

Despite mass opposition, India pushes ahead with operationalizing nuclear plant

By Arun Kumar and Kranti Kumara
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Despite mass protests by villagers, the Indian government in partnership with the Tamil Nadu state government is pushing ahead with the loading of nuclear fuel at the recently built 2000 MW Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KNPP) located on the Tamil Nadu coast.

This massive power plant is a joint venture between India and Russia and has cost 172 billion Rupees (about \$3.2 billion) to build. The plant currently houses two nuclear pressurized water reactors (PWR) reactors, each capable of driving a 1000 MW electric generator. But there are plans to construct four additional reactors at the site.

Since the nuclear disaster that occurred at Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant in March 2011, there has been a groundswell of opposition against nuclear power plants in India, especially since successive Indian governments have announced plans to produce fully 25 percent of the country's electricity from nuclear fission reactors by 2050. Despite the deep misgivings of the population, the Indian elite, without any democratic debate, is rushing feverishly ahead, claiming that nuclear plants are essential to satisfying growing domestic electricity needs.

This particular plant is causing great concern among villagers and fishermen living in its vicinity, because it is situated right next to the ocean just like the Japanese Fukushima plant. Built at the southern tip of the state, KNPP is highly vulnerable to undersea earthquakes and tsunami that are an ever-present danger in the Indian Ocean region. That such concerns are far from hypothetical was demonstrated when the plant installations got inundated from ocean waves unleashed by the massive undersea earthquake that occurred in the Indian Ocean in 2004.

Over the past year thousands of villagers and fishermen have been angrily protesting against the danger posed by the KNPP. The agitation has become particularly intense since the Indian government announced last year that it would push ahead with loading nuclear fuel into the first reactor as a prelude to making the plant operational. The fuelling of the reactor, originally scheduled for last December, got derailed by the mass protests.

The AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam Party) state-government led by the arch-reactionary Chief Minister Jayalalitha, in concert with the Indian government, has responded to the protests by unleashing police repression. It has deployed over 10,000 police and paramilitary forces that have mercilessly chased and beaten the agitating villagers, arrested hundreds and even filed charges of sedition and waging "war against the government" against some activists.

Last April witnessed a particularly brutal response by joint forces deployed by the Indian and the state governments. The police cut off water, food and power-supply to protesting villagers and imposed a curfew in the villages where the agitation has been centered. Nearly 200 people were arrested including women and children. Subsequently protests abated somewhat as the People's Movement against Nuclear Energy (PMANE), which has led the agitation, called it off in the hope that the Tamil Nadu and Indian judiciaries would intervene on its behalf.

However, by late August the Madras High Court gave the green light to the Indian government to proceed with the steps it needs to take to make the plant operational. An appeal was then filed by an anti-nuclear activist with the Indian Supreme Court asking the court to halt further progress on operationalizing the plant, since 11 of the 17 critical safety measures recommended by the government's own Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) had not been implemented.

Around this time, widespread protests resumed and the police responded with still greater violence. On Sept. 10 a protesting fisherman, 48 year-old Antony John, was shot dead. A young girl was also trampled to death when police resorted to charges to break up the protests. To observe and terrify those conducting a water protest, the Coast Guard flew low-flying aircrafts. One of the protesting fisherman named Sathyam panicked when a surveillance aircraft flew low, then slipped hitting his head against a boulder and subsequently died. Sathyam's funeral became a rallying point for opposition to the nuclear power plant attracting

large number of villagers from neighbouring areas.

Earlier this month, India's Supreme Court refused to even hear the petition against operationalizing KNPP. In so doing, the court ignored publicly available evidence of shoddy workmanship, the dangers inherent from using an untested reactor design, and the fact that over 1 million people live within a 30 Km. radius of the plant, which violates even the AERB's feeble safety regulations.

Following this, the Indian government proceeded post-haste to begin loading enriched-uranium fuel rods into one of the reactors. The government has said that it expects the fuel loading to be complete by Sept. 28 and the plant fully operational soon afterwards.

This move provoked the villagers into intensifying their agitation.

On Saturday, Sept. 22, over 500 fishing boats laid siege for several hours to the Tuticorin port about 100 Km north of KNPP. This port is used for unloading nuclear fuel rods from ships for transportation to the reactor at the plant. Simultaneously other protestors including villagers led by PMANE undertook "Jal Satyagraha" (Water Agitation), by standing in waist-deep water in the ocean near the plant and forming a human chain.

Solidarity protests also sprung up across the state. But the police repression has continued unabated with arrest warrants being issued for activist-leaders, many of whom including PAME leader Udayakumar have now gone into hiding. Under the pretext of looking for protest leaders, the police in bands of 10 have gone on a rampage, breaking down doors and ransacking the houses of villagers living in the Kudankulam area. This is clearly an attempt by the government to terrorize the populace into submission.

Kudankulam has been practically sealed off by armed policemen who are allowing only the transport of essential goods into the area. Public transport has also been barred from entering some of the areas surrounding the plant.

To the consternation of the authorities, the protests have now snowballed with growing numbers of people, including students, advocates and villagers, joining protests across the state and even in the Bangalore, the capital of the neighbouring state of Karnataka.

It is not just the safety of the plant that the villagers are angry about. While the Indian government has spent huge amounts to build ultra-modern facilities for the nuclear plant's employees, including a fully-equipped hospital, villagers are barred from using them. Most of the villagers and fishermen live in squalor and poverty lacking even basic facilities such as running water.

Moreover the villagers put no faith in the ability of the Indian elite to manage a nuclear accident given the government's display of a mixture of incompetence and

callousness during and after the 1984 Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal. The uncontrolled release of toxic gas at Bhopal, which caused over half a million casualties including over 20,000 deaths, was the worst industrial disaster in world history. Even after the passage of 38 years, the government has left the plant site and its surroundings severely contaminated with toxic substances. No one has been held criminally responsible and the Indian government has essentially connived to this mass crime by agreeing to accept a measly \$470 million in compensation from Union Carbide.

Despite this horrible precedent, the Indian government has agreed that the Russian firm that has supplied and built KNPP's reactor will have zero liability in the event of an accident

In a desperate attempt to justify the state suppression of the protests, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has brazenly declared that the anti-nuclear protestors are acting at the behest of United States-based Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that want to derail India's "progress".

The Indian establishment is justifying its single-minded pursuit of nuclear power plants by claiming that it will help reduce the chronic electricity shortage that afflicts the country. Such arguments are duplicitous as there are far more cost-efficient ways to produce electricity than from nuclear power plants.

But motives other than providing cheap electricity are propelling the Indian elite to expand the country's nuclear power industry—first and foremost its drive to increase its arsenal of nuclear weapons. With the signing of the India-US Nuclear Accord in 2008, the Indian elite can now utilize domestic uranium reserves for weapons production while obtaining and gaining expertise in the latest state-of-the-art nuclear technology.

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