

Living on the edge of Pokhran blast fame - pride but bitterness too

It should have been known as the Khetolai blast, is the oft heard complaint here. Ten years after the desert town of Pokhran became a global landmark with India conducting its nuclear second test, there is pride here but also discontent at being denied the fame due to it as the village closest to the test site.

About 25 km from Pokhran town - known the world over as the place where India conducted its first nuclear test in 1974 and then exploded as nuclear power with multiple tests on May 11 and 13, 1998 - Khetolai lives on a dirt road forking to the right from the excellent National Highway 15.

A short distance away, the single storey houses begin on a drive through a featureless landscape dwarfed by four cell phone towers.

Yellow, in all its hues, dominates in the village, over 500 km from Rajasthan capital Jaipur. From the sandy soil to the facade of the village temple, and even the dry thorny bushes starved of any hint of green.

The resentment runs deep.

'Why is it known as the Pokhran blast? It should be called the Khetolai blast,' grumbled Bhagirath Bishnoi, a government teacher sitting on a charpoy rolled out on a floor still wet from a recent wash.

'Pokhran may be the sub-division, but the town is over 25 km away from the test site while it is only three km from here. It is rightly ours,' Bishnoi told IANS.

Ten years after India's Operation Shakti, or power, the codename for the Pokhran II blasts, there is little sign of Khetolai's historic association.

'Earlier, we had written on the signboard - Khetolai alias Shakti Sthal (power place). Most people in Khetolai had also painted the words Shakti Sthal on their motorbikes. Not any more,' said Bishnoi.

What rankles more is that the land for the test site, inside a military firing range, had been acquired from Khetolai residents in 1965.

'It was all our property. But we had to give it up for a pittance when the government wanted it,' said 75-year-old Hiya Ram, counting beads on his rosary.

As compensation, Hiya Ram's family received Rs.18 for a bigha, the traditional land unit less than an acre. But he was luckier than 84-year-old Dooda Ram, who got only Rs.4.

'Many of us went to Delhi to meet (then prime minister) Indira Gandhi after the 1974 test blast asking for better compensation. We got assurances of more money or rehabilitation. But nothing has happened so far,' Hiya Ram told IANS.

Added Garu Ram, nearly blinded with age: 'It was good for the country, but did not mean anything much for the village.'

Nothing much changed for the villagers 24 years later when India conducted the Pokhran II tests on May 11.

As a result of the May 11 blast, most houses here developed large cracks in their walls. After a survey, the government offered a total compensation of Rs.400,000 for all 400 houses.

'We rejected it. Then they hiked it to Rs.1.5 million. We took the money but it was not enough,' said Ram Swaroop, who was 18 at the time.

He remembers the day clearly.

'The army people came at about nine in the morning and asked people living in pucca houses to move out. We knew that something was happening; helicopters were also flying overhead.'

He recalls former president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, then chief of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), visiting the village in the days before the test.

'I saw this man in the military dress. He had wild white hair, so he stayed in my mind. He has come to buy cigarette from the store. It's only when I saw him on TV that I realised he was Kalam.'

What has heightened the feeling of dispossession from an event that is widely regarded as India's coming of age as power player is the lingering after effects.

A few months after the blast, some cattle gave birth to blind or crippled calves. There were some initial surveys by the Department of Atomic Energy, but the villagers demand routine testing.

'We need a permanent research laboratory to monitor any radiation after effects,' said Ram Swaroop.

He admitted that while there had been a few scattered complaints of itching and nausea immediately after the blast they did not see any lasting effect on humans.

But that has not stopped outsiders from being suspicious of the environment here.

'We have a problem of getting marriage proposals for our boys as parents of girls think that there still may be some problems in the water or food. But now as most of them are in government service this problem has eased a bit,' said Daulat Singh.

Despite the many tribulations, however, Khetolai still prizes its link to India's nuclear programme and supports it.

'It showed Pakistan that we are powerful,' said Hiya Ram. When reminded that Pakistan also conducted six nuclear tests a week later, he reasoned: 'But we cannot trust them. We never know if it happened or not.'

Then there is the thrill of living on the edge of fame.

'When I gave an exam for the Rajasthan police (recruitment), there was a question in the paper

asking which is the nearest village to the nuclear test site. It really feels good to see that we are now a general knowledge question,' said Ram Swaroop grinning, his earring glinting in the glazing sun.

Devirupa Mitra (© IANS / India eNews)