

Nuclear Power: The Energy of Protest. The Future could be Renewable

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With an increasing global population, many wonder just how future energy needs can be met. While wind, tidal and solar energy are posited as being cleaner and sustainable when compared with fossil fuels, certain countries have opted for nuclear power as the solution to their energy needs.

Fukushima has however raised concerns about the safety of nuclear power and has served to place the nuclear industry on the back foot. Moreover, when government costs, the impact of uranium mining and the issue of long-term nuclear waste storage are factored in, the industry isn't as cheap, energy efficient, sustainable, environmentally friendly or as safe as is often claimed.

Of course, there is also thorny issue of the link between nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Any number of Chernobyls or Fukushimas pale into insignificance when placed alongside the potential danger of nuclear terrorism or arms proliferation.

The late French environmentalist Jacques Cousteau once said that human society is too diverse, national passion too strong and human aggressiveness too deep seated for the peaceful atom and the warlike atom to stay divorced for too long. Countries with nuclear technology and know-how all have the potential to embark on a weapons development programme. At present, there are 21 countries using nuclear energy.

A major challenge to nuclear proliferation controls has been the spread of uranium enrichment technology. The question arises as to whether it is possible to adequately oversee a civil nuclear energy programme in order to prevent the diversion of plutonium to nuclear weapons.

Article Two of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) states that the Agency shall seek to enlarge its contribution to peace throughout the world and that it shall ensure that assistance is provided by it to prevent atomic energy from being used for military purpose. Article Four of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) reaffirms the inalienable right to develop the peaceful use of nuclear technology and pledges to facilitate trade with this in mind. Both bodies seek to promote the development of peaceful nuclear power, while at the same time trying to stop the spread of nuclear weapons.

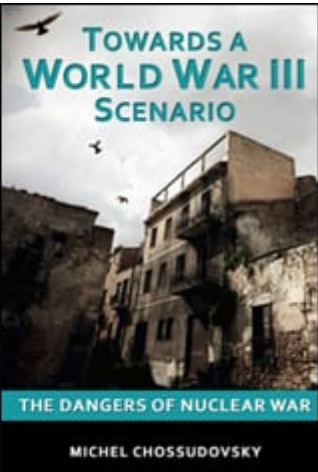
Nuclear weapons parties to the NPT — US, Britain, France, Russia and China — are prohibited from transferring nuclear weapons or associated technology to non-nuclear states, but can provide technologies for civilian nuclear activities. In return, the non-nuclear states agree not to seek nuclear weapons and to accept 'safeguards' on their civilian nuclear materials.

This has been made a mockery of with various states transferring nuclear technologies to others, which have gone on to develop nuclear weapons. Israel, North Korea, India and Pakistan all have nuclear weapons and are not party to the NPT.

When the Bush regime agreed to help develop India's nuclear energy programme in return for India opening up parts of its economy to US interests and complying with US geo-political strategies, the very principle on which the treaty is supposed to be based was undermined — that assistance with the development of nuclear energy is available only to those who say they will shun nuclear weapons. Many technologically advanced nations, including Japan, South Africa and Indonesia, have chosen to abide by the NPT to gain access to foreign nuclear technology. If India was made a special case, why should those nations do without nuclear weapons?

Proliferation concerns aside, the role that the powerful pro-nuclear lobby plays in shaping the debate about nuclear energy should not be underestimated. The US Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI) is described by Dr Helen Caldicott as the propaganda wing for the US nuclear industry, which spends millions of dollars annually to engineer public opinion. The NEI forwards the message that nuclear energy is clean, safe and cheap and in promoting this message has often attacked opponents and targeted legislators and policy makers via 'independent' reports, phoney claims and 'donations'.

Journalism Professor Karl Grossman of the State University of New York suggests the misinformation from General Electric and Westinghouse, the 'Coke and Pepsi' of the nuclear industry (who will incidentally both benefit enormously from India's lucrative, multi billion dollar expanding nuclear sector), have made the money put into PR and lobbying by the tobacco companies appear miniscule. Perhaps such a level of spending and propaganda is not surprising because Harvey Wasserman, writer and activist, says this is an industry that can't solve its waste problems, can't operate without leaking radiation, can't pay for itself and can't get private insurance against terror or error.



