Nuclear Power in India: The Clash of Risk Perceptions and the Theatre of Distrust

Ms. Catherine Wong Mei Ling
PhD Candidate, School of Sociology, Australian National University

ABSTRACT

The nuclear debate in India, particularly in the Post-Fukushima climate has been characterised by extreme polarisation and (at times) violent clashes of risk perceptions. The dominant theoretical approaches to risk perception (e.g., Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) and Trust Studies) provide significant insights to the underlying causes for these conflicts. But not only do they tend to lapse into normative arguments for greater public participation, they also pander to a neatly polarised debate, further reinforcing the intellectual, social and political distance between the nuclear establishment (experts) and the public (non-experts). Drawing on Actor-Network Theory, this talk proposes an alternative approach by conceptualising the clash of risk perceptions as a performance rather than just the outcome of conflicting social constructs and value systems. Drawing on interview data with the senior management of the Indian nuclear establishment and anti-nuclear activists, I will show that: 1) there is a marked difference in the performance of distrust on the “front stage” (i.e., the media, publications and other public domains of debate) and the “backstage” (i.e., one-to-one interviews with the author), 2) the nuclear establishment and the public, in fact, converge on a number of important issues more than is presented in the public sphere, and have more overlapping interests than is recognised in the current debate, and 3) there are important voices of moderation that occur in the backstage that can help depolarise the nuclear debate and open new spaces for more deliberative approaches to risk governance. These findings are of conceptual and practical significance. Conceptually, the performative approach brings the minority voices of moderation into the analytical fold of risk perceptions, thus enabling the de-construction of pre-dialogue positioning that polarise the nuclear debate. This also has practical implications for the creation of new institutions, social processes and mechanisms that allow more meaningful and constructive dialogue between the nuclear establishment and the public.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Catherine is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University, School of Sociology. Her dissertation is on nuclear power in India, with particular interest in organisational risk perception, risk management, safety culture and risk governance. Her theoretical analysis is drawn from a multidisciplinary approach including environmental sociology, science and technology studies (STS) and organisational theory. Prior to her PhD, she had worked as a business planning analyst at Hewlett Packard, a journalist for The Business Times and The Straits Times, and a research associate at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. She continues to write travel articles for newspapers and magazines as a freelancer while on snowboarding and surfing expeditions.

DATE

Wednesday, 19 February 2014

TIME

3.00pm to 4.30pm

VENUE

Malay Studies Seminar Room, AS7 #04-13, Kent Ridge Campus, NUS