

Solar power projects in Ladakh

Looking to the potential of and harnessing solar power in Ladakh estimated as high as 23000 MW and mostly, the seasons remaining cloudless and getting very less rains during monsoon season, setting up of solar power projects in Leh and Kargil districts can be described as one of the best decisions taken by the Government in solar power sector. Ladakh can very assuredly be described as having the capacity to become North India's power hub . In 2019, a cumulative 7500 MW of solar energy was planned to be installed in the area by the year 2023 at a cost of Rs. 45000 crore. However, since the power project is promoted by Solar Energy Corporation of India, it expected things to move in a phased manner but within a definite time frame. It is, however, quite unfortunate that the process of selection of developers has eaten away considerable time and there being neither any concrete follow up nor any headway in making the said selection, Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) has terminated the process. Leaving aside what targets were fixed for harnessing the solar energy though in phased manner, a period of more than two years in the present era of fast development going astray means not a thing of mediocrity.

Where exactly have things gone wrong and why, is important to be known so as to address those issues seriously and not let the process get weakened, now with the termination of the process by the SECI. It is learnt that bidders are not showing the due response despite lot many relaxations and concessions by way of incentives being incorporated in the document of Request for Selection. The solar power was to be purchased by the said bidders for a period of 35 years based on the terms and conditions apparently weighing high in their favour and their overall financial interests. In spite of the offers to avail of fiscal incentives like Accelerated Depreciation, Concessional Customs and Excise Duties, Tax Holidays etc by the prospective bidders, nothing concrete having taken place has, for the time being, proved really a stumbling factor in realising the dream of the mega project.

Is it because the infrastructure conducive for generating this type of power is not favourable as the region has very less roads and connectivity and many more are required to be built connecting the solar sites? Strengthening power infrastructure being a prerequisite for such a promising project has got to be linked with all prospects of harnessing solar energy. We also learn that Ministry of New and Renewable Energy had agreed to partly fund the linked transmission line to provide a cushion of funds limitations as, otherwise, the cost of power was becoming unaffordable. Looking from a broader perspective, with the said project coming up, it was hoped that the UT could become a carbon neutral region and that could crown Ladakh with a unique speciality in the entire country. A glimmer of hope was there in that the Solar Energy Corporation of India doing well in extending the bid submission deadline to the end of this month. As of now, however, there is no perceptible development hence the termination of the Request for Selection for the mega project in the twin districts of Ladakh has become the reality of the moment.

The present position, therefore, being that of scepticism and uncertainty, the UT Government of Ladakh must take up the case afresh with Solar Energy Corporation of India so that some via-media could be found out since the vast potential of this region does not idle and ultimately, remain untapped indefinitely. The possibilities of the entire process taking over by the public sector undertakings or by the private investors at still better offers and even, as a last resort, by the Government departments must all be looked into keeping in mind what a vast treasure was there in the shape of solar energy to be tremendously benefitted from. Since the Prime Minister, in his Independence Day speech last year, reinstated that the aim of the Central Government was to establish a 7.5 Giga Watt or 7500 MW of solar power park in Ladakh, could it be hoped that he would take personal interest in ensuring that the lucrative project somehow came up to generate so much of power as projected from the said project?

Bharat Jhunjhunwala

The Finance Minister should increase the budget allocations for science and communications and for providing direct cash transfers to all the citizens. The former will lay the foundations of our economic prowess in the next century. The latter will engage our manpower in productive employment, put purchasing power in the hands of the people, generate demand in the market and set in motion a fortuitous cycle of employment generation, production, creation of demand and yet more employment generation. Increasing expenditures on capital intensive infrastructural works like making highways will not start the economy because these do not employ large numbers of workers and do not harness the productive power of our youth. These activities are like a beautiful island in midst of a sea in turmoil.

