

Road to Disaster

Political Left in India has no viable domestic agenda to fight the many challenges it encounter. It offers no solution, political or social, to the grievances of the broad masses, nor any plans to address the impending humanitarian crisis the country might face in the event of rapid nuclearisation, particularly after prime minister Manmohan Singh's much-publicised mission to Moscow. The left of all shades is increasingly seen as weak and static. Even the far left working within the parliamentary arena looks reluctant to highlight the grave danger of India's nuclearisation drive. That Russians are coming in a big way to build atomic reactors along India's eastern coast is a fact of life. Not for nothing prime minister described the inter-governmental framework agreement with Russia, for civil nuclear cooperation as a "major step" forward and he was more than satisfied at the smooth development of bilateral nuclear business.

While detailing the specifics about nuclear cooperation with Russia prime minister was categorical enough to unfold his government's programme to build a nuclear power plant at Haripur, located in coastal Midnapore. Way back in May-June 2006, the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL) hit upon Haripur as the most suitable site for atomic power complex in eastern India. In Moscow prime minister just reiterated NPCIL words sending shivers down the spines of the people of Haripur and its adjoining areas.

On November 28, 2006, a 15000 strong rally announced the formation of *Haripur Paramanu Bidyut Prakalpa Pratirodh Andolan* [Haripur atomic power project resistance movement] to fight the menace called nuclear power plant and catastrophe associated with it. National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) was basically instrumental in launching Haripur anti-nuclear movement as fishers would be severely affected due to this Haripur tragedy. It is yet to be assessed how many thousands would be evicted from their land and livelihood. In 2006 NFF organised protest marches throughout the eastern coastal region of India explaining the impending nuclear hazards and human cost because of the government's anti-people policy. November 21 was World Fishworkers Day and some ten thousand fishers marched through Contai and convened a successful people's convention against the proposed nuclear power plant at Haripur. Also, three or four days back the people of Haripur and its adjoining localities blockaded the road and prevented the NPCIL expert team and a huge police contingent from inspecting the site. Since then the Haripur movement has been dormant as the centre and the CPM-led state government, apprehending a violent backlash decided to lie low and carry on their nuclear designs surreptitiously.

Incidentally, no political party, left or right, came forward to share the agony of Haripur people. It remains to be seen whether Haripur goes the Nandigram way because so many people cutting across party loyalty, would be affected, not in the distant future.

The communist left never realised the gravity of the nuclear problem even when they were not in power. And now being an integral part of the ruling elite, they are determined to execute the Centre's nuclear power programme at any cost, even by resorting to fascistic methods to terrorise people.

The nuclear establishment in India is notorious in downplaying the danger arising from nuclear hazards that flow quite naturally from every nuclear entity, civilian or military. The ‘Kaiga’ contamination incident is a recent phenomenon and yet people know little about it. The contamination of at least 55 workers at the Kaiga nuclear power plant didn’t get much attention to parliamentarians as they were busy to debate over the Liberhan Commission Report. The Bharatiya Janata Party may be grateful to Congress for reviving the Babri Mosque question at a time when they desperately need something to agitate for. ‘Liberhan’ controversy is an ideal staple for them. But ‘Kaiga’ is a serious matter and the official explanation of a “disgruntled” employee causing mischief raises more questions than it answers. An accident is an accident. It doesn’t matter whether it is caused by a natural calamity, or by operation error, or by instrument or design failure or through a deliberate act of sabotage. The Kaiga incident in which drinking water at a cooler was adulterated by tritium, took place on November 25 and it was only on the 28th November that both print media and television got hold of the tritium contamination story. In 1991 on July 27, something very similar reportedly took place at the heavy water plant run by the Department of Atomic Energy at Rawatbhata in Rajasthan and as usual the authorities downplayed the danger.

The point at issue is how to confront the government’s massive nuclearisation drive. Barring a few NGOs and a section of civic society no political party shows any interest in anti-nuclear agitation. All of them seem to be in the same boat—the leaking nuclear boat. Meanwhile, the nuclear lobby, doubly encouraged by Manmohan Singh’s Russia visit continues to feed the notion that nuclear energy is safe and clean which, it is not. ☐☐☐