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BIOFILTRATION OF AIR

Shahina K H[1], Chandni P K Divakaran[2]

[1]Student , Department of Civil Engineering, JCET, Kerala, India
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of Civil Engineering , JCET, Kerala , India

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Abstract – *Air pollution caused by industrial processes, vehicle emissions, and other anthropogenic activities presents significant health and environmental risks. Biofiltration is a sustainable and cost-effective method used for the purification of air contaminated with volatile organic compounds (VOCs), hydrogen sulfide (H2S), and other pollutants. This process leverages microbial activity within a biofilter, where pollutants are absorbed into a moist biofilm and subsequently degraded by microorganisms. The biofilter typically consists of a packed bed of organic or inorganic materials that support the microbial community. As air passes through the filter, contaminants are metabolized into harmless byproducts like carbon dioxide and water.This explores the mechanisms of biofiltration, the design of biofilters, types of filter media, and the key factors influencing the efficiency of biofiltration, such as pH, temperature, and moisture content. Additionally, advancements in biofiltration technology and its applications in industrial air treatment and indoor air quality management are discussed, demonstrating its potential as an environmentally friendly solution for air pollution control.*

Key Words: Biofiltration , Air pollution, Microorganisms, VOCs, Air quality

1.INTRODUCTION

Air pollution has become a pressing environmental issue, with increasing concerns over the health and ecological impacts of gaseous emissions from industrial activities, vehicular exhaust, and urban development. Traditional air pollution control technologies, such as chemical scrubbers and catalytic converters, although effective, often entail high operational costs and energy consumption. In response to the growing demand for sustainable, cost-effective solutions, biofiltration has emerged as a promising alternative for the treatment of contaminated air streams.

Biofiltration is a biological air treatment process that leverages the metabolic activity of microorganisms to degrade pollutants. Contaminated air is passed through a packed bed filter containing a biofilm of microbial communities that metabolize and convert harmful organic and inorganic compounds into harmless end products, such as carbon dioxide, water, and biomass. The process is particularly effective for removing volatile organic compounds (VOCs), ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, and other malodorous or hazardous gases from industrial emissions.

The microorganisms live in a thin layer of moisture, the “biofilm”, which surrounds the particles that make up the filter media. During the bio filtration process, the polluted air stream is slowly pumped through the bio filter and the pollutants are absorbed into the filter media. The contaminated gas is diffused in the bio filter and adsorbed onto the biofilm. This gives microorganisms the opportunity to degrade the pollutants and to produce energy and metabolic byproducts in the form of CO2 and H2O.

The biological degradation process occurs by oxidation, can be written as follows

Organic pollutant + O2 = CO2 + H2O + Heat + Biomass

In comparison to conventional methods, biofiltration offers several advantages, including lower operational costs, minimal energy requirements, and reduced environmental impact. Additionally, biofilters can handle fluctuating concentrations of pollutants and do not produce secondary pollutants, making them an environmentally friendly solution. However, the successful application of biofiltration depends on the careful selection of microbial species, filter media, and operational parameters to ensure efficient pollutant removal and system stability.

This paper provides a comprehensive review of biofiltration technology, focusing on the principles, mechanisms, and applications of biofilters in various industrial sectors.

2. CLASSIFICATION OF AIR POLLUTANTS

Air pollution is one of the quickly rising issues of today’s world. Contaminants are ejected from various origins directly or Indirectly to the environment. One or numerous contaminant also exist within the air for extended periods, which may have few detrimental effects on humans, cattle, and plants. This also influences the international economy and environmental transitions for long periods. Air pollutants are categorized into the following different types.

2.1.Primary Air Pollutants

Primary air pollutants are directly emitted into the atmosphere from natural and anthropogenic sources. They include gases like carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, and nitrogen oxides, as well as particulate matter and volatile organic compounds. These pollutants can have serious impacts on human health, ecosystems, and climate, making their regulation and reduction critical in addressing air quality and environmental challenges.

Below are the major types of primary air pollutants:

2.1.1.Carbon Monoxide (CO)

Carbon Monoxide is released in to the air mainly from incomplete combustion of fossil fuels (e.g., from vehicles, industrial processes, residential heating), wildfires, and biomass burning. Carbon monoxide is a colourless, odourless gas that can cause harmful health effects by reducing the amount of oxygen that can be transported in the bloodstream to critical parts of the body.

