

Chapter VI

The Nation-State as an Ecological Communicator: The Case of Indian Nuclear Tests

While nations have always communicated about (their) ecologies—let's say, through religious rituals and performances and literary narratives—nation-states have only recently come to assume a prominent role in that arena. In fact, nation-states *at large* have become important communicators *outside* the fields of law and order, geopolitics, and diplomacy only recently. (The public controversies related to the stands taken by the Chinese, Canadian, and Singaporean governments on SARS are but the latest examples.) The two primary factors behind the increased eminence of the nation-state as an ecological communicator are simple: and are effective distinctively on the levels of *nation* and *communication*.

One: Nations have, on the one hand, been increasingly subsumed by the images and effects of their states—rather than being understood as cultures or civilizations at large;¹ on the other hand, they have also managed to liberate themselves, especially since the Second World War, from the politically incestuous visions of erstwhile royal families (colonial or otherwise). On the former level, the emergence of the nation-state as *the* player on the political landscape has had to do with an increasingly formal redefining of national boundaries at the expense of cultural and linguistic flows or ecological continua across landmasses. On the latter level, while administrative, military, and other governing apparatuses were very important through colonialism, empires were at once too geographically expansive and politically concentrated in particular clans to have allowed the nation-state to dominate over public imagination (except as extensions of the clans). Of course the empires, in controlling their subject nations, preempted and prevented the emergence of nation-states: and alternatively, both nationalism and nation-states came up as forces of resistance against the empires. The long and short of the above is that most of the world is only recently coming to terms with the solidification of the nation-state as the most important entity: and this does not necessarily contradict the rise of multinational corporations or global civil society initiatives in the more recent past involving Globalization. (After all, the heads of states are being routinely accompanied by throngs of top industrialists from their states.)

As for the second operative level—of communication—we might as well briefly reminisce Homi Bhabha’s innovative, though by and large slighted, thesis.² I would like only to remark that Bhabha and his colleagues tell us only a part of the story when they render the nation as a matter of narration; and, I guess few could dispute the proposition inherent to Bhabha’s thesis that nations cannot be reduced to their geographical or military territories or even to any single abstract or concrete form. Bhabha’s thesis is curious not merely because of its content and linguistic acrobatics, but also because of the context within which it was proposed: at the threshold of the 1990s’ globalization. Whereas, his dogged glorification and validation of a diffused nationalism and promotion of a discursive notion of nation seemed to repackage the nation for the increasingly globalizing migrant futures. The understanding of the nation that Bhabha put forward perhaps empowers (especially) the (élite, voluntarily migrant) individual to reinvent tradition and nationalism according to his or her own needs, and validates migrant reconstructions of *nation*; at the same time, however, it ignores the enhanced communicative role that the nation-state itself has come to play within the narratological din of nations *qua* sundry amalgamations of linguistic, cultural, religious, ethnic, and other affinities. In other words, Bhabha’s thesis overly emphasizes the informal aspect of national *self*, to use a bit of Ashis Nandy’s terminology: at the expense, perhaps, of both the formal and the clandestine. The latter two, to be located respectively in government and bureaucratic statements and activities, stand to chasten the version of nationalism that Bhabha glorifies.

Nation-states capitalize, one way or another, on the images they construct for themselves—in interaction with the images that fellow nations and global bodies impose upon them. For example, developed, developing, and underdeveloped are already well-established state-centered images of nations that are openly used to snatch concessions or to impose conditions within global as well as domestic arenas. Likewise, first/second/third world, North/South, Western/Non-Western are categories that nation-states actively embrace or resist—and may even calibrate according to diplomatic contexts—in order to discipline national and international cultures. Furthermore, national (and increasingly global) media outlets routinely portray nations in terms of modern versus traditional, or industrialized versus agricultural, divide—whereas, in the so-called

age of global terrorism, we are more likely to hear about *hard* versus *soft* states (with the onus clearly being on the latter to harden themselves, presumably against international terrorists). There is also increased pressure upon, and drive amongst, nation-states to reengineer their nations into so-called *knowledge societies*.

However, amid the crowd of such state-centered national images and efforts invested in supporting or resisting them, we are unlikely to find a single nation-state (or a group of nation-states) that clearly projects itself predominantly as *eco-friendly* or *healthy*—and has also attained the desired status in the global consciousness. This is because, in addition to the relative lack of incentive on the part of nation-states to project themselves as eco-friendlier, the global traffic of information clearly favors the industrialized and developed over the traditionally eco-savvy. Hence, in international media (environmental) references to Bhutan, the most bio-diverse and ecologically intact nation in the world, are likely to be far fewer than to United Kingdom or China. And, what that also shows is that crafted or packaged ecologies are far more likely to find a place in (global) modern media—whether for their corruption or purification—than naturally preserved ones: presumably because the penchant for crafted ecologies is part of the composite narrative of industrialization and modernization, and is being increasingly internalized by nation-states themselves. For all that, nation-states, in general, are more likely to sell themselves—and be bought as—eco-friendlier, ironically, if they could also capably project themselves as *developed*!

In such a scenario, in which *being eco-friendly* is saleable as part of *being investment-friendly*, on one hand, and *being developed*, on the other, where might one locate ecological communication—in relation to the nation-state? The European Union's statement on EC, which I have discussed in the first chapter, serves as a strong pointer to the futuristic *formal* dimension of ecological communication at the level of nation-state(s). For the clandestine dimension, however, we would have to look elsewhere: i.e., we cannot rely on (strategies of) formal declarations alone. Hence, I refuse to view EC in its positivistic presence for the moment; I also suspend direct theoretical formulations of what may be expected of a nation-state in its role as an ecological communicator. Instead, in what follows, I shall attempt to capture a democratic nation-state, India, in one of its painful and pathetic attempts at intervening, by default, in the

global eco-communicative highway. To be precise, I shall focus on India's May 1998 nuclear tests (and declaration of self as a nuclear power) *as a dubious episode in ecological communication*.

