

The Woes of Haripur

By A Correspondent

There is a proposal of setting up of an entire cluster of nuclear reactors in Haripur, on the East Medinipur Coast of West Bengal. The people of Haripur and adjoining villages, threatened by the prospect of eviction and the well-known hazards of nuclear power were terrified. But they found in themselves the will and vision to resist. The first onslaught of the nuclear establishment, embodied in a NPCIL team accompanied by bands of armed policemen, was decisively thwarted at the entry point to Haripur, on the 17th and again on the 18th of November 2006. The battle had been joined.

But the battle is far from won. If media reports are any indication then the West Bengal government and the national and international forces behind nuclear expansion are keen on Haripur, or somewhere nearby. Actually Haripur signals a more fundamental historical trend, manifested through various symptoms. The Indian ruling interests have drunk into 'development' frenzy in a big way and have joined the international coalition committed to energy greedy, eco-destructive mode of growth. One of the most glaring symptoms is of course the move towards Indo-US nuclear deal. However other symptoms are abundantly present - the criminal invasion into fertile agricultural lands in the name of industrial development, the grotesque love affair with SEZ, the endless paeans to double digit growth and so on and so forth. As to the environmental, ecological and resource costs of double digit growth, that is something that 'radical' academicians are left to ponder and citizens fated to suffer.

Haripur is a place which thousands of fishers and cultivators call their home. Haripur is a place where they earn their living without troubling other folks or poisoning the earth with untold volumes of noxious outpourings.

Haripur and the adjoining coastal villages of Purba Medinipur are collectively described as the 'fish basket of West Bengal'.

Haripur is also a symbol of a peaceful people threatened with the juggernaut of 'development'. Haripur is a symbol of State India's visions of a new nuclear age. Haripur is a symbol of citizen India's response to the pompous fantasies of a callous governance.

As to why it is Haripur that symbolises a new and frightening nuclear dawn is simple. India has 16 nuclear reactors in operation. Her most powerful reactor in operation has an installed gross capacity of 540 MW. Her most powerful reactor presently under construction has a gross installed capacity of 1000 MW. But Haripur is proposed to be the site of ultimately 6 reactors of installed capacity of 1650 MW each. It is the first chapter in a new narrative of nuclear grandeur - a narrative anticipated in the Indian Atomic Energy Commission Chairman's statement of having 40,000 MW installed nuclear capacity by 2030.

This frightening narrative may never come to be written. But that depends on whether citizens in India and sympathisers and activists abroad will fight to finish the narrative at its inception - but the prologue is already in place and the first chapter waiting to be written. While industrially advanced states are trying to phase out nuclear energy, states like India and China have decided to re-usher a new nuclear age. The age should not be allowed to take off.

If the project is as massive as reported then this will involve capturing of a considerable amount of very thickly populated coastal land, leading to eviction at least 20,000 local fishers, farmers, artisans etc. (in the villages of Haripur, Baguran-Jalpai, Saula, Junput, Bichunia, Kadua, Deshdattabar, Aladarput, Majilapur etc) from the core and buffer zone of the plant and place countless more lives at risk - from low level radiation and possible nuclear accident. It has been said regarding a possible nuclear accident at the Bradwell nuclear power station in Essex that if it “blew up and there was an east wind, London would have to be evacuated. Perhaps even the whole of southern England.”

Such is the nature of the beast.

Lives and livelihoods that will be lost through eviction and subsequent slow poisoning of the environment. Eviction will be followed by its inevitable consequences—rootlessness, alienation, social unrest and ‘criminalisation’. Such are the indelible wounds left by the chariot of ‘progress’ in its victorious march. But even in the most practical and hardheaded sense, nuclear programme in Haripur constitutes an economic disaster.

✍ Haripur and the adjoining area is commonly referred to as the fish basket of West Bengal.

✍ The dried fish produced in that area is a major source of protein and other essential nutrients such as iodine, phosphorus and riboflavin, in the Hills, the north-east, Bihar and Jharkhand area.

