

NOTE

Too hot to Handle

G M writes :

DESPITE THE RISING TIDE OF mass agitation against the proposed nuclear power plants in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu nuclear hawks in New Delhi show no inclination to say 'no' to nuclear energy. While the French are determined to install nuclear reactors at Jaitapur at any cost, Russinas have left Tamil Nadu, in the face of stiff resistance by the plant-affected people and somewhat passive response from the state government, for the time being. They hope to make a come-back when mass anger subsides for which Manmohan Singhs are working overtime to show the world that they won't abandon their grandiose nuclear energy programme under any circumstances.

Surprisingly enough, CPM being an out-and-out votary for nuclear energy and notoriously anti-peasant in land grabbing for industrial purposes, has decided to form a national committee comprising members from different opposition parties, to extend support to the people's struggle in Jaitapur and mobilise masses in their millions all over the country to demand a halt to the Jaitapur project. It is not clear whether they are equally enthusiastic in blocking the controversial project in Tamil Nadu where anti-communist Russians are stakeholders.

For all practical purposes the planet earth can't afford nuclear energy—be it mega or mini.

Despite the industry's glib assurances, nuclear power has never been a safe or foolproof technology. For evidence of that fact, below are few of the major nuclear accidents of the Atomic Age.

*United Kingdom (1957): Windscale reactor fire contaminates 35 workers. Radioactive cloud covers Northern Europe and causes at least 200 cases of cancer.

*Soviet Union (1957): Radioactive explosion at Mayak reprocessing site forces evacuation of 10,000 people. Radiation contributes to deaths of 200.

*USA (1975): Alabama's Browns Ferry plant catches fire and burns for seven hours with two reactors running. Meltdown feared as fire destroys controls.

*USA (1979): Partial core meltdown at Three Mile Island. Radiation released. Thousands evacuated.

*USA (1981): California's San Onofre plant closed for 14 months to repair 6,000 leaking steam tubes. During restart, plant catches fire, knocking out one of two back-up generators.

*United Kingdom (1983): Beaches near Sellafield (formerly Windscale) nuclear processing plant closed due to radiation contamination.

*Soviet Union (1986): Chernobyl explosion. World's worst nuclear accident - so far. Estimates of associated deaths run from 9,000 to nearly one million people.

*Japan (1997): Chain reaction at Tokaimura reprocessing plant exposes 37 workers and surrounding neighbourhoods to radiation.

*Japan (1999): Two workers killed at Tokaimura during unplanned chain reaction.

*Japan (2004): Steam explosion kills four at Mihama reactor.

*Sweden (2006): Short circuit disables emergency power at Forsmark reactor. Catastrophic core meltdown barely averted.

*France (2008): Tricastin nuclear facility accidentally releases 18,000 liters of irradiated water.

Then that's just a partial list. The problem with nuclear power is simple: It's too complex. When things go wrong as they inevitably do, because humans are fallible the consequences can be deadly.

The Fukushima disaster has severely hobbled the atomic industry's hopes for a big-ticket nuclear renaissance. So the American Nuclear Society has proposed a mini-renaissance based on "Small Modular Reactors," or SMRs. Cheaper, quicker to build, and small enough to fit in a garage, SMRs could power homes, factories, and military bases. South Carolina's Savannah River National Laboratory hopes to start building SMRs at a New Mexico plant and is taking a lead role in a GE-Hitachi demonstration project.

Even as Japanese engineers were working to contain the radiation risks at Fukushima, an international SMR conference in South Carolina in April attracted representatives from Westinghouse, AREVA, GE, the International Atomic Energy Agency, China National Nuclear Corp, Iraq Energy Institute, the US Army, and many US utilities. □□□