

# Nuclear necropower: The engineering of death conditions around a nuclear power plant in south India<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The article concentrates on the ways people's claim to life, citizenry and democratic dissent were revoked the more they dared to defy and mobilise against a nuclear power plant at Kudankulam in southern India. Building on the literature on biopower and necropower, it is argued that the Indian state is exercising nuclear necropower through the creation of death conditions for subaltern populations as well as their political supporters. These 'death worlds' go beyond physical demise to encompass ecological, social and political conditions by which a person's life is diminished. Victims, suspects, and/or targets are geographically, socially and politically created as a consequence of sliding and syncretic subjugations to do with 'let die' and 'make die'. These variegated perspectives might be delineated by way of three overlapping modalities that embed necropower in the politics of the nuclear industries, environment, social hierarchies and state-backed operations to undermine subaltern populations, anti-nuclear activists and environmentalists. The first modality encompasses ecological factors by way of a silent and encroaching death where nuclear industries subject marginalised communities and casual labourers to a life of environmental uncertainty, exploitation and health hazards. The second is the more overt and punitive violence exacted on- and offline in order to contain and extinguish dissent against nuclear power. The third is by way of producing a culture of vilification in terms of strategies designed to malign and outcaste anti-nuclear activists and environmentalists.

On October 23, 2012, thousands of south Indians who supported the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE), languished in a coastal village, Idinthakarai, that had become an 'open-air jail'.<sup>1</sup> As arterial roads to it had been cordoned off by police and paramilitaries from March of that year, a group of women made a poignant appeal.<sup>2</sup> They wrote in a digital letter:

Do we exist? Do we live within the exclusivity or sterilisation zone?  
.... We understand that none of our representations or appeals have been considered ... We do not want to be relocated or rehabilitated. We want to be here by the seashore in our own birthplace. We want to pursue our livelihoods linked to the sea and its bounties. We want good food, water and access to resources here in these villages. We

do not want money that is so ephemeral. We are willing to work hard, earn and live well ... We have no complaints other than dissent about the way in which the concerned authorities are unwilling to come to us and allay our fears and doubts. We want them to assure us that the KKNPP [Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant] will not be allowed to attain criticality at the cost of our lives and dreams. We want our sisters and brothers languishing in the jails to be released. We want our peaceful resistance to be dealt with decently and humanely.<sup>3</sup>

For exercising their right to peaceful dissent, fishing and farming communities who opposed the nuclear power plant were delivered dire blows. In the hands of a punitive state, they were forced to either live in

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<sup>1</sup> 'Koodankulam: Idinthakarai Turned into an Open-air Jail, Govt Playing Divide-and-rule, *DiaNuke*, April 10, 2012 <https://www.dianuke.org/koodankulam-idinthakarai-turned-into-an-open-air-jail-govt-playing-divide-and-rule/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> 'Do we Exist? Fifth Letter from the Women of Idinthakarai', *Countercurrents*, 23 October 2012, <http://www.countercurrents.org/5thletter231012.htm>.

prison or in a 'sterilisation zone', a designated 5 kilometer zone around the nuclear reactors as stipulated by India's Atomic Energy Regulatory Board.<sup>4</sup> Both places were empty of their life-potentials to do with their future health, livelihood, and generations (see Abraham, 2012, pp. 107–108). Not integral to or compliant with the state - referring to a complex of organisational structures, personnel, discourses and practices that can be both dispersed and come together as a concrete force in people's lives (Foucault, 2010, p. 4) – the women were decreed disposable and subjected to a shadow existence entwined in nuclear necropower (see Kohso, 2011; Schwab, 2014; Alexis-Martin, 2019; Fig. 1).

While according to Foucault (2004: 247), the modern state organises and affirms the lives of populations in biopower – 'to make live and to let die' – following Mbembe (2003), necropower departs from biopower by emphasising the centrality of death to the organization of socio-political life – in other words, 'to make die and to let live'. With a focus on conditions of colonisation, slavery and apartheid, Mbembe (2003: 39–40) proposes the notions of necropolitics and necropower so as to analyse 'the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.' He reminds us that 'death-worlds' are not an archaic form of sovereign government, for they persist into the modern era along with biopower. One does not supersede the other. Rather, as Siddick (2016: 4) elaborates, there is a 'living death in the "make die"' that underpins the modernist political project.

Taken into the realm of energy, Boyer (2015: 534) adapts the Foucauldian strand of biopower: 'Electropolitics infuse governance' – in a neologism, energopower. Elsewhere he elaborates (Boyer, 2014: 309): 'modalities of "biopower" (the management of life and population) today depend in crucial respects upon modalities of energopower (the harnessing of electricity and fuel) and vice versa'. The modern subject cannot live, let alone countenance a life without electricity especially when it is smoothly and invisibly integrated into the minutiae of their social world.

Energy *necropower* as opposed to *biopower* reverses the optics. With respect to the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, the supposed smooth operations of nuclear industries to produce power for metropolitan and industrial hubs are disrupted to create death conditions for those who have little to benefit from them in the hinterlands. With a focus on the entrenchment of nuclear installations in the peninsular region of Tamil Nadu, the article scrutinises what Verweijen and Dunlap (2021) describe

as 'political (re)actions 'from above'' (see also Geenen & Verweijen, 2017, p. 2). The political (re)actions from above interrogate the combined efforts of state, corporate and allied actors in their attempts to 'manage' dissent and 'manufacture' consent so as to prevent and pre-empt discord. The account investigates these (re)actions through the construction of death conditions that impair people's lives ecologically, socially and politically. It presents the case that the Indian state is exercising nuclear necropolitics through the creation of death conditions for marginalised communities as well as their political supporters through three interleaved modalities. The first modality encompasses ecological factors by way of a silent and encroaching death where nuclear industries subject local populations and casual labourers to a life of environmental uncertainty, exploitation and health hazard. The second is the more overt and punitive violence exacted on- and offline in order to contain and extinguish dissent against nuclear power. The third is by way of producing a culture of vilification in terms of measures and underhand practices designed to malign and outcaste anti-nuclear activists and environmentalists.

Beginning with a discussion on research methods, the article provides a theoretical elaboration followed by a substantiation of the three modalities of engineering death conditions. While acknowledging that the three overlap, it is the second and third death conditions that form the bulk of this article as the first is elaborated at length elsewhere (Kaur, 2020).

## 1. Research methods

The ethnographic fieldwork on the anti-nuclear movement goes back to a year in 2006 with periodic visits, each up to a month long, until 2018. The majority of this time was spent in the peninsular region of the southern state of Tamil Nadu that traverses Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli Districts - the main sites of activism against the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant. The research draws on participant-observation and over fifty informal interviews with those within and outside the anti-nuclear movement in southern India, as well as ongoing online communication with interlocutors based in the region. Fieldwork was complemented by analyses of reports and media representations of the movement and its key protagonists. These analyses were particularly pertinent for the main focus of this article on the period from 2012 when draconian measures to undermine and eliminate the movement escalated, thereby making physical contact with my interlocutors difficult. However, a south Indian environmentalist and researcher, Anitha S., whose fieldwork period overlapped with my own, posted online to widely disseminate local perspectives from the village – one of which opens this article. Due to the urgency of the matter, she was compelled to post online to counter mainstream media representations that rarely presented interlocutors' viewpoints. Similarly, statements by my interlocutors were expeditiously posted online, specifically by Dr S.P. Udayakumar and Michael Pushparayan from the PMANE Struggle Committee that was convened in 2011 to plan a series of agitations; and the *DiaNuke* website developed and edited by the human rights activist, P.K. Sundaram in 2011, to canvas views that nuclear authorities did not endorse. Other interlocutors communicated with me through email and Facebook from the village that otherwise was sealed off and turned into an open-air prison for the majority of its residents for the most part of the period between 2012 and 2014. Recourse to this online material in the article is therefore essential and complemented by relevant newspaper and Intelligence reports pertaining to my interlocutors.

