

No coal — no power — blackouts — economic stagnation

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Many issues on the CEB's power supply have been raised in the article 'Politics, bureaucracy, and electricity' by the Environmentalist Scientist Hemantha Withanage (HW), in *The Island* of 30.09.99. I suppose, he must have followed the comments I made on his earlier article 'Cheap electricity from someone's backyard' (*The Island* 25th and 26th August 1999). My comments appeared in *The Island's* Midweek Review of 6 October 1999.

Surprisingly another interesting article 'Can we do without a Coal Power plant?' by J. Varnakulasinghe, former Director - Technical, of the Ceylon Electricity Board, appeared in the same issue of *The Island*. He has presented a very comprehensive account of all the energy sources, which are talked about for the CEB's power supply. Here I shall try to explain some misconceptions about electricity, which are prevailing in the country.

Regarding beneficiaries of electricity H.W. states that about 10% of the people in Sri Lanka consume 70% of electricity while 65% of the people do not have access to electricity. This is an erroneous concept. It is to be realised that practically every one in the country, in one way or another, is benefited from electricity. Consider the large numbers working in factories. They may not have electricity in their homes but their employment is dependent on electricity, which operates the factories. It is employment, which brings them the food they eat, and the clothes they wear and not the few lights in their homes.

Efficient medical facilities which are a must for the well being of the public will fail if the power supply fails. The rice and fish we eat have electricity components in the grinding and ice plants used for processing food. Without electricity the water supply which provides water, printing machines which provide the reading material we read, textile and garment factories which provide the clothes we wear and all other such activities which benefit the public will surely come to a grinding halt. How then can we say that the entire public does not benefit from electricity.

Electricity Tariff

HW says that though hydro-power is said to be cheap, customers do not get the benefits and the electricity tariff increases from time to time. He questions what is the guarantee that CEB will not increase its tariff even if electricity from coal power is generated.

Since the completion of the accelerated Mahaweli, not a single worthwhile power project has been implemented. For the past 20 years, only studies have been done paying large sums of money to foreign consultants. All these projects were sabotaged by foreign funded environmentalists. These losses are in billions of rupees and they will have to be passed on to the consumers by raising the tariff. In addition, the prices of equipment and wages are not static. The fridge bought for Rs. 12,000 in 1960, now costs Rs. 50,000. Cars that cost Rs. 12,000 in 1960 now cost Rs. 600,000. Is HW not aware that inflation is a fact of life and we have to live with it? Is he prepared to dispose of his property say at 1970 prices.

HW questions why the Mahaweli reservoirs failed to provide the expected energy. The fact is that nothing has gone wrong with the Mahaweli hydro power projects except that the failure to add the required thermal power in this case coal power which is an integral part of the Mahaweli plan - has prevented us from reaping the scheme's full benefits. In this plan, with a solid thermal base load power source about 70% of secondary energy could have been used by the year 2000.

Here again these are the large losses in the power system, which are passed on to the electricity consumers. Who is to be blamed for this damage? All the anti-coal lobbies, diesel and foreign funded environmental lobbies. If this trend, the continuous obstruction of coal power generation on baseless grounds, is continued then HW should realise that the cost of electricity will rise rapidly. We should be prepared, to pay over Rs. 10 per unit.

Anti coal protestors question how Sri Lanka can have coal power without coal. Then how is the entire transport system is running on oil, something Sri Lanka does not have? Besides, we are now planning to have the power system based on large quantities of oil, which we shall have to import. The map shows that the major coal flows are to Europe and to Far East Asia. These are the two global regions most highly developed. Coal is transported all the way from Australia to Europe. Then, what is the difficulty for Sri Lanka to get coal from Australia, or South Africa. Coal transport is not a problem. It is so well developed. USA has the largest coal resources in the world, followed by Russia, China, U.K., Germany, India, Australia, South Africa, Poland, Canada, Brazil, Yugoslavia, etc.

The purpose of going in for coal power generation is not only to provide cheap electricity, but it is also less polluting and less expensive than oil (steam), which is the only other alternative available for base load power operation in Sri Lanka. Coal is very important, to diversify our sources of energy use. In Sri Lanka the entire transport system is based

on oil and it is not at all a safe proposition to make our power system over dependent on oil imported from the volatile Gulf countries, with uncertain price increases. Oil which was US\$13 in 1998, has now shot up to \$25 and is soon expected to reach \$ 30, a barrel.

Joke of the New Millennium

HW has referred to a projected power development plan in the USA. According to this plan, for the year 2020 nuclear 6.6%, wind 5.9%, solar 23.8%, hydro 4.2%, big-mass 17.9%, and fossil 41.6%. In this plan, the contribution of renewable sources has increased from the present 7.6% to 33.9%. This is the joke of the new millennium. This plan is concocted for the consumption of the gullible public in the third world.

When the Trinco coal power plant was planned, the Americans produced a list of 40 countries where coal power stations are planned. In this list, there was no mention of USA. Later I came across a publication of the Institute of Electrical Engineers (London) in which it was stated that 42,000 MW of coal power were to be added in the USA. That is, mind you, in addition to the 300,000 MW of coal power she already had at that time. The main business of Black and Veatch (Trinco coal power consultants) is the planning of coal power plants for the American power system.

Protests against Dams.

Another interesting statement made by HW is 'Although the electricity planners do not admit their past errors, the World Bank has admitted that projects like building dams can carry hidden costs and harm communities through population displacement and other cultural and environmental problems.

