



Indians rally against nuclear power

By
Praful Bidwai



If the Indian government thought it could politically isolate the growing nation-wide anti-nuclear struggle, it is manifestly mistaken. Three important developments have put the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) and Nuclear Power Corporation of India (NPCIL) on the back foot.

First, the National Committee in Solidarity with the Jaitapur Struggle, comprising Centre-Left leaders and experts, has issued a powerful statement against the proposed Jaitapur project in Maharashtra, based on six huge (1,650 megawatt) reactors of the French company Areva, warning of grave safety issues and exorbitant costs.

Second, India's first big People's Hearing on all major nuclear plants was held on August 22 in Delhi, which bears testimony to the growing anti-nuclear public sentiment. This developed a new informed consensus on alternatives.

And third, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) published a report on India's nuclear regulator, the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, documenting serious organizational flaws and sloppy practices, raising a question-mark over the safety of India's perennially crisis-bound, accident-prone, money-guzzling nuclear power programme.

The National Committee on Jaitapur includes heavyweights like Communist leaders Prakash Karat and AB Bardhan, and lawmakers from half-a-dozen parties, besides independent scientists. It holds the project wasn't subjected to "independent rigorous scientific techno-economic scrutiny and safety audit", but granted "conditional" clearance based on an "unscientific and deeply flawed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Report" by an institute which is "admittedly" incompetent to evaluate nuclear hazards.

It argues that Areva's "untested" European Pressurised Reactor design has raised "serious concerns" among various countries' nuclear safety agencies and in "an internal audit of the French nuclear industry". The power generator Electricity de France "may be planning to discontinue" it.

The EPRs under construction in Finland and France are in dire trouble on safety issues, and plagued by four-year-plus delays and 130 percent-plus cost overruns. Areva is perilously close to bankruptcy, has announced major job cuts and project cancellations, and lost 90 percent of its share value since 2007. It's unlikely that the EPR "would today pass even an elementary test of techno-economic due diligence".

At Jaitapur, multiple reactors will be erected at one location, aggravating hazards, as happened at Fukushima. The EPR has a flawed design for spent-fuel storage. As Fukushima showed, the spent-fuel hazard "is not less than that from the reactor itself". NPCIL also dismisses the possibility of seismic hazards at Jaitapur. But eminent geophysicists Vinod Gaur and Roger Bilham argue in a peer-reviewed journal that a severe earthquake can occur at Jaitapur. Recent historical data on seismicity near the site cannot be taken as a guide to future risks.

The EPRs' capital costs would be Rs24 crores per MW, compared to Rs9 crores for indigenous reactors. This will make Jaitapur's power ruinously expensive. The NPCIL cannot counter these unassailable arguments. But it's bent on imposing the project on an unwilling people while violating their fundamental right to safety of life and limb.

Logically, the National Committee in Solidarity with the Jaitapur Struggle should extend similar arguments to the Koodankulam reactors being erected in Tamil Nadu and demand their scrapping. There was at least an EIA for Jaitapur, but not even a token one for Koodankulam. Like all Russian reactors, the Koodankulam reactors probably have numerous design flaws, including inadequate and unreliable emergency cooling, poor evacuation procedures, and non-factoring of earthquake hazards.

Their already-high costs have further risen with eight-year-long construction delays. The first reactor's pressure vessel has a weld in the middle, which is impermissible. Serious questions have been raised about volcanic activity near Koodankulam, its vulnerability to tsunamis owing to certain ocean-bed formations, and the crucial absence of

an independent freshwater source. The station will depend on a seawater desalination plant. This can fail; and there's no backup. The NPCIL has failed to furnish vital documents to the public including the Site Evaluation Report and Safety Analysis Report, although it was directed to do so by the Central Information Commission. It also didn't conduct the mandatory off-site emergency evacuation drill within a 16-kilometre zone.

The government set up sarkari scientists' committees to assure the public of the plant's safety. This was a sham. They never met the people or experts nominated by them. Meanwhile, the police have framed false charges including "waging war on the state" against thousands. It has turned village Idinthakarai near Koodankulam into a prison for protestors. Shamefully, in breach of its own procedures, the AERB has granted clearance to NPCIL to start loading nuclear fuel into the first reactor. But as the CAG points out, this is characteristic of the irresponsible functioning of the nuclear establishment.

This functioning, marked by non-transparency, evasion, deception, outright lies – and blatant repression – came in for incisive criticism at the August 22 People's Hearing in Delhi. This was attended by scores of activists from Gorakhpur-Fatehabad (Haryana), Chutka (Madhya Pradesh), Kovvada (Andhra), Banswara and Rawatbhata (Rajasthan), and Haripur (West Bengal), besides Koodankulam and Jaitapur, who have been fighting against proposed nuclear plants for years.

In Gorakhpur, daily protests completed two years on August 17, just as a relay hunger-strike clocked a year in Koodankulam. Jaitapur has witnessed angry anti-nuclear protests since 2007. The people of Haripur, fighting since 2006, savoured victory when the project was scrapped in 2010. But there are misguided plans to revive it. The activists' testimonies, supplemented by expert opinions, were heard by jurors comprising Aruna Roy, member of the UPA's National Advisory Council, L Ramdas, former Indian Navy chief, and former Tripura Director General of Police KS Subramaniam.

The jurors recommended a moratorium on new nuclear projects and a thorough, independent review of all existing nuclear installations. No project must be pushed without prior, informed consent of the people. All false cases against protestors must be withdrawn. There are safe, environmentally sound and far cheaper alternatives to nuclear power, especially renewable sources.

Finally, the CAG report is a damning indictment of the AERB's failure to fulfil the mandate given in 1983 to be the paramount standard-setting authority and an independent safety regulator. The DAE ensured that, legally, the AERB continued to be "an authority subordinate to the Central government, with powers delegated to it by the latter" – unlike in countries like the US, Canada or France. "Consequently, the AERB has no rule-making powers." The AERB never fulfilled the requirement to prepare an overall nuclear and radiation safety policy. It has failed to develop as many as 27 of the 168 standards, codes and guides it had itself identified as essential.

The AERB has no independent budget, staff or equipment. It has no role in radiological surveillance of nuclear plants and in independently monitoring workers' health. It has no direct involvement in overseeing on-site emergency drills, nor the authority to get their inadequacies corrected. Even for serious safety infringements, the penalties are absurdly low (eg Rs500). The AERB doesn't have the powers of enforcement and levying of penalties.

The AERB doesn't even have a full inventory of nuclear materials and radiation sources. Ninety-one percent of India's X-ray units aren't registered with it. It has developed no framework for decommissioning nuclear plants. Judged as an effective regulator, the AERB is "on very tenuous ground". It's in such careless hands that the responsibility to protect millions of Indians against nuclear hazards is placed.

The writer, a former newspaper editor, is a researcher and peace and human-rights activist based in Delhi. Email: prafulbidwai1@yahoo.co.in

Praful Bidwai, "Indians rally against nuclear power," *The News*. 03-09-2012.

Keywords: Political science, Political issues, Political crisis, Atomic energy, Law making, Navy-India, Nuclear power, Nuclear protest, National issues-India, Prakash Karat, Vinod Gaur, Roger Bilham, Aruna Roy, India, Delhi, Canada, United States, AERB, DAE, CAG, NPCIL