

## **INDIA: THOUSANDS FAST AGAINST KOODANKULAM**

Launched in August, the anti-Koodankulam struggle, coordinated by People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy, is not a sudden upsurge against the 2x1000 MW reactors that were scheduled to attain criticality one after the other within this year. It was a continuous process that started around 24 years ago when the project was conceptualised by the then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. This long struggle at Koodankulam now has its reflections on various other nuclear projects in the country.

On November 23, the latest phase of the people's struggle against the Koodankulam nuclear power project in Tamil Nadu (India) entered its 100th day. It began August 16 at Idinthakarai and is spearheaded by the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE). The relay fast against the plant entered its 5th week two days earlier.

As of November 17, police said they have registered 76 cases for various offences including unlawful assembly, use of place of worship for propagating against the government, spreading rumors, instigating protests, preventing government employees from doing their work and public nuisance. Police have booked several persons, including its leader S P Udhayakumar, a bishop, and social activist Medha Patkar on different counts.

As the stir against Koodankulam spread to the seas on November 21, police swiftly slapped sedition charges against protestors saying that they moved too close to the plant. The police registered cases against 3,015 persons, under various sections, including 121 (waging war against country) and 124-A (sedition).

As, on November 21, the relay fast against the plant entered its 35th day at Idinthakarai, people from the fishing community from Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts had in large numbers laid siege to the seas off the project site, with black flags hoisted on their boats.

Sasi, a fisherman from Idinthakarai, said that fishermen from Idinthakarai in 460 fiber boats took part in the protest and reached up to the restricted area of the Koodankulam nuclear plant. At the same time hundreds of women staged a protest on the shore shouting slogans against the nuclear power plant. Around 700 policemen were deployed around the plant.

An earlier hunger-strike impelled the Tamil Nadu cabinet to demand suspension of the reactors' construction until people's apprehensions about nuclear hazards are allayed.

The movement against the two 1,000 MW reactors being built by the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL) in Tirunelveli district's Koodankulam area, about 650 km from here, began Aug 16 at Idinthakarai and is spearheaded by the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE). The struggle is now in its third phase as there were two breaks in the relay fast - the first between Sep 21-Oct 9 and the second break on Oct 17 for the local governing body elections.

The staying power of the activists and the support from the local people has put the spotlight on Koodankulam. "Once the fishermen decide on a thing, they remain steadfast. As to the funds, the fishermen's association in each village chips in with funds. There are no major expenses for us except water and the tent. It is a fasting protest so there is no expense on food," M. Pushparayan, convener of the Coastal People's Federation and a PMANE leader, said. He continued saying fishing villages which participate in the relay fast take care of the expenses for their team.

As the local people determinedly continue to resist the commissioning of the Kudankulam reactors, the statements of the nuclear establishment have acquired a desperate edge. The chief of the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) claimed that a “foreign hand” was behind the protests. But, as one activist replied: “It is not the people’s movement that has foreign backing, but the government that has foreign forces behind its decision as India’s main nuclear suppliers are Russia, America and France.”

The former President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, assured the locals that the reactors were “100% safe,” The idea that any technology, especially a complex hazard-prone one like a nuclear power, is '100 percent safe' is patently unscientific. All technologies carry finite risks. The more complicated, energy-dense, and dependent on high-pressure high-temperature systems they are, the higher the risk.

There is a very simple indirect test by means of which even a non-expert can evaluate the question of nuclear safety. If there was really a “0% chance” of an accident, why would nuclear vendors work so hard to indemnify themselves? Atomstroyeksport, the vendor of the Kudankulam plant is protected by a special intergovernmental agreement, which would prevent victims from suing it in the event of an accident. Companies like Westinghouse are holding back on reactor sales to India, since the new liability law includes some very mild liability for suppliers. When nuclear companies are unwilling to stake their financial health on these claims of “100% safety,” how can the government ask local residents to risk their lives?

Kalam also argued that nuclear energy is India's ticket to modernity and prosperity. Such claims go back several decades; for example, Jawaharlal Nehru compared the “Atomic Revolution” to the “Industrial Revolution,” arguing that “either you go ahead with it or ... others go ahead, and you ... gradually drag yourself.” However, in the intervening half century, atomic energy has failed to live up to its promise, and the idea that it is linked to progress and economic success is now both clichéd and historically inaccurate.

**Sources:** The Hindu, 12 November 2011 / Tirunelveli (TN), 17 November 2011 / New Indian Express, 22 November 2011 / Express News Service, 23 November 2011