1. The Event Called the Indian Nuclear Tests

It is public knowledge that India had had the nuclear capability since 1974, the year the late Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi allowed the first nuclear test. Since then, India had maintained the status of a "threshold power" until the second tests at Pokharan in May 1998. Meanwhile, India did not have any immediate threat from either China or Pakistan, and there were no other security emergencies either. Yet, all of a sudden, a rickety ruling coalition of 18 political parties took up the major decision in May 1998 to conduct ground-tests explicitly for military purposes on behalf of a country of around 1 billion people. As a matter of fact, the decision was taken by a handful of people without informing even the military.³ This theatricality of affairs offers an interesting link between technology and society that the state's scientific establishment, in liaison with the government in power, sought to establish and exploit to its own political ends through nuclearization.⁴

Evidently, the chief ingredients of the Indian nuclear event included the Indian nation-state, nuclear technology, and the national press. Ecological communication, then, is something that we would like to look for in the backdrop of the interaction among the above three: And, my proposition is that we view the nuclear event as a communicative proxy put together by the nation-state to operate somewhat distinctively on the domestic and global fronts. However, as the analysis shall demonstrate: (1) the Indian state's enterprising is to be viewed against the backdrop of a range of international pressures that have been, and continue to be, active on the typical nation-state through modernity; (2) nuclear technology itself is to be viewed for its peculiar status as the supreme *technology of polity*—and what that entails for the world-order; and, (3) the national press is to be viewed for its lack of preparedness for the sort of event that the nuclear tests were, and typically are.

Before moving any further, I would like to bring to our attention what Ashis Nandy wrote in response to the tests, and in the manner of a chilling indictment. In a

monograph published soon after the tests, he wrote of, what he called, a “culture of nuclearism,” which he as “one of the true ‘universals’ of our time.”⁵ He went on to elaborate by arguing that “[l]ike Coca-Cola and blue jeans, [nuclearism] does not permit cultural adaptation or edited versions,” and that “[i]t is the same in Paris and Pokharan, Lahore and Los Alamos.”⁶ Now, we may or may not be able to measure off the extent of Nandy’s conviction in the homogeneous and homogenizing attributes of the above three entities—I have a feeling that the blue jeans have been edited!—there is enough *prima facie* truth to his comparison to warrant hawkish fact-finding on our part. Perhaps the utility of the comparison lies in the fact that it allows us to view this technology of polity, to put it in my terms, as an “ism”—i.e., a coherent framework of ideas and actions with political and psychological underpinnings and ramifications.

More specifically, Nandy’s characterization captures well the paradox whereby an exact technology—invoking universality of application and effect—is *localized* as a *homogenizing* norm across various cultures: such that it in itself constitute a universal culture of its own, an “ism.” Accordingly, nuclear technology is not merely a defense or energy infrastructure, nor a scientific force running against “culture,” nor is it to be upheld simply as culture-free or value-neutral. In addition to these sometimes conflicting ways, the nuclear technology should also be viewed as the prime expression and producer of a treacherous universality. Taken to its conclusion, Nandy’s “nuclearism” implies a homologous relationship between *cultures of globalization* and *globalizing technologies*, inducing us, in the end, to place nuclear technology in the cultural politics of the global order.

To situate nuclear technology accordingly requires considering the ways through which the global hierarchies of military and economic power have come to create a larger cross-cultural psychological environment that tacitly accepts the technology as the final arbitrator of power and prestige. As nation-states attempt to respond to this global order by actively participating in nuclearism, as has been the case with India and Pakistan, they inescapably incur unprecedented costs to the local populations and commit violence regionally. In other words, like most content-based universals, nuclearism is a costly and violent enterprise in regional terms, only that it *outclasses* them all both quantitatively and qualitatively. The material and psychological contingencies of nuclearism have been

powerful enough to generate an environment of their own across geographies, which I shall refer to as its "political ecology."

What follows is my attempt at briefly characterizing the nature of this political ecology in the context of the recent Indo-Pak nuclear tests. More specifically, I shall try to explicate the kinds of relationship that played themselves out through nuclearism between technology and society at the behest of the Indian state and the Indian scientific establishment. Insofar as nuclearism is a technological universal *specified* as an unrelenting, uncompromising cultural universal, the issue of democracy becomes central to my consideration of its political ecology. Hence, I raise the question—and attempt to unravel its theoretical complexities—as follows: What may it mean to *be democratic* for a nation-state and a national institution while the former goes (militarily) nuclear?

At this point, I am inclined to believe that perhaps it is more difficult for a political and cultural theorist than it must be for a determined government to be able to identify a trait, event or undertaking as genuinely democratic given the lures, pitfalls, and pressures of multilateral forces involved in a given political scenario. If anything, I acknowledge the Indian nuclear tests to have been precisely such a scenario: that retains the potential to challenge any thinking person to ascertain, perhaps for his or her own sanity, how the issue of democracy could be addressed or even raised within the globalized rubric of nuclearism.

I began by suggesting that I would try to approach the Indian nuclear event without succumbing to its own dictates regarding how it ought to be understood—for example, as a dubious EC episode. This presumes, on my part, that this state-sponsored nuclear event was able to present itself in particular ways to the people at large owing to certain factors—the technology being one of them; that it was able to assume a strong sense of "self," so to speak, for the same reasons. I also maintain that the event, through its span of immediate effectiveness, was able to "create" a people as its legitimate receptionists and representatives, and that it encouraged a certain range of questions and not others. And, for all that, this was also one of those events that forcibly and forcefully shape our ways of understanding them: Wherefore, to understand such an event despite itself, or despite its Self, means to retrieve itself from Itself, and to retrieve ourselves from Itself as well as Ourselves as its occasional contingencies! It is only by such a

comical leap of faith in ourselves as interpreters that we might get beyond the *truth* of the event—and to its clandestine selves and their shadows.