Moreover, the digital data that informs some parts of this article highlights an artificial authenticity attributed to on-the-ground fieldwork (viewed as 'thick evidence') as against their mediations through other channels (seen as 'thin' and biased, see Postill, 2013). There is, however, a strong case to counter such positivist views as can be seen in 'multi-situated' ethnographies conducted on- and offline (Kaur, 2019), when it was, in effect, virtual transmissions rather than physical presence and proximity that provided a safe and effective lifeline for

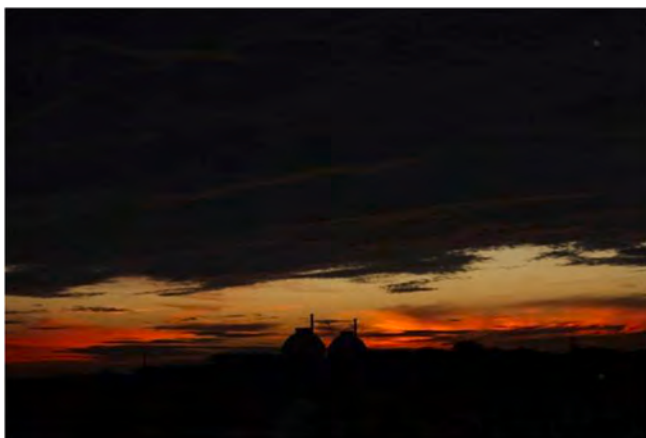


Fig. 1. Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant on the southern Indian coastline. Photograph by Raminder Kaur, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/india-nr-cns-5th-rm-2011.pdf>.

communication especially during police and paramilitary clampdowns on the village. Social media also played a major part in the exponential growth of anti-nuclear campaigning across the country and beyond especially after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident in 2011 – a phenomenon that while not simply instigated by technology could not have reached the extents that it did without the affordance of the internet and panmediation platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (see Fuchs, 2014; Riberio, 1996; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

## 2. Death-worlds

The anti-nuclear movement around Kudankulam emerged in 1988 in response to India and the former USSR's plan to build the plant at Kudankulam. Under the aegis of the Department of Atomic Energy, the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) liaised with Atomstroyexport, under the parent Russian company, Rosatom. But in 1991, the proposal was shelved for a decade due to the break-up of the former USSR and the assassination of India's then prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi. New agreements were renegotiated and finalised by the premiers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Vladimir Putin in 2001, and construction began on two reactors soon after to meet India's growing electricity needs (see Ramana, 2013, pp. 86–88 and 279–292). In 2013, the first reactor reached criticality and was followed by the second in 2016.

Resistance marked the history of the plant in starts and stops from the late 1980s. It reached a crescendo after the Fukushima Daiichi disaster in March 2011, an event that rallied hundreds of thousands to the cause under the PMANE umbrella. However, a year later, a violent crackdown ensued to add to other measures to crush the movement, a period that provides the main temporal focus in this article. Death conditions for those that lived around and challenged the nuclear power station were generated by a combination of slow, surreptitious and blatant forces, and in this case, compounded by the opacity and autocracy of the 'nuclear state' – a state-military-corporate complex around nuclear power and weapons (see Jungk, 1979; Kaur, 2013a).

Nuclear necropower is engineered by way of three overlapping modalities that differ in terms of their positioning on a sliding spectrum between 'let die' and 'make die' (see Davies, 2018, p. 1540). First, nuclear industries subject marginalised communities and casual labourers to a life of uncertainty, exploitation and environmental hazard with the sphinx-like silence of an encroaching death. This aspect is more a case of 'let die' rather than 'make die' so as to provide electricity to metropolitan and industrial hubs that benefit most from the installation (see Li, 2010). This ecocidal death condition for those forced to live with the construction of nuclear power plants in their neighbourhood chimes with Nixon's (2011) elaboration of the 'slow violence' on landscapes and people exposed to toxic material, waste or, in this case, radionuclide emissions from reactors that are absorbed into the environment, food chain and DNA of nearby residents and nuclear industry workers (see also Alexis-Martin and Davies, 2017; Davies, 2018; Hecht, 2018; Rose Johnston, 2011).

Second, death conditions are through more punitive (re)actions, embodied in measures that target people who protest against nuclear plants. This might include neighbouring communities to nuclear plants as well as a wider range of political supporters. While contingent on 'let die' as described in the first modality, this aspect leans more towards 'make die' so as to repress anyone who rises against their nuclear subjugation. This modality might also include the hiring of henchmen to enact violence against people and property, or orchestrating intimidation, harassment and undue stress upon protesters and their networks (see Dunlap, 2018a, pp. 644–646). The practices are augmented by online warfare targeting email accounts, social media and web pages to undermine leading activists and environmentalists, and their communicative potential, so as to contain and extinguish dissent (see Dunlap, 2020, pp. 1–22).

Third and relatedly, death conditions are by way of suffering produced through delay, denial and dismissal with overt and covert

practices to malign and outcaste key protagonists (see Patterson, 1982; Card, 2003; Short, 2016; Dunlap, 2018b). This aspect was through 'let die' as a consequence of 'make die' – that is, when anti-nuclear perpetrators are identified, they are subjected to a plethora of repressive and defamatory operations to produce a culture of vilification that alters the wider socio-political landscape. Such (re)actions entailed efforts to monopolise public opinion with accusations of communalism, foreign collusion, and bringing down the Indian economy, the unleashing of 'diffuse violence' (Warren, 1999, p. 234), the weaponising of law and policy, and leaking tip-offs and 'Intelligence' to the media to create grey zones of doubt about peaceful dissidents.

The status of the living dead comes with the diminishment of life that extends from somatic deaths to other kinds of social and political deaths as a consequence of prolonged experiences of violence, deprivation and suffering, which can impair lives and sever relationships. 'Social death' is a debateable extrapolation of necropolitics. Sexton (2010) suggests that it is not possible to apply social death, developed to characterize the violence exercised on enslaved black people, to contexts outside the Caribbean or North American plantation. Others such as McKittrick (2016: 3) suggest the need to move away from 'a biocentric conception of the human' that monopolises black studies. Moreover, 'social murder' has its origins in Engel's ([1845] 2009: 95) analysis of the debased lives of the working classes in nineteenth century Britain who 'inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death' (see Card, 2003; Short, 2016). This brief overview underlies the transferability of the term, social death, when considering the lives of oppressed people who are diminished physically, socially and politically on count of their location, identity, work, and the fact that they mobilised against a nuclear power plant. The social death in south India is on the basis of toxic industries built in their midst, in measures to vilify and ostracise those who dissent, and extends to political or civic deaths in terms of operations that lead to their branding as seditious, anti-national as well as stripping them of their rights to citizenship among other measures.

Modalities connote both discursive and figurative elements – that is, discourses that configure necropower combined with relatively more agentic strategies. They are akin to de Certeau (1984) on the strategies of governments, corporations, and other institutional bodies developed out of Foucauldian concepts of discourse. These 'distributed agents' might come to the fore as politicians, civil servants, police and Intelligence officers, their henchmen, and allied media operators who surround the core of nuclear authorities, protected as they are under the opaque umbrella of 'national security'. It is this dual sense that I use the term, engineering, in this article to encompass both discursive and authored processes, the ambiguous and the known, and the rumoured and identifiable.

