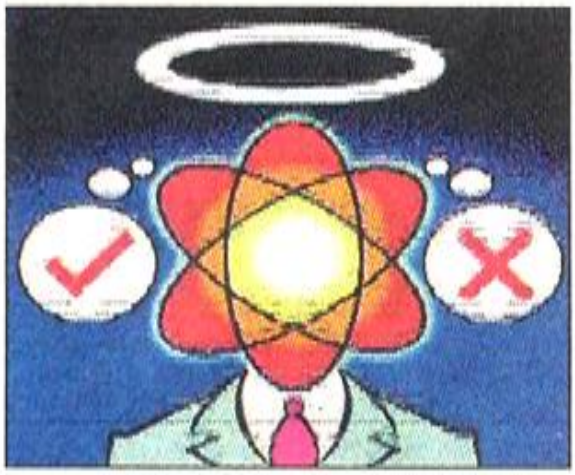
Misguided Activism

Fast-growing India can't do without nuclear energy

Energy-hungry India's ambitious plan to raise nuclear capacity to 63,000 MW by 2032 makes sense. But meeting the target won't be easy, going by demonstrations against nuclear power projects countrywide. The latest agitation over Tamil Nadu's Kudankulam plant – agitators there have just ended an 11-day fast – shows yet again how easily passions can be whipped up. Why nuclear energy appears open to mischievous fear-mongering isn't hard to see. These mega-ventures, involving big bucks and foreign collaboration, need to be built and maintained with top-grade safety standards. However rare, when mishaps do occur as in Japan's Fukushima, they serve as fodder for anti-nuclear power lobbies besides provoking knee-jerk local protests.

Sometime ago, Fukushima was used to justify calls to scrap the Jaitapur plant in Maharashtra. Haryana, Andhra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat have had their share of troubles while Bengal junked the Haripur project. In Tamil Nadu, NGO-backed protesters now want Kudankulam's atomic power plant closed, citing misgivings over safety and displacement. The chief minister's detailed statement about safety measures in place fell on deaf ears and the Centre – reportedly ready to 'reconsider' the project – seems on the verge of caving in. When people adopt agitation for agitation's sake, goaded by myopic activists with ideological axes to grind, the first casualty is reasoned debate. Yet public awareness can hardly be raised without cool-headed discussion on both the benefits and risks of nuclear energy use.



It is no one's case that public concerns over safety needn't be addressed. If anything, Fukushima torpedoed complacency about nuclear power, driving home that disaster preparedness must plan for even freak accidents. Mishaps, however, can happen as much in a chemical plant, a coalmine or an oilrig as in a nuclear power plant. Managing concerns demands open debate about our nuclear edifice, whose decision-making processes must be more transparent. Periodic reviews of existing plants are in order, along with public education about security assessments and contingency plans. Reinforcing the structural integrity of sites must be top priority. This mandates upgrade in installation design – reactors, control rooms, containment areas, cooling systems, power backups – to help plants better withstand calamities.

The aim, ultimately, is to have our nuclear power programme take off. Fast-developing India can't rest content with Luddite responses to technology, as frequently manifested in misguided activism be it against transgenic crops or nuclear energy. Our power consumption is set to increase by leaps and bounds. Environment-friendly energy use being critical to our high growth path, we require alternatives to polluting fossil fuels. Renewables – coming with their own set of headaches concerning use of land and other resources – can't do the trick alone. We need a diversified energy basket, which includes an emissions-free source like nuclear power generated to benefit people on a mass scale.