

## **An Extended Nuclear Anti-Climax at Koodankulam?**

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The saga of the upcoming Koodankulam nuclear reactor on the southern tip of India has taken a very dramatic turn. The stage was all set for commissioning of the reactor in April. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had assured the Russian President that the reactor built by Rosatom will be commissioned soon. The Secretary of the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) claimed: "All that I can say is that we are quite close now. We are practically there, barring any new surprising development." The final clearance for going critical was awaited. But within the last one week, the operator NPCIL and the AERB, India's toothless regulator, have been forced to admit that they needed to replace 4 crucial valves in the passive heat removal system much-touted as Koodankulam's unique safety feature against any Fukushima-like loss of coolant accident.

While the nuclear establishment is yet to explain how could the deficient valves go unchecked despite the reactor undergoing two 'hot runs', several calibration tests, and a number of final check-ups over last 2 years purportedly "to be doubly sure" about safety, it is ight-lipped about the sub-standard valves being part of the consignment received from Zio-Podolsk, a sub-supplier of Rosatom, which has been engulfed in a massive scam involving counterfeit equipments. While Sergei Shutov, a Director of Zio-Podolsks has been arrested in Russia, it is feared that the sub-standard equipments have made their way to India, China, Bulgaria and Iran, given the time-frame of the scandal. Coincidentally, the official admission about the deficient valves came just a day after Dr. A Gopalakrishnan, AERB's former Chairman, wrote an article warning about the grave risk the corruption-riled supplier's consignment would pose for Koodankulam. At the grass roots, the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE) which has been spearheading the massive peaceful protests, had consistently raised the issue with the authorities and the regional and central political leadership ever since the scam was unearthed in December 2012. Earlier, in reply to the queries sent under the 'Right to Information' legislation, the NPCIL denied having any information about the sub-suppliers, particularly Zio-Podolsk. It is obvious now that this was a criminal lie.

What could be the implications of this scam? Not just the huge amount of money that has gone into the reactor purchase, which could go up exponentially if we include the costs of a potential accident. It also involves the undermining of a number of our crucial democratic institutions – the CAG which warned in its 2012 report about inadequacy and toothlessness of nuclear safety regulation in India, brazen violations of the AERB's own stipulations, govt's silencing of the Chief Information Commissioner who ordered that the safety assessment report of Koodankulam be given to the local people, not to mention the repeated appeals by eminent citizens of the country including the members of the National Advisory Commission(NAC), the former Navy Chief Admiral L. Ramdas, the Ex-Secretary in the Power Ministry Dr. EAS Sarma, and the 25-member independent expert committee on Koodankulam. It concerns health and safety of people, their livelihood and environment and their democratic right to decide whether they want the project.

This is one the biggest scam in A fresh petition in the Supreme Court of India has been filed by prominent lawyers. The Supreme Court has completed hearing the sides in the earlier litigation highlighting safety vulnerabilities, ill-conceived emergency plans, loss of livelihoods and environmental impacts of the project. People are apprehensive that once the operator starts the reactor, it will become virtually impossible to check the equipments received from Zio-Podolsk.