## 3. Silent and encroaching

Elaborating on the first modality of death conditions: the subjection of subaltern communities such as fishers, farmers and tribal groups to toxic industries has seen a spike in post-1990s neoliberal India with the increase of developments on an industrial scale. This contamination is on two counts: first, by virtue of location in that the industries are situated close to their homes in which they have little say; and, second, on the basis of social hierarchies in which there is a lack of protection or compensation especially for low caste people who might be dispossessed of their usual livelihoods and recruited to work in nuclear industries as casual labourers. The sterilisation zone produced around the nuclear power plant vindicates Alexis-Martin and Davies' (2017: 6) argument about 'exclusion zones' in which people's lives become dispensable for a larger good (see also 'sacrifice zones' in Lerner, 2010, 'mitigation landscapes' in Little, 2014 and 'nuclear landscapes' in Pitkanen and Farish, 2018). These hinterland populations become the site of necropolitics in stark contrast to biopolitics that span elite government, metropolitan and corporate interests.

On the geopolitics of toxicity, Nixon (2011: 2) aptly describes it as 'a

violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales'. The 'attritional violence' Nixon (2011: 2) of industrial toxicity at Kudankulam is due to gaseous wastes released by stacks, the release of radionuclides such as tritium, argon 41 and fission products of noble gases into the atmosphere, and low-level liquid wastes such as tritium, caesium 137 and strontium 90 (Ramana, 2013, p. 225). While epidemiological studies might be contested, it is inevitable that an increasing percentage of nearby populations will succumb to genetic mutation, disease and death in the long-term (see Cardis et al., 2005; Churchill, 2003) – and this is apart from the more immediate consequences of any reactor accidents. These radionuclide isotopes with dangerous half-lives that span days to decades instantiate the process of 'long dyings' (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Conjuring up a creeping death reaped by a grim reactor, nuclear plants appear little more than tombs of a contradictory modernity (Fig. 2).

Construction at the site began with stealth so as to avoid people's queries and appeals. Public hearings that are decreed mandatory for all large-scale industries by the Environmental Impact Assessment Notification Act (1994) were not held for the first two nuclear reactors. Plans for further reactors at the Kudankulam plant came with a public hearing but appeals were largely ignored (Kaur, 2013a); held in the heavily guarded confines of the nuclear power plant township, Anuvijay, for which passes were strictly needed for entry; or held among a phalanx of heavy security that outnumbered the approximately 800 attendants, and for which minutes of the public hearing acknowledged only two of the multiple petitions submitted on the day (Ramana and Rao, 2008, pp. 14–18). The minutes themselves that should have been shared with attendants on request could only be obtained through a subsequent appeal through the Right to Information Act (2005).

The exploitation of local labour by nuclear industries to do precarious work is to add to the geopolitical toxicity. With recourse to minimal health and safety concerns and regulations, it is with the 'dispensability' of the labouring classes that nuclear fuel such as uranium and thorium have been mined, milled and processed (see Hecht, 2012, pp. 213–318), nuclear complexes have been constructed, and their buildings and gardens continue to be maintained and cleaned in the global South.

In India, casual workers are recruited by contractors from nearby populations of low caste Parava and Mukkuvar communities who are not on any official nuclear industry labour books. From conversations with the daily labourers, it is apparent that there is less than satisfactory training and protection, exposing them to various health hazards (Kaur, 2020). This is during the construction and cleaning of the nuclear power plant grounds; as it is in allied nuclear industries such as sandmining for the alpha emitter thorium from the monazite on the surrounding beaches.



Fig. 2. Gathering for People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy solidarity event, Idinthakarai, 2012. Photograph by Raminder Kaur.

Health hazards are most striking for the sandmining industry in the south Indian region, for the alternative nuclear fuel, thorium, that is mined and milled in the region and sent to other nuclear installations in the country (see Busher, 2009; Padmanabhan, 1986, 1987). The plentiful supplies of thorium derive from monazite on India's south-western beaches along Kerala and Kanyakumari District. At the nearby Indian Rare Earths Limited sandmining site for atomic minerals in the coastal village of Manavalakuruchi, fishermen manually heap up sand so that manned lorries can take it into the factory compound. Safety and monitoring measures are lacking, many of the casual labourers using porous bags for the transport of sand instead of plastic ones that ought to be used to contain the alpha radiation in the monazite mineral. Nor do the casual workers have recourse to a Thermo-luminescent Dosimeter (TLD) or any kind of monitoring scheme that should be standard practice for anyone in contact with radioactive material (Kaur, 2013b). As a combination of lithium fluoride crystals and either a metal foil or aluminium planchet, TLD badges record the level of radiation received by the wearer. Any fogging of the photographic film in the badge should then be analysed at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Trombay, 1300 km to the north (Sundaram et al., 1998, p. 138). But, according to my interlocutors, such protocol is rarely followed. M. Ahmed Khan, an advocate from Friends of Nature Society, underlines the fact that those working for the nuclear industries: 'will be used like curry leaf and put in the dust-bin after extracting the essence'.<sup>5</sup> Such acts of negligence are just the tip of the iceberg, for there are plenty of other oversights and 'accidents' that have led to critical illnesses among those directly or indirectly employed by, and living around nuclear industries (see Udayakumar, 2014).

Indian nuclear authorities take full advantage of the marginality of the poor, deeming their lives as of less value (see Hecht, 2012, p. 44). As they do so, they exploit subaltern populations, as much as they entrench new divisions and hierarchies between migrant and autochthonous people. A youth worker from the town of Nagercoil located about 30 km away from the nuclear power plant, observed:

This is all happening here because of power crisis in Delhi which is dictating the terms here. India seems to have an energy crisis and nuclear is the answer without enough investment and research in alternative energy sources — due to the Brahminic lobby.

On further discussion with him, he clarified that this lobby is not specifically about Brahmins exclusively – traditionally associated with those endowed with sacred learning in the hierarchical caste system – but high caste 'outsiders' in general. The reference was to the institutional power of Brahminic hegemony, rather than suggesting Brahmins are inherently powerful (see Berreman, 1971). Ramana too describes the nuclear enclave as part of an 'elite priesthood' (2003: 207), noting in particular that the structure of the Department of Atomic Energy is hierarchical and not conducive to dissent.

High caste hegemony in the modern nuclear state can be described as neo-Brahmanism. The phenomenon characterises many of the powerful nuclear institutions that are seen to constitute the fulcrum of national security and where reservations for other castes and classes are not in place being exempt as part of 'scientific and technical posts' (Mohanty, 2020). This is also the case with high security think tanks, Intelligence bureaus and the like that are not open to reservation quotas for Backward and Scheduled Castes.<sup>6</sup>

Neo-Brahminic elitism comes with a 'passive extermination' (see Goldberg, 2009) of subaltern populations that has its roots in caste hierarchies with Brahmins at the top and Dalits as 'untouchables'. It is compounded by modern-day fears of the numerical expansion of poor

<sup>5</sup> Cited in 'Koodangulam: A Nuclear Graveyard' (1989) *Indian Express*, 20 June.

<sup>6</sup> See also <https://citizenmatters.in/facts-reservations-ews-sc-st-abc-governement-court-9719> B-K.

low-caste people (see Hansen, 1999). Krishnan (2006: 2327) expands on how neo-Brahminic elitism comes with a (metaphorical) murderous impulse where the upper caste, middle class sectors of Indian society bemoaned aborted attempts at sterilising the poor in the mid-1970s under prime minister Indira Gandhi's Emergency regime, and would quiet happily look the other way if the 'masses' were to 'disappear'.

