

India/Koodankulam : Nuclear power vs. people power

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Article Highlights

- India's ambitions include a tenfold increase in nuclear power so it supplies 25 percent of the nation's energy needs by 2050. Two 1,000-megawatt nuclear reactors at Koodankulam are expected to go online very soon — the first commissioned reactors since Fukushima.
- The People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy has successfully mobilized tens of thousands of Indian citizens to join nonviolent protests, while the Indian state has resorted to harassment and threats of violence.
- The nuclear establishment is the darling of Indian statehood, with far more people employed by the nuclear industry than the renewable energy sector. Citizen calls for increased transparency, accountability, and proper adherence to procedure have been met with repeated denials, deferrals, and deceit.

India has come into its own, a once-sleeping tiger waking with a seismic roar. In the last two decades, India has emerged as a robust modern military force, a formidable science and technology hub, and a soaring economic success despite the global recession. These developments, however, are accompanied by more and more demand for, and reliance on, nuclear power — and lots of it [1].

In fact, India's ambitions [2] include a tenfold increase in nuclear power so it supplies 25 percent of the nation's energy needs by 2050. Two reactors at the Koodankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tamil Nadu — built by the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd. in collaboration with the Russian Atomsroyexport — are expected to go online in coming months. The 1,000-megawatt reactors are the first to be commissioned after the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear disaster in March 2011. Disconcertingly, India's new coastal reactors are situated in an environment similar to that of Fukushima — a tsunami and earthquake zone, with the addition of karst formations, geothermal irregularities, and a lack of emergency water supplies [3].

India's strides in the nuclear sector have not come without resistance. The People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE) — formed in 2003 and now led by the scholar S.P. Udayakumar and two Jesuit priests — has successfully mobilized tens of thousands of Indian citizens. And as more and more people realize the dangers a nuclear reactor could bring to the south Indian peninsula, the PMANE cause grows. Activists have stuck diligently to nonviolent protests — inspired by Mohandas Gandhi — and managed to stall construction of the Koodankulam plant for six months; the Indian state, on the other hand, has resorted to harassment and threats of violence.

The day after the Tamil Nadu state by-elections last March, for example, Chief Minister Selvi J.

Jayalalithaa suddenly reversed her earlier decision to support the protesters, dispatching at least 6,000 police and paramilitary to the region. For three days, the government prevented essential supplies — including tankers of water and milk — from reaching the PMANE base in Idinthikarai, a coastal village about two kilometers from the Koodankulam reactors. But nearby fishing communities sympathized with the protesters at Idinthikarai and sent in boats of supplies for them [4]. In an unprecedented display of solidarity, traditional local women also took to boats to reach the village. Residents blocked roads en masse, preventing police from arresting the movement's coordinators.

Over the last year, the protests have been punctuated by four hunger strikes that have each lasted at least nine days. The strikes ended with state promises of conciliation and dialogue — none of which has come to pass. Protest leaders said that at least 23,000 Indians surrendered their voter cards in May to draw attention to the government's intransigence [5]. The state responded [6] by confiscating the protesters' passports and by cancelling the ration cards for their family members.

And so the tug of war continues. In fact, one police station has filed First Information Reports — including more than 6,500 allegations of sedition and “war against the state” — against more than 55,000 people [7]. This is the largest number of First Information Reports to be compiled by a single police station in India's history. Perhaps unsurprisingly, PMANE's Udayakumar has had more than 300 of these reports filed against him alone; this police-reporting blitz [8] has made it nearly impossible for Udayakumar to keep track of the charges against him.

Despite requests via India's Right of Information Act for reports about the site evaluation and safety analysis for the Koodankulam plant, the Nuclear Power Corporation of India has so far released only one — a clearly outdated report that refers to Russia as the Soviet Union. The authorities have refused entirely to release the safety analysis report because it is “a third party document.” [9] The denial has raised a storm of controversy [10].

The Nuclear Power Corporation's secrecy has fuelled anxiety about safety, and PMANE has set up an expert committee that issued a 70-page report detailing serious concerns about the Koodankulam plant. Among the concerns are questions about the reactor pressure vessels for the two nuclear units; activist claim those vessels, large cylindrical structures that would house the reactor cores and cooling systems, will include welds that could be weakened over time by neutron bombardment, even though original designs for the plants did not allow for such welds.

Despite the vast funds given to the nuclear energy establishment, industry critics point out, the Nuclear Power Corporation provides less than three percent of India's energy needs. Wind power provides double this amount [11], and if these decade-old wind generators were upgraded, they could supply an even larger slice of India's energy pie. And according to a report by the UN Foundation Expert Group on Energy Efficiency, India could save more than 120,000 megawatts of power generation through small energy-efficiency improvements [12]. Meanwhile, the PMANE expert committee has proposed that the Koodankulam reactors be converted into a natural gas-fired power plant [13]. But such suggestions have so far fallen on deaf ears in the Indian government.

The nuclear establishment has been a darling of Indian statehood since Homi J. Bhabha, the “father” of India's nuclear program, set up the Atomic Energy Commission in 1948. There are far more people with vested interests employed by the nuclear industries than there are in the renewable-energy sector. While the Indian state supposedly embraces a diverse energy policy, renewables are regularly dismissed as unstable when compared to nuclear power.

Citizen calls for increased transparency and accountability and proper adherence to procedure have been met with repeated denials, deferrals, and deceit. The Koodankulam Nuclear Power Plant has

become a significant test case not just for India's nuclear energy plans, but also for the future of Indian democracy.

Raminder Kaur, 9 July 2012

P.S.

* Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists:

<http://thebulletin.org/web-edition/op-eds/nuclear-power-vs-people-power>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/inf53.html>

[2] PDF: http://www.psimedia.info/handbook/India_Energy_Handbook.pdf

[3] <http://www.scribd.com/doc/76388792/PMANE-Expert-Committee-Report-Dec-2011>

[4] See on ESSF (article 24834), [India: Idinthakarai Updates on Koodankulam Anti-Nuclear Struggle](#).

[5] <http://www.hindustntimes.com/India-news/Chennai/Kudankulam-protest-23-000-surrender-voter-ID-cards/Article1-852958.aspx>

[6] PDF: <http://www.dianuke.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/AP-Shah-Jury-report-Final1.pdf>

[7] See on ESSF (article 25978), [India/Koodankulam: The Silent and Telling Emergency in India](#).

[8] PDF: <http://www.dianuke.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/AP-Shah-Jury-report-Final1.pdf>

[9] See on ESSF (article 25979), [India/Koodankulam: Right To Nuclear Information or A Practical Joke?](#).

[10] <http://www.timesnow.tv/Debate-Nuke-Corps-secrecy/videoshow/4403337.cms>

[11] <http://www.scribd.com/doc/76388792/PMANE-Expert-Committee-Report-Dec-2011>

[12] PDF:

http://www.globalproblems-globalsolutions-files.org/unf_website/PDF/realizing_potential_energy_efficiency.pdf

[13] <http://www.scribd.com/doc/76388792/PMANE-Expert-Committee-Report-Dec-2011>