

NUCLEAR MENACE

HARIPUR CALLING

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[What follows is an interview based on a discussion with Shri Harekrishna Debnath, the chairperson of the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF). The govt. of West Bengal has recently planned with the govt. of India to set up a nuclear power project at Haripur in Kanthi Sub-division of Purva Medinipur. The chief Minister has very arrogantly advocated for the project. Haripur is a thickly populated area at the vicinity of the sea. A large number of Fisher people lives there. The NFF has been working among them since the mid-1970s and playing the leading role against the proposed nuclear power project. The interview was taken on 30.11.2006 at the central office of the NFF at 20/4, Sil Lane, Kolkata-700015.]

Q. What are the aims and objectives of the NFF?

A. First it has to be cleared that the NFF is not an NGO. It is the central trade union of Fish workers, a federation of trade unions of different states. The NFF was registered in 1985 though it has been working among fish workers since the mid-1970's.

People directly dependent on fishing are also under the ambit of NFF.

The primary objective of the Forum is to protect the occupational interest of the fishing community and to vigil and struggle against pollution of the sea, displacement of the fishing community in the name of 'development'.

Actually the fishing community all over the world has a unique feature. One may call it the way of life of the community. They are deeply attached to the sea, fish and environment. Not merely a means of subsistence, the sea is a lot more to them. It is their culture and heritage. Even when they do not sail for fishing they spend time on beach till the midnight. "The sea calls us—they say humbly". So displacing these people from the vicinity of the sea is not only the physical eviction but also the death of their culture, heritage and age-old lifestyle.

So the fundamental occupational interest of the fishing community is to maintain the natural environment of the sea and mainland.

Q. What about marine laws?

A. No doubt the Marine and Fishing Act is very helpful to a sustainable fishing community. But what is needed is to supervise its implementation.

Fishing is also a very hazardous Job. Occupational death rate is very high in this occupation, it is around 0.3% of the workforce. So we are also trying to make fishers conscious to lessen the hazards.

We are promoting "code of conduct of responsible fishing" at par with the law. Our slogan is "fishing for the future" so that generations to come may depend on these natural resources.

Q. Does your organisation have any political affiliation?

A. No. We are purely apolitical organisation. On the contrary people with different political affiliations are working with us. We believe that nature, fish or environment do not distinguish people on the basis of political affiliation.

Q. You are conducting movement against the govt. decision to set up a nuclear power plant at Haripur. What is your attitude towards the ruke? Are you fighting against the decision for setting it up in Haripur or against the nuclear energy in general?

A. Primarily we are struggling against the proposed nuclear power plant project at Haripur. But we categorically say that we are not only against the nuclear menace at Haripur but anywhere.

Q. Govt. has not yet declared details about the project. What information you have gathered from your sources?

A. What we have come to know from reliable sources is really shocking. We have learnt that govt. is going to install at Haripur six super-reactors. In India there are 16 nuclear power plants with a capacity of total 3000 MW. Whereas at Haripur govt. has decided to install six super reactors each having the capacity of 1400 MW. It means it is a project of 8400 MW. Just think, we have no experience of super reactors; we do not even know anything about the intensity of the radioactivity and we are going to set up six super reactors.

In a nuclear power plant there will be a continuous interexchange of water between the sea and the plant. The plant will pour contaminated hot water into the sea which not only will change the temperature of the water of the sea but also spread radiation slowly and the aquatic environment would eventually get destroyed. Fish either will die or flee out of the coast. Apart from this there is a great chance of contamination of ground water by radioactivity. Chance of fatal accident is very high and if any minor or major accident takes place in the nuclear power plant not only Haripur or Kanthi sub-division but most part of the West Bengal including Kolkata will be suffered for generations by this menace of radioactivity.

There are also problems of radioactive waste materials of the plant and high cost of the nuclear energy.

The govt. is claiming that nuclear technology is safe enough but why are they then planning to evict all people living around 5 km radius of the proposed plant?

Q. How many pleple are going to be evicted for this project?

A. We do not exactly know the actual demaracation as govt. has made no declaration on this yet. But the locality is thickly populated. One has to evict a minimum number of 50,000 people to install the nuclear plant, to keep empty land for buffer zone etc. etc. In a thermal power plant people are allowed to move within the plant but in a nuclear power plant people will not be allowed to move far beyond the actual plant to avoid the risk of radioactivity. A nuclear plant at the vicinity of the sea is more dangerous. But it is very unfortunate that the left front govt. is pursuing such a hazardous project.

Q. Would any compensation be sufficient for this eviction?

A. I have earlier said that the fishing community has a unique feature. If you take away the sea from these people no compensation will be sufficient enough to compensate their lives, culture and heritage.

Q. What adverse impact would be there on the people around Haripur?

A. Fish in Kanthi sub-division will be affected badly. Agriculture will suffer a lot. The price of land will decrease significantly due to panic. The agricultural produce of this area also would not be sold for this. There will be adverse reaction on the tourism industry of Digha. Economy of Kanthi sub-division shall face severe slowdown as there is no significant industry in this sub-division other than tourism.

The fishing community of nearby areas like Mugberia or Paharpur will be affected due to this project. A good number of fishermen in those areas come for fishing in the Juput coast in season time.

The problem would be aggravated by the radioactive pollution of the aquatic environment.

Even, I think the Haldia industrial zone and the proposed special Economic zone in Nandigram will face great challenge. Entrepreneurs would not be interested to invest here due to the panic of radio-activity.

Q. What is the present state of the Movement?

A. The people successfully resisted the observation team of the NPCIL from entering Haripur for two consecutive days on 17 and 18 November 2006.

A protest meeting was organised on 28 November at the Junput Bus stand. Nearly 15000 people assembled there to protest against the proposed project.

An organisation, named, *Haripur Paramanu Vidyut Prokalpa Pratirodh Andolon* has been formed to conduct the movement in different parts of West Bengal.

We have constituted resistance committees locally in almost every village and regularly arranging protest meeting there.

At the national level the NFF is going to launch an agitation programme of fish workers from Gujarat to West Bengal against the project.

World Forum of Fisher People, an international organisation has planned to protest against the project in front of Indian High Commissioner's offices in different countries of the world.

Many national and international organisations have conveyed their solidarity to the movement.

Q. What is the nature of your movement?

A. The NFF believes in non-violent and democratic movement. Our organisers are always trying to convince the aggrieved not to succumb to any threat of the state. Any hectic measure may cause great harm to the movement, so we are forwarding very cautiously.

Q. Is your organisation facing any trouble from ruling parties in conducting the movement?

A. Not yet. People with different political affiliations are participating in the movement. People have understood that the impending eviction is not going to spare them on the basis of political affiliations. Local workers and supporters of the ruling parties are with us and struggling against the govt. decisions.

Q. Apart from political movement what initiatives have you taken at the administrative level?

A. We are trying to convince our friends in PMO, CMO and within Left Front. We are also trying to meet UPA chairperson, Smt. Sonia Gandhi on this matter.