

India N-plants: The March from Tarapur to Jaitapur

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Living in a state of denial over the possibility of another Fukushima, the government has given a green signal to the six-reactor nuclear plant at Jaitapur. This article recounts the public meetings, demonstrations and arrests that were part of the three-day march from Tarapur to Jaitapur during 23-25 April, which brought together an ideologically diverse group of activists. A growing number of anti-nuclear struggles in various parts of the country are concerned as to how many more Chernobyls and Fukushimas will be needed to arouse our imagination to come up with less wasteful and less destructive energy options.

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The march from Tarapur to Jaitapur during 23-25 April 2011, followed by a demonstration on Chernobyl in Mumbai the day after, telescoped the historical memory of the last 25 years, which experienced three significant events. These were the horrendous meltdown in Ukraine in 1986, the recent shock of the triple meltdown in Fukushima, and the people's struggle in Ratnagiri district to prevent the setting up of a gigantic nuclear plant with the support of French nuclear firm Areva in Jaitapur. It also made visible the iron determination of the central and state governments to not let the truth about nuclear energy and the energy question at large, enter the public mind, to tire out and criminalise the campaigners and to behave as if nothing was the matter at all.

Meetings and Arrests

The campaign was organised by Konkan Vinashkari Prakash Virodhi Samiti (KVPVS), Azadi Bachao Andolan and Lokayat from Pune, and was supported by numerous organisations and prominent individuals. It started at Bhupesh Gupta Bhavan in Mumbai and moved to Tarapur, where a public meeting took place under massive police protection, addressed by two retired judges, B G Kolse Patil and P B Sawant, and L Ramdas and many activists.

The meeting ended peacefully at 3 pm, but police harassment started immediately afterwards and 134 activists were arrested under Sections 67 and 68 of the Mumbai Police Act (prohibiting assembly of more than four people). The detention in Boisar police station lasted until late in the night (without raising charges). To hold people for so long without charges was illegal, and to detain over 30 women past 8 pm under such circumstances was against all rules. The phones were jammed and tapped most of the time. After the roll call at 9 pm and the attempt to finally serve food, the activists declared a hunger strike. The bus drivers were intimidated by the police and were reluctant

to carry on. One vehicle was abandoned, so that all the stranded people had to be crammed into one bus. The overloaded bus driver protested and dropped people off at the nearest bus stop at 2 am. The activists reached the next leg at Yusuf Meherally Centre near Panvel only at 6 am.

The afternoon of 23 April witnessed a substantial crowd at a public meeting in Thane, organised by Rajan Raje, independent trade unionist of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena. Sawant and Kolse Patil together with many local activists addressed the meeting.

On 24 April a procession and public meeting took place in Pen in Raigad district, where N D Patil of Shetkari Shramik Sangathana has been supporting the struggle and the district administration is generally supportive. But since the state government in collusion with the centre put enormous pressure on the local police, 23 people had to court token arrest and were released only at 5 pm, while the yatra remained paralysed. The yatra could not reach Sane Guruji Smarak, where a local meeting was organised by Ulka Mahajan.

Living in Denial: Token 'Solutions'

In view of the enormous obstruction by the state government, the larger part of the march moved towards Sane Guruji Smarak on 25 April and decided to end the campaign in Mahad, the highly symbolical and significant place of Ambedkar's historical struggle against the privatisation of water of Shaudar Talab (1927-29). In the meantime, Banwarilal Sharma of Azadi Bachao Andolan, along with nine supporters from his organisation and prominent figures like Anil Sadgopal and Amarnath Bhai (Sarva Seva Sangh and National Alliance of People's Movements) went to Ratnagiri district using public transport and visited the family of Tabrez Sayekar. They dodged the police to reach Nate village, expressed their condolences and had a public meeting reaffirming their determination to fight.

The youth part of the yatra, supported by older leaders like Ramdas, Lalita Ramdas, Niraj Jain (Lokayat), Vaishali Patil (KVPVS), Sanobar Keshwar (advocate), S P Udayakumar (National Alliance against Nuclear Energy), Soumya Datta (Delhi Platform) and D Gabriele (NAPM) held a march through Mahad and a public meeting at Shivaji Chowk. Once again, the police insisted on detaining 15 people. After the release, the meeting closed with a forceful affirmation of our democratic rights to agitate, mobilise, organise and a condemnation of nuclear energy as the ultimate and most lethal form of untouchability, invisibly contaminating water, air, soil and living beings and radiating on up to 40,000 years. People in Fukushima did not know how to dispose of the dead and could not even come near them. Everything depended on the workers cleaning up the radioactive material, who risked their lives to intolerable levels of contamination. In the mean time, Mathani Saldana of the National Fishermen Forum (NFF) campaigned with pamphlets in Lonere. It was indeed a decentralised triumph of unity despite great obstacles.

The demonstration on 26 April in Mumbai from Dadar to Currey Road Naka supported by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, All-India Trade Union Congress, CPI-ML, Trade Union Centre of India, marchers of the Konkan Bachao Samiti, KVPVS, Lokayat, NAPM and many others, focused on Chernobyl and Jaitapur. All this went on in the teeth of vigorous defamation campaigns. On 25 April, the Mumbai Mirror reported that petrol bombs were hurled at a staff bus in the premises of the plant at Tarapur, injuring two employees. The report mentioned that this violence was assumed to have been incited by the campaign and march of Azadi Bachao Andolan. This is of course sheer character assassination, as the march was entirely non-violent and Azadi Bachao Andolan is based on Gandhian ethos. The same day, some newspapers reported that Jairam Ramesh felt the need to halt the Jaitapur project for a year until a transparent nuclear policy could be spelled out. This upset

the Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar, Industries Minister Narayan Rane, and Home Minister R R Patil. This explains in part the extent of pressure put on the police to obstruct the yatra.