It is with such an attitude that the low caste labour force is recruited for casual and menial jobs in the nuclear industries. With reckless safety procedures, they remain the 'dog's bodies' to neo-Brahminic hierarchies entrenched in the nuclear establishment. The racial necropolitics that Davies (2018) identifies for petrochemical pollution in the African-American dominated town, St James, in Louisiana is paralleled with caste necropolitics imbricated in the coastal nuclear reactors at Kudankulam. The death condition vindicates a form of environmental casteism that is comparable to environmental racism as reported for the mining of uranium in South Africa (Hecht, 2012), the siting of toxic facilities near African Americans (Bullard, 1990), and nuclear waste deposited near indigenous American populations (Churchill and LaDuke, 1986; Masco, 2006; Endres, 2009).

#### 4. Overt and punitive

To ally and mobilise with subaltern populations on environmental and social justice grounds is to extend the purview of nuclear necropower to others in India, no matter what their backgrounds, as we shall now examine with regards to the second modality of death conditions imposed on those who dissent against the nuclear state. These encompassed punitive (re)actions on- and offline, either directly by state protagonists or outsourced to their middlemen to subject physical and socio-political injury and death on anti-nuclear campaigners.

Homicides of anti-Kudankulam protesters go back to the 1980s. One fisherman known as Ignatius was killed in police fire at a march in 1988. Two other deaths as a result of their anti-nuclear protest arose in 2012. These included fishermen, Anthony John, who was shot by police when participating in a solidarity rally, and Sahayam Francis who was killed when he fell from rocks along the beach after an Indian Coast Guard surveillance plane dived within a few meters above his head (Fig. 3). Francis was watching those engaged in civil disobedience who were standing in a chain among the waves and on the beach for a *jal satyagraha*. Literally meaning 'water-based truth-force', thousands of people engaged in an oceanic demonstration. It was adapted from Gandhian tactics of nonviolence against the colonial state to evoke the greater truth embodied in people and the environment (Hardiman, 2003; Sen-thalir, 2012).

Other physical deaths were less direct, emerging from the (re)



Fig. 3. Indian Coast Guard plane flies over *jal satyagraha* (water-based 'truth-force' struggle), Idinthakarai, 2012. Photograph by amirtharaj stephen/pep collective.

production of death conditions that overlap with the other two modalities. This is exemplified by the case of a woman from a fishing community engaged in the protest, J. Roslin (Fig. 4). Her arrest came during a protest camp in September 2012, after the Madras High Court had dismissed a public interest petition for environmental clearance of the two reactors, and the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board had given a highly questionable clearance to the loading of fuel rods into one of them (Ramana, 2012).<sup>7</sup> In yet another show of defiance, more than five thousand people including inhabitants of neighbouring villages ended up camping outside the eastern walls of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant on 9 September to defy police orders to assemble under Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (1973) that had been imposed on the area six months earlier (Senthilair, 2012). The following day, after a 10 minute warning from district and police officials, about two thousand police and paramilitary officers descended upon them with batons (*lathi*) and tear gas, pushing them away from the walls and into the sea. Several were harassed and injured in the onslaught. Around two hundred people of all ages from a 15 year old boy to a semi-blind septuagenarian were detained under charges to do with 'sedition' and 'war against the state' (Fig. 5).<sup>8</sup>

When in prison, several were subjected to isolation and intimidation, and treated like criminals rather than the political protesters that they were.<sup>9</sup> The primary aim was to create a prolonged psychosis of discipline and distress (see Lovelace, 2016: xi).<sup>10</sup> Most survived their ordeal, but Roslin who was also picked up during September's civil disobedience of camping outside the nuclear plant, had a severe ailment and was denied treatment that led to her rapid deterioration in prison. She was released on bail and asked to sign into a Madurai police station every week, an overland journey of over 200 km that took about 6 hours on a bus one way. Shortly after being released on bail, she succumbed to her illness. People were both saddened and incensed, convinced that her death was yet another outcome of state vengeance. They declared:

Roslin is a victim of neglect, and the vengeance of a state that views the very holding of a contrary opinion on nuclear power as a crime warranting imprisonment under harsh sections.<sup>11</sup>

The Kudankulam death toll is on top of other deaths incurred during protests around the Jaitapur nuclear power plant in Maharashtra in western India, where a police officer driving a four-wheel drive Sumo SUV rammed into a 40 year old activist, Irfan Qazi, on his scooter (Viju 2010). Three elderly farmers — Ishwar Singh Siwach, Bhagu Ram and Ram Kumar — also died due to the cumulative stress of a sit-in (*dharna*), a long-term land-based occupation that had been going on since 2010 against acquisition plans for the Gorakhpur nuclear power plant in the blazing heat of Haryana state (Sundaram 2012). In all cases, their deaths were spurred by measures adopted by the nuclear state to bulldoze ahead with their plans while ignoring the public's right to consultancy and appeal. Unsurprisingly, authorities have denied culpability, a familiar pattern that has characterised state reaction to people's protests

<sup>7</sup> 'Supreme Court moved against HC go ahead to Kudankulam', *The Hindu*, 11 September, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/supreme-court-moved-against-hc-go-ahead-to-kudankulam/article3885533.ece>.

<sup>8</sup> Recollections of these events were relayed to me by people in Idinthakarai and supported by a 'Report of the Fact-Finding team's visit to Idinthakarai and other villages on September 20–21, 2012' by former judge of the Bombay High Court, B. G. Kolse Patil; senior journalist Kalpana Sharma; and the Tamil writer R. N. Joe D'Cruz. <https://www.countercurrents.org/koodankulam260912.pdf> Accessed: 20 February 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> See 'Three Koodankulam Protestors Face Arrest: Amnesty Action Alert', *DiaNuke*, 18 May 2012 <http://www.dianuke.org/three-koodankulam-protestor-s-face-arrest-amnesty-action-alert/>.

<sup>11</sup> 'Kudankulam: Jailed Idinthakarai Woman Dies for want of Timely Treatment', 21 December 2012, <http://www.indiaresists.com/Kudankulam-jailed-idinthakarai-woman-dies-for-want-of-timely-treatment/>.



Fig. 4. Portraits of Antony John (Manapadu), Sahayam Francis (Idinthakarai); J. Roslin (Idinthakarai) and C. Rajasekar (Kudankulam) who died during the struggle against the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, Idinthakarai, 2013. Photograph by Raminder Kaur.



Fig 5. Paramilitary descend upon anti-nuclear movement outside the compound walls of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, 2012. Photograph by amirtharaj stephen/pep collective.

against large-scale development projects across India (see [Baviskar, 1995](#); [Nilsen, 2012](#)).

Since the escalated anti-nuclear struggle at Kudankulam from 2012, there has been an intensification of predatory prosecutions – a situation that is comparable to the weaponisation of law or ‘protracted lawfare’ to stem dissent as recounted by Joseph in Ecuador (2012: 64–66). An inflated number of more than 55,000 people have been accused in about 380 allegations from the nearest police station to the nuclear plant in Tirunelveli district, which is among the highest recorded in India’s history. These allegations have come in the form of First Information Reports (FIR) that list aggrandised charges. Of the people charged, about 9000 have been accused of ‘sedition’ and ‘waging war against the state’, allegations that carry with it the prospect of a life sentence or death penalty ([Janardhanan, 2012](#)). Typically, a few names would be mentioned in any charge with an extra number of a few hundred to a few thousand to add to the list of named individuals in strategies of creating a fear psychosis. The exact figures have vacillated along with the

prevarications of officials and some were subsequently dropped after campaigners appealed to the Supreme Court. In a flurry of FIRs, S.P. Udayakumar is ‘Accused No. 1’ in the allegations, a prime target of the Indian state.<sup>12</sup> A postdoctoral scholar of political history and peace studies, Udayakumar has studied, researched and lectured on peace studies abroad, and became one of the main spokespersons of PMANE, leaving his home-town, Nagercoil, in Kanyakumari District to join the coastal community in Idinthakarai in the neighbouring district ([Fig. 6](#)).

