

Haripur: Land for Nuclear Plant



Looking ahead?

BACKGROUND

Even as the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal was 'under-consideration', the Government of India decided to set up five coastal nuclear power projects in the country. A 12-member Site Selection Panel, under the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), visited a number of coastal districts in India during November 2006. The Site Selection Panel is said to have zeroed in on sites in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal. Based on its final report to be submitted to the Atomic Energy Commission, the Government of India will finally decide on the sites. Only after that the Central Government-owned Public Sector Undertaking, Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL), 'spearheading' India's nuclear power programme, will undertake the job.

The NPCIL, the sole nuclear utility implementing authority, has a total of 16 operational plants with a capacity to generate around 3,900 MW, which is about 2.8% of the total electricity generated in the country. Seven more plants with a combined capacity of 3,000 MW are in advanced stages of construction, the first of which is expected to be operational by March 2007.

In all probability the proposed nuclear power plants will use light water reactors to be run on imported fuel. It is reported that Haripur will boast of six nuclear reactors each of 1650 MW – a total of 10,000 MW of electricity. Since the NPCIL can indigenously produce reactors capable of generating up to 700 MW, the Indo-US Agreement on Sharing of Nuclear Technology could pave the way for the transfer of US technology too.

STATE NEEDS A NUCLEAR POWER PLANT

Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, Chief Minister of West Bengal, went on record saying, "The State needs a nuclear power plant and will certainly get it. [**The Statesman, 19.11.2006**]" (1).



Haripur – endowed by nature!

In West Bengal Haripur is the 'selected one' -- a 'candidate' or 'probable' site. Haripur near Junput is in Contai Sub Division of East Midnapur District, West Bengal. It is about 170 km from Kolkata, India. From Kolkata, travelling along the NH-6 (Bombay Road), one turns left towards Haldia after Kolaghat, and then turns right at Nandakumar to proceed to Contai. As the crow flies the hamlet of Haripur is about 5-6 km from Contai or Kaanathi, a bustling town with a population of about 78,000.

Accordingly, the Government of West Bengal has decided to acquire 1013 acres of prime agricultural land, in and around Haripur, including the fish processing centre at Junput, for setting up of the nuclear power project (2).

Each 'probable' site is supposed to be examined in terms of its suitability for setting up large nuclear stations and technical data including soil test, availability of water, flood data, and geomorphologic data is examined before finally selecting the site. Villagers at Haripur say that some 'government people' had come to the village towards early August 2006 for conducting soil test. The site of soil testing was about hundred yards to the South of the Haripur 'sea-dyke' (constructed during the British period) which is a kilometre inshore running roughly parallel to the coastline for about 20-25 km in east-west direction.

No one objected since it was said that the soil testing was necessary in connection with a tourism project (3). On 19 August 2007, the Bengali vernacular Ananda Bazar Patrika carried news stating that a nuclear power plant will come up at Haripur. Earlier there was unconfirmed news that Egra in East Midnapur had been chosen as the probable site.

THE RESISTANCE

The news spread like wild-fire. The foremost reaction was that of disbelief. It was unbelievable that they would be dispossessed of their land, their ancestral homestead and their livelihood related to agriculture, sea fishing and sea fish processing. It was not just their property and livelihood but their way of life that they were going to lose. Most of the rooted, jeered at the very concept of, or discussion about compensation. Cutting across party lines there was a growing sense about the need to resist. The central opposition was reflected by the questions, 'why here?' and 'why can't the Government shift it to a district

where there is no agriculture and sea-fishing?'



“Why here?” was what they asked

Around early September, 2006, some activists of Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity (PBKMS) who, prior to that, were actively campaigning at Egra, East Midnapur, at what they believed was the site for proposed nuclear plant, shifted base to Haripur -- the real 'candidate site'. With their initiative a campaign against the proposed nuclear power project got underway. Some local activists were accompanied to anti-nuke meetings at Kolkata. Senior anti-nuke activists from Kolkata started making repeated trips to Haripur. Consequently local meetings were organised opposing both land acquisition and the proposed nuclear power project.



... way of life is what they are going to lose

Around mid-September 2006 unconfirmed news wafted in that the Site Selection Panel, under the Department of Atomic Energy would be visiting Haripur any day. The route to Haripur along the Junput-Haripur sea-dyke at Junput Bazaar-crossing was barricaded. Hundreds of villagers lay in wait. No one came for three days. Questions were raised by some about the rationale behind such preparations based on unconfirmed news.