The present year 2020-21 was abnormal hence I will give my suggestions for the coming budget on the basis of the figures for 2019-20. I have given all figures in approximate to keep the presentation simple. On the revenue side, my first suggestion is that the rates of Corporate Tax must be increased. The share of the Central Government in the collections from Corporate Tax was Rs 3.2 lakh crore in 2019-20. This may be increased to Rs 4.0 lakh crore. Indeed, there will be a tendency of Indian Corporates to shift their head office to foreign countries in order to avoid paying the high taxes here. This should be dealt by amending the Double Tax Avoidance Agreements that we have entered into in the last two decades. Two, Income Tax rates must be increased. The share of the Central Government in the collections from Income Tax was Rs 2.8 lakh crore in 2019-20. This must be increased to Rs 4.0 lakh crore in 2021-22. Indeed, this will lead to a reduction in the demand from the better-off sections who are income tax payers but much greater demand will be created from the common man by the dropping of helicopter money as I propose below. Three, GST rates must be reduced. The share of the Central Government in the collections from GST was Rs 6.1 lakh crore in 2019-20. This must be reduced to Rs 4 lakh crore in 2021-22. This will lead to lower prices of goods in the market and rev up the demand. Four, customs duties must be increased three times. The share of the Central Government in the collections from customs duties was Rs 0.6 lakh crore in 2019-20. This must be increased to Rs 2 lakh crore in 2021-22. This will provide a big boost to domestic production by providing them protection from cheap imports. Five, Central Excise Duties must be increased by about 67 percent. These are collected

mainly on petroleum products. The Central Government collected Rs 2.5 lakh crore in 2019-20 from these duties. This must be increased to Rs 4 lakh crore in 2021-22. This increase will lead to higher price of petrol, reduced demand and lesser dependence on imports. That, in turn will lead to less pressure on us to export. Once again, the loss to the common man from higher price of petroleum products will be many times compensated by the helicopter money. Six, the fiscal deficit may be reduced from the 7 percent-plus expected in the present year 2020-21 and restricted to 3.8 percent of GDP as it was in 2019-20. That will provide an amount of Rs 7.6 lakh crore from borrowings. The total budget of the Central Government was Rs 27 lakh crore in 2019-20. This will increase to Rs 30 lakh crore due to the increased receipts from taxes suggested above after compensating for the reduced receipts from GST.

On the expenditure side, the first suggestion is that the allocations for defense must be increased. The Central Government spent Rs 4.4 lakh crore on defense in 2019-20. This must be increased to Rs 7 lakh crore in 2021-22 in view of the threats we are facing from China. Two, allocations for technology and communications must be increased

manifold. The Central Government spent Rs 0.3 lakh crore each on these heads in 2019-20. This must be increased five times to Rs 1.5 lakh crore for both the heads in 2021-22. These sectors will lay the foundations of our future technological progress and this must be done pronto. Three, allocation for Home Ministry at Rs 1.4 lakh crore must be maintained since law and order is a fundamental requirement of a stable economy. Four, allocation for Health Ministry at Rs 0.6 lakh crore must be maintained. However, there is a need to change to composition of expenditures within the Ministry. The expenditures on Central Government Health Services and similar schemes that provide health care to individuals must be scrapped entirely and the beneficiaries must be asked to pay in full for the services. The money saved may be diverted for research in control of Covid pandemic. Five, expenditures on infrastructure must be temporarily reduced and expenditures on welfare schemes like Public Distribution System, MNREGA and education that provide welfare services to the people directly must be entirely scrapped. The Central Government spent Rs 20 lakh crore on these Ministries in 2019-20. This must be reduced to Rs 10 lakh crore in 2021-22. The

above mentioned expenditures will require Rs 22 lakh crore leaving a balance of Rs 8 lakh crore out of the total revenue of Rs 30 lakh crore. This money should be transferred as "helicopter money" in the bank accounts of the 140 crores of our citizens providing Rs 500 per person per month to all the people. This transfer will more than nullify the loss from the dismantling of the welfare schemes in increased burden from increase in petroleum prices. This transfer will immediately generate a huge demand for goods in the market. Coupled with the increase in import duties this will lead to higher domestic production and set in motion a fortuitous cycle of demand generation, production, employment generation and more demand generation. The expenditures on infrastructure such as in the highways can be restored after one or two years once the economy is back in motion.

We are in a crisis period. The Finance Minister should not increase expenditures on capital-intensive infrastructure schemes by borrowing ever larger amounts. That will impose a higher interest burden and throttle the economy. When domestic demand can be generated by increase in taxes and dropping of helicopter money; why try to do the same by borrowing and pushing us into a debt trap?

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COVID vaccine: Is it Halal or not?

