

From Hiroshima to Fukushima

A grand and deadly illusion! Nuclear power is safe and environment friendly. As Japan's nuclear crisis appeared to be spinning out of control, forcing some 140,000 people to remain indoors, in the vicinity of the explosion site at Fukushima Daiichi Atomic Power Plant, people living 240 km away in Tokyo also felt the nuclear heat because low levels of radiation wafted into the city's atmosphere. Fukushima is Japan's very own creation of Hiroshima. At the time of writing the death toll as per official press release in the quake-stricken country crossed 20,000 leaving a lot to ponder over how many remained unaccounted for. 55 years later, a nuclear holocaust is haunting Japan and this time the ruling circles of Japan are themselves to blame for the human tragedy of the era the Japanese people are facing at the moment. Panic all around and an international alarm as well.

No doubt the aftershocks of the ravaging earthquake and tsunami will continue to hound policy makers across the globe as anti-nuclear movement is likely to have fresh impetus even in areas where it is weak. For all practical purposes the Fukushima reactor meltdown has surpassed the March 1979 Three Mile accident in America and the April 1986 Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine of the former Soviet Union in terms of economic and environmental damage, human casualty and quantum of radioactivity that will affect generation after generation. Till date the real picture of Chernobyl catastrophe has not been revealed in full. Nor does the world know how many people are still suffering from radiation-related diseases across Soviet Russia and Europe. One hopes somewhat against hope that someday WikiLeaks will do the job. It is quite likely the Fukushima disaster too like "Three Mile" and "Chernobyl" will fade in public memory because the nuclear business lobby is now working overtime to minimise the vulnerability of existing reactors dotting the globe. They are busy to reverse the falling trend in Japan's Nikkei index while nearer home players are only interested in how much they have lost in the fall of Sensex following the Fukushima calamity.

Meanwhile, prime minister Manmohan Singh lost no time to assure MPs that India's atomic reactors numbering 20 were safe, albeit the government ordered a fresh scrutiny of safeguards at the nuclear power installations. The hawks are hawking the idea that Indian plants are safer than Japan's because they are mostly in regions that are supposed to be less prone to severe earthquakes and tsunamis. They are dishing out all this rubbish with a view to saving India's grandiose plan of investing huge money in forthcoming nuclear power plants along the eastern and southern coastline. But a few decades back the Koina earthquake shattered the myth of traditional and non-traditional earthquake prone zones even compelling geologists to revise their seismic map.

Right now India's total installed nuclear power capacity is 4,780 megawatts. And they have an ambitious programme of raising it to 63,000 megawatts. Even conventional wisdom says it is difficult to find a suitable location in India where they can put up reactors with full proof safety measures. Then Fukushima is no headache for India's environment minister Jayram Ramesh as he came down heavily on the critics while reiterating in no uncertain terms that there would be no rethinking on the Jaitapur nuclear power plant in Maharashtra. The proposed 9,900 MW nuclear power project in the eco-sensitive western ghats, is actually a blueprint for massive disaster for people and environment. But Mr Ramesh seems to be satisfied with some additional conditionals and safeguards to be imposed on the nuclear power authority as he has done in case of POSCO steel-cum-port project in Orissa, hopefully to protect environment and people.

Jaitapur apart, they are said to have revived the Haripur Atomic Power Project in coastal Bengal. Fukushima is no deterrent in their perverse way of thinking. In the face of stiff resistance by the people of Haripur they had to retreat and withhold the survey in the recent

past but they are back again, no matter what happens to sea-coast based reactors in Japan's Fukushima. Maybe, Haripur is India's future Fukushima. Then the darlings of India's pampered nuclear club have no time to give second thoughts on nuclear power and heavy cost the nation might have to pay for it in future.

In truth they are more interested in bombs, not power. Close on the heels of Fukushima fall-out, India's former external affairs minister Mr Jaswant Singh called for a second look and revision of the country's no-first use doctrine in the nuclear field in view of drastic changes in the global scenario. Maybe, it is one way to tell the international nuclear industry that there is no re-thinking on India's great leap forward into nuclear deals. □□□ [22-03-2011]