As an inlet into the above problem of going beyond an event's dictates, and for the fact that a nation's media is one of the best indicators of the nation's democratic practice, that I have also decided to analyze the rather precarious disposition of the Indian media, particularly the national print-media, through the "peak hours" of the nuclear episode. I present that analysis under the section "Nuke Journalism," and expect that section to serve, at least partially, my objective of raising and addressing the question of democracy in the context of nuclearization: of recognizing or not recognizing certain institutional or public dispositions to be genuinely democratic under the circumstances. This whole aspect of democracy relates to our topic out of our underwritten expectation of a certain standard and ethic of democracy from both *ecology* and *communication*: and the question for us presently is what might happen to them outside the positivistic frames of reference for EC. This aspect is also supposed to point to the relationship that the Indian nation-state sought to establish with the nation—and what that has come to mean in eco-communicative terms.

2. The Subtleties of the Nukes as a Technology: Fundamentalism, Scientism, Masculinism, and State-sponsored Nationalism

Given the context, it is useful to reminisce a research project on Peace and Global Transformation that the United Nations University sponsored more than a decade ago, in which the relationship between science and violence figured prominently. In the first volume resulting from that project, *Science, Hegemony, and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity*, Ashis Nandy, as the editor of the volume, mentioned in his now classic "Introduction: Science as a Reason of State," how "conspicuous technology has become gradually the official goal of science in India, as well as the main source of legitimacy for science among the Indian middle classes." Nandy went on to "trace the idea of science as a reason of state to a speech made by the American President John F. Kennedy in 1962," concluding that:

[F]or the first time Kennedy's speech showed that a wide enough political base had been built in a major developed society for the successful use of

science as a goal of state and, perhaps, as a means of populist mobilization. Spectacular science could now be used as a political plank within the United States in the ideological battle against ungodly communism.⁷

Much in line, as it were, with this unholy harmony between techno-science and the politics of the modern state that encourages a sharply polarized, territorial world-view, we find that at the heart of this second stage of Indian nuclearization has been a Hindu nationalist party, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), which was the majority leader of the minority government through the May 1998 tests. What the nuclear tests did for it, at least for the time being, was to unify the Indian masses against the apparition of the evil Islamic Pakistan.⁸ Remarkably, therefore, while the Indian government's explanation to the G-8 and the UN Security Council focused on its perceived threat from China, its informal domestic political rhetoric almost entirely targeted Pakistan as the reason for the hasty decision to go nuclear.⁹ In other words, the supreme use of the nukes lay not exactly in the realm of India's international security or diplomacy, but in the kind of Hindu nationalism the fundamentalist ruling coalition was able to incite in the social sphere of Indian polity literally in a matter of hours of the tests, and in the way it was able to channel the societal dynamics toward fundamentalist concerns. Accordingly, Aijaz Ahmad characterized "these nuclear fireworks," for their potential to "help [the BJP] cut across the Hindu/secular divide and reach out to claim the mantle of Indian nationalism as such."¹⁰ Pakistan's subsequent tests only corroborated this design insofar as the average Pakistani called his "product" the "Islamic" bomb.¹¹ The domestic politics of both the countries consciously involved the implicit nuances of this particular technology—with its capability to assert spectacular destructive power, which remains a significant, unspoken parameter of a nation's status in the existing world order—to stretch the religious polarization between Islam and Hinduism on one hand, and Pakistan and India, on the other.

But the beauty of this nuke theatricality lay not so much in its rather obvious fundamentalist or—what South Asians call—*communal* agenda; it lay, instead, in the idea of "scientific temper" that it was able to mainstream alongside. The sudden, dramatic unification of the nation around the nuclear tests had a great air of technical

superiority, scientism, and progress to it: of, in short, "techno-machoism." Accordingly, while glorifying the tests as a monumental achievement on the part of the Indian (atomic) scientists at several public forums,¹² Prime Minister Vajpayee shrewdly added "*Hail the Scientist*" to the popular Indian slogan of "*Hail the Soldier, Hail the Farmer!*", originally given to the nation by late Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri."¹³ Aided by the Hindu communal forces, the otherwise deliberately "insulated" or politically-immune Indian nuclear establishment pushed Indians into a latest phase of mass *techno-scientific* "hyper-masculinization" that thinkers like Ashis Nandy and Vandana Shiva have long deplored imperialism, modernity, and globalization for.¹⁴

While the charge of "hyper-masculinity" may sound essentialist, the tone of the mass sentiment toward the tests only supports it as we sift its underpinnings: one representation of which lies in the numerous press photographs of the street-celebrations of the rival nuke events in India and Pakistan respectively. In my post-Pokharan survey of a number of major Indian newspapers, a few American newspapers, of the television coverage by the British Broadcasting Corporation and the CNN, I did not come across a single picture of the celebratory crowds with a woman in it. (Women were present, however, in certain rallies protesting the tests.) The celebrations, much like the entire operation of the nuclear tests, had a near-absolute male constitution to them.

Perhaps the clearest tribute to this contrived posture of masculinity—*hyper-masculinity*—came in the form of the first public reaction to the tests by Balasaheb K. Thackaray, the chauvinist leader of the militantly Hindu political organization (and a close associate of the ruling BJP) Shiva Sena, who strongly justified the tests as he exclaimed: "We have to prove [to the world] that we are not eunuchs(!)."¹⁵ Meanwhile, celebratory and self-laudatory press-statements and public appearances by BJP leaders, nuclear scientists, and top government officials continued to underline the *enhanced* strength of India as a nation owing to its nuclearization. Prime Minister Vajpayee summed it all up, as it were, in the following words—while answering Prabhu Chawla's potent question, "What does this explosion mean for our country?":

Millions of Indians have viewed this occasion as the beginning of the rise of a strong and self-confident India. I fully share this assessment and this dream. ... I would, therefore, say that the greatest meaning of the tests is

that they have given India *shakti*, they have given India strength, they have given India self-confidence.¹⁶