In the aftermath of FIR charges, many named protesters were financially, physically and psychologically wrecked by legal fees and constant trips to either attend court hearings or, if on bail, periodically report to police stations as far away as Madurai. Often, to turn up at a hearing was simply to hear that the case has been adjourned and a date set for a new hearing. Stupefying to say the least, court cases drawn-out over months and years were like an albatross around the accused’s necks, tied in to policing prerogatives to extinguish dissent. Defendants become puppets to larger machinations as lawyers - if they showed up at all - debated right from wrong in an excruciatingly slow Indian judiciary. The process itself was the punishment.<sup>13</sup>

To not attend court in what many considered to be unjust and distorted charges in the first place was to risk further punishment. S. Mugilan, a member of the PMANE Struggle Committee from a farming background, was himself arrested in September, 2017 for ignoring a succession of court summons ([Ananth, 2018](#)). To add misery to the outrage, those who are in pre- or post-trial custody are atrophied with unwarranted isolation, beatings ([Kaur, 2018](#)), substandard food, unhygienic conditions, and swarms of mosquitoes as if nature too is scripted for mercenaries.<sup>14</sup> Women in particular face the added burden of being vulnerable to sexual assault while in prison. Its suspicion alone is a merciless poison if and when they are released (see [Sen, 2014](#); [Vaid,](#)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See *Human Rights Watch* (2016) ‘Stifling Dissent: The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in India’, 24 May <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/05/24/stifling-dissent/criminalization-peaceful-expression-india>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/amirtharaj.stephen/videos/pcb.10155258388737202/10155258380312202/?type=3&theater>.



Fig. 6. Dr S.P. Udayakumar, convenor of the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy, 2012. Photograph by Raminder Kaur.

2016).

Udayakumar himself reflected that the struggle collapsed because repeated court appearances and police threats 'broke them mentally. The government wanted just that' (cited in Sukumar, 2017). It was part of a grand project of nuclear social engineering – to create a coerced consensus for nuclear development. Even while some people persisted, socio-psychological breakdowns encouraged a situation of 'coerced neutrality' for the rest (Stoll 1993).

Violence might itself be outsourced, distantly orchestrated through a series of middle-men who have no official standing. While the siege and stand-off was ongoing in Idinthakarai from March 2012, assaults were foisted outside the village upon anything or anyone associated with PMANE. Henchmen rumoured to be connected to the local right-wing group Hindu Munnani and to Congress, took to damaging the properties of the lead spokesperson with two attacks on the SACCER (South Asian Community Centre for Education and Research) Matriculation School led by Udayakumar's wife, Meera, on the outskirts of Nagercoil. Despite formal complaints to Rajakkamangalam Police Station officers, the Deputy Superintendent of Police in Kanyakumari Town and the Superintendent of Police in Kanyakumari District, including also a letter to the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, no one was taken to task.<sup>15</sup> This silence and inaction point to a state-wide complicity that spans official and not-so-official elements.

The attack is a vindication of, as Patnaik (2014: 43) describes it, 'mosaic fascism', with its dispersed local power centres in which henchmen were recruited for outsourced state operations. Aggression came with systematic and not-so-systematic attempts to intimidate Udayakumar's extended family through threats, rumours and other measures to undermine the school as a 'den for terrorism' in order to put parents off from sending their children to the school as part of the diffusive politics of contagion – that is to say, guilty by association.

Online operations are another means to harass antinuclear

protagonists as Udupa (2018) has shown with respect to right-wing Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) 'IT cells' used for tweeting and trolling individuals. With respect to the people's movement in India, emails, blogs, websites, petitions, and Facebook groups amongst other outlets have been subject to what could be described as the silent arms race of digital surveillance and cyber-attack. This has included websites such as *Dianuke* being brought down on at least half a dozen occasions in one year alone as Sundaram accounted in 2012; and as other interlocutors related, being subject to the circulation of spam mail, phishing (when the recipient is enticed to enter sensitive information on a fake website that could implant malware or spyware), and trolling by posting inflammatory statements to discredit the status of activists and environmentalists who have gained popularity (see Shulsky and Schmitt, 2002; Udupa, 2016). A local resident declared in a message on social media:

phones are being tapped and mobile calls are monitored ... emails are being hacked regularly and obscene mails are sent from the email and facebook profiles of key persons ... it is creating a wrong msg [message] among the general public ... and sometimes creating a wrong image on the leaders of the [PMANE] movement as there were phishing of porn mails and post to others FB [Facebook] account from the leaders' account.<sup>16</sup>

These are just the more explicit online measures. There are also plenty of other setups that are not so easy to pin down as they draw upon now widely prevalent military-industrial psychological operations designed to influence publics that we will focus on in the next section (see Wooley and Howard, 2016). This emergence also alerts us to the blurred line between overt and covert, direct and indirect (re)actions from above in order to harm and malign people in the anti-nuclear movement, an area on which we next concentrate.

## 5. Dismissive and deflective

Nonviolent movements that have a wide support base also compel less blatant or indirect techniques of control by the state to avoid backfire from the general public and other agencies (see Ackerman and DuVall, 2001). The third modality is a broader one about how a culture of vilification is produced that, while targeting anti-nuclear activists and environmentalists, also changes the wider socio-political landscape. Allied with obvious acts of oppression such as police sieges, arrests, death, damage, FIR charges, and compulsory court appearances came the dispersed strategies of the stealthy state that had a wider remit across the country - to reframe nonviolence and dissent as a threat to the entire body politic, in the process maligning the key protagonist as suspect and thereby contributing to their socio-political deaths.

Indicative of circular and circuitous control rather than head-on confrontation, state representatives deployed a variety of practices including waiting out or ignoring a protest, blocking off crucial lifelines, incentivising nuclear compliance, producing 'diffuse violence in daily life' (Warren, 1999, p. 234), weaponising bureaucracy, and leaking tip-offs and 'Intelligence' to monopolise public opinion and mainstream media (see Loadenthal, 2014). Such strategies were an alternative to physical violence, but just as influential in atrophying and maligning individuals and organisations while generating a fear psychosis across the region (see Galtung, 1969; Wodak, 2015).

In and around Idinthakarai, specific sectors of society were targeted so that their social and/or economic standing could be expediently undermined. The aforementioned fact-finding team reported that women were frequently molested and abused when they joined campaigns (see Stephen, 1999; and Brock and Dunlap, 2018, p. 43). They noted how women were abused by the police so as to shame them in public: "Why all of you are going behind Udayakumar? What has he got

<sup>15</sup> 'Kudankulam: Letter to CM about Attack on School', *Dianuke*, 30 April 2012 <https://www.dianuke.org/koodankulam-letter-to-cm-about-attack-on-school/>.

