

TARAPUR TO JAITAPUR – NATIONAL ‘YATRA’(march) AGAINST NUCLEARISATION OF INDIA

April 23-25, 2011; A Brief Descriptive Report (not an analytical one, as that should be attempted by the organising groups together);

Background : --

To raise public awareness and understanding about various scientific, social, environmental & economic issues related to nuclear (fission) energy, specially in light of the recent nuclear accidents in Japan and the world-wide debate about the pros & cons of nuclear energy, and also to protest the refusal of the Govt of India to reconsider its mad rush for putting huge nuclear power plants all over the country, a Tarapur to Jaitapur National Anti-nuclear Yatra (march) was organized by various anti-nuclear civil society groups from all across India. Tarapur is the site of the first nuclear power plant established in India, and Jaitapur is the site chosen by the Govt for the (till now) world's largest nuclear power plant to be established, in the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. The decision to take out such a national march followed the many meetings, public debates, seminars, conventions etc – by many civil society groups and other organizations, to discuss threadbare the whole nuclear issue in the perspective of the recent nuclear accidents in Japan, and also of the energy & climate crisis debates. The organization of the national yatra was taken up by a collective of civil society groups in Maharashtra – as the yatra was to start & end within Maharashtra, both Tarapur & Jaitapur being located in that state.

Many groups responded to the call of the Yatra, along with suffering people from many of the sites of both existing and proposed nuclear power plants and uranium mines. Retired Supreme court & High court judges, retired admirals of Indian navy, scientists, professors – retired & working, public educators, doctors, public sector union leaders, economists, cultural workers and many such participated actively in the 3-day yatra.

Day 1, 23rd April : Yatra begins in Mumbai & first public meeting at Tarapur (11 :30 --14:30)

Participants assembled in several meeting points in Mumbai from the afternoon of 22nd april, and Bhupesh Gupta Bhawan in Prabha Devi was the starting point for the yatra. On the morning of 23rd, around 7 AM, nearly 200 Yatris started on buses and jeeps decorated with anti-nuclear messages explaining the dangers of nuclear energy, and also carried & distributed educative material throughout the over 100 KM route from Mumbai to Tarapur. Right from the beginning, information was trickling in that the Maharashtra Govt is planning to scuttle the Yatra by all means, and “jilabandi” /prohibitory orders were in force in Ratnagiri district. Yatris were preparing accordingly.



Yatra Starting From Mumbai on 23rd April Morning

A few speakers for the public meeting in Tarapur and some key organizers started much earlier by train, to avoid the very real possibility of being detained in the identified vehicles, as the Maharashtra Govt was putting all kinds of obstacles in the way of the yatra organization and proceeding beyond Tarapur. Apart from over 200 anti-nuclear activists, many of whom were teachers, scientists, social activists, educators, and of course – a large no of people from the areas all over India where nuclear power plants are either proposed or operational, good no of local farmers and fisher people also assembled, to take part in the anti-nuclear meeting at Tarapur, where India's first nuclear power plant (supplied by General Electric – nearly of the same design as those at Fukushima Daiichi in Japan) came up in 1969. A large band of young activists, mixed with old but spirited eminent citizens and locals kept the atmosphere somber yet spirited. Questions were raised about the motive of both the Maharashtra & Indian governments in going blindly ahead with these NPP proposals, even when the world is taking a relook into nuclear power in the wake of Fukushima nuclear accidents. The connection with the neo-liberal market agenda and neo-colonialism were also brought in.



Yatris / Activists raising Anti-Nuclearisation Slogans at Tarapur Before the Meeting Started

The public meeting was preceded by anti-nuclear songs by a young band of activists from Lokayat Pune and other groups, and each contingent of activists that came in to the meeting venue were welcomed with enthusiasm. The meeting began at around 11 AM and leader of Azadi Bachao Andolan Prof Banwari Lal Sharma, retired justices from the Supreme court & Maharashtra high court – justice P B Sawant & justice Kolse Patil, ex-chief of the Indian Navy Admiral Ramdas, Prof Sarade from Aurangabad, Dr SP Udaykumar the leader of Tamil Nadu anti-nuclear movement and convener of National Alliance of Anti-nuclear Movements, Dr Gabriele – one of the national convener of National alliance of people's Movements, Neeraj Jain & Vaishali Patil from the Konkan Vinashkari Prakalp Virodhi janandolan, Soumya Dutta – the national convener of Bharat Jan Vigyan jatha, Sanovar – advocate & senior environmental activist from Mumbai, Mr K ashok Rao of the central public sector employees union..... and many other prominent citizens of India spoke to the large gathering at Tarapur – located a couple of kilometres away from the nuclear power plant entrance. The meeting venue was kept surrounded by nearly 100 police persons, but that failed to dampen the spirit of the activists and organisers.



