



Q&A: M K Balaji, Project site director, Kudankulam nuclear project

'Deeply pained by villagers' agitation'

Sanjay Jog / Mumbai October 16, 2011, 0:08 IST

The ongoing agitation against the Kudankulam nuclear power project has come as a rude shock to nearly 1,000 scientists and engineers of the Nuclear Power Corporation. Despite repeated demands to scrap the project, NPC's local management is hopeful the situation will improve soon. In an exclusive interview with *Sanjay Jog*, Kudankulam project site director **M K Balaji** explains the present state of affairs and the fate of the project. Edited excerpts:

Until recently, everything was going smooth. Did the fast and rasta roko by protestors against the Kudankulam project come as a shock?

I must say we are much pained by the method of agitation adopted by the villagers, who are, in fact, our neighbours. All these years, we had been living like a family and interacting regularly. We really do not know what made them suddenly doubt us. We have reached out to them on several occasions, explaining the Kudankulam nuclear power project's safety features and also of nuclear power, in general. I want to reiterate here the plant is safe, as we are following the vision of former PM Jawaharlal Nehru and the father of nuclear programme, Homi Bhabha. We are distressed to know the villagers think NPC is advocating a dangerous technology capable of causing public damage. How can we do this? There are 20 nuclear reactors operating in the country and safety has been of paramount importance. Our employees are working in these plants and also residing in the nearby colonies. How can we use a technology which can prove to be dangerous to

The protestors blocked employees' entry for the second day today. Have the operations been affected at the plant?

It is true that all employees haven't been able to enter the plant since yesterday. However, we are thankful to the district administration for helping us bring out some employees who had been in the plant for the whole of Thursday. Thanks to them, we could also send some employees inside the plant this morning. We are motivating them on how to cope up with the situation. They are quite dedicated and are cooperating with us. We are awaiting the district administration's advice to decide the future course of action.

Who is instigating the villagers? What are the real forces behind the agitation?

I am a technical person. I cannot comment on this. I repeat they are our neighbours and we have a good rapport with them. I am quite optimistic we will be able to reach out to them again after the advice of district administration. We have formed a special group to aggressively implement awareness among the villagers and the public at large on how nuclear power is safe, pollution-free and cheap. A special group has been formed to carry out this job. We have held a special one-week camp for engineering graduates, explaining them safety applications at the plant site. Besides, visits of students, children, technical persons and general public have been organised. We will reach out to every single individual and explain them in their language the importance of nuclear energy. The idea is to enhance public awareness.

Villagers have serious apprehensions about the safety and design of the plant, especially in the wake of the Fukushima disaster. What are the additional safety applications incorporated in the project?

In the Kudankulam reactor design, many advanced safety features have been deployed. These include a passive heat removal system which ensures cooling of the fuel even if power and cooling water are not available, as was the case with Fukushima. We have installed 154 passive recombiners to avoid the formation of the explosive mixtures inside the containment, by maintaining the mixture's volumetric hydrogen concentration below the safe limits. The passive catalytic recombiners work passively without any external or diesel power or manual intervention.

Most villagers are fishermen and worried about the adverse impact on fish population. Can you throw some light on this aspect?

The project's cooling water system provides for fish protection, ensuring the latter are not sucked into the intake. Several studies conducted by NPC have shown there are no adverse effects on marine ecology around the nuclear power plant site.