

Calcutta Notebook

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Those who are shocked to see how POSCO is having its way slowly but steadily because of the latest decision taken by UPA government and environment minister Jairam Ramesh may literally get scared if the panic scenario behind the controversial venture floated by yet another government enterprise—Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) gets exposed. The idea is to tap shale oil trapped in a geological formation extending from Durgapur in West Bengal to Hazaribagh in Jharkhand. ONGC is now selling euphoria and utopia as well about how million and million cubic feet of gas will be extracted from the shale bed to fuel India's engine of growth. ONGC is too busy to paint a rosy picture of future energy sector without saying a word or two about the environmental catastrophe that awaits in store. A large-scale eviction apart, environment in the region in the question and adjoining areas will be degraded beyond repair. Maybe a desertification and even more!

Some American companies are ready to sell technology otherwise not tested in America itself. During the Bush era a serious effort was made to tap shale oil in Alaska but later the project was abandoned for more than one reason, both economic and scientific. Now they want to dump their so-called high-tech kit on India because policy-makers in New Delhi don't bother about India's future generation and long-term adverse consequences resulting from dozens of ill-conceived projects.

The technique of tapping shale oil involves hydraulic fracturing or fracking, in which drillers blast millions of litres of water, sand and chemicals at high pressure in underground rock-formations to create cracks for gas and oil to escape. But in the process the underground water systems get totally contaminated and unfit for human consumption. If anything this fracking technique is unproved and unsafe. Even in the West "Environmentalists and regulators have become increasingly concerned that the fracking chemicals—including toulene, xylene and benzene, a carcinogen, which are all from diesel gas..." will seep out into underground sources of drinking water. Even in America environmental impacts of fracking are in the process of investigation. But India is a third world country and there lies no regulation to regulate controversial techniques like fracking. And yet anything can be done in the name of technology transfer.

Meanwhile reports are pouring in from South Africa where farmers oppose Shell's shale gas plans. 'Royal Dutch Shell is facing stiff resistance to its plans to exploit shale gas in South Africa's semi-desert Karoo region, as peasants fear methods used to extract oil and gas will contaminate water and harm the environment', according to a recent report by Reuters. This unproven technology has high risks for fresh water abstraction and pollution.

Petrochemicals group Sersol, Anglo-American, Falcon Oil and Gas and Bundu Gas and Oil Exploration, are among those eyeing shale gas in the region. And here ONGC is all set to open an area otherwise thickly populated, to oil multinationals to destroy nature and loot natural resources. People in many districts of West Bengal and Jharkhand are already in serious trouble because of arsenic and fluoride contamination of ground water. ONGC is going to add woes to their drinking water problems.

Political left in India always dances to the tune of investment song. Environment is not their concern. Everyone is waiting for investments to take hold. They have no time to think over environment, they think it is a luxury, reserved for the elites' drawing rooms where someday some NGO people will discuss it. □□□