



**LEADERS OF CHANGE?** DMK's M K Stalin, S Thirunavukkarasar of the Congress and VCK chief Thol Thirumavalavan at MDMK leader Vaiko's anti-neutrino rally in March

# Aswatthama is dead. Now will they kill neutrino project?

## STORYBOARD

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In a crucial phase of the Mahabharata war, when Drona mounted a fierce attack on the Pandavas, Krishna schemed to use Drona's son Aswatthama's name to dishearten the warrior guru. Accordingly, Bhima killed an elephant (a violation of war rules) called Aswatthama and the Pandavas roared: "Aswatthama is dead."

Drona would trust none but Yudhishtira, who would never utter a lie.

"Is my son dead?" Drona asked him. "Aswatthama is dead," said Yudhishtira, without specifying if it is the elephant or the man.

Drona threw away his weapons and went down on his knees, weeping. And Krishna got Driśhtadyumna to behead Drona.

On Friday, self-proclaimed new-age Pandavas on social media screamed that the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has stayed the proposed India-based Neutrino Observatory in Theni. It was a classic case of what communication theory calls 'distortion of message'. A section of the mainstream media failed to catch this, and ran the fake news. All that the NGT said was the project cannot be implemented without approval from the National Board for Wildlife (TOI, page 10, November 3), something which is anyway mandatory, for which the INO has applied. In other words, it was stating the obvious. In fact, the NGT refused to stay the environmental clearance given by the Union ministry of environment and forests, which was the prayer of the petitioner who is the coordinator of an NGO called Poovulagin Nanbargal.

While NGOs giving a spin to facts is an old game, what's appalling is our politicians' ignorance — or their refusal to be less ignorant — of science. While an Indian politician with a sci-

entific spirit is a rarity, those few knowledgeable ones toe the alarmist line of some environment activists who cock a snook at environment science.

Tales about 'INO Armageddon', scripted in the NGO theatre and merrily mouthed by politicians, range from the frivolous to the frightful. One says the neutrino observatory will kill tigers in the vicinity (and you thought killing T-1 was tough); others warn of radiation and earthquakes that can destroy the Idukki dam.

Indeed, the INO's PR has been pathetic. In the absence of public consultation, the campaigners found it easy to work on public distrust.

This column is not an attempt to rubbish all the concerns (there are a few genuine ones which are as serious as the ones raised during any largescale construction activity). Nor does it seek to explain how safe and beneficial INO is (Some of the best scientific brains, including a few Nobel laureates have done it lucidly in this video: [youtube.com/watch?v=cPATEhMG6zg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPATEhMG6zg)).

A less informed group, meanwhile, asks what is that we gain from observing neutrinos (a trillion of which pass through you, me and the earth every moment without interacting with anything) in a tunnel bored 1,300m deep inside a peak. Such naysayers in the past have found themselves in the dustbin of history.

When asked by an economist what we gain from discovering the Higgs boson at the Large Hadron Collider, physicist David Kaplan said: "I have no idea. We have no idea. When radio waves were discovered, they weren't called radio waves, because there were no radios. They were discovered as some sort of radiation. Basic science for big breakthroughs needs to occur at a level where you're not asking, 'What is the economic gain?' You're asking, 'What do we not know, and where can we make progress?' So, what is the LHC good for? Could be nothing other than just understanding everything."