

I was in New York when the Indian government decided to gatecrash its way into the exclusive Nuclear Club of Five. The Americans have a nuclear arsenal so large that it can blow up this planet hundreds of times over and convert it into a radioactive rubble that could not play host to any human life for epochs to come. The US preoccupation with the power to annihilate the entire human race is, strangely enough, called deterrence. And yet the level of righteous indignation the American establishment displayed over the Indian government's desire to flex its measly nuclear muscle succeeded in cornering me to defend its position.

The barrage of condemnation, moral outrage and contempt levelled at India raised a basic question: Who are they to give us sermons? At the same time, I was acutely aware that had I been in India at that moment, my gut reaction would have been to join those few who opposed and protested against our government unleashing such a no-win nuclear arms race in the subcontinent amidst pompous claims and childish jubilation. My own confused emotional reactions gave me quite an insight into why the Indians living in Europe and North America (the NRIs) tend to be such easy prey to aggressive nationalism. Living amidst such self-righteous and often racist prejudice it is indeed difficult to think and react sensibly to developments in India.

Manhood Anxieties

However, thanks to the Internet that provided easy access to Indian newspapers, I was soon brought in tune with events in our poor

**This phrase was coined by Hyderabad - based civil liberties activist Kannabiran and came to me through my friend Tapan Bose.*

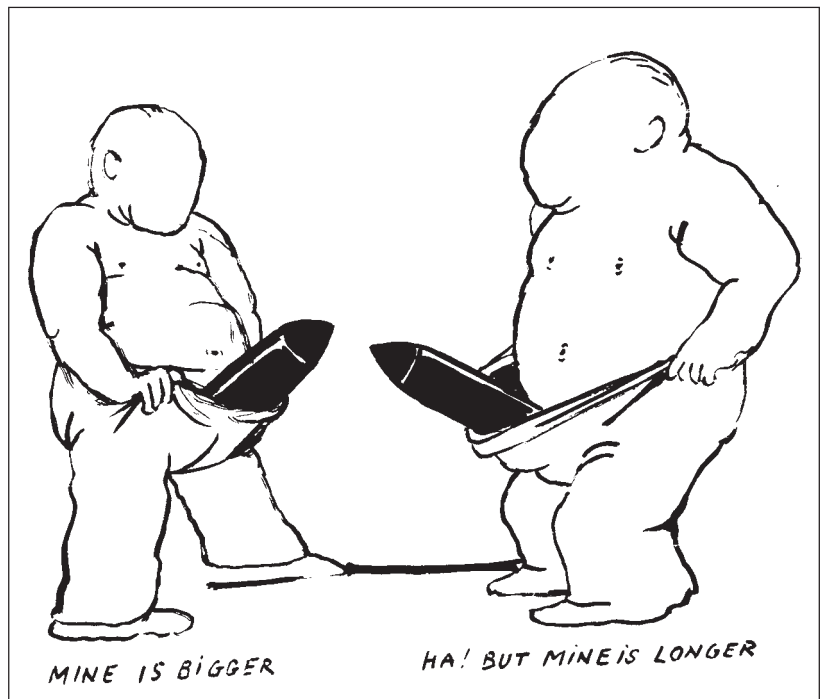
BJP's Wargasm*

○ Madhu Kishwar

motherland. Bal Thackeray, considered by his devotees as among Bharat Mata's most illustrious sons, put the nuclear tests in perspective in his inimitable style. He proclaimed: "With these explosions we have shown the world we are not eunuchs." I, for one, was impressed by the candour of his confession. Having watched the antics of Thackeray's Shiv Sena hoodlums leading hate and loot campaigns over the last 25 years, many of us knew that such men who make a grandiose ideology out of sheer gangsterism are likely to have seriously disturbed personalities, including performance anxieties. The neurosis produced by the dysfunctionality of certain vital organs in the lower half of their bodies may tend to dominate their heads and hearts.

I wished some well-wisher of Mr Thackeray would advise him that there are many less expensive and harmful cures available for such a condition, the latest being the new male potency drug called Viagra. Surely, the country need not be saddled with such a big financial drain and political burden just to give the likes of Thackeray a sense of potency. Wargasms are an inappropriate substitute for the real thing.