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Nuclear power and the crushing of democracy in India

One thing that is sometimes missing from the nuclear energy debate, however, is the notion

of democracy. In a way, the whole debate revolves around the kind of world we wish to live in. Democracy, human rights and ecology are central to the debate. Look no further than events in India to witness the crushing of democracy in the name of nuclear power.

In India, the proposed Jaitapur nuclear power plant in Madban village, Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra, will be the world's largest nuclear power plant. Environmentalist Vandana Shiva argues that Jaitapur is a seismically sensitive area, and that there is no proper plan for the disposal of 300 tonnes of nuclear waste that the plant will generate each year. What's more, the plant will require about 968 hectares of much-needed fertile agricultural land that the government claims is 'barren'.

Jaitapur is one of many nuclear power plants proposed on a thin strip of fertile coast land. Villagers of the Konkan region have been protesting against the nuclear plant, and Jaitapur has been put under prohibitory orders in an attempt to dampen protests. Other planned nuclear plants are affecting hundreds of villages across India and are mired in accusations pertaining to land grabbing and forced population displacement. In Koodankulam, Tamil Nadu, thousands of villagers and fisher people are currently engaged in a heroic struggle against the police and authorities because of their valid concerns about the nuclear plant being constructed there.

Believing that what is being done in Koodankulam in the name of 'development' is a crime, author and activist Arundhati Roy says that the Indian government has shown itself incapable of even being able to dispose of day to day garbage, let alone industrial effluent or urban sewage. How can it therefore say it knows how to deal with nuclear waste? She has a point!

Sedition charges have been filed against nearly 7,000 villagers protesting against Kudankulam nuclear plant in order to quell legitimate protest. Factor in the bribery and dodgy backroom dealings that went on in parliament to help push these policies through, not least the cash for votes scandal, and it becomes clear that the sacrifice of democracy is the price being paid for India's expansion of nuclear energy.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

The future could be renewable

A report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change shows that close to 80 per cent of the world's energy supply could be met by renewables come mid-century, if backed by the right enabling public policies.

And here lies the solution for energy, which, going by the hundreds of billions of dollars to be ploughed into nuclear power in the next 20 years or so (some of which will no doubt illegally find its way into certain individuals' pockets - or already has), the Indian government has little commitment to. The solution involves proper research and investment in renewables to improve availability and efficacy, coupled to a deep seated commitment to democracy by making renewable 'green' energy integral to local economies and communities, rather than uprooting, contaminating or destroying them. With most of its population still rural based, India has an ideal opportunity to develop its rural and agricultural infrastructures and to promote organically based, biodiverse, self sufficient communities powered by nature.

With that in mind it is worth considering that in the fog of rhetoric and facts concerning the merits or drawbacks of nuclear energy, many fail to question the wider model of modernity it is tied to. It is a model that is not only ecologically destructive, but promotes high consumption levels of energy in order to engage in unnecessary work to produce unnecessary goods that have an inbuilt planned obsolescence. This wasteful, high-energy system is tied to what is ultimately an environmentally unsustainable consumerist mindset shaped by an image of the world laid down by powerful transnational corporations.

Moving away from a high-energy, urban-centric system of consumerism would throw into question the perceived inevitability of spiralling energy demand in the coming decades and the apparent need for nuclear power.

While too many policy makers are eager to dismiss renewable sources on the misguided basis that they are impractical, a report produced by London-based Bloomberg New Energy Finance for the United Nations Environment Programme says that worldwide investments in renewable energy had gone up by roughly a third between 2010 and 2011 to \$211 billion. Led by China's renewable push, the world is now on a trajectory that will see its investments in renewable electricity surpass those in fossil fuels within a year or two.

Physicist Sowmya Dutta also argues the case for renewable energy forms by saying that the alternative energy sources are actually more abundant than other options such as nuclear. The world has potential for 17 terra watt nuclear energy, 700 terra watt wind energy and 86,000 terra watt of solar energy.

Excluding hydropower, renewables made up about 35 per cent of the power capacity added worldwide in 2010, and produced over five per cent of the total power. In Africa, led by Egypt and Kenya, investments were up nearly five-fold, reaching \$3.6 billion.

With proper commitment and investment in renewable energy and a push towards an alternative model of development, the future need not resemble the past or indeed the increasingly catastrophic present. The future could be bright. The future could be renewable.

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