

‘Atoms for Terror’

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At a meeting in early April—rather get-together-organized by the posh Calcutta Club, a well-known nuclear physicist and associated with the national nuclear establishment compared the apprehension about the negative features of nuclear energy with hydrophobia. Another theoretical physicist showed his acumen in staging volte face and took up cudgels for nuclear electricity. Among the listeners was Prof Sujay Basu, first director, School of Energy Studies, Jadavpur University and one of the pioneers in the battle against nuclear threat – from weaponry to electricity generation, but he was not even allowed to ask questions, leave alone participation as a speaker. Dr Basu, unlike the nuclear physicist, is delinked from nuclear establishment. The episode was sorts of symptomatic manifestation of how nuclear hawks have been swarming or digging around since the signing of 123 Agreement between the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the erstwhile US President George William Bush in 2007.

It will be naïve to look at the deal as one limited to atomic energy. It’s political and military repercussions are widespread. For the US, it was a both strategic and diplomatic milestone as it traverses beyond aspects like safe energy, environment protection, and technological concerns. It denoted a triumph of American foreign policy in sync with the strategies and goals of neo imperialism for consolidation of global hegemony. Politics, economics, society, religion and culture all are woven internally and the external façade is generation of atomic energy. There is a deliberate tendency to overestimate the contribution of nuclear electricity to aggregate power production. Even going by official optimism, it won’t account for more than 5 percent of power generation in 2022. Forget the huge price tag to its exchequer. But the scar will be felt on the borders of India’s sovereignty.

The South Asian edition of Stephanie Cooke’s voluminous narrative*** is a powerful polemic against the apologists of lies, deceit, deception, cover-ups, and secrecy that hoodwink the real face of the nuclear industry under the cloak of ‘nuclear renaissance’. It is a revelation on the gradual deepening of understanding of the pros and cons of embarking on nuclear energy. One gets a breathtaking account of how stewards of the nuclear age—military commanders and civilian nuclear boosters—walk into the traps of their own hubris and wishful thinking. It is one area where failures are repetitive but success on a sustainable basis remains elusive.

Rémy Carle, involuntarily drawn into the commissioning of EL-102, the highly destructive reactor in the Negrev, Israel, with the production capacity of five or six nuclear weapons a year, admitted in a conversation with the author, “My main problem was the secrecy” which is correlated with lack of accountability and duplicity. With the potential of being groomed into a brilliant technology-researcher, Carle walked into a trap of pelf sans power. Instead, he became virtually a bonded techie, ‘as secretive as the organization that hired him’. He

ended up as director, Division of Reactor Construction, or Commissariat a l'energie Atomique (CEA) in France but not with chin up.

Geniuses in physics like J Robert Oppenheimer in the USA and Russian Nobel laureates, Pyotr Kapitza, the most favourite student of Lord Rutherford, and Lev Landau, one of the most outstanding theoretical physicists and best product of Niels Bohr, were branded as spies. Mutual suspicion in nuclear bomb-preparations is so common that one can't differentiate between Harry Truman and Josef Stalin, Ben Gurion and Charles de Gaulle . Oppenheimer realized years after the Hiroshima-Nagasaki mega-tragedy, "There must be no barriers to freedom of inquiry ... The scientist is free, and must be free to ask any question, to doubt any assertion, to seek for any evidence, to correct any errors". But pretence is a characteristic of nuclear world.

The concept—'atoms for peace'—is profoundly deceptive. The main aim of trillion dollar nuclear industry being production of fissile material, essentially meant for weapons production, the concept is congenitally equivocal. Cooke rightly states that 'pride, greed and the lust for absolute power' are behind the 'cover of peaceful programmes to disguise military nuclear activities'. And be it noted, nuclear weapons-making and electricity are no mutually exclusive. The dichotomy on nuclear reactors into military and civil nuclear categories is a calculated hoax. Cooke argues, 'the civil nuclear enterprise is more politicized than any other industry, even oil, because of its close link to nuclear weapons' is a significant message to all committed to peace and disarmament.

Cooke refuted the nuclear lobby, including the Nuclear Energy Institute of USA, which fanatically defends nuclear power as cheaper alternative to traditional non-renewable fuels. The AEC chairman of the mid-1950s, Lewis Strauss said scientists and bureaucrats demolished such an illusion, "It is not too much to expect that our children will enjoy electrical energy too cheap to meter".

The decision to bring out its first South Asian edition is timely. It's handy for all who fight for transparency in nuclear industry, especially the defenders of peace and disarmament. In January 1961, Christian Herter, US Secretary of State (later, US Ambassador to the UN), in the outgoing team of President Dwight Eisenhower prophetically told the new President John F Kennedy that among the likely possessors of nuclear weapons would be "Israel and India". So Pokhran I (1974) and Pokhran II (1999) were no surprise to Washington.

Long before the successful nuclear fission, Lenin hailed the new physics as 'a snapshot of fabulously swift and real motions'. But contrary to his fond hope it didn't remain benign. □□□