

What should Energy Security mean to India?



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Such an energy policy must be centered on a wide mix of renewable energy options -- solar, wind, small-hydel, biomass and others.

Given the fast declining costs of such technologies globally, diverse resource base of India to support them, and their suitability for integration with decentralized community-managed systems, they fit the bill.

Conventional large-scale options like nuclear and large hydro have failed to provide energy security almost everywhere in the world thanks to high capital costs and unresolved impacts on the local communities, environment and safety.

Systems based on clean coal and natural gas, given their current domestic availability and low capital cost respectively, can play stopgap role in the transitory phase until production and delivery infrastructure based on renewables is put in place.

Besides establishing such an infrastructure, major institutional changes will be required to replace the centralized, fuel reserve driven notion of energy security with a supply chain resources driven, people-centered and sustainable one.

Since the trend of rising international oil prices and speculations of depleting oil reserves began, the concern for energy security has been on the top of the policy agenda in most countries. This article revisits the notion of 'energy security' and assesses India's energy policy against its backdrop.

Broadly understood, energy security connotes the capacity of a nation to satisfy energy needs of the current and future generations of its citizens.

Various programmes that a government undertakes with explicit aim of making accessible useful energy carriers to all citizens in adequate quantity and quality and affordable cost over a long period of time without imposing heavy burdens of any kind can be said to enhance that nation's energy security.

It is important to emphasize accessibility to 'all citizens' for the obvious reason that a nation can be said to be energy secure only if all sections of its population are so. Thus enhancement of energy security demands an appropriate choice not just of technologies and energy carriers, but also of institutional structures and delivery systems that ensure access to even the poorest sections of population.

Another aspect that needs emphasis is that 'no heavy burdens of any kind' must be imposed. Heavy social or environmental burdens, even if they are not directly reflected in short-term costs of energy services, are likely to erode competitiveness of an energy strategy in the long run, and hence, diminish energy security.

Finally, it needs to be realized that in a world with increasing economic inter-connectedness, the factors that enhance energy security are different than those in the old world.

For instance, mere domestic availability of a particular fuel may not boost energy security. A nation requires a range of resources in the entire energy supply chains -- primary energy, financial capital, material and human capabilities for development and manufacture of relevant technological systems, and logistical infrastructure for delivery -- to make available useful energy carriers to its citizens at affordable costs over a long period of time.

In a globalizing world, being at the frontier of technological development based on energy carriers with growing markets can give a nation greater energy security than possessing vast domestic reserves of a carrier whose competitiveness is declining globally.

- Dr Rahul Pandey

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