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N-power a green option, but costs high

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NEW DELHI: When PM Manmohan Singh claimed that nuclear power was important to meet the challenge of climate change, one could be sure yesterday's pariah had turned into this era's green hero.

"It will give an impetus to India's pursuit of environmentally sustainable economic growth," the PM said, basking in the success of having wrenched, or some would say, getting US to wrench concessions out of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

He is not alone in calling nuclear power a greener and cleaner option. There is a very vocal lobby that believes introducing nuclear power will help prevent the biggest environmental crisis till date — climate change. Their logic is simple. Compared to most conventional sources of energy — coal, oil or gas — nuclear power generation causes next to zero emissions of carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases that alter climate. So, why not shift to nuclear power and avoid future emissions?

Sounds good but, a tad too simplistic.

In India, for nuclear to become a source that can replace coal as the key additional source, the cost of nuclear power has to be adequately low. It isn't as yet, and it could take a good while before research allows costs to dip. Climate change, as the UN's Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change has warned, requires an immediate and powerful response.

"I think that nuclear energy, once you have the plant up and running is very cost-effective, but the capital costs are very high so... I wouldn't be surprised if given the capital cost nuclear would take some time to become a cost-effective approach," says Yvo de Boer, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The real costs of nuclear power remain the most contentious part of the debate within the country but if it has to become a solution India or other countries can use under an international convention, an acceptable nuclear package could take time that the world cannot afford. But it's surely an option for the distant future.

There are yet other environmental groups that claim such big ticket solutions to climate change — nuclear power, carbon capture and storage or some nature bending geophysical experiment — take attention away from the real issue. Soaring consumption patterns of the rich countries that demand untenable energy consumption per capita, lead to continuously increasing GHG emissions.

But with climate change becoming the 'hot topic' to latch almost every possible government action on for acceptability, others are quick to warn of other more local ramifications of going down the nuke path.

"Other environmental concerns, which are well-founded and critical, such as dumping of radioactive waste and mining, should not be put on the back-burner. Comparing one benefit to another liability is like comparing apples and oranges," says M V Ramana, nuclear scientist and senior fellow at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Environment and Development.

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