It is significant to note here that through this nuclear episode one did not encounter the usual ways in which engineering technologies tend to affect particular societies first materially (let's say the railways, or computers, affecting people's activities concretely), and then—by extension—corporeally and psychologically. The nuke episode, as a technological event, was remarkable for its capacity to generate psychological apparitions among the masses: apparitions whose potency could not, at the same time, be questioned in the least. In other words, the Indian celebration of the tests (just like their rival Pakistan's on the flip-side) had a very limited material basis in that no ordinary Indian gained *anything* from that episode except for the bit of the news that the blasts took place in the desert. If there were a material impact, it was to be realized in the form of the financial losses owing to the international trade and monetary sanctions that several countries, including the United States, would impose upon India subsequently. The nation-wide celebrations were, therefore, little more than an outburst of the hyper-masculine aggressive tendencies that the fundamentalist establishment was able to tap within the framework of scientific temperament and techno-rationality on one hand, and Hindu nationalism, on the other. That the scientists were over-zealous in their participation in the event in precisely the fundamentalist way was also evident from their enthusiastic celebration of the heroic status that the masses, the national press, and the politicians accorded them publicly after the blasts.

Seen this way, we find that the near-transcendental sophistication of nuclear technology and the well-nurtured elitism of Indian nuclear physicists together served the purpose for the current political establishment of unleashing a national heroism having little value for women, the Muslim and other minorities, or any economically underprivileged sections of the society. At the same time, however, one is legitimate to identify the nuclearization as one more desperate attempt, on the part of the modern Indo-Pak establishments, to make themselves as well as these sections of their societies "deserving" citizens of the global order. This sentiment was captured well by Vinay Lal, who noted:

By signaling its departure from the body of world opinion, India has sought to arrive on the world stage. It is the one resounding cruelty of our times that no nation-state which refuses to partake in realpolitik and zero-sum politics of our times can receive much of a hearing.¹⁷

3. "Nuke Journalism": Or, the Media as Nuclearism's By-Product and Political Contingency

"Nuke journalism" is the name I have presently given to the distinctive sub-genre of journalism that developed in India (and Pakistan) in the wake of the nuclear tests in May 1998. True to the sensationalism unleashed by the explosions, nuke journalism was a short-term phenomenon that fizzled out within the next four-five weeks. In retrospect, however, it serves testimony to the kind of crisis that the tests presented before the national media in terms of political values and loyalties.

In this section of the essay I discuss the media frenzy of "nuke journalism" as a *contingency* of nuclearism, so that the vital concerns presently relate to the role of the regional or national media in protecting the local interests in the face of the national adoption of the nuclear "universal." As a case in point, therefore, nuke journalism pushes us into thinking about the role and scope of the media relating to *democratic* values during such crises. That nuclearism was also a crisis in the *flow of information*—as I seek to argue—insofar as the tests automatically forced a suspension in the democratic norm of public-interest informationalizing on the part of the mainstream media, is another issue that "nuke journalism" makes us confront, alongside.

More theoretically, the crisis of nuke journalism can be explored as a sub-set of nuclearism as a whole once we recognize that the notoriously *secretive* Indian nuclear tests, having enormous global and multilateral political significations, caught the national media rather suddenly. For, under such circumstances, it is hard to hold the media responsible merely for how it reported the event to the public at large; it is no less difficult to judge the media entirely on the basis of how it sought to "construct" or "package" the given event (as Timothy Luke does nonetheless brilliantly in his analysis of the Chernobyl disaster).¹⁸ Because, at several levels the media very likely fell vulnerable to the sheer force of the event that had been thrust upon it, by the secretive

compulsions of the nuclear statehood, to “cover.” Therefore, apart from having to report and package the event in so many ways, the media seemed to have confronted, thanks to nuclearism, the unusual prospect of becoming a prime product of the event itself for the effective time period.

Arguably, the prospect of this kind of “crisis” for a national media must be peculiar to a democracy since in other systems the media is not expected to have a direct relationship to *any* event—especially not significant ones—anyway. In a non-democratic state, the media is in a perpetual crisis of an altogether different sort in that it is the state that retains the right to represent the event in its tailored but “absolute” existence through it. In non-democratic systems, therefore, the media is invariably a state produce: it is not a product or effect of the event (with which it is only indirectly related), nor is it a genuine reporting mechanism or constructor of the same. For the absence of media’s authentic existence in the non-democratic setting, the question of its relationship to the “event” is rendered largely irrelevant.

Nuke journalism, as a precondition to the peculiarities of nuclearism as a modern political-cultural “universal,” invokes concerns related to media and democratic values precisely for this reason. In the short period of political sensationalism following the nuclear tests in India, we encountered a situation in which the otherwise “free” media of a democracy found too little time and too narrow range of choices in covering an event that hit it with an unprecedented speed and without prior notice. Additionally, the event carried with it an intrinsic patriotism for the national media per the state’s deliberate invocation codified in the enactment of the event itself—apart from the various statements promptly served upon the public by the state spokespersons immediately following it. It won’t be too much to claim, therefore, that nuke journalism was not much more than a sheer consequence of the nukes themselves: *much as the state wished it to be*. Given this situation, and given the utmost prior secrecy that the state maintained as of understandable military necessity, can we consider nuke journalism to have been a democratic exercise on the part of the Indian media?

The above question may appear too general to be legitimate in that one could point out a number of articles in the Indian newspapers that openly attacked the government for the tests. What is important, however, is to understand nuke journalism

as a temporary *formal* pre-occupation of the media with a state-event *prior to* accounting for (the variety of) its content. That the Indian media found itself with little choice other than to overwhelmingly preoccupy itself for weeks with a surprise state announcement—at the expense of other socially significant events—is on its own a pointer to a temporary lapse in the democracy of news coverage implicitly engineered by the state itself. There is reason to argue that the national media automatically fell short of its *reporting* function in the strictly democratic sense insofar it was the state that assumed that role in the main from the beginning.

