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THE AFTERMATH OF FUKUSHIMA IN INDIA

The three-in-one disaster at Fukushima has stirred human consciousness all over the world. On the one hand, it has prompted Germany's decision of phasing out nuclear energy by the year 2022, Italians' overwhelming vote against nuclear power in a national referendum, and some 20,000 Swiss citizens' rallying against nuclear power and so forth. Even the Chinese government put all its nuclear activities on hold and decided to do stocktaking before proceeding any further.

WISE India - On the other hand, Fukushima has evoked a totally different and horrendous response from other quarters. India is a case in point. The chief of Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) tried to explain away Fukushima accidents as "chemical explosions" and the chief of Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd. (NPCIL) claimed that the Indian nuclear power plants were all away from earthquake-prone zones. The Prime Minister of India tried to reassure the nation that the Indian nuclear power plants were all safe. He did not elaborate on what made him feel so confident or what steps he had taken to evaluate the safety standards and procedures at the Indian nuclear power plants.

This kind of lame excuses and false promises only made the people of India wearier about the whole nuclear power program. To add insult to injury, Manmohan Singh cabinet chose April 26, 2011, the 25th anniversary of Chernobyl Day, to issue an official statement that they would persist with the nuclear power program. This slap on the face of every Indian on a sensitive day betrayed the real values and loyalties of the government.

The Congress party-ruled states such as Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh where French and American nuclear power parks are coming up are working overtime to facilitate these anti-people but pro-corporate projects. But the chief minister Mamta Banerjee of West Bengal asked the central government to cancel the Haripur project with Russian collaboration and pronounced that they would not welcome any nuclear power plant anywhere in her state.

In Tamil Nadu, however, all the political parties tend to see the nuclear power project as a developmental project and have never raised their voice against the Koodankulam or Kalpakkam or the Neutrino project coming up in Theni district. The People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy has been protesting against the Koodankulam project from the very beginning. Although we enjoy much support and sympathy in coastal villages where people live in harmony with Nature and will be the first victims of any nuclear calamity, people in the interior areas and the middle class have been generally indifferent. But watching Fukushima plants explode and the Japanese citizens flee the triple-tragedy on their TV screens, our people realize the intensity of the danger we are facing.

When the Koodankulam authorities gear up to start the first unit of 1,000 MW plant within a few months of Fukushima, the local people do take offense. When the former tries to conduct a safety drill, the local people get alert and angry. Safety instructions ask them to cover their noses and mouths and to enter the nearest building and close the doors. While the state government claims that 0-5 km area is sterilization zone, the Koodankulam authorities say informally that nobody will be displaced. This kind of confusions and carefully-concealed decisions do not help the people to feel confident.

On August 11, 2011, thousands of people from Koodankulam gathered around the local Catholic Church and demonstrated against the nuclear power plant. A local activist, Advocate Sivasubramanian phoned me and asked me to go to Koodankulam immediately. We organized the demonstration as best as possible and asked people to be careful and nonviolent as we did not want the emerging uprising to be crushed by the state power. The crowd of thousands of people was very cooperative and responsible although the presence of several drunkards, police informers, friends of vested interests and the ever-growing strength of police was a cause to worry.

As this demo was going on in Koodankulam, we received a message that people in the neighboring fishing village, Idinthakarai were ringing the bell in their church and gathering around the parish priest's house. We were invited to go and talk to them. We arranged a group of young people to lead a hunger strike at Koodankulam, and a few of us rushed to that fishing village and held a discussion. People took decisions such as boycotting fishing, keeping children away from schools, a complete shut down of shops and facilities, hoisting black flags in front of the houses, returning the government ration cards (which serve as important Identity card) and passing a resolution at the Village Council on the Independence Day (August 15) against the Koodankulam plant.

We held a planning meeting at Nagercoil on August 13 and decided that our only demand was closing down the Koodankulam plants and that we would avoid processions and marches that carry a good degree of vulnerability and stick to nonviolent hunger strikes.

On August 14, we visited the villages of Koothankuli, Koodankulam and Idinthakarai and conducted planning meetings. On the Independence Day (August 15) the Village Councils of Koodankulam, Vijayapathi, Koothankuli and Levingipuram passed resolutions to close down the Koodankulam nuclear power plant. On August 16, more than 10,000 people gathered for the hunger strike and we also formed an administrative committee, finance committee, and legal cell to lead the struggle.

On August 17, we started our three-day hunger strike at Koodankulam and thousands of men and women gathered for that. Police had denied permission on the 16th midnight but we defied that and went ahead with the strike. We heard that police was planning to break up our peaceful demonstration by force and we contacted the authorities to protest against it. They invited us for talks and requested us to halt all our demos in return for the cancellation of the safety drills. We reached an agreement that we would not hold any massive campaigns until September 7. But on August 27, 2011 the DAE chief announced that they would start the first unit of Koodankulam nuclear power plant in September 2011. Since this nullifies the ongoing dialogue, we convened our administrative committee meeting on August 30 at Idinthakarai and decided to resume our struggle. After all, India is still a democracy and Indian citizens have been guaranteed the rights to life and livelihood by our Constitution.