



THE MYTH OF INDIA'S IMPECCABLE NON-PROLIFERATION RECORD

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On May 6, 2021, the Indian authorities seized 7.1 kg of uranium from two Indian citizens, Jigar Jayesh Pandya and Abu Tahir Afzal Husain Choudhary, a scrap dealer, in Mumbai. The Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) in Mumbai, pointed out that uranium was highly radioactive and dangerous to human life. This raises several issues and concerns. It raises the question of whether this was an isolated incident or one in a string of such incidents over the years. Examining the record of the last few decades it becomes apparent that this is not an isolated incident. There are dozens of such incidents spanned over the last 3-4 decades. It debunks the myth of India's impeccable non-proliferation record. It puts a huge question mark over India's nuclear safety and security record. What does it mean for India, the international non-proliferation efforts and for neighbouring countries like Pakistan which could become the target of terrorist activities in the form of crude nuclear bombs also known as dirty bombs.

The incident raises serious concerns. The seized uranium which was unprocessed is worth US\$2.9 million. It is believed that it has been stolen or illegally mined. It is unclear what the two individuals intended to do with it but it would likely have ended up in the international black market. This does, however, point to serious gaps in the state control mechanism. Pakistan has already raised concern over the issue. Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesman, Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri, said that "We have noted

with serious concern the reports about the seizure of more than 7 kg of natural uranium from unauthorised persons in India.”¹ He further said that “There is a need for a thorough investigation of the matter as to how such sizeable quantity of uranium could become available outside any state control and identify the gaps which made this possible.”² India should report the incident to the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA’s) Incident and Tracking Data Base mechanism since such material could end up in the hands of unauthorised personnel or non-state actors.

Pakistan government has not reported the incident to the IAEA. However, Chairman Institute of Research and Reforms (IRR) and ex-senator Abdul Rehman Malik has urged the IAEA to take serious notice of continuous nuclear proliferation by India and called for an investigation on such incidents in a letter written to the IAEA Director General, Rafael Mariano Grossi. In his letter, he demanded a detailed investigation by the IAEA because the BJP government is controlled by extremists and cannot be trusted. He also requested the IAEA to refer the case of nuclear proliferation to FATF as it is too serious to be ignored. He asserted that the threat of a dirty bomb is a bigger threat than actual terrorism and money laundering.³

India’s nuclear safety and security record is blemished with dozens of such incidents. Here are some known incidents:⁴

- In 1994 Meghalaya Police seized 2.5 kg of semi-processed uranium from a gang of four smugglers in the Domiasiat region.
- In 1998, a federal politician was arrested near the West Bengal border with 100 kg of uranium from India’s Jadugoda mining complex.
- In July 1998, the CBI unearthed a major racket in the theft of uranium in Tamil Nadu, with the seizure of over 8 kg of the nuclear material.

¹ “Pakistan Calls for Probe into Seizure of Uranium in India,” *Dawn*, May 9, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1622839>

² Ibid.

³ “Malik asks IAEA to take Notice of Nuclear Proliferation by India,” *The News*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/833627-malik-asks-iaea-to-take-notice-of-nuclear-proliferation-by-india>

⁴ Adrian Levy and Jeffery Smith, “India’s Nuclear Explosive Materials are Vulnerable to Theft, US Officials and Experts Say,” December 17, 2015, <https://publicintegrity.org/national-security/indias-nuclear-explosive-materials-are-vulnerable-to-theft-u-s-officials-and-experts-say/>, and Malik Qasim Mustafa, Ghazala Yasmin Jalil and Tahir Mahmood Azad, “Pakistan and India: Non-Proliferation Credentials,” Nuclear Paper Series No. 2, Islamabad Papers 2016, Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.

- In May 2000, Mumbai police seized 8.3 kg of uranium. It was termed as depleted but radioactive uranium by the BARC. The source of this uranium theft – as cited by the police – had been a local hospital, the Leelavati hospital, in Bandra.
- Again in November 2000, the Indian intelligence seized 25 kg of highly radioactive uranium from a scrap dealer in Bibi Cancer Hospital
- In August 2001, Police in the Indian state of West Bengal arrested two men with more than 200 grams of semi-processed uranium.
- In 2003, a group was caught in a village on the Bangladesh border with 225 grams of milled uranium allegedly illicitly purchased from a mining employee that they said they intended to wrap around explosives. Indian authorities initially claimed it was from Kazakhstan but concluded later it was more likely from a uranium mining complex at Jadugoda, in eastern India.
- In December 2006, a container packed with radioactive material was stolen from a fortified research facility in eastern India.
- In 2008, another criminal gang was caught attempting to smuggle low-grade uranium from one of India's state-owned mines across the border to Nepal.
- In 2008, another group was caught moving an illicit stock of uranium over the border to Bangladesh, the gang having been assisted by the son of an employee at India's Atomic Minerals Division, which supervises uranium mining and processing.
- In 2009, a nuclear reactor employee in southwest India deliberately poisoned dozens of his colleagues with a radioactive isotope apparently due to numerous gaps in plant security.
- In 2013, leftist guerillas in northeast India illegally obtained uranium ore from a government-run milling complex in northeast India and strapped it to high explosives to make a crude bomb before being caught by police, according to an inspector involved in the case.
- In 2016, Indian police seized almost 9kg of depleted uranium in the Thane area of Maharashtra.
- In 2018, a uranium smuggling group was arrested by the Kolkata police with 1 kg of radioactive material. The smugglers were reportedly trying to sell uranium worth about \$440,000.