<sup>16</sup> Facebook, 17 May 2012.

that I don't have? Come I'll show" and even worse abuses' [sic].<sup>17</sup> The state also targeted young men seen to be the most pugnacious of protesters: "We were told that most of the young men had left the village and some had even gone as far as Chennai to escape the police dragnet".<sup>18</sup> Profiling individuals in terms of a cross-cutting of age and gender associations on top of their caste and minority religious identities meant that vulnerabilities could be exploited to maximum effect (see [Dingli and Purewal, 2018](#)).

Incidents of manufactured micro-aggression where one person or community was pitched against another was also evident. The neighbouring village to Idinthakarai was home to many Muslim residents, and it was believed by PMANE members that some 'stooges to the state' were planting rumours against Christians at the head of the anti-nuclear movement, adding that they are 'only in it for themselves and for money'. The rumour itself was radioactive, mutating realities as it spread so that others began to distrust PMANE motives (see [Raj, 2018](#)). The classic divide-and-rule formula from the colonial era was reinstated ([Tharoor, 2017](#); [Wilson, 2016](#)). As Dunlap elaborates:

These strategies are designed to adapt and merge with local interests, which often seek to widen existing social and political divisions as a means to fragment, break and isolate resistance groups, often intentionally blurring the line between counterinsurgency and inter-communal conflict (2018: 649).

The majority of the local police officers in Kudankulam are themselves of Hindu Nadar background. Nadars are a constellation of various sub-castes. Traditionally, cultivators of palmyra trees and jaggery (cane sugar), they have made great economic strides through education and entrepreneurship to form middle ranking groups. They were held accountable for fermenting trouble among the coastal communities who were largely low caste Christians 'because of their caste and religious prejudices'.<sup>19</sup> Once successful with their tactics to whip up caste and communal tensions, solidarity against the nuclear power station collapsed to intersectional caste-communal conflict.

Even though decried as a 'parody of law', the list of FIRs reported above had a toxic tenor ([Rajappa et al., 2012](#), p. 5). A Human Rights Watch report on 'stifling dissent' in India underlined the misuse of the legislature 'in defiance of Supreme Court rulings or advisories clarifying their scope'.<sup>20</sup> In 1962, the Supreme Court of India had ruled that 'speech or action constitutes sedition only if it incites or tends to incite disorder or violence'.<sup>21</sup> But state authorities continue to charge people with sedition even when this criterion is not met. They exploit the fact that the easiest way to crush dissent is to frame its spokespersons and supporters as suspect, accusing them of being 'seditious', 'terrorists', 'traitors' and 'extremists' bent on bringing the country down (see [Brock and Dunlap, 2018](#); [Dunlap, 2019](#)). For the accuser, whether the allegations are genuine or artificial is beside the point. An allegation could come with arrest and assault before the case is thrown out months or even years later. It was like 'a sentence for purgatory' as one activist put it. Even the fear of a false allegation created coerced compliance among the larger populace.

India is currently going through a fever of sedition revivalism. Accusations are banded around against anyone who seeks or seems to go against official state-backed narratives on hot topics. This is not just about the rise of charges of sedition, but more worryingly, as [Singh \(2018\)](#) points out, 'persecution in the name of sedition finds popular

acceptance in India'.<sup>22</sup> Such allegations mutate realities, setting up new regimes of truth ([Foucault, 1977](#)) according to which people orientate their thoughts and behaviour, themselves fearful of victimisation and public shaming. In such a scenario, mere supposition of treachery leads to a state of 'guilt before innocence' against which the accused then has to operate. This burden of extrication is a heavy one in contexts where the stakes are high and where there is less than satisfactory scrutiny of state conduct and the criminal justice system.

A political culture has emerged that has suppressed people's voices and credentials for environmentalist, activist and even charitable work to help the poor, marginalised and ill. It is a culture characterised by limited imaginaries beyond the horizon of nationalism entrenched by the state to 'rationalize forms of repression' ([Warren, 1999](#), p. 228).

Weaponising bureaucracy is another strategy that includes the blocking of essential permissions, services or provisions to which people might be entitled. Passports of known members of the Struggle Committee were cancelled in 2012. Negotiations with otherwise banal bureaucracies became more apprehensive (see [Sharma and Gupta, 2006](#), p. 11). As many of the men in the village sought to find work overseas in countries like those in the Gulf, for instance, a passport was mandatory. But if it was known that the applicant lived in the epicentre of anti-nuclear struggle, Idinthakarai, their passport would invariably not be processed, their home having been branded a pariah place. Furthermore, the politics of contagion spread to other state permissions that might not be granted, as happened with a police officer who threatened an activist in 2012 saying that his son's company in another part of Tamil Nadu would not be cleared for business if he did not stop his support for PMANE.

In addition, 'politicized paranoia' ([Feuchtwang, 2009](#): 231) was powerfully whipped up through the entrenchment of the 'foreign hand bogey' that is deployed to cast environmentalist campaigns as anti-development and therefore, anti-national (see [Venkataramanan, 2011](#); [Ittyipe, 2011](#); [Mbembe, 1992](#), pp. 3–4; [Mazzarella, 2006](#), p. 474). Deriding the foreign is a crucial organisational principle of societal control for it stems dissent of state-backed plans and thus becomes central in the policing of dissent. In a disinformation campaign designed to discredit, the Indian state portrays specific individuals as 'funded by foreigners' to bring the country down (see below). Once the moral and political claims of the accused are undermined, their status as citizens becomes questionable, and they become the legitimated – rather than legitimate – targets of other strategies to harass or intimidate.

To add to name-calling, bank accounts were frozen or blocked if individuals were accused of stirring anti-nuclear dissent. If Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) were seen to be supportive of anti-nuclear protest, the Ministry of Home Affairs might revoke permissions to receive foreign funds under Section 18 of the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA), an act that was established in 1976 to scrutinise the voluntary sector during Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule and revised in 2010 to tackle terrorism and money laundering. With latter-day revisions, it has become the case that all NGOs who receive foreign funds have to have FCRA approval from the government every five years. This approval is conditional on no political or 'anti-national' activity. Suspicions or allegations of anti-nationalism became the premise to apply the FCRA to any organization working on social, environmental or human rights inimical to the government's agenda. These were extended to church-based NGOs seen to be part of a trans-national Christian conspiracy helping out coastal Catholics in the peninsula. The NGOs that supported the anti-nuclear struggle included

<sup>17</sup> 'Report of the Fact-Finding Team's Visit to Idinthakarai and Other Villages on September 20–21, 2012', p.9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p.12.

<sup>19</sup> PMANE Struggle Committee (2016) *PMANE Letters and Press Releases (April 2012-January 2014)*, Idinthakarai: People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy, p.17.

<sup>20</sup> *Human Rights Watch 'Stifling Dissent'*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> 'Persecution In The Name of Sedition Finds Popular Acceptance in India', Says Anushka Singh, Author of the recent book, 'Sedition In Liberal Democracies'. *Live Law*, 21 April 2018 <http://www.livelaw.in/persecution-name-sedition-finds-popular-acceptance-india-says-anushka-singh-author-recent-book-sedition-liberal-democracies/> See also <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/16/amnesty-international-accused-of-sedition-in-india/>.



the Tuticorin Multipurpose Social Service Society, Tuticorin Diocese Association, People's Education for Action and Community Empowerment and Good Vision Charitable Trust in the district of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant.<sup>23</sup> Priests are answerable to the Roman Catholic Diocese in their respective districts, and even though their laity might support the struggle, most began to think twice about supporting anything that might rattle the government.