In addition, it is my contention that while a nation's media may carry news analyses and opinion articles critical of the ruling regime, its democratic outreach or role is better judged based on the “matter-of-fact” reports and the editorials. This is because it is the reports and editorials that best reflect a newspaper's normative notions regarding newsworthiness just as they affect the public most radically. News-reports tend to be most effective owing to their implicit “objectivity” and sense of “direct public relevance,” while editorials for their earnest “self-positioning” and value judgments. Keeping that criterion in mind, it becomes clearer upon surveying Indian newspapers that the mainstream Indian media, both regional and national, duped itself through nuke journalism by confusing populism with democracy, techno-machoism with diplomacy, and physics with politics.

To come up with a few examples: the *Indian Express* exhorted the government to "Seize the Moment" in its editorial the day after the first series of explosions, maintaining that

the tests have...raised India to the level where it can look upon [the nuclear five] as its peers, and to see that its point of view gets a decent hearing. Now, at this turning point, the government must act with dispatch to capitalise on the event, or lose the initiative forever.¹⁹

The Hindu, the newspaper (and the publishing group) which should otherwise be duly credited for a number of well-informed articles radically challenging the logic behind conducting the nuclear tests, had nonetheless glowing praises to offer to the nuclear scientists as it cast the event in terms of nationalistic technological achievement and diplomacy in its editorial:

There is no question that the stunning mastery of technological sophistication and the demonstration of the world class versatility that went into the success of the three nuclear tests...are a matter of national pride. The dedicated group of atomic scientists...has won the gratitude of an entire nation for a history-making achievement that places India in the exclusive league of nuclear weapons powers. Yet amid the widespread celebration of India's daring act, it must be recognised that the diplomatic and strategic implications of this new strategic gambit are far-reaching. The decision to end decades of India's nuclear ambiguity would acquire far greater moral weight if it is consciously placed in a diplomatic context which categorically emphasises a more constructive approach within the region, even as it signals a willingness to do business with a non-proliferation regime that is not discriminatory.²⁰

Perhaps the most blatant example of the crisis of nuke journalism, however, was the *Times of India*, which lost no time in setting up on its internet site a catchy and colorful atom-shaped iconic link, titled "Nuclear India," dedicated exclusively to the coverage of *the* event. (Of course the link was temporary, quite like the state-bound nuke journalism.) This certain celebratory mood was shared by the majority of the media, much as it was flooded with government announcements, nuclear scientists' and politicians' interviews, and with the news related to the street-celebrations over the event.

The penetrating interpretative impact of nuclearism was also evident in the way the Indian media made its bid at defining *democracy* or *democratic* afresh in the wake of the tests. The cherished ideal of "total nuclear disarmament" —first *formally* proposed to the world community by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the late eighties—had to be quickly divorced from that of democracy as the Indian media asserted in as many ways the democracy behind the state's decision to challenge the elitism of the global nuclear club by going nuclear itself. The nuclear "universal" could not be edited, to put it in Nandy's words; on the contrary, the media had to tailor the long-cherished Indian norms of democracy and peace in supporting a more *democratic* distribution of nuclear power that the Indian tests had made possible, such seemed to have been the costs of domesticating a "true universal."

On another level of the meaning of *democratic*, it is important to note that after the government broke the news about the tests the Indian media, much like the masses in the streets, suddenly tended to speak in an elevated idiom generally and to throw in its lot with a conspicuously *globalized* view of the issues at hand. The editorial excerpts quoted above reveal this tendency quite clearly, and it is only reinforced if one looks at the media coverage of the tests at large. To use a pertinent analogy to illustrate this aspect of nuke journalism: quite in contrast to the "more traditional worm's-eye view of life on the ground" recommended by renowned ecologists Gadgil and Guha, the Indian media found itself perched, as it were, on to "the modern bird's-eye view of the satellite" while dealing with the nuclear blasts.²¹ So, the *Indian Express* crowed:

With the tests, India has graduated to a larger sphere of debate. Its stand on the nuclear issue should develop to a corresponding scale, beyond regional obsession.²²

The Indian newspapers generally failed to focus on the particularly local context of the entire test-operation, which included a completely unexpected, inconsiderate and forcible evacuation by the Indian army of ground zero villagers barely three hours before the blasts. Villagers from Khetolai, Dholiya, Loharki, Latmi, and Bhadriyo settlements were ordered to move "for their own safety" — they were *inaccurately* informed — "as the army was conducting artillery practice."²³ Evidently, the media did not consider this short-noticed, non-negotiable evacuation under-false-pretext in violation of the human rights of the local villagers: it was invariably explained away, on the margins of the event-reports, as part of the greatly successful *secret* operation pulled off by the government (apparently in defiance, and by making a fool, of the world-body, particularly of the CIA!). The Indian media certainly did not find the evacuation at all *as* newsworthy or worthy of focused editorials as the atomic blasts themselves which had, by the way, "caused a large mound of earth to rise into the air" creating "[a] thick blanket of dust [enveloping] nearby villages."²⁴ Incidentally, opinion-articles in the various publications also did not address the plight of the villagers in any focused manner.

Put in terms of Rajni Kothari's masterly articulation of the "dispensability thesis of democracy," we are safe to conclude that the Indian media, just like the state, inherently assumed the affected villagers to be "dispensable" members of the global

technological order.²⁵ Hence, nuclearism, as Nandy's "cultural universal," can appropriately be considered one of the most revealing mechanisms or moments of Kothari's "dispensability thesis of democracy" as it epitomizes the vision that seeks to provide—to the total exclusion of all humanist considerations—for the unhindered advance of technology that would integrate the world into a single unified world political economy.²⁶

That nuke journalism retained quite a touch of the celebratory—and certainly did not venture strongly enough on the local level to dampen the spirits in the post-Pokharan scenario—shows that the mainstream Indian media participated in nuclearism rather actively, falling short of its genuine democratic responsibility to inform the public accurately and let it share as passionately the sad social and environmental undercurrents behind this scientific-technological celebration. Not to be outclassed in this respect, the international media too focused almost entirely on the diplomatic and defense related concerns that the Pokharan blasts generated, thereby ignoring them as a social-environmental event with very local ecological repercussions. The rural and ill-informed evacuees, irrespective of their subsequent participation in the post-test jubilation themselves, remain "ecological refugees"—to use a Gadgil and Guha coinage—who suffered neglect or had to undergo a strange patriotic glorification at the hands of the Indian media.²⁷ In short, both national and international media inevitably became part of the global dynamics of nuclearism as they weighed the Indian nuclear tests predominantly for their military or strategic relevance.²⁸

