

Jaitapur N-plant: Clear and present danger

Saturday 4 June 2011, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2011).

The government has shown crass insensitivity towards nuclear safety by announcing on the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster that it will go ahead with the Jaitapur atomic power project. This is on a par with the callousness of the statement by India's ambassador to Japan on Hiroshima Day in 1998, at Hiroshima, that he hopes "the Japanese people will understand" why India had acquired nuclear weapons.

It also mocks safety concerns just when the Fukushima multiple-reactor disaster is unfolding and the plant has released cancer-causing iodine-131 and caesium-137 in quantities similar to those from Chernobyl.

India's nuclear stance is sharply at odds with that of Germany or Switzerland which are phasing out or cancelling nuclear reactors. The European Union has ordered safety audits on all its 143 reactors lasting several months. Even China has embargoed further reactor construction.

Post-Fukushima, the global nuclear industry's future appears bleak.

However, the Indian government is recklessly forging ahead with new reactor projects. Its hubris isn't rooted in the Department of Atomic Energy's (DAE) technology or experience, but in blind faith in imported reactor designs, such as the French company Areva's, to be installed at Jaitapur.

But Areva's European Pressurised Reactor is untested and hasn't received regulatory approval anywhere, including France.

The first-ever EPR under construction, in Finland, has become a fiasco: four years behind schedule, 90% over budget and mired in bitter litigation over a contract that forbids cost escalation. It has attracted hundreds of queries about safety from regulators in Finland, Britain, the US and France.

Put simply, the EPR design is not yet frozen. But that hasn't prevented the DAE or Maharashtra chief minister P Chavan from certifying it as safe.

Such loyalty is shocking, but not surprising. Why, when the Fukushima reactors suffered hydrogen explosions last month, pointing to serious nuclear-fuel damage, DAE secretary Srikumar Banerjee declared that these were "a purely chemical reaction, not a nuclear emergency..." Nuclear Power Corporation chairman SK Jain described the crisis, which sent operator TEPCO into a panic, not as a "nuclear accident", but "a well-planned emergency preparedness programme..." That men prone to such delusions run our nuclear programme inspires no confidence. That they aren't publicly accountable is positively scary.

This is of a piece with the nuclear industry's practice of deception and disinformation everywhere. Areva's CEO also pronounced after the March 11 accident that "Fukushima was not a nuclear catastrophe." Yet, on March 12, Areva pulled out all its staff from the Fukushima station.

Last fortnight, Areva flew a group of Indian journalists to its headquarters. Its COO Luc Oursel boasted that a Fukushima-type accident cannot happen in EPRs: "The EPR has the highest safety standards, it can resist an air crash — an Airbus A380 crash." This is, of course, unverifiable.

But Areva and French authorities have claimed that the EPR design is protected against both terrorist attacks and air crashes. Yet, when the EU mandated comprehensive reactor “stress tests”, covering threats from airplane crashes and terrorists, France lobbied for their exclusion from the audits.

The French nuclear safety authority chief said: “I will do what I can to keep risks from planes and terrorism out of the audits.”

If hypocrisy is built into the nuclear industry, so is monumental arrogance. The DAE and the government have convinced themselves that the sustained five-year long popular protests against the Jaitapur project are based on ignorance, irrational fear, and provocation by ‘outsiders’. This is false.

As I noted during my visit to Jaitapur, its farmers, Alphonso mango-growers and fishermen are well-informed and aware of the inherent hazards of nuclear power. They are determined to resist the project despite the compensation being offered for land (raised eightfold, and to be increased further): 95% of them have refused to take the money. The rest are mostly absentee landowners.

Citing the Shiv Sena’s entry into Jaitapur is a red herring. The anti-project movement is autonomous and firmly under grassroots activists’ control. An overwhelming majority of the area’s 40,000 people oppose the project for good reasons. Pushing the project through at gun-point will violate the public’s fundamental rights, offend political decency, and degrade our democracy, besides inviting nuclear danger.

The government has finally decided to separate the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) from the DAE. But the AERB’s responsibilities and powers must be defined in advance and its members selected with exemplary care and prudence so that only persons with the highest integrity, impartiality, and commitment to the public interest are chosen by a broad-based collegium.

This is as important as choosing the lokpal. The life and death of millions will depend on the AERB. India’s experience with regulatory authorities in telecom, insurance and hydrocarbons has been unhappy. We simply cannot afford ‘regulatory capture’ or sham regulation in the nuclear field.

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* Published in: Hindustan Times, 1 May 2011:

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/editorial-views-on/columnsothers/Clear-and-present-danger/Article1-692084.aspx>

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