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Politics of Protest: Anti-Narora Atomic Power Project campaign incident by Dhirendra Sharma (excerpted from "Uncharted Life's Journey: A Social Activist's Story" by Dr. Dhirendra Sharma, 2019).

Professor Sharma recalls: India's Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, in her election campaign in the 1970s had announced construction of a Nuclear Power plant at Narora located at Ganga(65 miles from New Delhi). With some social activists and my Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) students, I decided to organize a protest march at the Narora Atomic Power Project site to stop its construction.

The reason behind our protest was that the Vengurlekar Site Selection Committee of scientific experts, had not approved the NARORA site for the proposed atomic power plant as the location fell in the high seismic zone IV. The question, therefore, I raised was: " what were the compulsions that forced the (political)decision makers to risk the safety of the millions in the country's hinterland?" (India's Nuclear Estate, pp. 106-7)

On the appointed day, with a few hundred students- mostly from JNU, and Lady Sriram Girls College, we arrived at the Narora site. Well disciplined and well behaved urban students were lined up in front of the construction site. We were totally peaceful. I was addressing the security personnel inside the parameter of the project informing them about the dangers of such a project, presenting scientific data and explaining technical problems in construction of nuclear reactors posing threat to life and environment. I had prepared a write- up in simple Hindi for distribution; and had also prepared a documentary on dangers of atomic power based on lessons learnt from European and American accidents.

A women journalist covering the event informed us that she had heard a police officer prompting local(village) boys to attack the protesting "Dilliwali girls".

I quickly regrouped our boys, and placed them in a protective formation around the girls, and alerted the scouting commandos. I also went on the mike to warn plain clothes intelligence officers against adopting such disruptive tactics.

But more disappointing experience was yet to come.

A local political leader who had been a former Member of Parliament appeared on the scene and showed great support for our campaign. Welcoming this village leader,I asked him to help mobilize the local support for us as the project posed greater threat to their health and security. After sometime, the politician returned saying: "Professor saab, your this anti-nuclear campaign can be a real political success provided you take me as your leader."

I welcomed him: "Oh, Netaji, (leader), that will be great. Please, lead the campaign." I responded enthusiastically.

The Netaji drew me closer to him and in a conspiring tone whispered: "OK then, tell your boys and girls to attack the security guards. We will have to make a coordinated charge. Two boys will snatch the gun from a soldier, and the two girls shall surround other guards, doing Gherao. While this is going on, rest of us shall push through the gate, shouting slogans of 'Atomic power down, down. Hindustan Zindabad!'"

"But I do not want any trouble." I objected, "If we cross the line and forced entry into the construction site, the soldiers are likely to hit back and our students will get hurt. Our campaign is nonviolent Gandhian. It must remain totally peaceful -I want no violent confrontation."

I told the students to maintain discipline and show no disrespect towards the security guards as they were doing national service. "They are our friends, and protectors, not our enemies," I asserted.

The political intruder was disappointed: "If you cannot provoke a firing and take a few casualties, then how can you build a protest campaign. If one person gets killed, you will be headlined in tomorrow morning's newspapers and your anti-nuclear campaign will get the support it needs."

I refused to associate him with the protest.

The leader walked away in disgust: "you are not going to have any success here. Your anti-nuclear campaign is dead from the start."

HOW RIGHT he was. With no riots, no killings in the streets, I did not see any political party, any political leader come forward to join us in taking stand against the construction of the Narora power plant, nuclear energy and its subsequent weaponization in India.

(The Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered closure of my Science Policy Centre at JNU with no political party or leader ever protesting or defending my human rights as an academic).

Dr. Dharendra Sharma, Author: INDIA'S NUCLEAR ESTATE (1983).

Insaan-ko, Insaan-se ho Bhai-chaara, Yehi hai Paigaam Hamara!

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