The media's lack of interest in, or inability to engage with, the local repercussions of the tests was also evident on a different level: on the level of science. Rarely an Indian newspaper (or a foreign one for that matter) did an original, thorough probative coverage of the nuclear tests: such that would go deeper than the popular euphoria over the technological *achievement*. In fact, the media showed very little effort at developing a critical view of precisely the scientific aspect of the blasts at the local level of ecology. From the scientific angle the coverage remained restricted to the rather mundane information about the *type* and *strength* of the blasts handed down, in most if not all cases, from the Indian nuclear establishment itself. In other words, a very narrow scientific dimension of the tests—basically that relevant to military analysis and, in that

sense, to the achievement of the involved nuclear physicists—found space in the mainstream media.²⁹ Worse, as the sampled excerpts from the Indian newspaper editorials merely point to, the scientific information so received got couched in the rhetoric of nationalism, progress, security, and celebration through the journalistic enterprising—such were the political demands placed upon the national media by the nuclearism.

Accordingly, the Indian media, instead of probing, ended up airing the heroic proclamations of the nuclear scientists associated with the project, showing little concern for the average citizen whose knowledge of nuclear physics is generally confined to the marvelous and the spectacular. Through the pressing compulsion of showing commitment to the foreign policy of its home-state, nuke journalism automatically and inherently marginalized several other significant scientific aspects. On one level, the marginalization was of information regarding the impact of the nuclear tests on the health—both mental and physical—of the local population around the site of the blasts. A survey of Indian newspapers’ coverage of the event would normally reveal only brief incidental references to the odd health problems that villagers living close to ground-zero and their cattle suffered after the *first* Indian nuclear tests at Pokharan in 1974. Such references are not only eclipsed by the news related to the celebration of the recent blasts by residents of the very same rural settlements, they are also at best collected and presented almost as retrospective “heresy.” They occur as part of casual interviewing of the festive villagers that a few journalists did for their newspaper’s third or fourth page. (The nuclear establishment, on its part, has of course flatly denied any radiation leakage owing to the May 1998 tests.) But, on another level, it did not help that the site of the blasts was a desert, a geographical space that does not register easily *as a living ecology* in the mind of the urban or remote commoner.

More generally, however, nuke journalism’s crisis was perceptible in its passive acceptance and representation of the dominant and the visible since, far from attempting to seek women’s “off-the-street” opinions nation-wide, it projected the all-male street demonstrations welcoming the tests to be reflective of the people’s reception of the event at large. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the national media ignored almost entirely the shocking news of a second brutal gang-rape of one young woman in

Rajasthan—ironically the same state where the nukes were tested—and the subsequent large mass protests by women activists, that took place within days of the nuclear tests. (This reference may appear rather far-fetched in relation to the routine meaning of EC—but only as long as we are willing to ignore the fuller import of eco-feminists' idea of a sound social ecology.)

4. Conclusion?

To be brought to a point where a strong "media-activity" felt needed to be understood and analyzed as a *contingency* of a technological event is, in my view, fairly significant. For one, it tells us about the certain peculiarities of nuclear technology that lend it to particular political uses and status in the public sphere at the hands of powerful state establishments even when the technology is not quite *in use*. At the same time, the very same peculiarities remain strong enough across the globe to significantly affect a number of elements and human forces in their surroundings in a fairly uniform way just by the sheer fact of the technology's (inactive) existence. This point of eerie contact between (a) technology's universality and its societal determinism is something I have attempted to explore in this chapter. Within the context of this exploration, I also evolved a certain psychological view of (nuclear) technology which, I believe, will have applications for future analyses.

It is important to mention here that, instead of calling it an issue in "political economy" and dealing it accordingly, I chose to write about "nuclearism" as a political ecology. For the most part, this was intended to retain the sense of geography and environment that nuclear technology necessarily affects—both psychologically and materially. In addition, I felt that a typical political economy approach may run the risk of framing issues related to nuclear technology or nuclearism in terms of military, diplomacy, and economics—which is pretty much what I have accused the Indian media of doing. But to speak in terms of political ecology is to lay particular emphasis on the local communities and geographies affected in so many ways, and to see them as well as the overarching technology and politics as part of an interconnected human-natural ecology. This is relevant also because ecological movement has come to command a particularly broad base in India's non-establishment politics and, I am inclined to believe,

in politics globally. We were alerted to this fact early on by Rajni Kothari who, while eloquently articulating the quest for "a comprehensive democratic order," wrote:

The concern of the more creative and imaginative voices in the ecological movement is not simply to arrest the degradation of environment, but equally with issues like restoration of community life and dignity of women. It converges with the new thinking in the feminist movement which seeks to go beyond mere catching-up and making it to the level of the masculine world.³⁰

Given this orientation, I have attempted to show how the case at hand, although about a very particular technology in a given context, points to much larger issues in cultural politics under the thrust of global hierarchies and modernity. Even a cursory glance over the critical literature on nuclear issues is enough to suggest that secrecy, control, misinformation, aggression, and pervasive fear are the terms associated with nuclear establishments, especially with those serving military purposes. Unfortunately, what has not been paid enough attention to is that nuclearism is also one conclusive extremity of the *idea* of technological superiority that carries sufficient weight in the modern world-view of industrialism, development and scientism. The nuclear arms race in South Asia has a lot to do with the confluence of these broader universalistic ideologies—to which certain forces in the region have sold themselves rather hastily.

