Neyveli Boiler Blast - Safety Protocols

What is the issue?

- Six workers were killed and 17 injured after a boiler exploded in Unit V of the thermal power station-II of the NLC India Ltd. (NLCIL) in Neyveli, Tamil Nadu.
- This is the second accident at the power station in less than 2 months; it calls for lo0king into the overall safety protocols.

What happened?

- The power station has seven units of 210 MW each, totalling 1,470 MW.
- On 7 May 2020, a boiler explosion occurred in Unit VI.
- This killed five persons, including two permanent staff members.
- In the recent incident (July 1, 2020), Unit V was shut down after it got tripped the previous night.
- The workers and engineering staff were attempting to revive it.
- It was then that a fire broke out in the boiler, resulting in the explosion.
- Six people were killed and a dozen workers suffered severe burns.
- Power generation in the unit was stalled after the accident.
- All other units in the station and other thermal power plants worked as usual.

What are the other such incidents elsewhere?

- A day before the boiler blast, 2 persons died and 4 were taken ill after a gas leak at Vizag pharma company.
- Those affected inhaled benzimidazole vapours.
- It happened at the Sainor Life Sciences Private Limited at JN Pharma City in Parawada, a suburb of Visakhapatnam.
- The gas leak at the LG Polymers factory in the Visakhapatnam area in May 2020 is well known.

Why is the Neyveli incident so worrying?

- The boiler blast is inexplicable, as the power producer had encountered a boiler explosion only on May 7, 2020.
- Following that, NLC had ordered a review of its infrastructure and processes.

- Without meticulous care, boilers are dangerous pieces of equipment.
- High-pressure and superheated steam make for a lethal combination at the event of an explosion.
- Keeping the release mechanism in good order is absolutely crucial.
- Also, occupational safety demands that boilers are operated by trained personnel.
- But some of those on the ground have been described as contract employees.

What is the larger concern?

- Given the safety threat, boilers are regulated strictly under the Indian Boilers Act, at least on paper.
- The terrible consequences of lax boiler safety were evident 3 years ago in Rae Bareli.
- Back then, a blast at an NTPC power plant killed a few dozen people.
- But States have clearly not internalised a culture of zero tolerance to boiler accidents.
- In the Neyveli incident, it is said that the boiler was not in operation as it had tripped.
- Notably, the major operations of this equipment involve a furnace and production of steam.
- So, what led to an unexpected blowout should be inquired into.
- The gas leak at Vizag pharma company raises questions on maintenance and operational procedures.
- How vapours of a stable but acutely toxic chemical escaped should be looked into.
- It should be ensured that there is an upgrade to safety protocols.

What is the way forward?

- The response of the Centre and States to industrial accidents is usually to stop public outrage by announcing compensation for victims.
- A transparent inquiry that leads to a fixing of responsibility and reform is often a low priority.
- This culture of diverting from the real problem must change.
- NLC India is a key power producer.
- It rightfully has an obligation to present a transparent report on why its facilities are beset by mishaps.
- There should be an independent probe in this regard.
- It should determine whether cost calculations guided staffing decisions (contract workers) in such a hazardous sector.
- Such accidents are mostly preventable, and occur rarely in the industrialised world given the attention to safety.

- India’s aspirations to industrialise should essentially be founded on safety.

Source: The Hindu

Quick Fact

NLC India Limited (NLCIL)

- NLCIL was formerly the Neyveli Lignite Corporation Limited.
- It is a 'Navratna' company of the Government of India in the fossil fuel mining sector in India and thermal power generation.
- It annually produces about 30 million tonne lignite from opencast mines at Neyveli in the state of Tamil Nadu and at Barsingsar in Bikaner district of Rajasthan state.
- The lignite is used at pithead thermal power stations to produce electricity.
- Lately, it has diversified into renewable energy production.
- It has installed 1404 MW solar power plant to produce electricity from photovoltaic (PV) cells and 51 MW electricity from windmills.
- It was incorporated in 1956, and it is under the administrative control of Ministry of Coal.

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