2.1.2.Sulphur Dioxide (SO2)

Sulphur dioxide is a gas that can be found in the air around us. It is produced from burning fossil fuels like coal and oil. Factories and power plants are significant sources of sulphur doxide emissions. Sulphur dioxide can cause respiratory problems and is a precursor to acid rain, which damages ecosystems, buildings, and crops.

2.1.3.Nitrogen Oxides (NOX)

Nitrogen oxides formed from the combustion of fossil fuels in vehicles, power plants, and industrial processes and natural sources include lightning and microbial activity in soils. NOx can irritate the respiratory system, cause lung diseases, and reduce visibility in the atmosphere.

2.1.4.Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs)

It is emitted from vehicle exhaust, industrial processes (such as petrochemical production and painting), solvents, and natural sources (like trees). VOCs contribute to the formation of ground-level ozone and smog when they react with nitrogen oxides in the presence of sunlight. Many VOCs, such as benzene and formaldehyde, are harmful to human health and can cancer, respiratory issues, and organ damage.

2.1.5.Particulate Matter (PM)

Particulate matter is emitted directly from combustion processes (e.g., vehicles, industrial facilities, residential wood burning), construction activities, dust storms, and It is classified basedased on size, with PM10 (particles less than 10 microns in diameter) and PM2.5 (particles less than 2.5 microns in diameter) being the most harmful.

2.1.6.Methane (CH_4)

Methane formed from natural gas extraction and transportation, agriculture (livestock emissions, rice paddies), landfills, and wastewater treatment. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas that contributes significantly to global warming.

2.1.7.Ammonia (NH_3)

Ammonia contributes to the formation of secondary pollutants, such as ammonium salts and particulate matter (PM), when it reacts with other chemicals in the atmosphere. It can also cause respiratory irritation and contribute to nitrogen deposition, which harms ecosystems.

2.2.Secondary Air Pollutants

Secondary air pollutants are not emitted directly into the atmosphere but form when primary pollutants undergo chemical reactions in the atmosphere, often involving sunlight (photochemical reactions), water, or other natural compounds. These secondary pollutants are often more harmful than primary pollutants, contributing to issues like smog, acid rain, and respiratory diseases.

Below are the major types of secondary air pollutants:

2.2.1.Ground-Level Ozone (O_3)

Ground-level ozone is formed when nitrogen oxides (NOx) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) react in the presence of sunlight, a process called photochemical smog formation. Ozone at ground level is a harmful pollutant that can cause respiratory problems, exacerbate asthma, and reduce lung function.

2.2.2.Peroxyacyl Nitrates (PANs)

PANs are formed from the reaction between nitrogen oxides (NOx) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in the presence of sunlight. They are a component of photochemical smog. PANs are toxic to plants, causing leaf damage and inhibiting growth. They also irritate the eyes and respiratory system in humans.

2.2.3.Nitric Acid (HNO_3)

Nitric acid forms when nitrogen oxides (NOx) react with hydroxyl radicals (OH) in the atmosphere. Nitric acid contributes to acid rain, leading to the acidification of soils and water bodies. It can damage vegetation and aquatic ecosystems and cause the corrosion of buildings and infrastructure.

2.2.4.Sulfuric Acid (H_2SO_4)

Sulfuric acid is produced when sulfur dioxide (SO_2) reacts with water and oxygen in the atmosphere, often catalyzed by sunlight. Sulfuric acid is a major component of acid rain, which leads to soil acidification, forest damage, and the deterioration of buildings and monuments. Sulfuric acid aerosols play a role in cloud formation and can influence weather patterns by increasing cloud reflectivity, contributing to global cooling effects.

3. HISTORY OF BIOFILTRATION

Biofiltration has evolved significantly over the centuries, transitioning from basic filtration techniques used by ancient civilizations to sophisticated environmental management technologies. Its origins trace back to early methods such as sand and gravel filtration used by the Egyptians. However, these early systems relied solely on physical processes, lacking the biological mechanisms that characterize contemporary biofiltration.

Scientific exploration of biofiltration began in the 19th century, driven by the demands of sanitation in rapidly industrializing cities. In 1829, John Snow demonstrated the efficacy of sand filtration for water treatment, leading to its integration into municipal systems, such as the water supply infrastructure in Lawrence, Massachusetts, by the late 1800s. By the early 20th century, biofiltration expanded to wastewater treatment with the development of trickling filters, which utilized microbial activity to degrade organic matter. This period also witnessed the advent of activated sludge systems, further enhancing the biological treatment of wastewater.