Such a fit of enlightenment on the part of Jairam Ramesh was swiftly wiped out. After a meeting of the prime minister with Maharashtra Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan, Minister of State in the prime minister's office V Narayanasamy and Jairam Ramesh, it was announced that Jaitapur would go through unquestioned. They were briefed by the Secretary of the Department of Atomic Energy, S Banerjee, and S K Jain of the Nuclear Power Corporation of India that will operate the two 1650 MW reactors in Jaitapur. An independent Nuclear Regulatory Authority of India will subsume the role of the existing Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) and all reactors will have separate shutting down systems so that chain reactions, like the one in Fukushima, could be ruled out. A "generous new compensation package" was also envisaged. None of the marchers felt confident about such "solutions". It was only clear that the march had raised some dust and had made the establishment nervous. How many more Chernobyls and Fukushimas would be needed to break through the wall of denial is a question that still awaits an answer.

Ideological Composition

The struggle of resistance to nuclear energy has many complicated ideological ramifications. The yatra itself was of very mixed composition – from Gandhian to broadly leftist – but with a large participation of youngsters who are primarily ecologically motivated, some of them Ambedkarites. Among the left, only the Marxist-Leninist forces have taken a clear anti-nuclear stand, while the CPI and CPI-M are more on an anti-imperialist line against foreign technology, but are reluctant to oppose the nuclear option as a whole. The disaster in Fukushima has no doubt made everybody more cautious and safety conscious. But nobody knows how to store nuclear waste, which clearly ruins its "clean alternative" image. The stand of the Shiv Sena is reminiscent of the struggle against the Enron plant in Dabhol. The party has jumped on the issue because of the massive local resistance against the Jaitapur plant. The local member of legislative assembly, Rajan Salvi, is in jail with 49 activists for having blown up the project wall on 18 April.

This constellation made it necessary for the Shiv Sena to spell out a policy on the nuclear question. Anti-nuclear activists helpfully made available the views of the likes of Helen Caldicott and Praful Bidwai and translated the cut-and-paste job into Marathi. This position is now published with the names of Manohar Joshi, Uddhav Thackeray and Rajan Salvi. Sometimes truth travels in very circuitous ways to reach the light of day. The political problems thrown up in this process can become very complex. The violence employed by the Shiv Sena gives justification to more state repression.

The Strong Anti-Nuclear Wave

One thing is clear – anti-nuclear struggles are at present on the rise. On 26 March 2011, a silent demonstration of about 700 activists took place in Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu. The first two 1,000 MW reactors of this plant with Russian VVER-1000 technology are supposed to go critical in June. This is likely to be delayed, as the Coastal Regulation Zone clearance has not been obtained. The contract for this plant goes back to the 1980s and the process was held up due to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Around two years ago, the prime minister announced proudly the acquisition of Russian submarines, which could keep safe our nuclear war heads. These submarines were indeed the reason why we bargained for a technology which was thought to be less safe than the Chernobyl type reactor before Chernobyl happened. In the mean time, the people of Kudankulam can look

forward to six such reactors. The fishing community has consistently protested and the final leg of the Coastal March of the NFF “Protect Waters Protect Life” ended in a shoot-out by the police, in which six fishermen were gravely injured on 1 May 1989 in Kanyakumari (Dietrich 1989). Today, fishermen’s organisations in Kerala are expressing their resistance against the Kudankulam project as well. The protest by the inland population has risen on and off, but has remained rather subdued.

In West Bengal, the struggle against the Haripur nuclear plant has a long-standing history and since recently, even Prakash Karat of the CPI-M has ventilated doubts whether this is the right place for such a project. The proposed Gorakhpur nuclear power plant at Fatehabad district in Haryana has been described as “Nuclear Madness at Delhi’s Doorsteps” by Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha and Delhi Platform. Representatives of all these struggles were present in the march from Tarapur to Jaitapur.

To sell nuclear options as a solution to global warming and an anti-dote to peak oil is a blatant absurdity. However, the neo-liberal ruling classes are doing just that. The Germans, living on after two world wars, feel a greater sense of urgency to review their options and a southern state Baden-Württemberg, has just elected the Greens to power, after having been run by the Christian Democrats for 58 years. Yet, the fact that Japan is now queuing up to sell its nuclear technology abroad, shows how very difficult it is to get rid of the spectre of devastation. In order to break out of the vicious circle of denial, we need a much deeper analysis of the neocolonial process of globalisation. The connection between energy options and warfare has to be recognised. The present approach towards growth, extraction and devastation of nature and human communities needs a drastic change. For this, the unorganised workers, peasants, subsistence producers, forest dwellers, dalits, adivasis, women, and indigenous people in the north-east need to build alliances. The ongoing warfare against the internal colonies has to be seen eye to eye. The marchers got a mild taste of this internal warfare. The anti-nuclear struggle is the tip of an iceberg, and we need less wasteful, less destructive and decentralised energy options. It is difficult to think these options today, but how many Fukushimas do we need to rekindle our imagination?

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Reference

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