

Energy Crisis & Consumerist Culture: Applying Sociological Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Every year we celebrate December 14 as World Energy Conservation day, however the deliberations in academic and diplomatic discussions have not yielded the desired results in terms of conservation of energy resources in the world. On the other hand, the energy requirements of the world are supposed to rise in future and so is the need for efficient use as well as conservation of the available resources of energy. The amount of energy to be used, the type of resources to be harnessed and the pattern of unorganised or organised distribution of the energy are largely determined by the culture of the societies. The argument put forth in this research paper is that the rising consumer culture in modern societies is leading towards reckless use of energy resources. There is a dire need for refocusing on the critical theories that target the capitalist model of development and try to understand the forces which undermine the critical thinking skills of the individuals. The goal of energy conservation is very difficult to be achieved in the culture of consumerism. This article thus questions the energy scenario of the world based upon the Conflict and Critical perspectives in sociology.

Keywords: World Energy Conservation, consumer, skills, sociology

The Energy requirements of the world are rising. Hence many parts of the world are facing crisis in terms of the shortage of energy. The viable solutions to this crisis are generation of more energy on one hand and the conservation of energy on the other. The countries throughout the world are exploring alternative and

unconventional sources of energy. However, the lack of respect for the existing sources of energy may lead to wastage and shortage of energy sources for the future.

Infact, there is need for more sociological understanding of the consumerist culture of use of energy. The policy makers on the energy choices of the future cannot afford to overlook the symbiotic relation between society and environment. The consumerist culture of our times needs to be questioned and moulded according to the needs of the future, if the sustainability of energy sources has to be maintained.

Necessity of energy & Energy crisis

The energy is the key input in economic growth

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and there is a close link between the availability of energy and future growth of a nation. As the energy consumption is the measure of development today and Energy is defined as the capacity to do work, it means no energy will mean no work. The global economy will always be dependent on energy as it always has been. Also, it is imperative that if the definition and direction of development continues on current lines, more and more energy will be required. The increased use of energy is also necessitated due to rapid rise in population, industrialisation and urbanisation. These factors together have put a pressure on the world to have more and more energy production.

The importance of energy conservation can be easily understood on the basis of the laws of thermodynamics which deal with energy. The first law of thermodynamics tells us that the energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but only be converted from one form to another, it can be directly concluded that no amount of capital, labour or technology can create energy. Instead, available energy must be spent to transform existing renewable sources (e.g. Petrol or Oil) into energy. Alternatively, some energy must be spent to divert an existing energy flow (e.g. wind, water) into more available energy.

The second law of thermodynamics also tells us that energy is wasted at every step in the economic process. The engines like heat engines, e.g. diesel or petrol engines waste more than 50% of the energy contained in their fuel. So we need to have some energy for the use in the task of drawing energy. We know the energy sources are either conventional like coal, oil etc. or the renewable sources like solar energy. Energy crisis has been defined in terms of lesser use of renewable sources over the conventional sources of energy. In a developing country like India, the energy crisis means, energy shortages are more than the availability. Since the fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) reserves of the earth are limited and finite and therein lies our responsibility of optimizing their utilization. The need for energy conservation also arises from the fact that in many parts of the world; the non traditional sources of energy have not become much popular either due to the attitudes of the people or due to higher costs attached to them.

Sociology and energy conservation

The description of Energy crisis of the world has recently become the subject of importance in Sociology. The sociologists reject mere economic and psychological reasons for unequal distribution and crisis of energy management in the world.

We have tried to apply some of the sociological perspectives in understanding the situation. From Durkheimian perspective, the key units of society which are responsible for energy conservation are not individuals, but society. The cultural practices of social groups have definite role in describing whether the individual's decision about whether or not to change their way of using energy. These perspectives view the various elements of social structure such as values, norms as the key determinant of human behaviour. These perspectives ignore the role of the individual in making any decisions with regard to the use of energy. For sociologists like Lutzenhiser (1993) and Aune (2006) thus, the barriers to energy efficiency or conservation are not merely characteristics of individuals, but are the product of cultural lifestyles and demographic patterns.

Lutzenhiser 1993 and Wilhite *et al.* 2000 believe that the social institutions need to be aligned with the cause of energy efficiency if the goal of energy conservation is to be attained. Thus, we should not examine energy consumers in isolation; energy consumption (and conservation) is always a result of social processes in the family, community and institutional level. Thus, Declining household size, increasing mobility and variations in cultural expectations lead to markedly different patterns of energy use.

The branch of sociology called The sociology of technology further confirms the above view by examining how technology and sociology interact in the development of wasteful or efficient practices of energy use. Individual choice is limited by the way cities, energy supply systems, housing designs and products are configured (Wilhite *et al.*, 2000). Thus, change in energy-related behaviour is viewed as part of a larger change in the social and technical organization of 'systems of provision'.

The equitable distribution of resources – a utopia

The Marxian thinkers even today consider that the lack of equity in sources of energy distribution by nature as well as by men has led to a group of people to act as 'haves' and 'have nots'. The technologies for energy use in the developing countries are far out-dated and then the countries which are developed to continue to dictate the policies. However, the data clearly show that the developed countries of the world continue to be the prime consumers of energy.

