

## Xpressions

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# Scared of nuclear energy?

Mention of the very word nuclear produces a shiver down the spine of every layman. We seem to link it with a nuclear bomb! Yes we are scared of nuclear energy, but we are not scared of the match-box in our pockets or the LPG in our kitchen. One may counter that both these items have safety devices. Of course, but we have to have safety devices while using any type of energy, be it electricity, matches or LPG and the like.

Nuclear power, of late has been much condemned and criticised, especially after the earthquake generated tsunami, that struck the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan on March 11, 2011. But remember, thousands perished in the tsunami, but no one died of radiation due to leak from the plant.

We are running terribly short of electricity and also running terribly short of time in the race of development. The power scenario of the country is quite bleak, with about 300 million people still without electricity. We need to generate more, but not at the cost of the environment.

With more than 65% chunk of share of power generation by thermal energy, a large area of our country is sadly reeling under the perils of pollution. Hundreds of persons are afflicted by neurological disorders due to release of mercury from the thermal power plants at Singrauli (MP) and Sonbhadra (UP). Despite knowing the perils caused by the fly ash from the thermal power plants, the atomic power plants were, even in my mind not very safe places. It was a sheer coincidence that I was chosen a member of the eight-member delegation of scientists, environmentalists and doctor to see in detail the Narora Atomic Power Station (NAPS) in UP.

Thus, in May 2012, the drive from Delhi to NAPS in

the scorching heat was quite taxing, but a late evening stroll in the garden of the NPCIL guest house at NAPS was really refreshing. We had our own apprehensions and doubts about the safety factors and all of us were straining our necks to locate the high, hideous and smoke-belching, broad chimneys of the power plant. To our dismay, except greenery and a moonlit sky, nothing else was visible.

During after dinner briefing, we were told that area within a 1.6 km radius outside the plant is an exclusion zone. Human habitation is prohibited there. On the contrary, seven lakh trees were planted as the plant came up. These had now taken shape of a dense forest with all kinds of wild life, birds and aquatic fauna, including fish, crocodiles and dolphins. As proof, we were taken on an early morning drive in the forest.

The officer of NAPS accompanying informed us that it is customary to keep another five kilometre perimeter outside the forest as 'no habitation zone'. The first nearest habitation, therefore, was the township of Narora with the huge colony of NAPS, with the guesthouse. No wonder, we could not see the chimneys of the plant!

Once inside the forest, we were in a completely different world, where animals and birds of all kinds roamed around freely, not scared of our vehicles. There were hordes of monkeys sitting atop the high boundary wall in a row, as if giving us a guard of honor. Peacocks dancing, wild boar rushing off, rabbits frolicking, and herds of bluebull and deer remained grazing, unconcerned.

A variety of large fish were busy gulping swarms of insects in the Ganga canal, which flows parallel to the river.

**TO BE CONTINUED**

**(THE VIEWS OF THE WRITER ARE PERSONAL)**