On the other side of the border, Nawaz Sharif was reported to be facing an avalanche of criticism for failing to show that Pakistanis were not eunuchs either. Not to be outdone in wargasms by any man, Benazir Bhutto was reported to have publicly offered bangles to Nawaz Sharif, implying that his failure to



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explode nuclear bombs demonstrated he was an effeminate man with no right to rule over a nation which had to prove its manhood to India. Such an attack was all the more pathetic considering Benazir is widely believed to be a battered and abused wife, who submits to insults, slaps and kicks from her husband despite her political power and position.

The euphoria surrounding the atomic tests by India and Pakistan has had many such tragi-comic features. We have not yet heard a clear policy statement on why these nuclear tests were required at this particular moment. Were they aimed at Pakistan? China? America? the Nuclear Five? or the Indian and Pakistani voter?

Eye-contact Hangups

Answering a question on what the nuclear testing had actually achieved (other than international sanctions and condemnations) BJP spokesman K.R. Malkani is reported to have said: "It has enabled Indians to stand straight and look at others in the eye. It has given us pride. Earlier we were like some Timbuctoo!" I knew that Malkani himself has a long history of serious problems looking some people in the eye, including a harmless creature like me. I have had to tell him on a few occasions to look at me straight in the eye and confront me directly rather than attack me through various devious means whenever we have differed on issues like Kashmir in public meetings. However, I did not succeed in giving him that confidence.

I had imagined this was Malkani's own personality problem. His most recent statement suggests that looking people straight in the eye is not just his individual



problem but is also that of his entire party. As a result of the tests, Malkani says he and his partymen have finally gathered sufficient courage to look outsiders in the eye and will henceforth be standing straight. Can we trust the destiny of one billion people in the hands of those who are ridden with such inferiority complex?

It is important to ask: What have the tests done for those of us in India who do not have these eye-contact hangups or 'standing straight' problems, but often feel ashamed because of the doings and misdoings of our *rajnetas*? Is the world treating us more seriously at last?

The country need not be saddled with such a big burden—financial and political—just to give the likes of Thackeray a sense of potency. Wargasmis are no substitute for the real thing.

Yes, India has indeed succeeded in exposing the double standards and hypocrisy of the nuclear haves and made them realise the foolishness of trying to pretend they can keep an exclusive monopoly over such weapons as another means of ensuring their political hegemony. If India and Pakistan—among the poorest nations in the world—could go nuclear, many other nuclear have-nots with demonic ambitions backed by big money power won't be far behind.

Opprobrium All

But apart from having gained the dubious distinction of causing anxiety to other nations of the kind so far provided by Uncle Sam, the

Stalins, the Maos and Dengs, the Saddam Husseins, Khomeinis and Gaddafis of the world, is India going to be taken more seriously and given more respect by other nations and peoples? Flight of capital from India, its downgrading by international rating agencies, the downswing in the sensex and the Indian rupee indicate the outcome has its major downside. Even at the people to people level, while in America, I only heard sneering comments, sentiments of pity and often downright contempt in response to our Big Blasts, which some here call an "explosion of India's [desperate need for] self-esteem". I can epitomise those reactions no better than by narrating some of the salient pieces of conversation I heard on my trip back to India a week after the Pokharan explosions.

For example, as we were checking in to board the United Airways flight to Delhi at Heathrow Airport, a young couple embarking on their first visit to India asked the woman at the ticket counter: "We are just carrying two rolls of toilet paper

with us. Do you think we should rush and buy lots more? We are told it is very hard to get toilet paper in India.” The airline’s staffer tried to muster as polite a reply as she could manage: “Well, you can get toilet paper in big cities, not very good quality, though.” Even before she had finished, I heard some fellow passenger heading for Hong Kong remark with obvious disdain: “If I were you, I would be more worried about finding a clean toilet—a virtual impossibility in India—or, for that matter, clean water.”

A little later I heard two passengers sitting behind me in the plane discuss our nuclear capability. The long and short of their conversation was: “These crazies want to become a nuclear power. With their abysmal levels of inefficiency, their inability to build even safe cinema halls, or run ordinary electricity stations, we won’t be surprised if they blow themselves up and reduce their own country to a heap of radioactive rubble.”

