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Environment

The truth behind India's nuclear renaissance

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Jaitapur's French-built nuclear plant is a disaster in waiting, jeopardising biodiversity and local livelihoods. The global "nuclear renaissance" touted a decade ago has not materialised. The US's nuclear industry remains starved of new reactor orders since 1973, and western Europe's first reactor after Chernobyl (1986) is in serious trouble in Finland – 42 months behind schedule, 90% over budget, and in bitter litigation.

But India is forging ahead to create an artificial nuclear renaissance by quadrupling its nuclear capacity by 2020 and then tripling it by 2030 by pumping billions into reactor imports from France, Russia and America, and further subsidising the domestic Nuclear Power Corporation of India (NPCIL).

The first victim of this will be an extraordinarily precious ecosystem in the Konkan region of the mountain range that runs along India's west coast. This is one of the world's biodiversity "hotspots" and home to 6,000 species of flowering plants, mammals, birds and amphibians, including 325 threatened ones. It is the source of two major rivers. Botanists say it's India's richest area for endemic plants. With its magical combination of virgin rainforests, mountains and sea, it puts Goa in the shade.

NPCIL is planning to install six 1,650-MW reactors here, at Jaitapur in Maharashtra's Ratnagiri district, based on the European Pressurised Reactor (EPR) design of the French company Areva – the very same that's in trouble in Finland. The government has forcibly acquired 2,300 acres under a colonial law, ignoring protests. As construction begins, mountains will be flattened, trees uprooted, harbours razed, and a flourishing farming, horticultural and fisheries economy destroyed, jeopardising 40,000 people's survival.

To rationalise this ecocide, the government declared the area "barren". This is a horrendous lie, says India's best-known ecologist Madhav Gadgil, who heads the environment ministry's expert panel on its ecology. As I discovered during a visit to Jaitapur, there's hardly a patch of land that's not green with paddy, legumes, cashew, pineapple and coconut. So rich are its fisheries that they pay workers three times the statutory minimum wage, a rarity in India.

Jaitapur's villagers are literate. They know about Chernobyl, radiation, and the nuclear waste problem. They have seen films on injuries inflicted on villagers like them by Indian uranium mines and reactors – including cancers, congenital deformities and involuntary abortions. They don't want the Jaitapur plant. Of the 2,275 families whose land was forcibly acquired, 95% have refused to collect compensation, including one job per family. The offer provokes derision, as does Indo-French "co-operation". When Nicolas Sarkozy visited India to sell EPRs, Jaitapur saw the biggest demonstration against him [see below].

The EPR safety design hasn't been approved by nuclear regulators anywhere. Finnish, British and French regulators have raised 3,000 safety issues including control, emergency-cooling and safe shutdown systems. A French government-appointed expert has recommended modifications to overcome the EPR's problems. Modifications will raise its cost beyond ₹5.7bn. Its unit generation costs will be three times higher than those for wind or coal. India had a nightmarish experience with Enron, which built a white elephant power plant near Jaitapur, nearly bankrupting Maharashtra's electricity board.

Jaitapur's people are more concerned about being treated as sub-humans by the state, which has unleashed savage repression, including hundreds of arrests, illegal detentions and orders prohibiting peaceful assemblies. Eminent citizens keen to express solidarity with protesters were banned, including a former supreme court judge, the

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Communist party's secretary and a former Navy chief. Gadgil too was prevented. A former high court judge was detained illegally for five days. Worse, a Maharashtra minister recently threatened that "outsiders" who visit Jaitapur wouldn't be "allowed to come out" (alive).

This hasn't broken the people's resolve or resistance. They have launched their own forms of Gandhian non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Elected councillors from 10 villages have resigned. People boycotted a 18 January public hearing in Mumbai convened to clear "misconceptions" about nuclear power. They refused to hoist the national flag, as is traditionally done, on Republic Day (26 January). They have decided not to sell food to officials. When teachers were ordered to teach pupils about the safety of nuclear reactors, parents withdrew children from school for a week.

The peaceful campaign, with all its moral courage, hasn't moved the government. It accepted an extraordinarily sloppy environmental assessment report on Jaitapur, which doesn't consider biodiversity and nuclear safety, or even mention radioactive waste. It subverted the law on environment-related public hearings. It cleared the project six days before Sarkozy's visit.

Why the haste? India's nuclear establishment has persistently missed targets and delivered a fraction of the promised electricity – under 3% – with dubious safety. It was in dire straits till it conducted nuclear explosions in 1998, which raised its status within India's national-chauvinist elite – and its budget. The major powers have "normalised" India's nuclear weapons through special exceptions in global nuclear commerce rules. France used these to drive a bargain for cash-strapped Areva. Its counterpart is the disaster-in-waiting called Jaitapur.

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Villagers, activists protest Nicolas Sarkozy-backed Jaitapur plant
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By Alok Deshpande | Place: Mumbai | Agency: DNA

Coinciding with the visit of French president Nicolas Sarkozy to India, thousands of people on Saturday staged a protest near Jaitapur, the site of the proposed one-trillion-rupee nuclear power project to be built in collaboration with France-based company Areva.

The state-run Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) is expected to sign a deal with Areva in the coming days.

The protesters included environmentalists, villagers and farmers, from the coastal Ratnagiri district. Leaders like Arun Velaskar, were arrested at Madban, around 12km from Jaitapur. The police tried to lock the Bhagwati Temple in Madban, preventing the people from entering inside but eventually had to back down.

Supreme Court retired judge BJ Kolse-Patil was arrested in the Natye village near Madban, after which an angry mob vandalised the police van, injuring three policemen. The mob also targeted two buses used to arrest the protesting villagers. Others arrested included leaders of voluntary groups Konkan Bachao Andolan and Janahit Seva Samiti, which are spearheading the stir, the activists said, adding, the local fishing community also took part in the demonstration.

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Greenpeace energy specialist Lauri Myllyvirta said that at least 10,000 people had turned out to protest. In Mumbai, a coalition of trade unions and NGOs has also planned protest.

According to the government, the final contracts are expected to be signed in the first half of 2011. There will be six reactors with a capacity of 1,650mw each. The first unit is expected to become operational by 2018.

The Konkan Bachao Andolan leaders, Velaskar, Madhu Mohite and Mangesh Chavan travelled from Mumbai to take part in the agitation. They will be produced before a court in Rajapur.

* From *The Guardian*, February 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentis...>