... jeered at the very concept of compensation

On 17 November 2006, officials from DAE along with police and local administration reached the spot but were not allowed to proceed to Haripur. With great swiftness thousands of villagers converged behind the barricade. No one was to be allowed to proceed towards Haripur, was the clear message – not even the Police or District Administration. Members of PBKMS and the Matsyajibi Unnayan Samity (a constituent member of the National Fishworkers Forum) were active participants. Subhendu Adhikary, the local Trinamul Congress (TMC) MLA, was active and present at the blockade. Members of most political parties including supporters of Socialist Unity Centre (SUCI) and Democratic Socialist Party (DSP – a constituent of the ruling Left Front) were active too. A larger police force on the next day was matched by an even larger number of villagers cutting across party lines. In presence of Superintendent of Police (SP) and Block Development Officer (BDO), an all-party meeting was held but the villagers were relentless. Though the Site Selection Panel, under DAE was not allowed to inspect the site, Mr SK Jain, Chairman Site Selection Committee (and Chairman of NPCIL) reportedly informed the West Bengal Chief Minister on 19 November 2006 that Haripur has good potential for setting up a nuclear plant (4).



Rally on 26 November 2006 touching 20 villages

Next day, that is on 20 November 2006, all organisations, unions and political parties active in the area got together at a Convention at Junput Bazaar and decided to form a citizens' committee named 'Parmaanu Chulli Birodhi O Bhitay Maati Jeeban Jeebikaa Bnachao Committee' (meaning Committee Against Nuclear Plant and To Save Home, Land, Life and Livelihood) which could act as a common platform for joint movement.

LIVELIHOOD OF THE VILLAGERS



Golden grains!

The paddy yield here is exceptionally high. Potato is grown but predominantly for domestic and local use. Haripur has been famous in the district for its tasty *kumrah* (gourd).



Tomato on large tracts of land.

Yield is so high that brinjal, tomato, green chilly, sesame, *kawrola* (bitter kitchen vegetable), *jhingay* (a cucurbitaceous vegetable) and such other vegetables are grown on a commercial basis in large tracts of land.



Huge brinjal crop

Beetle leaf (sweet) is another common cash crop grown by those who can make initial investments.



Betel-leave plantations

The area is liberally dotted by orchards of banana, coconut and beetle nut. Besides, homesteads have, on an average, three to four types of common fruit trees like mangoes, berries, jack fruits and elephant apples surrounding it – mostly for local consumption.



Orchards aplenty

There are hundreds of water bodies for prawn culture and sweet water pisciculture. On both sides of the sea-dyke there are canals into which seawater is allowed during high tide and as a result fish nets hanging around the houses is a common sight. Saline water prawn culture is an age-old process in and around this area.



Water bodies for prawn culture

And then there is the sea. The mechanised boats have ushered in a change and those involved in sea fishing is no longer restricted to a profession-based caste. Moreover there are many other occupations/trades/jobs linked with sea fishing, which provide employment to those members of traditional farmers who still do not dare to go out to sea. Sea fishing being predominantly seasonal is also allowing the traditional fisher folk to turn to agriculture-related work given the extravagant yield in this area. This two-way process has successfully made poverty a thing of the distant past.

Junput has a large and well known West Bengal Fisheries Department run sea fish farm, which has been in existence for well over forty years. Moreover training centres operate at Junput, Contai and in a few other nearby areas where local men and women are trained at sea fishing, boat making, weaving of fishing net, maintenance and repairing of mechanised boats, pearl culture and such other sea-related activities.

Since the 16th Century, the salt factories along the seaside in the Hijli-Contai area have supplied salt to various parts of India, Asia and Europe. The well-known Bengal Salt Factory is about 5-6 km to the West of Haripur. There are a number of salt factories, which exists from the pre-independence era. The factories here follow the traditional method of manufacturing salt with the help of sunlight – technology coming in handy only while cleaning it. Contai presently supplies about 15% of the salt requirement of West Bengal.



Dry-fish farm

This area is known far and wide for its dry-fish farms locally called the *khoti*. For every fisherman going out to sea there could 10-12 land-based workers churning out thousands of tonnes of dried-fish.



Those who did nothing for it will destroy it

The workers are involved with carrying, selling, sorting, drying, weighing, packing, storing and transporting dried fish. Trucks carry the loads primarily to states of Assam and Tripura.



Truckloads of dry-fish

The most famous dry fish farm of West Bengal is the one at Junput, while the Haripur one is the next best.



Will it be a permanent ebb?

Both the farms incidentally, along with the fishing industry, falls within the buffer zone of the proposed nuclear power plant and this could affect about 15-20000 locally. Another 15-20000 villagers traditionally depending on agriculture for sustenance will be evicted from their land. Land which has high crop yield and very high cropping intensity.

NUCLEAR POWER

It is said that the mission of Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL), is 'to develop Nuclear Power Technology and to produce Nuclear Power, as a safe, environmentally benign and an economically viable source of electrical energy to meet the increasing electricity needs of the country'. This could be said to be the official position of the Government of India and the

Government of West Bengal, which are determined to set up nuclear power plants at Haripur and at other places.

However those opposing hold that ‘nuclear energy should be ruled out on grounds of safety, world security, and economics; also because it is a finite, non-renewable resource, and it gives energy returns and savings on carbon emissions no better than gas-fired heat and power cogeneration’.