Towards the end of the flight, the air hostesses came to offer duty free wares. As invariably happens, a good number of people bought bottles of liquor. One of the Indian passengers suggested to his friend that the duty free shop at Delhi airport offers liquor at fairly competitive prices so why not buy from there instead needlessly adding weight to his carry-on luggage during the flight? The air hostess who heard this advice intervened: “You don’t want to risk adulterated liquor for a dollar or so less? They routinely fill imported liquor bottles with substandard Indian stuff even in the government owned shop at Delhi airport.” At this, an American who heard this exchange told his woman companion: “I hope that corruption has seeped into their nuclear power plants as well and the fissile mate-

rial they are using is adulterated. That might save them from themselves!”

Well Deserved Contempt?

There is indeed overwhelming evidence all around that this kind of contempt for the level of corruption, incompetence and mismanagement in India is well deserved. Even in high security zones and matters, our record is shameless indeed.

Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her own security guards, in her own house and the way her bullet ridden body was handled is poignant proof of the utter incompetence of our political establishment and its security apparatus. She had the tightest security cover possible after Operation Blue Star. Yet none of it functioned—neither our great intelligence apparatus nor our presumed ability to provide her with even emergency first aid services.

To begin with, she was shot by her own security men without those in charge of her safety getting an inkling of their plan. The emergency ambulance supposed to be provided at her residence was simply not available. Without any life support systems, she was bundled into an Ambassador car with daughter-in-law Sonia in tow. They first decided to go to Ram Manohar Lohia hospital. After reaching the gates of that hospital, those in charge changed their minds and decided to take her to the All India Medical Institute (AIIMS) situated in the very opposite direction.

Thus precious time was wasted while Mrs Gandhi lay bleeding to death in the car. She was almost dead by the time her car reached AIIMS. There, too, the doctors made farcical attempts at saving her life. They kept pumping blood into her body long after she was dead simply because no one wanted to risk saying she was

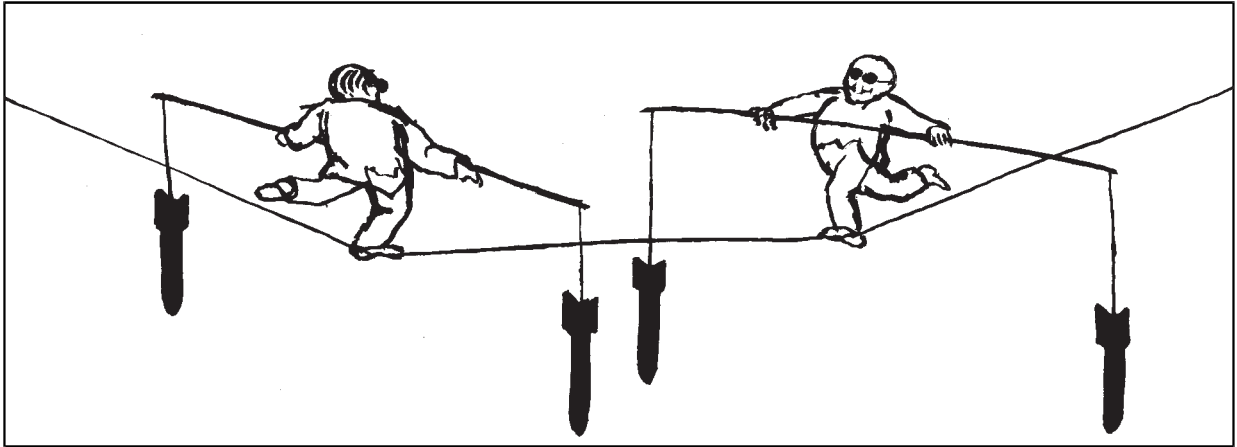
no more. Merely because her son and heir apparent was not around to take the decision no one in the government dared announce her death—even after BBC had broadcast the news. On hearing rumours of her assassination in Calcutta, her son Rajiv tuned in to the BBC—not All India Radio—because he did not expect the government controlled media to tell the truth.

