



Directorate of
Intelligence

Near East and South Asia Review

23 November 1984

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Approved for Release
Date WAR 2000

23 November 1984
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Near East and
South Asia Review

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India's Nuclear Power Program
Sails Into Heavy Media Waters

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Publications of Interest

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Some articles are preliminary views of a subject or speculative, but the contents normally will be coordinated as appropriate with other offices within CIA. Occasionally an article will represent the views of a single analyst; these items will be designated as noncoordinated views.

India's Nuclear Power Program Sails Into Heavy Media Waters

India's once sacrosanct nuclear power program is coming under increasingly severe criticism in the Indian press. Citing numerous public failures of the program, the Indian press is calling into question its management, safety, and, in particular, its economic viability. Continued troubles and bad publicity, we believe, will result in increased parliamentary scrutiny that could eventually result in some cuts in the program.

Critical Press

India's atomic energy program operates under a tight veil of secrecy. India's prime ministers have always held the nuclear power portfolio, and policy has been made by the Prime Minister and a small number of advisers. The nuclear establishment—principally the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE)—has sought to influence public opinion favorably by feeding selected information to the media, advertising the opening of new plants, and suggesting smooth operation and eventual success of the program.

In the last year the major newspapers have been less inclined to be manipulated by the DAE. They have reported the failings of the program and questioned whether secrecy was used to cover mistakes. The *Indian Express* recently challenged the constant claims of success and demanded that the DAE provide a complete budget, including goals and performance. [REDACTED] DAE Chairman Raja Ramanna attempted to stop negative press reporting because it made DAE officials look foolish. DAE, however, has either failed to respond directly to the criticisms or not taken serious issue with them.

Bottom Line: Poor Performance

The press has cited a number of cases which it claims illustrate how poor management resulted in mediocre and even scandalous performance. For example, the

press reported the rate of plutonium recovery at one plant was 30 to 50 percent lower than that of other countries. The *Sunday Observer* called this an unacceptable performance and a consequence of mismanagement and inefficiency. The Rajasthan Atomic Power Station (RAPS) managed to supply only 18 percent, rather than the planned 40 percent, of the state's electricity because only one plant was operational. RAPS has been plagued by equipment failures and strikes which lead to further shutdowns. According to *India Today*, many of RAPS's problems are the result of inadequate maintenance by a staff with sagging morale.

India Today also questioned the capacity of Indian plants to produce enough heavy water for critical testing in June 1983 of the Madras Atomic Power Station (MAPS). Because the Indians sought to have MAPS operate unsafeguarded, they could not legally use heavy water they bought from the United States, Canada, or the Soviet Union. The MAPS was commercially commissioned in January 1984—after a decade's delay resulting in part from insufficient Indian-produced heavy water. Since January, it has operated fitfully, plagued by equipment failures and other problems.

Uneconomic Power

According to the *Financial Express of India*, the major argument against the nuclear power program is that it is too great an investment of Indian resources given the meager return. The *Financial Express*

Indian Media

The Indian press enjoys a high degree of freedom in comparison to the press of its neighbors, although parliament can and has restricted freedom of the press. For example, censorship has been imposed in states under President's rule.

Most newspapers are independently run and privately owned, although a few are associated directly with political parties:

- *The Indian Express, published in 10 Indian cities, has a circulation of over a half million. It is popular among India's growing middle classes and is influential with government policymakers and business leaders. Fiercely independent, the Goenka family, which owns Indian Express, has often braved the wrath of governments displeased with their critical editorial policy. This press group also publishes the Financial Express, which has a national circulation within the business community.*
 - *The Times of India, published by the press group of the same name, is highly respected within academic, business, and government circles. The independent paper is left of center, according to the US Embassy, but supports a mixed economy and is basically Western oriented.*
 - *India Today is a growing biweekly English-language magazine on the order of US weeklies. Known for its independent and investigative reporting, the magazine is popular with English-speaking urbanites throughout the country, and we believe the magazine has a growing influence among policymakers. The magazine supports a mixed economy and is highly critical of India's economic performance.*
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points out that nuclear power in India has proved more costly than electricity generated from other means. The *Indian Express* claimed that final costs of power stations and heavy water plants have been three times the estimate originally made by DAE. Other newspapers question the high expenditure in view of the need for other development programs.

Many journalists agree that India can no longer afford to support experimentation in the development of nuclear power plants—"reinventing the wheel" as one journalist put it. The *Indian Express* in February 1983, decrying what it saw as India's nuclear hypocrisy, urged the government to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and accept international safeguards of civilian power facilities so that India could import expertise and technology from the West.

Safety: An Emotional Issue

Charges of callousness were leveled at the DAE when serious radiation exposure to workers was reported in 1983. The *Times of India* charged that radiation levels at the Tarapur facilities were dangerously high, posing severe health risks to workers. The DAE was stung into releasing medical records of the workers at facilities that showed that radiation levels had indeed been high but had been reduced in recent years. *India Today* quoted nuclear medicine experts who agreed that the publicized levels of long-term radiation were not dangerous and that the only severe cases of exposure were the result of worker carelessness. The publicity surrounding the mid-1983 disclosures, however, ensured that the press and DAE have become sensitive to nuclear safety and radiation dangers that will remain an issue for both.

DAE has sought to shift the blame for some safety problems to the US and Canadian suppliers of equipment by claiming much of it was defective. The press has brought into question DAE's technical inadequacies in failing to recognize the alleged problem before the equipment was put on line. Criticism has been muted more recently since the Indo-US agreement that allowed India to procure fuel and spare parts in the West, but DAE vulnerability to charges of incompetence probably influences its inclination to seek a foreign scapegoat.

Outlook

We believe there will be changes in the nuclear program, and perhaps some reductions, because of adverse publicity. The government could also be compelled to replace the senior officials of the DAE if there is continuing incompetence. At the same time, there will be an inclination in New Delhi to pull the veil of secrecy even tighter, probably on grounds of national security.

The critical press coverage has failed to generate a wave of popular or parliamentary opposition to the Indian civilian nuclear program thus far. Support for nuclear energy is a popular political stance, and we believe it will remain so, barring a major nuclear accident. Nuclear power will come under more scrutiny, especially if the overall Indian economic situation declines, but the prestige associated with the program will carry it a long way.

If failure to meet energy goals persists, policymakers may consider enlisting foreign assistance as the press has suggested. India's recent eagerness to shop around for sophisticated foreign computer technology may extend to the nuclear field and lead to some softening in India's philosophy of nuclear self-reliance.