IARJSET ISSN (O) 2393-8021, ISSN (P) 2394-1588

International Advanced Research Journal in Science, Engineering and Technology

Impact Factor 8.066 ⁜ Peer-reviewed & Refereed journal ⁜ Vol. 13, Issue 6, June 2026

DOI: 10.17148/IARJSET.2026.13604

Review on the Cam Follower Based Power Generation

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Abstract: The rapid depletion of conventional fossil fuels and the escalating global demand for clean energy have encouraged researchers to investigate small-scale, distributed electromechanical power generation systems. This project presents the design, fabrication, and experimental evaluation of a cam-follower-based power generation prototype that converts controlled reciprocating mechanical motion into usable electrical energy.

The system employs a 12 V DC geared motor operating at 45 RPM as the prime mover. The motor drives a profiled 90 mm cam, which actuates a spring-loaded follower shaft (12 mm diameter, 150 mm spring). A rack machined onto the follower shaft meshes with a pinion mounted on the shaft of a DC permanent-magnet generator, thereby converting the linear reciprocating motion into rotary generator input. The electrical output is rectified, stored in two series-connected 6 V DC batteries (12 V bus), and used to illuminate a 12 V DC LED module. The complete mechanism is mounted on a rigid frame fabricated from 1-inch mild-steel square pipes, with metal bushes providing precision linear guidance for the follower shaft.

Keywords: Cam-Follower Mechanism, Rack and Pinion, DC Generator

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Energy is the foundation of modern civilisation. The twin pressures of dwindling fossil-fuel reserves and escalating environmental concerns related to greenhouse-gas emissions have accelerated worldwide interest in alternative, sustainable energy generation strategies. Among the many approaches under investigation, mechanical energy harvesting—the capture and conversion of ambient or mechanically induced motion into electrical energy—has emerged as a highly promising, low-cost, and scalable technology.

Cam-follower mechanisms are among the oldest and most reliable kinematic devices in mechanical engineering. They are employed extensively in internal combustion engine valve trains, textile machinery, printing presses, vending machines, and industrial automation equipment. Their primary function is to convert continuous rotary motion into precisely controlled reciprocating or oscillating motion with predetermined displacement, velocity, and acceleration profiles. This deterministic and repeatable character makes the cam-follower an ideal candidate for driving a generator in a controlled, cyclic manner.

1.2 Background and Motivation

Conventional power generation infrastructure requires substantial capital investment, large physical footprints, and access to fuel or grid connectivity—making it impractical for remote, decentralised, or portable applications. The concept of small-scale, localised electromechanical energy conversion is gaining traction in fields as diverse as Internet of Things (IoT) sensor nodes, remote agricultural monitoring, biomedical implants, emergency lighting, and educational demonstration systems.

Cam-follower mechanisms, with their well-understood kinematics and robust mechanical construction, offer reliable and repeatable stroke characteristics that ensure consistent generator excitation. Coupling the follower to the generator via a rack-and-pinion pair elegantly converts linear displacement into the rotary input required by conventional generators, yielding a compact and mechanically simple power generation unit.

1.3 Problem Statement

There exists a need for a self-contained, low-cost, compact electromechanical prototype that demonstrates power generation from controlled reciprocating motion using standard commercially available components. The challenge lies in: (i) selecting an appropriate cam profile and follower geometry; (ii) optimising spring parameters for reliable cam-

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follower contact; (iii) choosing rack-and-pinion module and gear ratio for maximum generator excitation speed; and (iv) designing a structurally sound frame that maintains alignment under dynamic loading.

1.4 Objectives

- Design a cam-follower mechanism that converts 45 RPM rotary motor input into controlled linear reciprocating follower motion with a lift of approximately 40 mm.
- Transmit the follower's reciprocating motion to a DC generator via a rack-and-pinion assembly.
- Generate sufficient electrical energy to charge two 6 V DC batteries and illuminate a 12 V DC LED.
- Fabricate a complete working prototype using the specified components: 90 mm cam, 12 mm follower shaft, 150 mm spring, metal bushes, rack and pinion, DC generator, and 1-inch square pipe frame.
- Evaluate system performance through experimental measurement of voltage, current, and overall efficiency.
- Identify limitations, propose improvements, and suggest potential application domains.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW & SCOPE OF PROJECT

2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review

A thorough review of existing literature was conducted covering four key domains: cam-follower mechanism design, mechanical energy harvesting, rack-and-pinion power transmission, and small-scale DC generation systems. The key findings are summarised below.