If this is the level of performance of our government agencies and security apparatus in dealing with the life of the most protected person in our land, one can well imagine how efficient its doings are in other areas. Only the Pakistanis can match the sheer incompetence of the Indian political establishment. Can we really trust such deadly weapons of generational genocide in the hands of such incompetents?

Informed Debate Needed

Most of those who are opposed to India’s nuclearisation, claim that in a country where millions still don’t get adequate food, shelter, clothing, spending thousands of crores on nuclear weapons is a crime. They argue that the same money ought to be diverted towards providing education, healthcare and other basic requirements so acutely lacking in our society. To build a case against nuclear weapons on the ground that the nation cannot afford to divert its scarce resources towards building a nuclear arsenal is to strengthen the case of nuclear haves like America. The implication is that those who are rich enough can justify indulging in such deadly war games.

In the brief period since the explosions, reams have already been written on this topic. However, even basic simple facts about our nuclear weapons strategy are so shrouded in secrecy that people are taking pro- or anti-government positions



based largely on their ideological or moral predilections rather than as part of a well-informed debate on the military, political, and economic implications of becoming a nuclear weapons state.

We need an informed and contextual discussion on nuclear weaponisation in India and to carry out a dispassionate political evaluation and audit of India's nuclear policy around the following themes:

- What were the threat perceptions that precipitated the decision to weaponise at this point of time?
- Are these tests evidence that India is ready to add a spectrum of reliable, strategically significant nuclear weapons to the Indian Army's firepower? Or are we far from such actual weaponisation? What is the actual military significance of the nuclearisation that we have achieved? What strategic advantage do they have in potential conflicts with our opponents?
- What do these nuclear tests tell us about the ability of our scientific community? What achievements do we illustrate in replicating a technology already known for over 50 years? True, many other nations are yet to get this far; however, just how far have we come?
- Is there any real difference between nuclear tests for peaceful purposes

and those for making weapons?

- How safe are our nuclear facilities? What do we know about their track record so far? How safe are our command and control systems? What do we know about the structure, manning and training that have gone into them and whatever further is planned as weaponisation proceeds?
- Are the political, technical, and organisational control structures in Pakistan and India sufficiently developed at this point to ensure that the very possession of nuclear weapons does not push the two countries into disasters?
- What do the conflicting and sometimes mutually contradictory statements regarding the purposes of the bomb issued by our political, scientific and military leaders tell us about our nuclear policy and its implementation?
- Did we proceed in response to security threats from China, to protect ourselves from Pakistan, or was it a response to the proxy war in Kashmir? Or is it for all these purposes and others as well? Can we afford to open up so many fronts at the same time? Is this good military strategic thinking?
- Is our nuclear arsenal actually targeted at some real threat or is it simply a vague and insufficiently considered product of the grand-

iose fantasies of those who tenuously hold power at present?

- How much importance in the decision can be ascribed to the desire of our government to drive home the message that they would be willing to consider the use of nuclear weapons on Pakistan if they do not stop creating further trouble in Kashmir?
- If our government's real considerations are Pakistan and China, why then have they opened another big front by flaunting their new-found nuclear muscle to the big powers? Are some of our leaders and bureaucrats correct in insisting that by exploding five nuclear devices, we have challenged the double standards of those powerful nuclear states who wish to impose a nuclear apartheid on the rest of the world?
- Those political leaders and scientists in favour of weaponisation never tire of repeating that they are meant for deterrence, not for use. What and who are we deterring with our bombs? Under precisely what conditions would they consider use of nuclear weapons? Have they made other nations aware of their policy on when use of these weapons would be seriously considered?
- Have we actually gained greater clout in the international arena or even in the subcontinent with these

explosions? Or have we earned many more enemies and lost the goodwill of many of those, who were somewhat more friendly before the blasts?

➤ With the nuclear blasts, Pakistan has finally succeeded in internationalising the Kashmir issue—something India resisted all these decades. Does our nuclear weaponisation strengthen or weaken our case on Kashmir?

➤ What are the scientific and technological issues that need to be carefully considered while the government continues to build nuclear weapons?