The Koodankulam project, and also its opposition, has a long history. It's a Soviet-vintage Indo-Russian collaboration project conceived in 1988. The project agreement met with massive protests since the beginning, with a 15,000-strong people's demonstration in 1989. However, with the collapse of the USSR, the project went into a limbo. When it was revived around 1997-98, by the new leaderships, protests resumed. The actual ground work started in 2002 and both the local people and the larger community of independent experts and activists have been vociferous in their opposition since then. The Fukushima accident in 2011 marked a turning point after which the nearby villages turned, mostly fishing communities, turned decisively against the imminent commissioning of the first of the total 6 planned reactors, under the remarkable leadership of S P Udayakumar, a humble professor who has a doctorate in peace studies from the US. Despite the agitation's consistent non-violent nature and the wider support it enjoyed, the Indian State has come down heavily on the protesting people with massive crackdowns twice last year – after the breakdown of 'talks' with people in March and then in September when thousands came out to protest the loading of the radioactive fuel in the reactor. The government never went for an open and equal dialogue in the first place and the team of experts constituted by it to 'allay the fears' of the people never went to the villages to talk to the people, nor were the movement leaders given access to the basic safety-related documents. The government meanwhile indulged mischievously in maligning the movement as 'foreign-funded', church-driven and so on. During the period when it pretended to have dialogue with people, it kept on piling fictitious charges under colonial-vintage repressive laws of sedition and 'war against the state'. Today, around 10,000 people including women, young adults and the elderly have been facing these obnoxious criminal charges. Despite all the inhuman repression, people in Koodankulam are fighting a heroic battle to save their lives and livelihoods.

The issues raised by the people's movement are tremendously significant. They have raised wide-ranging issues pertaining to safety – both site-specific nuclear hazards and crucial lapses in the adherence of AERB's own norms, issues of health and environment, questions of loss of livelihood due to the project and its attendant security apparatus disallowing them fishing, and the larger issues of democracy and people's say in defining progress and development. The Koodankulam movement has gone far beyond the 'not in my backyard' framework. People have expressed their solidarity with anti-nuclear grassroots movements ongoing in other parts of the country, refuting the allegations of being provoked by the US to oppose the Russian reactors. On the safety front, the movement has raised some crucial questions with sound technical data and arguments. Inadequacy of cooling water is a huge risk for the reactor as Koodankulam will perhaps be the only reactor to operate without a natural source of sweet water and will be dependent totally on a desalination plant, that too insufficient capacity. That the area has been prone to Tsunamis and its geology has a history of volcanism and earthquakes has also been pointed out. Non-adherence to the crucial 17 recommendations of the post-Fukushima safety analysis is another important basis of objection. Brazen defiance of the nuclear establishment's own rules regarding population density and emergency evacuation arrangements has also been

brought to the fore. Non-compliance with the standard environmental impact clearance for the project has been explained away by the establishment on the flimsy ground that in 1980s when the project was conceived, the environmental guidelines did not exist. The loss of livelihood for the tens of thousands of fishermen in the vicinity of the upcoming reactor has also been one of the key issues and central triggers behind the massive upsurge.

When the Indian government and its nuclear establishment are not repressing people and flouting rules, they have been found mingling with ludicrous denials of the risk in Koodankulam and other projects. From claiming on March 14, 2011 when actually the Fukushima accident took a worse turn, that it is nothing but a chemical accident and the authorities in Japan are doing routine check-ups, to calling Koodankulam the safest reactor in the world, India's nuclear-pushers have shown utter contempt for the common people's intelligence and their democratic rights. The political observers and activists see the role of larger pressures and interest groups behind such callous attitude. The government of India fears that if it accedes to people's demands in Koodankulam, it will give a boost to grassroots protests at other places like Jaitapur, Kovvada, Mithivirdi, Chuta etc where its ambitious nuclear expansion is planned – consisting of reactors imported from the US, France and Russia - the nuclear purchases which India had to promise in return for these countries' support in getting exemption in 2008 from the Nuclear Suppliers' Group which had imposed embargo on it ever since India's first nuclear tests in 1974. In essence, India offered its vulnerable people as a bargaining chip to create a nuclear elbow-space for itself in the international politics.

Thus, Koodankulam represents the relentless struggles and hopes of India's common people to safeguard their rights and basic interests. That the scam in Russia has been unearthed at this crucial juncture and the Indian establishment has been forced to further delay commissioning is an ominous signal that this project must be scrapped. However, the nuclear establishment is still far from admitting the gravity of the situation. On the contrary, it has just tried to use the opportunity to sound more responsible and understated the risk by replacing just a few valves. This complacency would prove fatal.

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