The mid-20th century marked a turning point for biofiltration, as it was adapted for air pollution control. Biofilters began utilizing organic media to support microbial communities capable of degrading volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and other pollutants. In 1923, German scientist Bach introduced the biofilter concept, and by the 1950s, Richard Pomeroy had patented soil bed systems in California, which were among the first to successfully address odor control in waste gases. This innovation underscored biofiltration’s potential in mitigating industrial emissions.

During the 1960s and 1970s, biofiltration was further refined, particularly in West Germany, where it was employed to manage odors from sewage treatment plants, food processing facilities, and livestock operations. Research in this era focused on improving airflow designs and filter media, with municipal solid waste compost being tested as a filter material. These advancements, combined with gas humidification, optimized microbial activity and filter performance.

The 1980s saw significant advancements in biofiltration, particularly in Europe. Germany and the Netherlands led the implementation of biofiltration for VOC control in industries such as biochemical plants and printing workshops, as well as for odor management at wastewater treatment facilities. By this time, biofiltration was recognized as a Best Available Control Technology (BACT) for air pollution, offering a sustainable alternative to traditional methods like incineration and chemical adsorption.

In recent decades, biofiltration technology has continued to progress. Modern biofilters are now capable of treating complex mixtures of contaminants, ranging from single compounds like methanol to hazardous mixtures such as BTEX (benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and xylene). The development of bio-trickling filters and hybrid systems has further expanded the efficiency and scope of biofiltration, making it an integral part of sustainable environmental management. Today, biofiltration is a globally recognized solution for the treatment of water, air, and stormwater, valued for its cost-effectiveness, environmental sustainability, and versatility in addressing diverse pollutants.

4. COMPONENTS OF BIOFILTRATION SYSTEM

Biofiltration of air is an environmentally friendly method for removing air pollutants, particularly organic compounds, odorous gases, and volatile organic compounds (VOCs). This process relies on microorganisms that live on a biofilter medium, breaking down contaminants into harmless byproducts. To operate effectively, biofiltration systems require several key components, each playing an important role in the process.

Below is a detailed explanation of the primary components

4.1.Biofilter Media

The biofilter media serves as the substrate for microorganisms and provides the surface area where the biological processes occur. The media is porous, allowing air to flow through while offering ample space for microbial colonization. The characteristics of the media directly affect the efficiency and longevity of the biofilter. Several types of media are commonly used, including:

Compost: Rich in nutrients and organic matter, compost is often used because it promotes the growth of microorganisms.

Peat Moss: Lightweight and naturally abundant, it provides a good environment for microbial activity.

Wood Chips: These provide excellent airflow due to their size and shape, making them ideal for biofiltration.

4.2. Microorganisms

The real work of biofiltration is carried out by the microorganisms that grow on the biofilter media. These include bacteria, fungi, and protozoa, which break down contaminants into simpler, non-toxic compounds such as water, carbon dioxide, and biomass. These microorganisms thrive in environments where they have access to pollutants as a food source,as well as oxygen and moisture.

Bacteria: The most commonly active microorganisms In biofiltration, bacteria, degrade a wide range of pollutants.

Fungi: Fungi are effective in breaking down more complex, hydrophobic compounds, such as certain volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and odour-causing sulfur compounds.

Protozoa: Though less common, protozoa can also play a role in degrading specific pollutants Or feeding on bacteria to control bacterial populations.

The health and activity of these microorganisms are vital for the biofiltration process. Regular maintenance and monitoring of thesystem help to ensure that the microbial community remains active and balanced. The degrading classes In biofilters are typically between 1% and 15% of the all-out bacterial growth. A significant part of the biofiltration investigation has been focused on microorganisms, although fungi have also been studied. Manure has been described to utilize microbes such as Proteobacteria, Actinobacteria, Bacteroidetes, and Firmicutes. Although controlled data are accessible on the bacterial networks associated with biofiltration, novel machinery, for example, denaturing gradient gel electrophoresis (DGGE), Temperature gradient , Gel electrophoresis (TGGE), and single-Strand conformation polymorphism (SSCP), have perrmitted for a superior consideration of bacterial growth dynamics within open and closed biofilter arrangements.