The Public Meeting at Tarapur in Progress – April 23 Morning, 2011

The administration and police started their dirty tricks after the public meeting was over by around 2:30 PM, and the media people left the venue. About 130 of the Yatris were tricked into leaving the area – away from the media people, and then detained in the police station on flimsy charges. The detained people included very senior /aged retired professors, ex-Navy Chief and many other respected citizens, though the two retired justices managed somehow to come out of the area. A few speakers for the next public meetings at Bhiwandi & Thane - including me - also slipped out of the police cordon, took whatever local public transport was available, and managed to go out to Mumbai for the scheduled meeting with the help of local organisers. The Bhiwandi meeting had to be cancelled though, as not many could come out. The detained marchers were not given food or even enough water, and towards late evening when the police offered them some food – they started a hunger strike demanding to be released. Under pressure, they were released in the night, but the police managed to scare away the Yatra vehicle owners & drivers by threatening to cancel their permits & licences. Loosing most of the vehicles was a big obstacle, but the organisers summoned all their resources to arrange alternative transports by late in the night and somehow managed to reach the Yusuf Meherally Centre in Tara in Raigad district, which was the scheduled night halt – by about 4 in the morning.

In the meantime, a large public meeting in the bustling Mumbai suburb – Thane, took place in the evening as scheduled, and about 500 people turned up to nearly fill the pandal. It was organised mainly by trade union leader Rajan Raje and other local groups including Lok Raj Sangathan, Konkan Bachao Samity and others. Five-six of the Yatris – including myself - were

able to evade police detention at Tarapur and reached the venue to address this meeting. Alka from Lokayat, Soumya Dutta of Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha, justices Sawant & Kolse Patil, Pradip Dutta from the Haripur anti-nuclear plant struggle in West Bengal, Vivek Monterro and Rajan Raje spoke and discussed with the large gathering, which stayed put from around 7 PM to 10:15 PM when the public meeting ended. Many people showed tremendous support and appreciation at the marchers and their supporters keeping up with the public interactions and the march, despite state/ police repression.



A Section of the Large Gathering at the Thane Meeting – 23rd April Evening

Many issues relating to nuclear energy, nuclear accidents, health effects, reactor controls etc were discussed in detail, and the people appreciatively pointed out the qualitative difference with an earlier public meeting addressed by India's previous nuclear czar Anil Kakodkar some months ago, when he refused to answer people's questions, contrary to the openness of today's meeting.

Early next morning we found that large police contingents have surrounded and cordoned off all the gates / exit routes of the Yusuf Meherally Centre where we were staying for the night, to prevent the Yatra proceeding towards its next scheduled rally at Pen in Raigad. Strategies were then quickly chalked out, and locals who knew the terrain helped us go out through small forested patches and agricultural fields – in batches of 5-7 yatris each with our tell-tale anti-nuclear T-shirts and caps put inside handbags. We took whatever local transports were available – 3-wheelers, state transport buses... from different spots on the highway and reached Pen by the appointed time, but kept ourselves dispersed in different tea-shops, markets etc - to avoid detection, till the rally started.



Yatris Sneaking out of Yusuf Meherally Centre through Fields & Forested Patches – 24th morng.

Several contingents of police were patrolling the town of Pen, but they came to know of the rally only when it started and the local Maharashtra TV channels were broadcasting this. We took part, spoke to the TV channels about the state repression and against the Jaitapur project. More police rushed in and 13 of the marchers, including the militant Konkani leader of the movement – Vaishali Patil, were arrested. As all the vehicles of the marchers were stopped and yatris detained, the main Yatra could not go ahead, but a few of us who were to speak at the next public meetings – sneaked out again and proceeded to the next meeting venue in a vehicle kept well outside the town, and which avoided being marked by the police.



The Anti-nuclear Rally in Pen Town About to Start – April 24, 11 AM

As the Yatra entered the ecologically rich Konkan region, the focus was intensified on the richness of the agriculture, on the biodiversity and the sheer natural bounty of the Konkan area, with its many rivers & creeks, rolling hills and lush green cover. The proposed Jaitapur project (along with the many coal-based thermal power plants being proposed in the region) will cause devastation for all of these. The regions economy is rich not only in food-grains, but is famous for Alphonso Mangoes, high quality Cashew and the rich fishing stretches all along the coast and creeks & rivers.