On our part we strongly believe that there should be no nuclear power plant at Haripur, West Bengal, India or for that matter anywhere else in the world. However it is outside the purview of this small write-up to substantiate our position in any more details. Nonetheless we do have some very disturbing questions, which we would like to share.

It is a fact that during the last decade or so the rate at which nuclear power plants were being set up in most developed countries have steadily come down to almost a halt. Moreover many developed countries have decided to opt out and have planned to reduce its dependence on nuclear power drastically during the next decade or so. They are not closing down functional nuclear plants right away but they have decided to phase out gradually. All this is not without reasons? Why then is there such over-enthusiasm on the part of the Government to set up huge number of nuclear plants in our part of the world?

24 nuclear power plants are ‘planned and proposed’ to be added to the 23 functional and under-construction nuclear power plants in India. Doubling the number when nuclear power the world over was thought to be a thing of the past. There must be a design behind this paradox?

Climate change, rather climate crisis, is a reality, despite various theories to explain it away. Carbon emission, despite near consensus to arrest it, remains unchecked and is indeed accentuating green house effect. Carbon Trade is in a way legitimising pollution causing carbon emission, and also in a way is rewarding the polluters. The world is facing this crisis for which the ongoing paradigm of industrial development and wasteful consumption is largely responsible. And the blame lies squarely on the developed world. This no one can wish away even if it is difficult to rectify.

The United States of America had for long denied that there was any global warming. They have not signed the Kyoto protocol yet, signatories of which committed to bring down emission rates of green house gases. However suddenly there is a major US-backed initiative to proclaim that Nuclear Power is safe, environmentally benign and an economically viable source of electrical energy for the future. So the worst polluter of the world churning out one-fourth of the worlds greenhouse gases with its unsustainable paradigm of industrial development and wasteful consumption vows to restore the pristine environment of the battered earth by offering nuclear technology as a final solution. The newest apostle of nuclear power is actually trying to silence its detractors and move their gaze away from the spiralling ill effects of climatic change owing to carbon emission of which USA is one of the worst offenders.

The timing of the Indo-US agreement on Sharing of Nuclear Technology and the globalised ‘consent’ of choosing Nuclear Power as the future option is breathtaking.

It is not just displacement and nuclear power we are fighting against at Haripur – we must also look at it as another onslaught of the evils bred and fostered by the recent trends of globalisation. We are affected but it is not so often that we see it so clearly.

NOTABLE NOTES

(1) None of the existing Nuclear Power Projects in India are located near the Coal Belt Area. There has been a national policy in this regard. With Buddhadeb Bhattacharya asking for one, maybe to flaunt his brand of 'modernism', such policies were unceremoniously discarded. The stakes are perhaps high for the UPA Government at the Centre too. Conceding to Left Front demands at West Bengal would perhaps 'suitably' calm the Left Parties on the issue of the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal, the UPA Government reckoned.

(2) It is absolutely unclear as to how the mighty Left Front Government proposes to set up a nuclear power plant by acquiring only 1013 acres of land. According to Mr SK Jain, Chairman Site Selection Committee (and also the Chairman of NPCIL), "an area of two square kilometres for the plant and another 1.6 km encircling it in all directions which will be the buffer zone" will be needed to set up the nuclear plant. Theoretically the minimum requirement by conservative assessment is a semi-circle with its diameter along the coastline with a radius of 2.4 km and the maximum requirement could be a circle of same dimension with its bottom edge touching the sea line. Hence the land required to be cleared of human habitation could be anywhere between 2700 to 5400 acres. Beyond the buffer zone, where no one will be allowed to live, only 10000 people will be allowed to live within a 5 kilometres radius, 20000 within a 10 km radius and 100000 only live in a 30 km radius. This will involve huge acquisition since Contai, a town which falls within the 5-10 km concentric zone, alone has a population of 78000 as per 2001 Census.

(3) This lack of transparency is very much in keeping with general standard attained by the ruling Left Front Government and this has become its hallmark when it has launched itself into its land-grabbing mode in the name of development. No one knows till date why the Haripur soil was tested -- for tourism or for nuclear power. Successful governance of this regime is tantamount to lying and using force at the right time and at the right place.

(4) If all technical data including soil test, availability of water, flood data, and geomorphologic data and such other relevant data can be made available from elsewhere what could then be the need for a 12-member Site Selection Panel to inspect sites for provisional selection? Statements to the media like "...site selection team visited the State and selected Haripur in Midnapur East as site for the plant" or "...found that Haripur has good potential for setting up a nuclear plant" does not make any sense? However if the presence of a 12-member Site Selection Panel on ground zero and their observations has any value in the process of site selection then how could scientists and politicians go public saying that the panel has selected Haripur? After all they did not visit the site owing to public resentment? This could be a serious aberration.

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