

COMMENT

No Electricity for the Poor

India is the Only country that refuses to rethink nuclear energy after Fukushima. Even China, otherwise billed by global players as the growth engine of world economy is seriously reviewing its nuclear options. No, it is unthinkable for the Manmohan Singhs who are hellbent on adding more MWs via nuclear route to the national grid by any means, even by subverting national self-respect and sovereignty and swelling the army of destitutes.

In the bizarre scenario of power game what gets less attention is why there is no electricity for the poor despite so many five-year plans and tall talk of welfairism. Nor does anyone ever question the skewed pattern of electricity consumption.

About a third of Indians do not have access to electricity. This not due to shortage of generation, though. A study by National Power Training Institute tells that a hilly state like Himachal Pradesh had provided electricity to 95 percent of households in 2004 itself. Even a 'backward' state like Madhya Pradesh had reached electricity to 70 percent of the households. Performance of the 'developed' states pales into insignificance in comparison. Gujarat has provided electricity to only 80 percent and Kerala to 70 percent of the households. This indicates that the real lacuna is absence of political will to reach electricity to the poor.

About four crore households do not have electricity today. Provision of electricity at lifeline consumption of 30 units per month would require 1.2 billion units per month. Generation in the country is about 67 billion units per month presently. Therefore, diversion of mere 2 percent of present generation is sufficient to provide electricity to all households.

Real problem is that the available electricity is captured by the upper classes for their luxury use. Not enough remains for the poor. The electricity bill of a prominent Mumbai industrialist is Rs 70 lac per month. The rich are consuming the electricity and depriving the poor because the Government is failing to intervene in favour of the latter.

Experts at University of Cape Town have studied the relationship between the Human Development Index (HDI) and consumption of electricity using data for about 100 countries. HDI is based on income, literacy and health status of the people and is the most acceptable measure of welfare of the people. Experts found that the HDI increases hugely from 0.2 to 0.75 as per capita electricity consumption increases from 0 to 1000 units per year. However, increase in HDI is small as consumption increases thereafter. Increase of electricity consumption from 1000 to 9000 units per capita leads to a small increase in HDI from 0.75 to 0.82. Consumption of the first 1000 units leads to an increase in HDI of 0.55. But further increase of consumption to 9000 units leads to a paltry increase of 0.07. This indicates that this huge consumption of electricity is not adding much to the welfare of the people. Conversely, a reduction in consumption by the rich will lead to small decline in HDI while supply of the same electricity to the poor will lead to a huge increase in HDI. Welfare of the people, therefore, will be attained by diverting the present consumption from the rich to the poor.

Increased generation of electricity is not necessary for securing economic growth either, it seems. According to data released by the Central Electricity Authority, demand for electricity is increasing more for domestic consumption. The rate of growth of domestic consumption is

7.4 percent per year against only 2.7 percent for productive sectors. India is generating electricity more for the luxury of the rich and less for economic growth.

The ability of mother earth to produce electricity is ultimately limited. Forests are cut and Green House Gasses emitted in the generation of thermal power. Thermal plants routinely discharge hot water in rivers and kill fishes to save money in making of cooling towers. Nuclear power carries the risk of radioactive leakages as seen in Japan. Hydro power is probably the worst of the conventional sources of electricity. Water of rivers ferments in the reservoirs. Ashes of the dead are immersed in the sullied waters. Pray! Will that beget them salvation? Hydro projects trap sediments and are leading to rapid erosion of sea-coasts. They obstruct the migratory routes of fishes and lead to their extinction. Huge amount of methane gas is generated from the reservoirs. This gas is more poisonous than Carbon dioxide and adds hugely to global warming.

But Government of India is determined to secure a huge increase in generation of electricity under the false premise that environmental and spiritual costs of generation are less and benefits are large. □□□ [contributed]