✍ The area is strikingly fertile. Paddy is of course grown in abundance but what is significant about the soil is that it is highly conducive to the growth of a whole range of vegetables. Besides betel leaves, betel nut and coconuts are grown on a commercial basis. When poor people in Kanthi (Contai) heard about the proposed power plant the immediate response was: ‘where will we get our vegetables?’ And there is of course the cashew nut. The village immediately adjoining Haripur—Baguran-Jalpai—is famous in the whole of East Medinipur for its cashews. ✍✍✍to Anita, just before departure from Kolkata. A young girl, Maitreyi (Sudipta Chakraborty) walks up to Anita, recognizing her, but Anita fails to recognize Maitreyi. Conversation on Ananya is revived. He had progressive political ideas, and died of a heart attack while walking in a procession. Maitreyi was working in a NGO preoccupied by forest conservation.

Dr Sen is hostile towards Maitreyi, and feels she could be part of a terrorist organization. A young man in the jungles, spots Dr Sen’s car and alerts an armed group in black fatigues. Dr Sen’s car reaches the tourist bungalow, across a hanging bridge. It is a scenic paradise, but Bubai wants to go home. He is indifferent to Dr Sen. Dr Sen stays in one cottage, while Anita and her son reside in a separate cottage. The caretaker Bahadur Thapa arranges for food. Anita is displeased when Thapa informs that Dr Sen was a frequent visitor, with his patients. Dr Sen gifts Anita an expensive dress. He grabs Anita and says that he has staked his career and life for her and her son. Bubai watches sternly from behind the curtains, as Dr Sen and Anita hug. From the view point, Dr Sen the bachelor, feels that he is the monarch of all he surveys. Binoculars help in spotting rhinos. Dr Sen supports modernization and the breaking down of traditions. Anita cries at the dining table. When Bubai is asleep, she meets Dr Sen in the garden. She does not ring up home, and feels not clear whether coming on the trip, was right or wrong. Dr Sen finds his work of looking after patients, firesome. Anita and Dr Sen walk through new leaves of spring. There are fears of wild animals, before they cross a stream. Anita remembers Aranya’s political poems on changing the

world and government. She was an orphan. Dr Sen points to her beauty in bondage, and she was fighting a losing battle.

In the darkness, the rebels watch the couple, Dr Sen offers to enclose Anita and her son, in his world. While the dinner is cooked in open air, Dr Sen picks up a drink, and offers Anita, her first drink. She gups and coughs, sighting lighted torches in the forests. Dr Sen observes that resistance has no future. Anita dances to flute music in the background. The couple embrace, and Dr Sen insists that Anita should forget about all traditional beliefs. Bubai makes up and leaves his room. When Dr Sen returns to his cottage to fetch cigarettes, he finds that Bubai has urinated on his bed and pillow. He abuses and beats up Bubai. Why was Bubai so disobedient to him? Bubai remains silent. Anita reminds Bubai that the doctor had saved his life. She also hits Bubai, expresses wish of marriage, and pleads with Bubai to accept Dr Sen. She tells Bubai how does one live without a husband. One requires money to live. Tears accompany Anita's Rabindra Sangeet on the Varandah.

Next day at a road junction, Dr Sen meets a forest department official. While Anita and Bubai are sitting on a bench, Maitreyi joins in. Bubai recognizes Maitreyi. On Maitreyi's mobile phone, Anita speaks to her maid in Kolkata, but the mother-in-law declines to speak. Maitreyi takes them to the river bend, and compliments Anita, on her singing. She suggests re-printing of Aranya's poems. Poetry was like property and could be lost. Anita informs that books have been returned by publishers, without royalty. Shyamal calls Maitreyi a terrorist and fundamentalist. He has had enough of revolutions, splits and historical blunders. Back in the cottage Bubai stares as Anita applies lipstick. He cries and pulls his mother's hair. Bubai walks off outdoors. The adult couple make love within the cottage. Running out in the rains, Anita finds Bubai missing, and screams "Bubai must stay". Next morning the rains stop, and through the mists, Bubai is discovered in a grove of trees, unconscious, with Maitreyi and a rebel group, dressed in black fatigues. Dr Sen thanks Maitreyi, but Anita declines to take her phone number.

