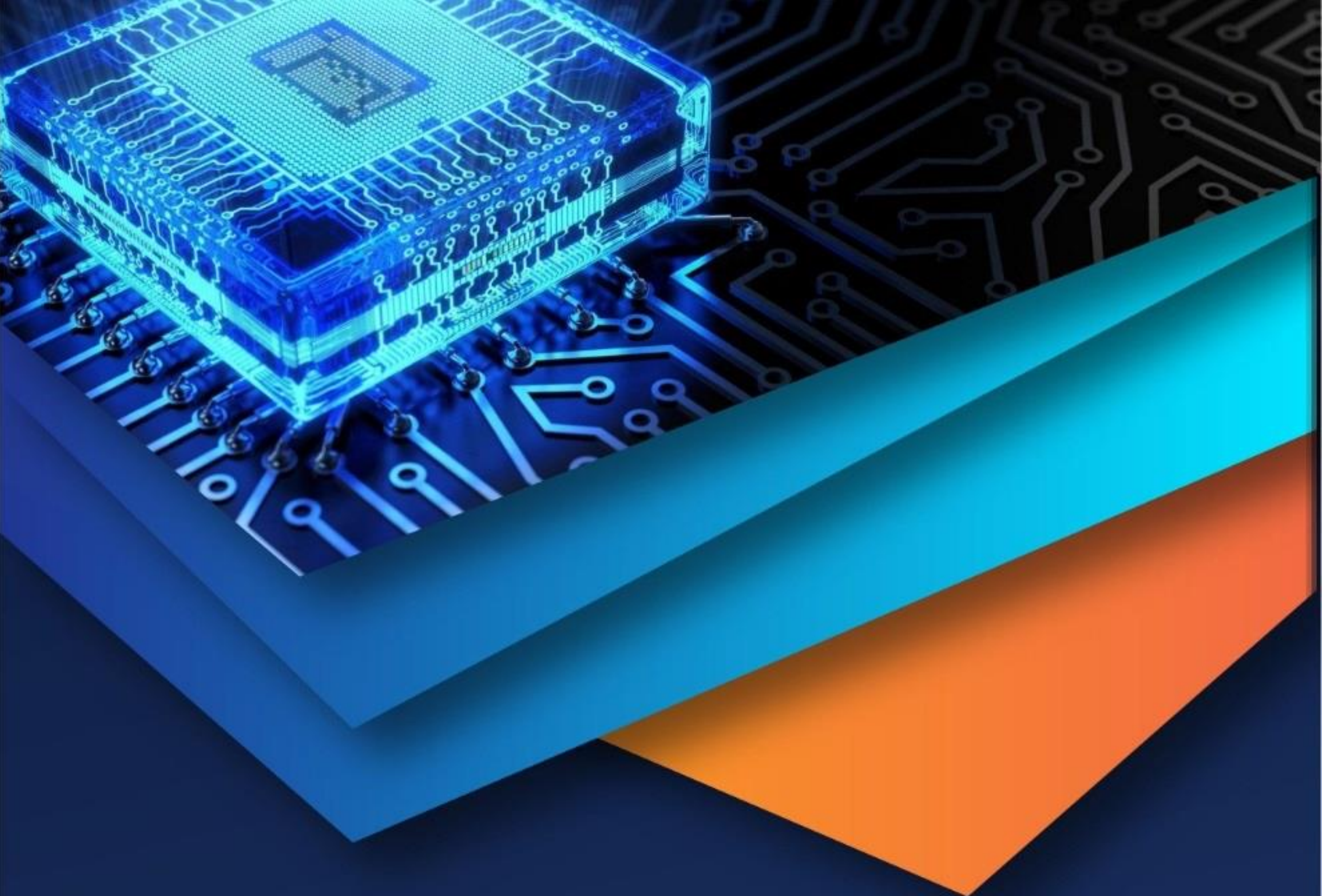

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