Moreover, according to an Indian parliamentary report, 147 mishaps or security-related occurrences were reported in Indian atomic energy plants between 1995 and 1998. Out of these instances, 28 were acute and nine of them occurred in nuclear power installations.⁵

These are only some of the incidents that were reported. There may be dozens more that were never reported to the press. Given the long list of nuclear thefts, an analysis by the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) expressed concern over the presence of a nuclear mafia in India and organised crime relating to nuclear materials.⁶ This is a source of concern as the effects of nuclear theft go beyond national borders and may lead to nuclear terrorism that should be an issue of international concern.

According to the Nuclear Threat Initiative's (NTI) nuclear security index, in 2014 India ranked 23 among 25 countries that possess bomb's-worth of fissile materials. India fared only above Iran and North Korea. The NTI analysis noted that India's stockpiles are growing and said the country's nuclear regulator lacked independence from political interference and adequate authority.⁷ In 2020 ranking India is number 20 with no change since 2018. In comparison, Pakistan ranked 19 in 2020, one position above India. Pakistan was highlighted as the most improved country in the theft ranking improving its overall score by 7 points due to strengthened laws and regulations.⁸

This is only one aspect of India's proliferation activities. There is also a history of other proliferation activities by India. It includes illicit heavy water acquisitions, centrifuge know-how leakage, illicit procurements,⁹ aided by a poorly implemented national export control regime and diversion of civil nuclear assistance for weapons use. To date the most glaring example of its proliferation activity is India's 1974 nuclear explosion, for which India diverted nuclear fuel from the Canadian reactors, supplied for peaceful purposes under the 'Atoms for Peace' programme, to conduct its nuclear test. As such, India became the first country to divert peaceful nuclear resources towards weapons use.

⁵ Ritu Sarin, "Hunt for Yellow Cake," *Indian Express*, June 4, 1998.

⁶ Dr. Shireen Mazari and Maria Sultan, "Nuclear Safety and Terrorism: A Case Study of India," Issue 19, Islamabad Papers 2001, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI)

⁷ Levy and Smith, "India's Nuclear Explosive Materials."

⁸ "Australia Ranks 1st, Pakistan is Most Improved," <https://www.ntiindex.org/news/australia-ranks-1st-pakistan-is-most-improved/>

⁹ For details see David Albright and Susan Basu, "India's Gas Centrifuge Program: Stopping Illicit Procurement and the Leakage of Technical Centrifuge Know-How," Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) Report (March 10, 2006), <http://isisonline.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/indianprocurement.pdf>, and David Albright and Susan Basu, "Neither a Determined Proliferator nor a Responsible Nuclear State," ISIS Report (April 5, 2006), <http://isisonline.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/indiacritique.pdf> and Mustafa, Jalil and Azad, "Pakistan and India."

Ironically, the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) was created in the wake of this explosion specifically aimed at preventing the diversion of civil nuclear technology for military purposes in future.

India's dismal record is apparent but Washington and others have chosen not to press India for tougher security measures. On the contrary, India is being built up as a responsible nuclear state and is being granted the NSG waivers so that the US and other states like France and Japan can do civil nuclear trade with India. Moreover, the US is lobbying for India's membership to the NSG. India is being portrayed as a country with an impeccable non-proliferation record.

However, with the US and other countries ready to enhance civil nuclear cooperation with India, the safety and security of its nuclear installations is a matter of greater concern and urgency, as insecure facilities and assets could lead to greater onward proliferation or nuclear terrorism.

India's non-proliferation record is far from unblemished as it has a long list of documented breaches. The incidents of reported nuclear materials theft may just be the tip of the iceberg. There is a history of unauthorised possession of radioactive material in India. Other proliferation activities include illicit heavy water acquisitions, centrifuge know-how leakage, poorly implemented national export control regime and diversion of civil nuclear assistance for weapons use. India needs to implement strict control over nuclear materials and a robust regime to prevent such materials from ending up in the nuclear black market. Incidents of nuclear theft and security breaches must be investigated at the international level. The US and Western powers must dispense with double standards and narratives of India as a "responsible nuclear state" India with an "impeccable non-proliferation record." Their efforts to bring India into the ambit of "nuclear normalcy" should not ignore New Delhi's proliferation record and dismal safety and security history.