Bubai is down with high fever, and Dr Sen diagnoses as infection in upper respiratory tract system and asthma. Hot milk and medicines are provided, and arrangements made for an ambulance to shift the child to Siliguri. Anita cries, and discards coloured dresses. Dr Sen collects medicines from a village shop. Anita and her son are alone in the cottage. The sound of wild animals frightens Anita. Stay is extended, and Maitreyi visits Anita. Maitreyi suggests in examination by Dr Rakhit. But this annoys Dr Sen. There is a growing feeling in Anita that it is the mother's sins, visiting the son, Dr Sen meets Dr Rakhit, and finds he is the shopkeeper of the chemist shop. Dr Rakhit puts medicines in strategic location fever boxes, for helping the locals to survive malaria. He is a people's doctor, and diagnoses Bubai's fever as mild malaria. Dr Sen denounces him. Soon Bubai is no more and his dead body is carried by the forest labourers on their shoulders. Anita is in a daze—was she a good mother or a bad mother?

Even though Dr Rakhit is full of statements on recent politics and the social condition, and Anita is engulfed in anxieties "*Songshoy*" is far from a morality tale. The occurrences remain more conceptual, and spontaneous. The egocentric behaviour of the protagonists hinders adaptation to love. But this leads to foolish annoyance and hysterical tears. In spite of the splendid Doars Nature, '*Songshoy*' fails to rise above invented melodrama. Asok Das Gupta's camera loses mobility whenever the protagonists descended from their car.

JOYMATI

Manju Borah's "Joymati—The Saviour" (Assamese, colour, 95 minutes) depicts the Mongoloids from west China, settled in Ahom, by 1681 AD. Two elephants are part of a procession, and the various tribals are settled on either side of the Brahmaputra river. As a beheaded chicken spills blood, the defence of Guwahati from the Monghols begins. Under the command of Lt Lachit Borpukan, the Assamese army defeat invaders. There are folk music and dances during the royal dinner. A noble, Meehua Barbaruah becomes the target of the intrigues at the ministers' conclave. He is deprived of royal status, as a commoner is not permitted to marry royalty. Aton Buragohain has absolute power, as the king's counsellor. Miscreants have entered the palace thrice, to kill the teenaged king, Sulit Chulikta.

There is a proposal to give up Guwahati to the Moghuls, 10,000 soldiers have been lost in a day. The princes from other royal clans are trying to seize power. Attackers are chopping off the right hand of princes in the lineage, or killing them, as a maimed royal prince can never become king. A noble, Godapani (Rohan Doley) wants to restore law and peace. Joymati (Nita Basumatary) tells her husband, Godapani to flee. If people rise against tyranny, the sovereign rule will perish. The juvenile king is indifferent, and plays with a small wooden wheel, tied to a string. Chased by armed soldiers of Laluksola Borpukan, Godapani escapes through fields and forests. As swords and spears cover the skyline, Godapani wants to defend his family and motherland. Some villagers give him shelter, and there are romantic affairs with village women. The king's forces torture the rustic folk. Joymati is dragged through the fields, tied to a tree, and whipped. Godapani trecks through darkness and rain. Joymati embraces death, while Godapani ascended the throne in 1681.

"Joymati" conveys the violence and intrigues of the medieval times. But the small plots and episodes appear unrelated, and far from simultaneous. This disjuncture in the narrative leads to theatricality and contrived effects. Raju Mishra's camera takes on indoors is excessively static, and becomes a passive recorder of courts and hovels. The historical events of atrocity and plots, allow a flow of images full of swords and spears. The visuals do not recount history, as the narrative lacks historical composition. The cliché of arms makes the characters remote. ❧❧