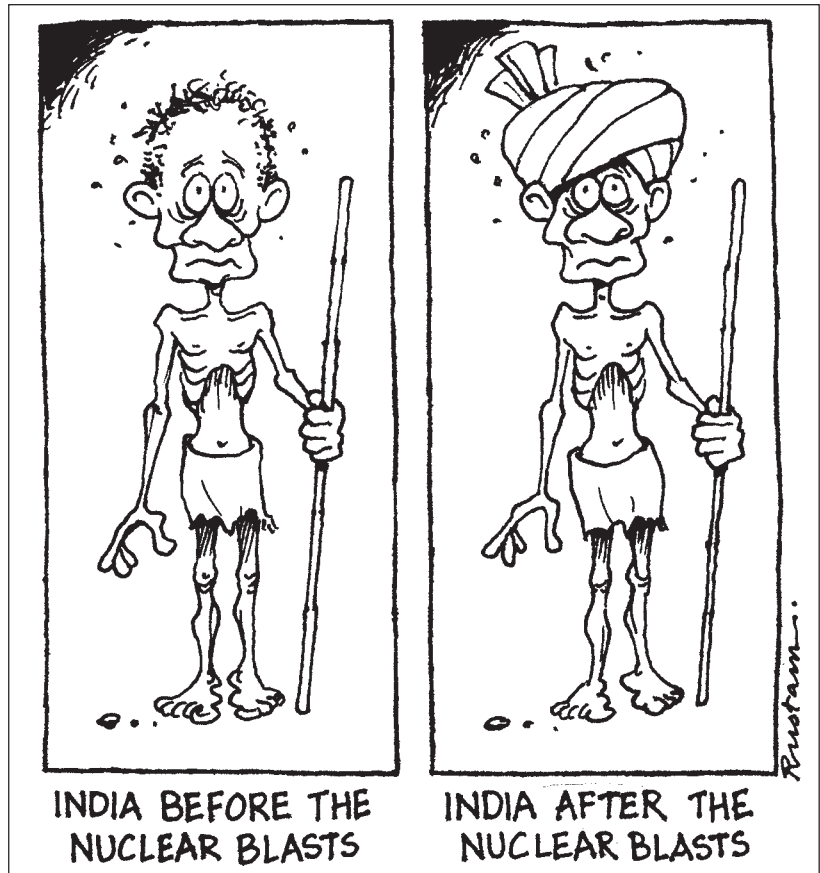
➤ What are the economic and political implications of nuclear weapons for the people of India?

➤ What do the nuclear explosions by Pakistan and India indicate in particular about their military potential? This topic requires expert scientific data and analyses.

➤ What are the larger implications for people all over the world that arise from the nuclear weaponisation and political instability in South Asia? For example, does it mean that Pakistan will be tempted, if it is pushed to the wall, to trade its weapon capacity with Middle Eastern and Islamic countries or other even less responsible governments to get bailed out of economic or other crises and bring the world closer to some major catastrophe?

Similarly, is there a possibility that countries like Libya might be able to buy key components of the bomb from some of the poorly controlled facilities in both Pakistan and India that produce it?

➤ A very basic question, the most important of all, is to outline what would be required to bring responsible political control to military decision making in Pakistan and India so that those with only self seeking short range goals do not end up with their fingers on the button.



➤ What are the opinions of experts on the political and other considerations that would have to be faced if both India and Pakistan were somehow to agree that having the bomb is not in their interests?

There is a historical record here that is important to investigate: South Africa gave up the bomb unilaterally. A number of nations that emerged out of the debris of the former Soviet Union negotiated deals that traded their ongoing denuclearisation for a variety of political and economic guarantees, when they felt that on balance they would be more independent and free from interference without being a nuclear state. Is any of this experience relevant to India and Pakistan?

Would it be possible for both Pakistan and India to get the kind of cooperation from other countries that they should be seeking in trade and investment by swapping

nuclear weapons capacity the way some East European countries—at times even including Russia—have been doing in the 1990s?

This discussion should not be trivialised by merely arguing for or against some form of national security council. Rather, it must seek to make major reforms in how politicians attain power, in how they are socialised and educated to understand the significance of their powers, and to make sure they attain some moral understanding that they are acting as proxies for the survival and security of billions of people.

We will attempt to answer some of these questions in a forthcoming issue of MANUSHI. We look to all our concerned readers to engage with us in a discussion of the consequences of the Pokharan explosions for our country's future. □