With the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to central government in 2014, measures against social, environmental and human rights organisations saw a step-change with more and more names placed on a security watch list.<sup>24</sup> After alleging that 'donors' to the anti-nuclear movement were based in western countries such as the USA, Netherlands, Germany and 'Scandinavian countries' in a conspiratorial scheme to 'take down' India's development projects, the BJP government threatened to dismantle NGOs that were receiving funds from foreign sources if they supported the campaign against the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant.<sup>25</sup> In 2016, up to 20,000 NGOs were threatened in a FCRA crackdown on bank accounts with the stated reason of non-submission of annual returns within nine months of the end of the financial year.<sup>26</sup> This compared with around 4,000 cancellations of FCRA status after the revised FCRA Act was first implemented under the previous United Progressive Alliance government in 2011 (Dubbudu, 2012). Even well-established bodies such as Greenpeace India had their funding status revoked in 2015 for about a year before a court decision in their favour reversed the decision.<sup>27</sup> Greenpeace is one of several organisations that had raised awareness about environmental violations in the construction of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant and, among their other work on health and environmental justice, they have been pulled up for 'prejudicially affecting public interest and economic interest' (Jain, 2016). The term 'environmentalist' too acquired a treacherous status which was used to decry and criminalise 'anti-development' protesters.

Law, policy, bureaucracy and such criteria as time limits for submissions and appeals, even though apparently depolitical, are rooted in and have their effects on politics (see Escobar, 1991). Critics fully recognise that the crackdown of FCRA is to expunge any movement that the government does not approve of, and to shackle opposition, with FCRA status being set up as yet another 'tool of repression'.<sup>28</sup>

Another way finance was weaponised in the neoliberal era was to enumerate the percentage by which individuals and organisations were alleged to have stymied India's development. This is clear in a report sealed by the institutional signature of the Joint Director of the Ministry of Home Affairs Intelligence Bureau, S.A Rizvi – a document that was

<sup>23</sup> 'Koodankulam: Crackdown on Anti-nuclear activists and Ngo's' (2012) *Nuclear Monitor*, #744, number 6238, 16 March <https://www.wiseinternational.org/nuclear-monitor/744/koodankulam-crackdown-anti-nuclear-activist-s-ngos>.

<sup>24</sup> 'Kudankulam Protests, Church and Western NGOs - A Citizen's Probe' (2012) <http://bharatkalyan97.blogspot.com/2012/04/koodankulam-protests-church-and-western.html>.

<sup>25</sup> S.A. Rizvi, 'Concerted Efforts by Select Foreign-funded NGOs to "Take Down" India's Development Projects', Ministry of Home Affairs, Intelligence Bureau <https://kractivist.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/NGO-Report-leaked-IB-report.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> 'FCRA Licenses of 20,000 NGOs Cancelled', *The Times of India*, 27 December 2016 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/fcra-licenses-of-20000-ngos-cancelled/articleshow/56203438.cms>.

<sup>27</sup> 'India Cracks down on Greenpeace and Foreign NGOs', *Aljazeera*, 27 May 2015 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/india-cracks-greenpeace-foreign-ngo-150526102622208.html>.

<sup>28</sup> 'FCRA as a Tool of Repression: Greenpeace India Signs Civil Society Statement in Solidarity with those Denied Registration', *Greenpeace India*, 14 December 2016 <https://www.greenpeace.org/india/en/story/2291/fcra-as-a-tool-of-repression-greenpeace-india-signs-civil-society-statement-in-solidarity-with-those-denied-registration/>.

leaked to the media and is freely available online.<sup>29</sup> This is the message circulated among governmental staff and trainees as well as the media in order to monopolise and financialise 'common sense' (see Crehan, 2016; Dinan and Miller, 2007). In the report, a variety of individuals and NGOs are accused of having a 'negative impact on GDP growth', attributing it a decrease of '2–3%'.<sup>30</sup> Blame for economic decline in what otherwise are the inevitable consequences of capitalist fluctuation is attributed to specific people and organisations. They include those who stand up to nuclear power plants, uranium mines, coal-fired power plants, genetically modified organism enterprises, hydel (hydroelectric) projects, and extractive projects more generally, among other large-scale industries. The document states that economic decline is encouraged by 'identified foreign donors [who] cleverly disguise their donations as funding for protection of human rights; "just deal" for project-affected displaced persons; protection of livelihood of indigenous people; protecting religious freedom, etc [sic]'. It is then alleged that the 'foreign donors lead local NGOs to provide field reports which are used to build a record against India and serve as tools for the strategic foreign policy interests of Western Governments'. Social justice and human rights charities such as Action Aid and Amnesty International are also claimed to 'dedicate a small portion of their annual donations to such project under varied veils such as "democratic and accountable Government", "economic fairness" etc.' Such practices, it is alleged, are designed to stop India's growth and keep it in a 'state of under-development [sic]'. It is worth recalling that, as Bornstein and Sharma (2016: 76) highlight, the organisations mentioned in the report 'were the very civil society bodies that international development organisations and the Indian state ... had lauded in the 1990s as ideal partners in development and democracy'.

It is further claimed in the leaked document that there was a 'larger conspiracy' that was 'unravelling when a German national provided Udayakumar a scanned map of all nuclear plant and uranium mining locations in India'. Elsewhere in the report the number comes down to six proposed nuclear power plants and five uranium mines that were 'marked prominently' on the map with hand-written name slips on 50 Indian anti-nuclear activities along with a 'Blackberry PIN graph'. The hand-written material is said 'to avoid possible detection by text search algorithms said to be installed at e-gateways'. Altogether, the piecemeal information is purported to reveal 'an organised agency and/or a highly professional well-paid entity' and 'an intricate "Network"' designed to 'take down India's nuclear programme through NGO activism'.<sup>31</sup>

As it transpired, the German with the perfidious map in question, Sonntag Reiner Hermann, turned out to be a 'hippy'. In February 2012, while the nuclear power plant's construction was stalled for up to six months due to the anti-nuclear struggle, he was summarily deported from the subcontinent without any media or legal access. He was followed a few months later by two Japanese nationals who were returned as soon as they landed at Chennai airport on their way to Idinthakarai.<sup>32</sup>

In a rare online interview after he was extradited, Hermann denied funding the movement. He stated that he lived on \$10 a day, and that 'I'm unemployed and don't receive orders from any group in Germany or anywhere else' (cited in Jacob, 2012). My interlocutors in south India confirmed that Hermann had no part to play in funding their campaign, much of which was collated through contributions from thousands of fisherfolk. They also considered the leaking of the Intelligence report as 'an intentional leak'. While worrying, one held it to be 'made up', another described it as a 'tissue report', and one other cast it off as a 'non-Intelligence report'. However, their views held little weight against

<sup>29</sup> Rizvi, 'Concerted Efforts by Select Foreign-Funded NGOs to "Take Down" India's Development Projects'.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> 'Kudankulam Protest: Japanese Nationals Deported' (2012) *First Post*, 28 September <https://www.firstpost.com/india/kudankulam-protest-japanese-nationals-deported-472580.html>.

the force of the mainstream current against them.<sup>33</sup>

Under the protective umbrella of 'national security', the peddling of Intelligence combines pieces of prominent information that might be verifiable, immersed in motivated extrapolation, rumour and inevitable error, witting or unwitting. With the tailoring of allegations, the Intelligence Bureau ends up belying their title. The imperative of the surveillance state (see Choudry, 2018; Zuboff, 2019) is to performatively (re)produce penal power where the exact content and context of the Intelligence does not matter so much as the effects the allegations or reports have as we have noted above (see Taylor, 1997). The foreign allegations had the effect of demonising individuals while stemming transnational alliances against nuclear power. As goes the irregularity of state secrecy and disclosure, such powerfully affective reports are for the most part kept behind the scenes but released when advantageous so that media and interested parties can milk them for at-once crowd-pleasing and crowd-controlling effects.

