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# Editorial

## Renewable and Other Alternative Sources of Energy – Reminiscence of a By-gone Era

The current issue of Vidurava takes the traditional clientele of the science magazine on a thought-provoking mission on the technicalities of both renewable and non-renewable energy generation. However, rather than getting entangled in a review of these excellent presentations, it was considered prudent to reminisce on a selected few of events that were extraordinarily significant and unprecedentedly controversial, that lit up the renewable energy generation sector of Sri Lanka in the early 1980's. The information reproduced here for the benefit of our new generation, was derived from a Memoir compiled by the current writer in October 1993, and published by Natural Resources, Energy and Science Authority (NARESA), (predecessor of the National Science Foundation), to commemorate the Silver Jubilee Anniversary of the organization.

In 1980, the National Science Council, (the earliest predecessor of NSF), decided to establish a non-formal body called the "Solar Energy Group" (SEG) on the recommendation of a specialist panel on Physical and Engineering Sciences. The same year, the 'Science and Technology Information Centre' of the National Science Council established the "Renewable Energy Resources Information Service", in order to enable interested scientists and technologists to retrieve the most recent information on Solar, Wind, Biomass and Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion (OTEC) Energy sources.

In 1981, on the request of His Excellency the President, the National Science Council appointed a sub-committee to examine a proposal for a feasibility study on OTEC, submitted by Dr. Arthur C. Clark, the well known science fiction writer on space travel. It was his contention that the coastal belt of Sri Lanka in the neighborhood of Trincomalee, where the coastal sea bed drops sharply down to a depth exceeding one kilometer, provided the ideal conditions for the establishment of an OTEC power generation plant. This sub-committee assessed the materials and financial resources available for an experimental project, and decided to call for quotations from foreign agencies for the supply of materials and equipment, in order to prepare an estimate for the project. However, in the meantime, learning from the experiences and outcomes of similar experimental

projects elsewhere in the world, especially in relation to the safe management, sustenance and maintenance of a massive steel tunnel meant to draw heated deep sea water to the surface from depths exceeding a kilometer for energy conversion, it was decided to abandon the exercise.

The year 1982 marked the occurrence of one of the most controversial episodes in the history of alternate energy generation in Sri Lanka. This happened when the then Minister in Charge of Power and Energy obtained Cabinet approval to establish an Atomic Energy Power Generation Plant in Sri Lanka. This surprisingly unforeseen and outrageous move in obtaining Cabinet approval for such a project came as a 'bolt from the blues' causing in the process an unprecedented uproar, and widespread public protests, demonstrations and processions. It led to serious agitation amongst the scientific community and environmentalists, who demanded a Commission of Inquiry. Responding to these public concerns, the then Head of State referred the matter to NARESA for a resolution after conducting a proper public inquiry. Consequently, the Board of Management of NARESA appointed a specialist Commission of Inquiry with the Late Prof. J.D. Gunawardena as the Chairman, and comprising some of the most experienced and highly qualified scientists and technologists in the country. The present writer functioned as the Convener and Secretary of this Commission.

The deliberations of this Commission of Inquiry took nearly two years to complete, during which the evidence and views of both local and foreign specialists were recorded. Finally the recommendations of the Commission were submitted to the Head of State. One of the key recommendations of the Commission was that, although the possibility exists for the establishment of an Atomic Energy Power Plant in Sri Lanka, the preliminary preparations including training of a workforce with the required expertise, skills and high level of discipline, was expected to take more than 20 years. With this finding, the controversial Cabinet decision was rescinded and the subject was shelved.

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