Asad Mirza

It's not only the Muslims, even Hindus and Jews have raised questions about the use of the COVID vaccine, due to prohibited substances in its composition.

Even before the COVID vaccination process starts in India. The Indian Muslims have courted another controversy. The question is whether they'll be amenable to get vaccinated or not, as there are reports that the proposed vaccines may not be halal as per the Islamic dietary laws.

Muslims, Jews and even Hindus have questioned the composition of the proposed vaccines developed by Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Bharat Biotech's Covaxin. Even as India is scrambling to start the coronavirus vaccination drive, Muslims have raised concern over the use of pork products - forbidden in Islam and Judaism, while the Hindus have questioned the inclusion of cow's blood in the vaccine.

Halal or haram

The vaccine manufacturers - Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Moderna - have rejected in vain the allegations of using pork gelatine. The manufacturers have clarified that pork products are not part of the vaccines, though pork-derived gelatine is known to be used as a stabiliser for safe storage and transportation of the vaccines.

The approved COVID-19 vaccines have been met with a mixed response from the Islamic theological community, halal associations and halal pharmaceutical experts as to whether the vaccine is halal, despite various governments' approval, including those of many Muslim-majority countries.

In the UK, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which is being given to the public, was approved by the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA) and other Islamic scholars, stating the vaccine was halal "based on the information available."

According to the British government, the vaccine does not contain any components of animal origin, which has been a concern for Muslims as

porcine, which is haram (non-permissible), or non-halal slaughtered beef could have been used.

However, the Standards and Metrology Institute for Islamic Countries (SMIIC), a unit of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), has so far, not officially stated that the vaccine is halal or not halal. Ihsan Ovut, the Secretary General of SMIIC, in an email to an Islamic website, said there is "no specific standard developed on the halal-ness of COVID-19 vaccines."

A halal pharmaceuticals expert says the vaccine cannot be claimed as halal if they are not halal-certified. But this No is on technical grounds. According to Dr. Mohammed Ali Al Sheikh, who works at SMIIC, the halal certification has to be carried out by a competent third-party and can not be claimed by a manufacturer itself, which Prizer did. It is an opinion seconded by the World Halal Authority (WHA).

Acceptance by Muslim countries

However, in spite of these flimsy or technical objections, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, the UAE and Pakistan, countries which claim to be Islamic or are Muslim-majority countries, have approved the Sinopharm vaccine, while Singapore's government has authorised the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for use in the country. This step must have been taken after considering the religious sensibilities and analysis of the composition of these vaccines.

In Singapore, which has a sizeable Muslim population, the Office of the Mufti of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), stated on its website that the COVID-19 vaccine is "a basic necessity (daruriyyat)" as it is a life-saving inoculation. In Indonesia, the government has already said it will include the Muslim clerical body in the COVID-19 vaccine procurement and certification process.

Indian Ulama's view

In India, the controversy was stoked last week by Mumbai's Raza Academy, a Bareilly outfit, seeking details about all the vaccines being developed and whether they contain pork extract, from the

WHO.

The Indian Islamic scholars, as usual are divided on the issue with the majority of them citing verses from the Holy Quran (Surah Nisa and Surah Baqara) to advocate for the vaccine, but not giving a clear-cut guidance to the Muslim populace.

Leading Islamic scholar Akhtarul Wasey, former professor of Islamic Studies at Jamia Millia Islamia, trying to put at rest the whole issue, opines that for Muslims pork and alcohol are not permissible for eating and drinking purposes, but if a part of these is used for medicinal purpose then it is allowed in Islam, as that medicine will be taken for the express purpose of saving life, which is allowed in Islam. Furthermore, he asserted that according to Islamic jurists a person suffering from hunger for more than three days and nearer to death is also allowed to eat the meat of a dead animal, in order to survive.

Prof. Wasey urged the Muslim Ulama to be more proactive in this regard and appreciated the stand taken by Deoband and Nadwa, the two leading Islamic seminaries in this regard. He also reiterated the fact that the Polio drive in India was completed successfully and the scourge of Polio in India was wiped out after the intervention of Indian Ulama. In fact, Jamaat-e-Islami Hind (JIH) has become the first Muslim body in India to categorically state that Muslims are permitted to use the Coronavirus vaccines, even if they contain pork extracts, as it sought to dispel all rumours suggesting otherwise.