The Natural Richness of Konkan Region – Which the Jaitapur NPP Will Devastate

Throughout the road from Pen towards Ratnagiri, police were keeping watch every 4-5 Kilometers, and we had to avoid getting marked and detained. It seemed that the police had information that a few of us managed to proceed towards the next meeting venues – in Kolhad and Mangaon (Shan-E_Guruji Ashram), but were not sure about who & how. The meeting at Kolhad – organised by another local resistance struggle lead by Ulka Mahajan, was being marked by police, but four of us managed to reach the venue – though were delayed by the obstacles. This meeting went ahead, but the next and larger meeting at Shan-E-Guruji Ashram had to be cancelled as the police reached in large numbers and threatened the local hosts, as some senior Yatris made a mistake of disclosing our plans to the police, without realising the implications.



The Meeting in Kolhad in Progress, April 24 Afternoon, 2011;

In the evening of 24th, all the Yatris met again in Pen, after the arrested Yatris were released by the police, and took stock of the situation. Senior activists like Prof Anil Sadgopal of All India Right To Education Forum also joined in the morning of 24th, and helped resolve differences and devise strategies. There were different opinions about the details of how to proceed in face of such constant harassment, but most of the marchers (yatris) were determined that the yatra should go on. After a couple of hours of discussions, the yatris publicly announced that “We are not going ahead to Ratnagiri”, and returned to the Yusuf Meherally Centre. This was done to mis-guide the police informers eavesdropping on the discussion. In the night, at the centre, plans were discussed, and inspite of continuing differences / confusions about the exact method of proceeding with the yatra, people decided to go ahead.



Strategy Meeting at Pen in Progress – April 24, Afternoon

Early next morning on the 25th, the Yatris started off in the direction of Ratnagiri in the hired vehicles. We decided to address the public in towns & villages on the way, and thus had our first public meeting in the main chowk of Mangaon, where 'parchas' were also distributed, apart from lectures on the nuclear issue. Next stop was Shan-E-Guruji Ashram, where we had our break-fast. It was decided here that the main part of the Yatra will end with a rally and a public meeting at the historic town of Mahad, where Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar mobilised the dalit people to ascertain their rights over the waters of the famous pond, and a small team will push ahead for Jaitapur.



Tarapur to Jaitapur Anti-nuclear Yatra Leaving for Mahad Town – 25th April, afternoon

The yatriks kept announcing their purpose and the protest of the people against the governments insane nuclear drive – throughout the journey, by the public address system mounted atop one of the mini buses. On reaching Mahad town, 11 of the Yatriks started off for Jaitapur, by taking public transport – to avoid being detected & stopped by the police, whereas the larger remaining contingent of about 100 marcers started a rally from the Ambedkar memorial on the banks of the historic pond.



Rally Starting from Ambedkar Memorial at Mahad



Rallyists Distributing Anti-Nuclear Literature at mahad Town

Apart from the public meeting at the main square of Mahad, many side meetings with small groups of people were held, explaining the rationale of the yatra, and also answering their many questions about how India can fulfill its energy needs without taking recourse to such dangerous sources.



Public Meeting in Progress in Mahad Town, April 25 Afternoon



Police Trying to Stop the Marchers and Arrest Them in Mahad, 25th Afternoon

As it was the last day of the march, it was decided that none of the outside-Maharashtra Yatris will court arrest, and 13 yatris were arrested by the police after negotiations. They were arrested under various charges, and finally released again at around 7:30 PM in the evening. The marchers assembled again in the park surrounding the Ambedkar memorial, and reviewed the effort. It was also decided that the struggle will be intensified in and around Jaitapur.

The 11 member Yatra contingent under the leadership of Prof B L Sharma, Amarnath bhai, Prof Anil Sadgopal, Prof Sarade etc meanwhile reached Ratnagiri after lots of hardship, their hired vehicle dumping them in the middle of a forested patch in the night, police looking for them at every town in the route. Finally they were able to hold a press conference in Ratnagiri which was also broadcast live, and reached the Sankri Nate fishing village – where they were received with great enthusiasm. An overflowing-with-people packed hall listened to them and welcomed them warmly. Locals were greatly enthused by the support they received from this National Yatra, and resolved to resist the destructive nuclear plant with all their might.

On their way back, many marchers participated and spoke in the Chernobyl day rally in Mumbai, and also held press conferences in many cities – demanding that the government scrap its insane plans of nuclearising India along its length & breadth.

----- **Soumya Dutta, Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha**
