

Atom–Not for Peace

WHETHER THE INDO-US NUCLEAR deal will get operationalised before Bush's departure from the White House is a secondary issue now. Nor can opposition to the deal by the left on the basis of the Hyde Act which will make USA suspend fuel supplies in case of a nuclear test, lead the masses to see beyond Pokhran. If anything the deal debate has once again brought to the fore the very question of nuclear power which has been a holy cow since Nehruvian times and compared to the investment made has never given commensurate returns. The contribution of the nuclear power to the total installed power capacity in India as of now is only about 3.5 percent and it is projected to go up to only five percent by 2032.

The debate as to whether nuclear power is a safe and suitable option for India has been going on for many decades. While the proponents of the nuclear power have been offering many arguments in favour of the option, there have been any numbers of issues raised by those who think it is not the best solution to meet the legitimate energy requirements of India.

While more and more complex safety systems are being designed and built for the nuclear power stations, it should be noted that they are only increasing the number of sub-systems and the complexity. Such complex systems can result in increasing the risk of failure of individual sub-systems/ sub-components and hence increase in the number of automatic shutdowns.

The common belief amongst the public is that the people manning Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) are generally deputed from Nuclear Power Corporation Ltd, which is the operator of the nuclear power plants in the country. In such a situation, can one be assured of complete operational independence from AERB?

There have been suggestions from Indian nuclear authorities that the safe storage of nuclear waste is technically feasible during its active life time. But what about the huge costs involved? Are the efforts to keep nuclear waste safe for thousands of years worthy of all the risks involved? The future generations will have to deal with all the risks and costs associated with the spent fuel.

What about the security of supply of nuclear fuel required for the large number of reactors (as many as 40 additional reactors as per one estimate) proposed? While the difficulties encountered in getting reliable fuel supply to nuclear reactors supplied by Canada are still fresh in memory of all, how can the nuclear establishment be certain that the same situation will not be repeated in the future? The main reason provided for lower Plant Load Factor of the existing nuclear power stations in the country is the shortage of nuclear fuel.

If the government decides to spend horrendous amounts of precious resources in establishing 40 additional reactors, how can one be assured that all these reactors will have adequate quantities of fuel available throughout their economic life time?

People used to hear the populist slogan of 'atom for peace' during Nehru-Bhava times. It is no more. Atomic power is not for peace and prosperity, for Indians it is a new source of agony that they want to avoid. □□□ *[contributed]*

