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Gnani Sankaran: Jayalalithaa lobs nuke potato into PM's court

WRITTEN BY

Gnani Sankaran

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J Jayalalithaa has become the first Tamil Nadu chief minister to challenge the Centre's nuclear policy. By saying that she has written to PM Manmohan Singh to temporarily halt all work at the Koodankulam nuclear project until all issues are resolved, she has placed the buck at the PM's door.

Hundreds of villagers, mostly fisherfolk, have been fasting for the last seven days, in the presence of thousands of people assembled there demanding the closure of the nuclear plant, now ready to go critical. Children and youth boycotted educational institutions. Fisherfolk struck work. Bus transportation to the small coastal hamlet Idinthakarai (broken coast!), where the agitation is on, was suspended. Several rounds of talks failed to convince the people. Jayalalithaa issued a statement detailing safety precautions taken and appealed to the people to end the fast. The people refused.

Finally she did a U-turn and asked the Centre to intervene. The change of heart within two days obviously is not due to Buddha-like enlightenment. The steadfast struggle of thousands of people at Koodankulam, gaining support from neighbouring districts, threatens to disturb Jayalalithaa's electoral prospects in the local body elections, which just a month away. The massive local body elections in Tamil Nadu will see about 100,000 people's representatives getting directly elected. Elections would be a show of strength for all parties.

Obviously with elections in mind, Jayalalithaa has now announced that she will sign the petition for the plant's closure and has asked other political parties to spell out their stand on this issue. She has also announced that a delegation led by her minister would meet the PM to demand closure.

Nuclear plants in India are basically weapons projects. Power generation is a fig leaf to hide the real motive. All of India's 20 plants together produce less than 3% of the country's electricity need. The projects are solely central government-run and generally thrust on a state by the Centre. Only one state government in the country has said no to nuclear plants so far.

The Kerala government and its legislature have refused permission for nuclear plants in Kerala, following strong opposition from environmental groups. The Koodankulam plant was planned for Tamil Nadu only after Kerala refused permission in the late 1980s.

The state governments also do not have any real authority over the nuclear plants. Kalpakkam, near Chennai, is a case in point. Under the law, the environment impact assessment report of the state pollution control boards is mandatory. When a 500 MW prototype fast breeder reactor was sought to be established in Kalpakkam in 2001, the state's pollution control board enacted a farce of the proceedings. (Incidentally Jaya was in power then too.)

The mandatory 30-day notice for a public hearing was flouted. A meeting was called for within three days at the Kanchipuram district collectorate. This was challenged in the high court successfully by the Coastal Action Network.

When concerns about increasing incidence of cancer in villages around Kalpakkam was raised, the Jayalalithaa government in 2003 released a report claiming that it has examined all the workers of Kalpakkam and residents of surrounding villages and none were cancer prone. Ironically, already 167 people were being treated for cancer.

The attitude of various political parties towards nuclear issues is generally vague and complex. The Congress and BJP support the nuclear weapons programme and have vied with each other in enhancing India's nuclear weapon capabilities. The left parties

have shunned the weapons programme but have strongly supported nuclear energy programmes.

There is no party with a green agenda in India. Regional parties have no clear thinking on these issues except to tow the line of all India big partners. The DMK's state executive committee passed a resolution in 1989 opposing Koodankulam project. Within months, on coming to power, it passed another resolution demanding early implementation of the project with a adequate safety measures.

For the first time now, there will be a state government-supported initiative, forced by a ground-level mass movement, asking the Centre to review its nuclear energy policy. The irony is that all village gram sabhas around Koodankulam have passed resolutions against the plant. While the Panchayati Raj Act declares that the gram sabha has the ultimate power to decide on all issues concerning the village, the real power in decision-making is never with them. The central government and the state governments ultimately decide what is 'good' for the village.

Will Koodankulam reverse this power equation? If it does, it could be a trendsetter for green politics in the country. A political fantasy?!

Gnani Sankaran is a Tamil writer, journalist, theatre person and filmmaker

• Tags: Congress, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Cancer, Manmohan Singh, Environment, Nuclear Weapons, Pollution Control Board, children, electricity, Chennai, BJP, J Jayalithaa, bharatiya janata party, Kalpakkam, Kanchipuram, Indias, Panchayati Raj Act, Gnani Sankaran, Coastal Action Network

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