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And now, bifacials make a dent

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Solar modules that provide energy from both the sun and reflected light are set to alter the game, writes M Ramesh

That solar power prices have fallen to historic lows — to ₹2.44 a kWhr, in one instance, well below the prices of conventional energy — seems to have done little to deter the optimists from anticipating further declines. The International Energy Agency (IEA) believes that solar prices could come down by as much as 60 per cent from today's levels over the next decade — not counting in any major technological breakthrough.

So what does the solar industry have up its sleeve? Well, for one, 'bifacial modules'. These special solar panels have in the recent few years been migrating from the pages of technical literature onto grounds and rooftops. Today, there is hardly any solar trade magazine that brings out an issue without news of bifacials — a new plant being set up here, an order won there, among other posts. The time of bifacial modules has begun.

"Bifacial modules have started gaining momentum worldwide and India presents a good case for its adoption," says Dr Arulkumar Shanmugasundram, Chief Technical Officer at Tata Power Solar.

Positive prognosis
Simply put, bifacial modules are those that produce electricity from both sides — front and back — the former from the sun and the latter from reflected light. Various descriptions of their economics are floating around, but the median theme is that the net cost-benefit is positive. Ivan Saha, who heads manufacturing at Vikram Solar, says that for bifacial modules you would have to shell out 30 per cent more, but they give you 15-25 per cent higher generation, depending upon the site conditions. He estimates that bifacials have the potential to bring down solar energy costs, averaged over the life of the plant, by 5-7 per cent from the current levels. Vikram Solar intends to produce bifacials in India. "The trials are at an advanced stage and the product launch is expected in the second or third quarter of 2017," says Saha.

