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Nuclear power

# Four years after Fukushima, India is flogging a nuclear dead horse

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**It's a telling comment on the state of the Indian media that most of it blacked out the fourth anniversary of the still-continuing Fukushima nuclear catastrophe, which fell on March 11. The same media reported breathlessly on the Indian government's plans to triple domestic nuclear power-generation capacity by 2020-21, and on the "breakthrough" achieved on the nuclear liability issue during Barack Obama's recent visit to India.**

In reality, there was no breakthroughâEuros"only sleights-of-hand to substitute administrative memoranda for proper laws enacted after prolonged legislative debate. This trick, meant to please US nuclear suppliers at the expense of India's public, falls foul of Parliament's intent. But it still won't work. Westinghouse and GE, now owned by Japanese capital, are unlikely to sell reactors to India so long as an element of liability exists.

As for the projected capacity tripling, it belongs to an established pattern of extravagant promises and poor performance: if the Department of Atomic Energy's 1967 projection had materialised, India by 2000 would have had 43,500 MW in capacity; it had 2,700 MW! Tripling assumes that 19 reactors would be started and completed in six years, when average global construction time is 10 years. Eight reactors are to imported, an unlikely prospect given that companies like "nuclear champion" Areva, for which the Jaitapur site is earmarked, are on bankruptcy's verge.

More important than all this is Indian policy-makers' and -shapers' disconnect from reality and obsession with nuclear technology, inherited from Homi Bhabha. Contrary to pet myths, nuclear power is rapidly shrinking worldwide. Its share in global power generation has declined from a peak of 17.6 percent in 1996 to 10.8 percent. Its contribution to the world's commercial primary energy production has also fallen from the 1984 trough of 4.5 percent to a new low (4.4 percent).

The number of nuclear reactors operating worldwide peaked in 2002 at 438. It now stands at 390. [1]. Nuclear has witnessed no major technological innovation for decades: 170 reactors (44 percent of total) are 30 years old/older. But only 65 new reactors are under construction, four fewer than a year ago. Reactor capital costs have more than doubled over a decade. Operating costs have risen 16 percent in three years in some countries, just as renewable wind-power and solar photovoltaics get cheaper every month.

Fukushima, the world's worst-ever nuclear accident [2], has probably sounded the death-knell of the global nuclear industry. It brutally exposed the unaffordable nature of nuclear risks even in developed societies, and has made atomic power publicly unacceptable everywhere. In 2014, no nuclear reactor generated power in JapanâEuros"for the first time since 1963. The Fukushima clean-up will take four decades and cost $200 billion. No bank or insurance company will back nuclearâEuros"unless crony-capitalist governments subsidise it.

India would commit a historic blunder by expanding nuclear power generation, given both its generic and domestic safety record (itself appalling), its high costsâEuros"Jaitapur power will cost Rs 15-plus a unit and bankrupt Maharashtra's consumersâEuros"and the popular opposition it faces at every site. This last is the greatest barrier to nuclear activities everywhere: it pits the nuclear establishment directly against the public and raises serious questions regarding the democratic content of decision-making about energy, people's needs and their right to veto projects they consider unsafe.

Nuclear has nothing going for itâEuros"not when wind and solar energy annually grow worldwide at 25 and 40 percent-plus, when their generation costs fall to those of gas- or coal-based power, and their modularity and flexibility establish their unparalleled versatility.

[1] www.worldnuclearreport.org/World-Nu...

[2] http://gu.com/p/46fjj/sbl