While I have presented and analyzed "nuclear journalism" as a by-product and political contingency of nuclearism, the phenomenon also points to the Indian media's complicity with the broad political vision and interests of the Indian state and other Indian élite as well as the bourgeoisie. To any alert media-watcher or news-analyst, it should be clear that the Indian media, especially at the national level, has invested remarkably little in rural journalism, community-oriented urban reporting, environmental news, and in the coverage of *domestic* science and technology issues— especially from a critical and participatory people's perspective. The media's lack of interest and specialization in the above areas puts it quite in harmony generally with the paternalistic, centripetal, and self-legitimizing "development" project of the state.

The English-language media, housed in the metropolitan centers, tends to traffic the flows of information—both from within and outside India—*toward* the upper-crust

state machinery and other educated urban élite located in those centers. The media does the above by both making the information intelligible and relevant to those sections of the society, and by making those sections intelligible and relevant to themselves: thereby generating exclusionary discourses overall. The non-English-language regional media, lacking the resources and well-trained personnel, often depends heavily on local political patronage and local élite on one hand; on the other hand, it must rely on government news agencies, the English-language Indian media, and international news agencies. The end-result is that the structure of information-flows caters much more significantly to the ruling needs of the ruling (un)official powers, instead of holding them accountable to the concerns of the larger population. What we have, then, is a persistent *toning-up* of information and news-worthiness and a public discourse complacent with the spectacular and the belligerent: in short, an info-sphere that is ultimately not very enterprising.

Specifically in terms of S&T news, I must observe that most news covered by the national dailies is not only not related to domestic research, but is also lifted from international news agencies' dispatches or various Western sources, often without regard to its local relevance, even intelligibility or application. The occasions on which the Indian media does bring some domestic S&T news to the fore, it rarely approaches it from the non-expert "local" viewpoints, or on the basis of its (lack of) relevance to the communities at large, or in consideration of whether the scientific or technological activity included any genuine *a priori* public input.

So, "nuke journalism" uncovers not only the Indian media's lack of preparedness for the powerful state-engineered nuke event, but also its entrenched practice of automatically excluding the usual "receiving ends" of such S&T adventures—Gadgil and Guha's "ecosystem people" and "ecological refugees"—from its critical purview. Therefore, while the Indian media may be "free," and the Indian state may well be a representative government, neither can be said to nurture much of a vision of a bottom-up participatory democracy and decision-making. On that count, I would like to ask the ilk of Bhabhas and Rushdies: What sorts of nationalism and narration might these forced ecological migrants have, and whether those sorts find any representation in their theoretical frameworks?³¹ On a different level, the discourse of EC should also ask itself whether it has any theoretical space—and, if yes, what—for the aforementioned groups

of human population? As for the communicative systems theory, such people might well be contributive of the most meaningless disturbances or noises that effectively translate into bottlenecks in the smooth operation of the world's social system.

“Nuke journalism,” in light of the above discussions, can therefore be generalized and understood as: a condition that allows a *democratic* nation-state to manipulate or misappropriate an otherwise independent (national) media for a duration through the engineering and staging of a spectacular technological event—without officially mandating or dictating anything. As a loose *idiom* of control, “nuke journalism” shows the way to several relatively under-explored points of communicative contact between nation-states and various national and international media outlets on the contemporary landscape of uneven (post)modernities. More relevant to the current project, the phenomenon serves to highlight the politics of absent, potential, and possible news narratives against occasional techno-nationalistic impulses: through the broad technological imperative of a zero-sum Modernity. Accordingly, I have noted with concern how the nuclear tests were received almost singularly as a defense or security issue, or at best as a political gimmick built upon a nationalistic scientific breakthrough, by both residents of India and the international community, and had rarely been understood or approached (and certainly not showcased) as an ecological sabotage amounting to an existential blackmail of both Indians and non-Indians.

Now, although I have critiqued and set aside the nuclear tests as a step toward a genuine democracy, it is not too difficult to see the connections between "democracy" and a poor nation's attempt at this radical form of technological display. The Indian nuclear display has been about asserting militarily, but also *scientifically* and *technologically*, just as it has been about gate-crashing into the privileged nuclear club: purportedly, though dubiously, to widen the global base of democracy. But there seems to be a more profound connection here to be understood: in terms of India's crude attempt to *be a modern* democracy in its strongly legitimated global-liberal form *despite* the continued and strong presence of its *traditional* cultural, religious, and ethnic plurality.

The democracy so sought is not a matter of gradual evolution from India's own pluralistic cultural and political traditions, nor of resolutely working on a

contemporaneous participatory model, but—to put it in the words of D. L. Sheth and Ashis Nandy—by abruptly connecting the nation's "present with the political vision of a future which is the present of the Western societies."³² With the time and passage necessary to arrive at mature indigenous forms of democracy denied by colonization, vulgar Westernization and modernization, India's nuclearization also offers itself to be understood as a national regime's imposition of a strong modern territorial integrity upon its traditional plurality. So, it is interesting to note that even as the "mass" impact of the blasts upon the Hindu-majority Indian public was to unify it against the evil *Islamic* Pakistan, there was also enough solace sought, and particular pride taken, by the very same public in the fact that the architect of the nuclear operation was a Muslim, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam.

Under these circumstances of multilateral pressures, global hierarchies, and will-to-modernity, elite "natural" science, it seems, would continue to evade itself as a reason of state, while the fundamentalist state would continue to evade its craving for control by taking recourse to "scientism." The future of the theory of EC would therefore depend on whether, and how, it could articulate ecologies through their evasive, clandestine acts of disappearance—behind rationalistic and macho facades and noises. The *nation-state* will be a critical point of attraction for such a theorization, alongside *technology*—and on the landscape of global *development*.

Notes

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¹ For an eloquent articulation of this thesis, see Ashis Nandy, *The Romance of the State: And the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics*, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2003.

² Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge: London & New York, 1990.