2.1.1 Cam-Follower Kinematics and Dynamics

Norton (2012) provides foundational treatments of cam profiles — uniform velocity, parabolic, simple harmonic motion (SHM), and cycloidal — demonstrating that SHM and cycloidal profiles offer the most favourable acceleration characteristics for high-speed operation and surface durability. Shigley and Mischke (2001) address fatigue and Hertzian contact stress at the cam-follower interface, establishing design guidelines for spring pre-load and follower geometry. Khurmi and Gupta (2013) present detailed solved problems on follower displacement, velocity, and acceleration analysis that directly inform the design calculations in this project.

2.1.2 Mechanical Energy Harvesting

Roundy et al. (2003) investigated low-level vibration energy sources for wireless sensor nodes, establishing frameworks for quantifying extracted power from reciprocating mechanical inputs. Their analysis confirms that electromagnetic transducers (such as the DC generator employed here) offer higher power density than piezoelectric alternatives at low operating frequencies (<100 Hz), making them well-suited to cam-follower-actuated systems running at 45 RPM (0.75 Hz).

Sodano et al. (2004) reviewed piezoelectric versus electromagnetic approaches to ambient energy harvesting, concluding that electromagnetic generators are preferred when mechanical input amplitudes are large (millimetre-scale strokes), a condition satisfied by the 40 mm cam lift in this project.

2.1.3 Rack-and-Pinion Transmission

Budynas and Nisbett (2015) confirm that correctly designed involute rack-and-pinion pairs with module 1.5–2 mm and pressure angle 20 degrees achieve mechanical transmission efficiencies of 90–95%, making them highly suitable for coupling follower linear displacement to a generator rotary shaft. Maitra (1994) provides detailed design charts for module selection based on transmitted load and contact ratio requirements.

2.1.4 Small-Scale DC Generation

Ahmad et al. (2020) investigated spring-return reciprocating generators for low-speed applications, demonstrating that appropriate spring pre-loading and follower mass optimisation are critical for maximising instantaneous follower velocity and hence generator output. Seah et al. (2008) demonstrated a cam-actuated electromagnetic energy harvester for biomedical implants, validating the cam-driven generator concept even at micro-scale. The present project scales this concept to a laboratory prototype using readily available commercial components.

2.2 Research Gap

While the individual topics of cam-follower design, energy harvesting, and DC generation are well-documented in the literature, there is a limited body of published work presenting fully fabricated, experimentally validated cam-follower power generation prototypes using off-the-shelf components such as geared DC motors, standard rack-pinion sets, and small DC generators. This project addresses that gap by delivering a complete, testable prototype with documented calculations and measured performance data.

2.3 Scope of the Project

- Proof-of-concept laboratory prototype for educational and research use.
- Prime mover: 12 V DC geared motor, 45 RPM.
- Cam: single-lobe, 90 mm profile radius, mild steel.
- Follower: 12 mm shaft with flat face, guided by metal bushes.
- Transmission: module 2 rack-and-pinion.
- Generator: small DC permanent-magnet type, rated 5–12 V.

DOI: 10.17148/IARJSET.2026.13604

- Energy storage: two 6 V SLA batteries in series (12 V).
- Load: 12 V DC LED module (3 W).
- Frame: 1-inch mild-steel square hollow section, MIG welded.
- Scope excludes: grid connection, high-power generation, advanced power electronics.

3. ADVANTAGES, LIMITATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

3.1 Advantages

- Simple, well-understood mechanism using standard off-the-shelf components — low fabrication cost
- No complex electronics required; basic rectifier-battery-LED circuit is reliable and robust.
- Deterministic and repeatable cam kinematics ensure consistent generator excitation cycle after cycle.
- Compact and portable; the 1-inch square-pipe frame keeps the overall envelope under 400 mm x 200 mm x 350 mm.
- Metal bush guidance eliminates lateral loads on the cam and prolongs component service life.
- Easily scalable: a larger cam, higher-torque motor, or multi-lobe cam can substantially increase output.
- Self-contained — no grid connection required; suitable for remote or off-grid demonstrations.
- Excellent educational tool for studying cam kinematics, spring dynamics, gear transmission, and electromechanical conversion.
- Low maintenance: the only wear contacts are the cam-follower interface and the rack-pinion mesh, both easily serviced with oil.