In an advisory, the Shariah Council of the JIH said, "Islam gives great importance to human life and also emphasises on its protection." It added: "If an impermissible object is transformed into another thing, totally different in properties and characters, it may be considered as clean and permissible. On this basis, the use of Gelatine derived from the body part of a haram animal has been considered to be permissible by Islamic jurists. Same is the opinion of some jurists about pork Gelatine."

It is not just Muslims in India, who were concerned about the composition of the vaccines.

Swami Chakrapani, president of the Hindu Mahasabha, had written to President Ram Nath Kovind demanding that the Government and pharmaceutical companies clarify whether Covid-19 vaccines contain cow's blood or not. But the Indian media coolly overlooked this letter.

There's a similar assessment by a broad consensus of religious leaders in the Orthodox Jewish community as well. Rabbi David Stav, chairman of Tzohar, a rabbinical organisation in Israel, said, "According to the Jewish law, the prohibition on eating pork or using pork is only forbidden when it's a natural way of eating it. If "it's injected into the body, not (eaten) through the mouth," then there is "no prohibition and no problem, especially when we are concerned about sicknesses."

Nonetheless, the Indian Muslims concerns as to whether the vaccine is halal or not, might be a challenge to convince people to be inoculated in addition to the anti-vaccination phenomena proliferating in many countries.

Meanwhile, there are reports that a halal-certified vaccine may however be on the horizon. Malaysia's MYEG inked a deal with China's Anhui Zhifei Longcom Biopharmaceutical to conduct Phase-3 clinical trials in Malaysia and to obtain halal certification, based on Malaysia's DSM standards for a COVID vaccine. Indonesia's state-owned PT Bio Farma, which is working with China's Sinovac Biotech Ltd, has also confirmed that it is seeking halal certification for the COVID-19 vaccine.

In the given circumstances it would be pertinent for Indian Muslims to decide for or against the vaccine, as per the conditions. Even the Indian government has not made the vaccination mandatory, so far. So it seems it would be better to err in favour of caution and need.

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Farm laws to protect farmers

(Dr) P.L.Kaul

Interest of the farmers and their welfare were always in Prime Minister's prime priorities since the very first term of Modiji's BJP Govt in 2014. Modi Govt has been constantly taking major steps and policy decisions to fulfill the dream of doubling the income of farmers and getting the right price for their produce. He has been always looking for the economic upliftment of the farmers since farmer is the backbone of Indian Economy. Farm reforms were becoming necessary, because poor farmers who are 70% of population of our country were getting poorer during the misrule of the previous Govt led by Congress at the centre, which did nothing for the betterment of the farmers.

As such the three new farm laws enacted in September 2020 have been introduced and projected by the Central Govt as major reforms in the Agriculture sector for the welfare of the farmers. The act will remove the middle man and allow the farmers to sell their produce anywhere in the country, wherever he gets his benefits. Intellectually, academicians, across the country have come out in support of the new reforms brought by the central gov't which will change the farmer's fortune and will free farming from ill practices and enable farmers to sell their produce at competitive prices.

Thousands of farmers mainly from Punjab, Haryana and parts of U.P. have been on agitation and are camping on various Delhi boards for almost over a month to protest against these three farm laws and demanding their complete repeal and expressing their apprehensions that the interests of farmers would be harmed, if the laws are implemented. They fear that Minimum Support System (MSP), would be abolished, existing Mandis will be shut down, and Con-

tract farming would deprive them of their Agriculture Land. The protesting farmers and the Unions have been saying that these legislations would leave them at the mercy of Corporates by weakening the MSP and Mandi system. These apprehensions are completely unfounded, and baseless, since the MSP and Mandi system are continuing and being expanded and strengthened further by the Central Govt for the bet-

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To further dispel the fears pertaining to 'contract farming', Govt in several meetings has repeatedly assured the farmers that contract is limited to exchange of crops/produce and not the land. There is no mention of land in the reforms. The Agriculture Land remains with the farmer. It is the opposition parties that are spreading the rumours that big companies will take over the farming land, which is entirely baseless and false. The fact is that under farming agreement, only crops or produce are to be procured. Several rounds of talks with the union ministers have failed to break the dead lock with the farmer groups, but the farmers are adamant demanding complete repeal of three laws.