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When I visited the Kotmale reservoir site at its construction stage, the poor people over there used to tell me, 'If it is good for the country we will leave'. It is always the foreign funded environmentalists and other disgruntled elements from Colombo who poison the minds of those people.

In New York, I was engaged in a consulting engineering firm. There I worked in a planning team engaged in augmenting the New York water supply. In this study, we had to locate all the possible dam sites to store water in the Hudson-Mohawk river basin. However, for the Third World, building dams is no good.

If the Americans are so concerned about the 13000 and 45000 displaced people in the Kotmale and Victoria reservoir areas, why can't the Americans settle them in the U.S.A. Her land area is 2.5 times that of India and her population is only a quarter of India's 980 million. The fact is that our displaced people here have been well settled and there are no complaints.

In these matters, Sri Lanka, a developing country will do better if she were to follow development patterns in developing countries like India and China which are more advanced than Sri Lanka, instead of following pious prescriptions issued by the developed West, which only result in retardation.

Lesson from India

An Indian development planner has this to say - 'Small is beautiful only on paper. Only big and bold ideas have liberated the world from the dark ages. Individual freedom has to be sacrificed in the national interest. It is a pity that activists lack the macroscopic perspective. And seldom do they come up with a viable alternative.'

When speaking to the villagers who were to be displaced by the Hirakud Dam in 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India stated 'If you have to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country'. Following this policy, India has constructed 3600 dams which can be classed as large dams. India is self sufficient in food and can even export food. At the time of independence, India had only a pathetic 1700 MW of power. Now it has increased to about 120,000 MW of which coal is about 70%. Nehru called these projects 'The Temples of God', because it is such projects which produce food and clothing for the masses.

In India leading politicians, business communities, and others arrange massive protest rallies against baseless project protectors. In contrast Sri Lankan leaders who have been elected to develop the nation join our insincere pro-

ectors sabotaging development projects and swallow the deceptive 'small is beautiful' slogans. I strongly support coal power generation, but not in the Kalpitiya peninsula. That is on security grounds. Those who support coal power in Kalpitiya are not friends of Sri Lanka, and those who oppose coal power altogether on baseless protests are traitors.

From HW's writings we see that he is against dams and coal power plants, while he favours all oil burning power plants, which are definitely polluting. He questions why the OECF combined cycle project (163 MW) which got environmental clearance in 1997 and the barge mounted thermal plant within the port of Colombo (60 MW) which was approved in 1998, were not implemented. A 20 MW oil power plant in Matara has been readily given environmental clearance. This is in keeping with the concept of power development planning by the diesel lobby. Study CEB's generation master plan. It is interesting to find out the relationship between the foreign funded environmentalists and the diesel lobby.

Conclusion

HW has concluded his article with this strange statement. 'If the electricity planners are honest and wish to take decisions in a transparent and a participating manner without resorting to arrogance, we are ready to co-operate in forming a National Energy Plan starting with a National Energy Policy for Sri Lanka'

My advice in this matter to HW is that he re-read my reply 'Destructive achievements of environmental scientists' (*The Island* - 6th October 1999) to his article 'Cheap electricity from some one's backyard' (*The Island* - 25/26 August 1999), make an honest soul search and consider his suitability to provide a genuine contribution in formulating a national energy plan. It should be realised by all, that ever since environmental laws were introduced and environmental scientists became active not one worth while power project towards meaningful national development could be executed.

In development planning, the environmentalists should realise that it is not their business to say what energy source is to be adopted, where power plants should be located and how they should be planned. Their task should be only towards mitigating environmental hazards, if any.

In my opinion the environmental scientists could, provide a valuable service to the country by making a concrete effort to eradicate the mosquito menace which is causing considerable damage to the country, spreading various diseases resulting in substantial loss of man working hours; see to garbage clearing, clogged drains, unhygienic eating places, and filthy toilets in public institutions. I have observed on T.V. Dr. Mrs. Ajantha Perera, Environmental Scientist, performing an excellent service in demonstrating how garbage should be handled and waste recycled.

Regarding air pollution *The Island* editorial 'Air pollution - presidential inquiry required' (15.10.99) has correctly pointed out that gaseous emissions of vehicles in Sri Lanka are far above those in Europe, so much so that the smoke monitors imported from Sweden are difficult to clean. All the people are breathing this poisonous carbon monoxide fumes. Little wonder that people are wondering why many, who have not smoked in their lives are dying of lung cancer. In addition, what we find here is that by sabotaging coal power generation and adding more and more polluting diesel power generating sets in our cities, we are aggravating this poisonous air syndrome. Our environmentalists should give their attention to controlling this pollution.

About coal power generation, the environmentalists could provide a great service if they see to the efficient maintenance and operation of the flue gas filter plants. This is because of the careless and extremely poor maintenance records we experience in Sri Lanka. This does not mean that they are expected to deal with any technical aspects here which do not enter their field and they are ignorant of. All the modern coal power plants are provided with fuel gas filters. The environmentalists need not be concerned with anything else about coal power generation like acid rain, ozone layer, warm water discharges, resettlement of people, alternative source of energy, etc.

We have already wasted 20 years on this subject and are we to go on talking for another 20 years, May be the environmentalists and others of their ilk want Sri Lanka to stagnate and even go backwards. Remember, unprecedented daily power cuts of 10 hours are on line. If we persist only in talking, arguing, and obstructing those plants we are doomed to perish in the new millennium, when every other country is intelligently and steadily forging ahead to prosperity.

THE INSTITUTION OF ENGINEERS, SRI LANKA

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on

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by

Mr. M. S. M. de Silva, Senior Engineer,

on

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