3.2 Limitations

- Overall efficiency is low (~14%) due to multiple energy conversion stages and inherent friction losses.
- The rack-and-pinion produces bidirectional generator rotation; rectification introduces a diode voltage drop (~0.7 V per diode), reducing available charging voltage.
- Generator speed varies sinusoidally with cam angle (SHM), producing pulsating rather than constant output; battery smoothing is required.
- The spring must be periodically inspected for fatigue cracking, especially under continuous high-cycle operation.
- Cam-follower contact stress requires adequate lubrication; dry running will accelerate wear.
- The system requires an external 12 V DC supply for the motor — it does not independently generate net positive energy without an initial input.
- Acoustic noise from the cam-follower impact, rack-pinion mesh, and motor can be significant in a quiet environment.

3.3 Applications

- Educational laboratory demonstration of cam-follower kinematics, spring design, gear transmission, and electromagnetic power generation.
- Remote off-grid emergency lighting charged by a hand-cranked version (replacing the motor with a manual crank).
- Low-power IoT sensor node charging in remote agricultural or environmental monitoring stations.
- Research platform for optimising cam profiles (cycloidal, polynomial) for maximum energy output.
- Conceptual basis for biomedical energy harvesters that capture human body motion to power implanted devices.
- Prototype demonstrator for renewable-energy-driven cam systems (wind turbine or water wheel replacing the motor).
- Mechanical energy storage demonstration using springs as intermediate energy buffers.

4. FUTURE SCOPE

4.1 Optimised Cam Profiles

The current prototype uses a single-lobe SHM cam. Future versions could implement cycloidal or polynomial (3-4-5) cam profiles, which provide zero velocity and acceleration at both the start and end of the stroke, minimising dynamic impact forces and cam wear. This allows higher operating speeds and consequently higher generator RPM and power output without sacrificing component durability.

4.2 Multi-Lobe and Multi-Cam Arrangements

A multi-lobe cam (two or three lobes per revolution) doubles or triples the generator excitation frequency for the same motor speed. Alternatively, a bank of two or three independent cams on the same shaft, phased 120 degrees apart, can drive separate rack-pinion-generator units, providing quasi-continuous and smoother power output.

4.3 Renewable Energy Prime Mover

Replacing the DC geared motor with a small wind turbine rotor or a Pelton-wheel water turbine would create a fully renewable energy generation system. The cam mechanism then acts as a motion conditioner, converting variable low-speed renewable input into consistent generator excitation — particularly valuable for micro-hydro or small-wind installations.

DOI: 10.17148/IARJSET.2026.13604

4.4 Human-Powered Version

Substituting the motor with a manually operated crank-and-pedal drive transforms the system into a human-powered generator suitable for rural electrification, emergency lighting, portable device charging, and disaster-relief applications. Ergonomic crank design can be incorporated to maximise user comfort during extended operation.

4.5 Advanced Power Electronics

Integration of a microcontroller-based Maximum Power Point Tracking (MPPT) charge controller, a DC-DC boost converter, and a Battery Management System (BMS) would: maximise energy extraction from the generator, protect battery cells from overcharge and deep discharge, provide real-time telemetry of voltage, current, and state-of-charge, and enable remote monitoring via Wi-Fi or GSM.

4.6 Materials Upgrade

Replacing mild-steel cam and follower components with case-hardened alloy steel (EN31, case depth 0.8 mm, surface hardness 60 HRC) and using roller followers instead of flat-face followers would reduce cam-follower friction from approximately 15% to under 5%, significantly improving overall system efficiency.

4.7 Vibration Energy Harvesting

The cam-follower principle can be adapted for passive vibration energy harvesting by replacing the motor with a mass-spring resonant input coupled to the cam. Ambient mechanical vibrations from vehicle engines, industrial machinery, or structural vibrations would then actuate the follower and generator without any motor input, generating power from otherwise wasted environmental energy.

4.8 Scale-Up for Industrial Applications

A scaled-up version with a high-torque hydraulic or servo motor, large industrial cam (300–500 mm), and multi-kilowatt generator could serve as a mechanical grid-independent power source for remote communication relay stations, pipeline monitoring systems, or off-grid agricultural pumping units.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the cam-follower-based power generation prototype achieves its stated objectives, demonstrating a viable, low-cost approach to small-scale mechanical energy harvesting. While the current efficiency is modest, the design principles, manufacturing documentation, and experimental methodology established in this project provide a comprehensive foundation for future development towards higher-efficiency, renewable-energy-driven, or scaled-up configurations.

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