³ See "Armed Forces not consulted before Pokharan N-tests," *The Hindustan Times*, 24 October 1999. The report quotes retired Lieutenant General Eric A. Vas as saying: "This momentous decision was taken solely on the advice of clever scientists and bureaucrats

who lacked constitutional responsibility or accountability. The military chiefs had not been consulted about a matter which had far-reaching security consequences." Plans for the test are believed to have been known only to the Prime Minister, the defense minister George Fernandes, principal secretary to Prime Minister, Brajesh Mishra, political adviser Pramod Mahajan, scientific adviser to Prime Minister A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, and Atomic Energy Commission chief R. Chidambaram.

⁴ As former Prime Minister H. D. Deve Gowda's May 15, 1998-letter to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee states: "[The] scientists had approached two previous governments to continue the tests, once in 1995 and then in 1997 ... I was requested to make a decision to conduct fresh nuclear tests. I convinced the scientists that the time was not ripe." Quoted by T. Jayaram in "Of Science and Nuclear Weapons: A Scientist's Perspective," presented at the Delhi Convention Against Nuclear Weapons, June 9, 1998.

⁵ Ashis Nandy, "The Epidemic of Nuclearism: Clinical Profile of the Genocidal Mentality," *The Nuclear Debate: Ironies and Immoralities*, eds. Zia Mian and Ashis Nandy, Fellowship in South Asian Alternatives, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies: Colombo, 1998, p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ashis Nandy, "Introduction: Science as a Reason of State." *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity*, ed. Nandy. The United Nations University, Tokyo, Japan. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1-23.

⁸ A national poll conducted by the *Times of India* right after the blasts found that 91% of respondents approved of the tests. Qtd. in Madhusree Mukerjee's "Blast Fallout: The Antinuclear Movement takes off in South Asia," *Scientific American*, February 1999. The *communal* connotations of the tests are too well-known for me to regurgitate; to the curious reader the following sources will be useful among several others: Aijaz Ahmad, "The Hindutva Weapon," *Frontline*, 15: 11, May 23-June 5, 1998; Vinay Lal, "Coming out from Gandhi's Shadow," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1998; Gail Omvedt, "The Hindutva Bomb," *The Hindu*, June 20, 1998; and, Kalpana Sharma, "The Hindu Bomb," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 54: 4, July/August 1998.

⁹ See esp. Ajay Suri's news-report "High on Tests, Govt. warns Pakistan," *The Indian Express*, 19 May 1998.

¹⁰ Aijaz Ahmad, "The Hindutva Weapon," *Frontline*, 15: 11, May 23-June 5, 1998.

¹¹ See esp. Ibn Barraq, "The Islamic Bomb," *Secular Humanist Bulletin*, 14: 3 (Fall 1998).

¹² In his interview with Prabhu Chawla Prime Minister Vajpayee remarked: "Our nuclear scientists and engineers have done a splendid job and, naturally, the entire nation has risen to salute their professional excellence, discipline and patriotism. They have had the benefit of having been led in the past by great men like Homi Bhabha and Vikram Sarabhai. Also, we should not forget that a visionary like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru understood the importance of nuclear science and gave full personal support to the founding of a world-class nuclear establishment. All the prime ministers who followed him have continued to support India's indigenous research and development in the nuclear field. What we are doing today is to build the superstructure on that solid foundation." See "We have shown them we mean business," *India Today*, 25 May 1998.

¹³ Quoted by Partha S. Ghosh, "Bomb, Science, and the State." *The Hindu*, 9 June 1998.

¹⁴ See Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), and *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988), and "Reductionist Science as Epistemological Violence," Nandy (ed.), *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity*, The United Nations University, Tokyo, Japan, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁵ Also quoted by Vinay Lal, "Coming out from Gandhi's Shadow," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 1998.

¹⁶ *India Today*, 25 May 1998.

¹⁷ Lal, "Coming out from Gandhi's Shadow," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 1998.

¹⁸ Timothy W. Luke, "'Packaging' Chernobyl": The Manufacture of Meaning from a Transnational Ecological Disaster," in *Screens of Power: Ideology, Domination, and Resistance in Informational Society*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 181-204.

¹⁹ "Seize the Day," *The Indian Express*, 13 May 1998.

²⁰ "A High Stakes Gambit (Nuclear Test)," *The Hindu*, 13 May 1998.

²¹ Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 1-3.

²² "Seize the Day," *The Indian Express*, 13 May 1998.

²³ Christopher Kremmer, "Ground Zero Villagers evacuated just three hours before tests," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 May 1998.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Rajni Kothari, *State Against Democracy: In Search of a Humane Governance*, (New York: New Horizons Press, 1989. First published: Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1987), 4-5, 139-141.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁷ Gadgil and Guha, *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 4.

²⁸ The re-elected Indian government has attempted to underline the global relevance of the tests. External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh recently said that the 1998 tests were aimed at acquiring "strategic space and strategic autonomy" in the new world situation that had emerged after the end of the Cold War. See "Jaswant Singh promises to refer Rajiv issue to PM," *Deccan Herald*, 29 October 1999.

²⁹ There was attention paid to broader dimensions of the tests by non-mainstream Indian press, such as by the environmental magazine *Down to Earth*. See "The aftermath," *Down to Earth*, 7: 2, 15 June 1998.

³⁰ Rajni Kothari, *State Against Democracy: In Search of a Humane Governance*, (New York: New Horizons Press, 1989. First published: Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1987), 7.

³¹ In the case of Salman Rushdie, see his *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticisms, 1981-1991*, Granta Books: London, 1991.

³² D. L. Sheth and Ashis Nandy, "Introduction," *The Multiverse of Democracy: Essays in Honor of Rajni Kothari*, D. L. Sheth and Ashis Nandy (eds.) (New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London: Sage Publications, 1996), 14. See also, Itty Abraham, "Postcolonial Modernity: Building Atomic Reactors in India," *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb:*

Science, Secrecy, and the Postcolonial State, (London & New York: Zed Books, 1998), 69-112; Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999). For an exquisite characterization of the modern state see Bhikhu Parekh, "The Nature of the Modern State," Sheth and Nandy (eds.), *The Multiverse of Democracy: Essays in Honor of Rajni Kothari*, (New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London: Sage Publications, 1996), 27-49.