More often than not, the evidence is fragmentary, twisted and forcefully extracted under conditions the observer cannot always or easily ascertain. P. Thirumavelan, the editor of *Junior Vikatan* magazine, who himself faces several cases, adds further testimony to the lack of 'hard facts' behind allegations to 'create a fear psychosis', adding that 'if the government were really serious, they would counter with evidence in a court of law'.<sup>34</sup>

Intelligence gathering is enlisted to a larger project of control and containment, aided by a plethora of secrecy clauses, the weaponising of law and policy, an exceedingly slow criminal justice system, and the rhetoric of nationalism and national security to veil proceedings rather than produce rigorous research and (untampered) evidence that could stand up to a fair trial in court. But such leaks can certainly lend itself to a post-truth trial by media as happened to Udayakumar on several occasions, and in other controversial cases, as with Iftikhar Gilani, a Jammu-based journalist who was imprisoned without bail under the Official Secrets Act in 2002 for 'possessing out-of-date information on Indian troop deployments in "Indian-held Kashmir" culled from a widely-circulated monograph published by a Pakistani research institute' (Varadarajan, 2005).

Unsurprisingly, a media-led sting operation against a 'foreign-funded' Udayakumar followed the disclosure of Intelligence where he was set up by two reporters pretending to be Indian students who had come from Britain. In the digital media representation, Udayakumar seemingly agrees to funds from a foreign donor.<sup>35</sup> Confirmation bias meant that only select information was used to validate the prior belief that Udayakumar was already suspect in the media sting. This allegation was backed up by tokenistic stock footage that foregrounded the anti-nuclear movement's unruly violence rather than its progressive politics of peace (Fig. 7) through the optic of coastal communities clashing with police. Altogether this messaging endorsed the stereotype of the premodern anti-national, anti-development and suspect activist intent on bringing the country down.

In his defence, Udayakumar contended that PMANE had no ulterior designs against the government, that all resources had been raised through ten percent of earnings contributed by fishing communities when it was based in Idinthakarai, and that their primary interest lay with the protection of the country and its future. But such defence stood little ground in a post-truth world where he was already framed as 'guilty' by a media optic.



Fig. 7. Candlelight vigil on Hiroshima Day in Idinthakarai, 2012. Photograph by amirtharaj stephen/pep collective.

Political and media spokespeople could not appreciate the fact that most activists and environmentalists are not against development *per se*, but campaign for development that is justly pursued and socially and ecologically complementary to people's lives. Udayakumar has asserted throughout the anti-nuclear campaign: 'We do not say no to development. We are a country with sunlight so we can produce enough electricity from solar power. From wind power too' (see Dunlap, 2018b). While the political, media and economic elites understand the country's progress, they cannot understand its progressiveness. Instead, a topoi of threat and urgency, barbarism and modernity, history and future, villain and saviour is promulgated in which the anti-nuclear protagonist is dismissed as illegitimate and inauthentic.

As Foucault (1977: 191) identifies, media has become 'a design of subtle coercion for a society to come'. Public slurs and bruising therefore become just as desired an objective in the (re)production of, on the one hand, socio-political death for detractors, and on the other, socio-political control and influence on the wider public. Streaked around conditions that directly or indirectly maim are those that cast targeted persons into a moral impasse. In a context where 'grey is the new black' as Cormac and Aldrich (2018: 477) argue, *satyagraha*, the 'truth-force' of nonviolent activism, is made redundant in a post-*satya* world. In this twilight scenario, interests and operations might be detectable, but they hardly ever come to laser sharp focus. Visible as they hide, there can be little of a battle when forces of dominance end up lurking in the murky light between truth and lies.

## 6. A world of in/visibles

By focusing on an anti-nuclear struggle around the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, this article has considered the way subaltern communities and their allies are subjected to death conditions by way of three interleaved modalities – silent and encroaching, overt and punitive, and dismissive and deflective that effectively alters the wider socio-political landscape. In so doing, other nuances have been added to debates on biopower and necropower that demonstrate sliding and syncretic subjugations to do with 'let die' and 'make die'. Nuclear necropower encompasses the 'let die' of exposure to ecological toxicity entrenched in social hierarchies that are compounded by the neglect of low caste-class casual labourers working for the nuclear industries. It is bolstered by the 'make die' of more punitive and overt intentions to suppress and extinguish dissent though the actions of particular agents or agencies. It is complicated by more covert, demonising and snowballing features that outcaste victims of political abuse as anti-national suspects so that they can become socially tabooed and targets of further intimidation in a political culture that has rationalised repression. The phenomena have unleashed several lines of concerted and

<sup>33</sup> 'Intelligence Bureau Report on NGOs Comes under Attack from Activists', NDTV 13 June <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/intelligence-bureau-report-on-ngos-comes-under-attack-from-activists-577864>.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Human Rights Watch, 'Stifling Dissent'.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.sify.com/news/activist-s-p-udayakumar-vs-arnab-s-republic-tv-news-columns-gxk18aeeichc.html>, 'Were Kudankulam Protests Funded by Foreign Money?' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3i4rYnz7Hc> Accessed: 20 February 2019.

dispersed attack that range from the aggressive to the stealthy in which the sponsor's role becomes 'plausibly deniable' even when 'denials lack plausibility' (Cormac and Aldrich, 2018: 477).

Nuclear necropower extrapolates from Mbembe's analysis: first in terms of considering death both in a physical sense and where individuals are forced to take on the status of the living dead, their lives rendered dispensable through an array of ecological, social and political conjunctions around a nuclear power plant. Second, the article extends the scholarship on race, class and toxicity (Davies, 2018; Davies et al., 2017; McIntyre & Nast, 2011) and the nuclear impact of tests and waste on South Pacific islanders (Davis, 2005; DeLoughrey, 2013), indigenous communities and 'downwinders' in USA (Endres, 2009; Kuletz, 1998; Masco, 2006) to encompass caste politics in south India in zones of exception marked out by nuclear installations. This focus on caste in oscillation with class also brings to light a stark contrast between local populations and the nuclear establishment dominated by the high caste middle classes. It vindicates a form of environmental casteism and provides an overlooked addition to the literature on environmental racism (e.g. Pellow and Brulle, 2005; Pulido, 1996; Walker, 2012). Third, the article highlights a politics of contagion for those in solidarity with subaltern populations from a range of backgrounds who dare to defy and mobilise against the nuclear power plant and are also subject to death conditions. In the expedient vein of a pejorative paternalism, the view is entrenched that activists are leading the 'illiterate' and 'uneducated' astray with their anti-development and/or anti-national views.

As has transpired in other locations, all kinds of dissenters are bundled together, decried as part of 'single-issue terrorism' (Brock and Dunlap, 2018, p. 35; see Futrell and Brents, 2003; Loadenthal, 2014; Dunlap, 2019) and treated as such by Intelligence, surveillance and law enforcement agencies both on- and offline. The (re)actions outlined above are becoming *de rigueur* for political, media and economic elites in cahoots with databank analysis companies to influence digital users while diabolising issues and individuals (Gayle, 2019, p. 13). As with the obscure nature of radioactivity, nuclear necropower instantiates a world of in/visibles that has oppressive effects in stifling subaltern populations' views, dissent and opposition (Kaur, 2020). In so doing, it ends up keeping nuclear political regimes in power, further eroding principles of democracy and dissent, however they are imagined.

## Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

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