The new world guided by World Trade Organization and based upon democratic liberalism makes it easier for the people belonging to otherwise divergent cultures to move and settle throughout the globe. Since most of the movements and settlements are for economic reasons, hence towards the developed world. The movements further make the developed world a more energy consuming area. This migration towards the more energy consuming countries is creating a world of 'haves' and 'have nots' amongst the nations and groups within the nation, thereby affecting the social structure and core social institutions of the nations and the world. The shortage of energy results in crisis for the poor and undeveloped countries and the people within the countries. Therefore the poor who are generally more dependent on traditional sources of energy suffer more than the rich. Common example of energy shortage is electricity shortage. The lack of these sources may result in shortage of energy supply in heating and cooking, thus causing problems for the poor. Therefore, a sustained energy crisis may become a humanitarian crisis.

Rationality of our times

The critical thinkers such as Habermas and Marcuse however, focus more on the emancipatory goal of the sociological knowledge. They believe in challenging the established practices of the culture which are causing harm to the society and causing energy crisis. Understanding based upon the critical perspective in sociology leads us to conclude that the energy crisis of the world is caused due to faulty cultural practices. Thus, it is important to note the people's attitude towards this probable rise in energy requirements. The

critical understanding of the role of social institutions in energy conservation must be made to achieve the goal of avoiding an energy crisis in the world.

The religious scriptures, the respect and worship for virtually all kinds of sources of energy, whether they are renewable sources of energy like solar or non-renewable like trees. Sun and tree are worshipped in all parts of the country.

The life style of villages in India had Fuelwood, animal waste, agriculture residues as the traditional sources of energy that continue to meet the bulk of energy requirements in rural India. Since these resources were important for common men and they had a culture of respect for them. However, with the change in culture, these non-commercial fuels are gradually getting replaced by commercial fuels such as coal, lignite, petroleum products and electricity. The commercial fuels now account for 60% of the primary energy supply in India. Thus, the shift in sources of energy from non-commercial to commercial has occurred. The rise in energy requirements are the direct result of the thrust on efficiency in production, deliverance and consumption of every material in the world. The urbanization, mechanisation and the farming activities, industrialization and massive transport systems of the world are the future goals of all the developing nations

The attitude of people towards energy is tilting towards energy consumption with the rise in consumerism in the society. The present generation is fast discarding the attached to trees and other natural resources. The concept of science and technology are the basis of the ongoing trend of rationality of modern times. The increase in the use of machinery and technology seems to be logical.

In the policies on energy, efficiency has superseded energy conservation. The countries of the world, especially developing world is focused on making efficient use of energy. However, the narrow application of the idea of energy efficiency focuses on the technological aspects of energy use and overlooks the human behaviours that drive energy consumption. It makes the assumption that the individuals who use scientific appliances and scientific temperament are

modern and rational. Habermas in his works criticises the instrumental nature of rationality of modern times. The development of knowledge does not lead men to understand the importance of conservation of energy resources. Those who use less of machinery are branded as lacking the development orientation. This has led to a technocratic consciousness. The use of energy consuming devices becomes a sign of progress. People are very slow in congratulating others on the purchase of a bicycle than on the purchase of a car. The alternative sources of energy like solar, bio, wind, ocean, hydrogen and geothermal are yet to be accepted by the modern public.

Responsibility for energy conservation

The shift of public towards the high use of energy is not a problem if it is associated with the culture of energy conservation. The most sensible way to fight shortages in energy is not to cause them in the first place. The society needs to change its attitude towards the definitions of modernisation. The energy requirements of the world are increasing but still the culture of conservation is not visible. This may prove to be catastrophic for the world. The generation of extra energy itself can lead to serious environmental concerns. The overuse has led to raised concern for the problem of environmental pollution. We are all familiar with the degree of pollution we have caused to air, soil and water. Energy sources must produce more energy than they consume, otherwise they can rightly be called sinks.

Progress of a country need to be measured in terms of the amount of energy conserved while not in terms of its consumption. Man must be reminded that he cannot afford to break his evolutionary links with the different sources of energy without risk. The non normative way of returning the nature's gifts of different resources with pollution has to end. These resources, alone can protect the material civilization of today.

There are many unintended consequences of focusing energy policies on energy efficiency. A better understanding of these consequences can lead to improvements in the effectiveness and equity of energy policies by helping to recast policy so that it more fully considers absolute levels of consumption in addition to

technical efficiency. For this there needs to be interaction between conservationists and industrialists. Even the indigenous people need to learn about sustainable lifestyles by conserving the energy.

These normative concepts of energy conservation can be organised and interpreted by reference to the conservation as a philosophy of life in the various cultures of the world, being threatened by the concepts of cosmopolitanism. Concepts like Energy Auditing, energy rationing may be useful in solving the problems of society.

Conclusion

It is everybody's logic that saving energy will help the people in saving money as well as resources for the future. However, the standardization and homogenization brought by industrialisation and globalization caused by the policies of new economic order have led to a consumption oriented society. We need to understand the capitalist agenda of encouraging consumption culture amongst masses. But consumption needs to be matched by the availability of resources. The dialectics between energy requirements of the societies of the future and consumerist culture is bound to lead to a situation of scarcities for some and plenty of others. This can be solved only by the development of alternative technology based upon the sustainability of energy usage. The social institutions and policies thus need to be rediscovered and redesigned in terms of the changing energy scenarios of the world.

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