4.3.Air Distribution System

An essential aspect of an air biofiltration system is the proper distribution of air across the biofilter media. The contaminated air must flow evenly through the media to ensure all parts of the filter are utilized and contaminants are consistently broken down. This is typically achieved through a combination of:

Fans: To maintain a steady flow of air into the biofilter.

Ductwork: That channels the incoming air to the biofilter.

Perforated pipes or Diffusers: These are placed within or beneath the biofilter media to ensure the air is distributed evenly across the surface of the media.

Proper air distribution prevents “channeling,” where air flows through certain sections of the biofilter while by passing others, reducing overall treatment efficiency.

4.4.Humidification System

The effectiveness of biofiltration depends heavily on maintaining the right moisture level in the biofilter media. Microorganisms require a humid environment to metabolize pollutants efficiently, and excessively dry air can reduce microbial activity, leading to system failure to prevent this, a humidification system is used to add moisture to the incoming air stream. This is particularly important in cases where the air is too dry, such as in industrial environments or during certain seasons. The system may involve water sprayers, misters, or steam injectors placed before the biofilter to ensure that air entering the system has the right humidity level.

4.5.Support Structure or Housing

The biofilter media and the air distribution system need to be supported within a containment structure, which could take several forms depending on the application:

Biofilter Beds: Horizontal beds where the biofilter media is spread in layers, often used for treating large air volumes at low pressures.

Biofilter Towers: Vertical towers where air flows upwards or downwards through the biofilter media, used for space-saving designs.

Enclosures or Chambers: These may be used to contain the media, ensuring controlled airflow and protecting the system from environmental factors like rain, wind, or temperature fluctuations.

The design and construction of the support structure directly influence the biofilter’s performance.

4.6.Drainage System

Biofiltration systems, especially those that use natural or organic media, require moisture to function effectively. However, excess water can accumulate over time, either from the humidification system or from condensation. To prevent waterlogging or flooding of the biofilter, a drainage system is implemented. This consists of:

Gravel or Coarse Material: At the bottom of the biofilter to allow water to flow through without obstructing the air.

Perforated Pipes: That collect and drain excess water.

Drain Ports: Through which the water is safely removed from the system. .

4.7.Monitoring and Control System

To ensure optimal performance of the biofiltration system, certain key parameters need to be regularly monitored and adjusted.These include:

Temperature: Microorganisms are most active within a specific temperature range.If the biofilter gets too hot or too cold, microbial activity can decrease.

Humidity: Maintaining the right moisture levels is critical, as both overly dry and waterlogged conditions can affect microbial activity.

Air Flow Rate: The flow of air through the biofilter needs to be controlled to ensure all pollutants are exposed to the microbial processes.

pH Levels: Certain pollutants can cause the biofilter's pH to fluctuate, which can inhibit microbial growth. A monitoring system will track pH levels and, if necessary, trigger corrective actions (such as adding buffers).

4.8.Exhaust System

Once the air has passed through the biofilter and the pollutants have been removed, the treated air is vented back into the atmosphere. The exhaust system ensures that the air meets environmental standards and does not contain any residual harmful contaminants.

5.MECHANISM OF BIOFILTRATION

Biofiltration is an advanced biological method for air pollution control, involving the use of microorganisms to degrade air pollutants into harmless byproducts such as carbon dioxide and water. This environmentally sustainable process is highly effective for treating industrial emissions, offering a natural solution to reducing harmful airborne contaminants. The mechanism behind biofiltration involves a complex interaction of physical, chemical, and biological processes within the biofilter system, where the transfer of contaminants from the gas phase to a biologically active filter medium occurs. This paper aims to provide a detailed explanation of the biofiltration mechanism, highlighting the fundamental processes of sorption and biodegradation, which form the basis of air purification.

In biofiltration, the contaminated air is introduced into the biofilter, typically entering through the lower portion of the filtering pool, where it is evenly distributed across the surface of the filter medium. The air rises upward through a porous filtering material, which serves as a support for the microorganisms responsible for degrading the pollutants. This filter medium can consist of organic material such as compost, rocks, activated sludge, or synthetic substrates, designed to prevent long-term compaction and ensure sufficient air permeability. The core of the process is the biofilm—a thin layer of water and microorganisms attached to the filter media, where most of the pollutant degradation occurs.