This has raised certain doubts in the minds of the people that there are certain vested elements playing a foul game and are bent upon to hijack the

agitation, despite the fact that all the doubts and apprehensions have been cleared by the Govt from time to time. Prime Minister Narendra Modiji himself came forward during his live telecast and interaction with the farmers and removed all the doubts and confusion in their minds and assured them of not harming the interests of the farmer. He repeatedly assured that the provision of MSP will contin-

ue and mandis would function as in the past and will not be shut down. He also assured that Govt will accept the amendments, in the interest of the farmers and appealed the farmers not to fall prey into such confusion created by the opposition parties. Sixth round of talks held on 30th Dec, 2020 between farmers union and Govt ended on a positive note, since consensus on two issues of electricity and Penalty against stubble agreement was reached. Next round of talks is scheduled on 4th Jan 2021 on main issues of three farm laws and legal aspect of MSP for which farmers want complete withdrawal of all the three legislations and giving a legal guarantee on the MSP.

It is certain that new farm laws in the agriculture sector projected by BJP Govt for the welfare of the farmers will change the life style of the farmer across the country and put the nation on the fore front of eco-

(The views expressed by the authors are their personal)

Electricity disruptions

Sir, Unprecedented power cuts in Jammu are a matter of concern. During the latest heavy snowfall in the Kashmir Valley, it is reported that the Power Department worked day and night and in most of the areas restored the power supply for which the public is appreciating the department. Here in Jammu it seems a different case. Mostly during the summer period, the power supply remains poor in Jammu. Nevertheless, during the winter it remains almost normal. Leave the power disruptions aside due to heavy rains in Jammu but it is inspiring why this season under normal conditions, the power supply is disrupted and there are unnecessary and frequent power cuts. It gives us the idea of the power problems in the coming summer.

With the abrogation of 370 and converting the state into Union Territory, we have been given the assurances of development and that too on fast track. But unfortunately the situation is otherwise on the ground.

In addition, the recent new set up of the Power Department generated hope that the miseries due to power crisis will be over now but no, it remains the same. It is time to stitch in time and save the people from the problems due to power crisis in this hot region in the coming summer. It is winter here, so the people can withstand with the power failure but in summer, it will be unbearable if it remains the same.

Hemraj Mahajan Channi Himmat

Sir,

The Prime Minister is reportedly meeting leading economists this week presumably to pick their brains for ideas and suggestions on how to go ahead handling the economy.

In the first week of January the next budget is just a month away. One wonders if the timing is not too late to incorporate any of the bright sparks that emanate from the meeting in the Union Budget. Generally, pre-budget consultations start way back towards the end of October for next year's budget. The covid pandemic would have precluded any of that exercise this year.

Better be late, than never. It might still be possible to introduce some of the suggestions or at least soak up the nuances. At any rate, as an outside onlooker, what are the priorities and issues at hand at this point of time in the run up to the Union Budget. This is important

Budget Blues

because the Unit Budget is the most influential instrument which leaves its imprint on the functioning of an economy during the financial year and, maybe, for longer.

No doubt the top priority for the forthcoming budget would be the fiscal situation following the covid crisis. It has imposed an unprecedented burden on the government and its finances. A slew of stimulus measures and sheer support for the weakest and most vulnerable had to be launched. Income support for the poorest, augmented work schemes under MNREGA, special steps for farmers have all been undertaken which have cost money.

Two concerns are there:

First is the threat of prices rising too fast. Inflation rate has shown a quick step-up in recent months. A already headline inflation is well above RBI inflation targeting

band. Even if, RBI does not embark on an inflation targeting policy immediately, the central bank's hands will be restricted in introducing growth inducing moves.

The other concern might be the sustained inward flow of funds from overseas. These will have two major consequences. One, it will further aggravate the price pressure unless the funds are sterilised. The other is that the exchange rate would be under upward pressure. It will be of prime importance to keep the rupee exchange rate from appreciating now when the global market is facing fierce competition and trade volume is not rising much.

The Budget therefore will have to pirouette around these conflicting demands. But the principal objective should be to keep the growth pot boiling.

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Readers Write