The treatment process in biofiltration relies primarily on two fundamental mechanisms: sorption and biodegradation. Sorption is the process by which contaminants from the gaseous phase are transferred to the liquid or solid phase on the biofilter medium. Once the pollutant is sorbed into the biofilm or dissolved in the water layer surrounding it, the microorganisms use the contaminant as a carbon and energy source for growth and metabolism.

The biodegradation phase begins once the pollutant is adsorbed into the biofilm. The microorganisms, typically bacteria and fungi, metabolize the pollutant in a series of biochemical reactions, converting it into less harmful byproducts. Organic pollutants, such as volatile organic compounds (VOCs), hydrogen sulfide, and other odorous gases, are broken down into simpler compounds like carbon dioxide, water, and microbial biomass. The biodegradation efficiency is influenced by several factors, including the pollutant's chemical nature, the composition of the biofilter medium, and the operational conditions within the biofilter.

Several physical, chemical, and biological factors are critical to the effective operation of a biofilter. Maintaining high moisture content in the biofilter bed is essential, as the microorganisms rely on a water layer for survival and pollutant degradation. Humidity levels must be carefully regulated, typically between 40-60%, to prevent desiccation of the biofilm, which would reduce microbial activity. Temperature is another critical factor; optimal temperatures for biofiltration generally range between 15°C and 43°C, as microbial activity is temperature-dependent. At lower temperatures, microbial metabolism slows down, leading to reduced degradation efficiency, while temperatures exceeding the optimal range can inhibit or kill the microorganisms.

The biofilter is housed in an open or enclosed vessel, ranging in size from small tanks to large industrial-scale buildings, depending on the volume of air to be treated. A blower is used to move the contaminated air through the biofilter, while an air dispersion system ensures an even flow of air through the bed, maximizing the contact between the pollutants and the biofilm. The design of the biofilter must accommodate several operational parameters, such as the size of the filter medium particles, air residence time, and the height of the filter bed, all of which influence the efficiency of pollutant removal.

Through a well-managed combination of sorption and biodegradation, biofilters provide an efficient and cost-effective solution for removing airborne contaminants from industrial emissions. By optimizing the design and operation of the biofilter, including selecting appropriate filter media, maintaining moisture and temperature levels, and ensuring a uniform distribution of air, biofiltration can achieve high removal efficiencies for a wide range of pollutants. This natural, sustainable process is a valuable tool in the ongoing effort to control air pollution, offering a green alternative to traditional chemical and physical filtration methods.

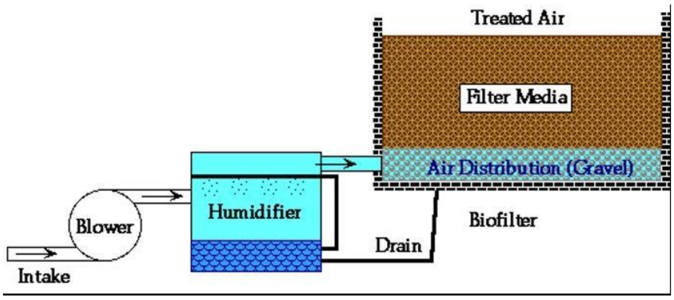

Fig -1: Schematic Diagram of Biofiltration

6. CONCLUSIONS

Biofiltration represents a highly effective and sustainable approach for controlling air pollution, particularly for the treatment of industrial emissions. By harnessing the natural metabolic processes of microorganisms, biofilters can degrade a wide range of airborne contaminants, including volatile organic compounds (VOCs), odorous gases, and hazardous chemicals, into harmless byproducts such as carbon dioxide, water, and biomass. The core mechanisms of sorption and biodegradation are influenced by various factors, including the composition of the biofilter medium, moisture content, temperature, and the chemical nature of the pollutants. Optimizing these parameters is essential to maximizing the efficiency and longevity of the biofiltration system.

The advantages of biofiltration, including its low energy consumption, minimal chemical usage, and ability to treat low concentrations of pollutants, make it an appealing solution in the quest for greener, more environmentally friendly air pollution control technologies. Despite challenges such as the need for regular maintenance and operational monitoring, biofiltration's adaptability and cost-effectiveness continue to drive its widespread adoption in industrial settings. Further research and development in biofilter design and operational strategies will enhance its applicability, enabling it to meet increasingly stringent environmental regulations and to contribute significantly to improving air quality worldwide.

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