



## The South Asian Bomb

# Indefensible Acts: South Asian Dissenters Speak Out Despite the Risks

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Vocal and increasingly organized opponents to the development of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan are making their views known despite the intimidation of the governments and nationalistic pro-bomb groups. Polls show that large majorities of South Asians support possession of nuclear weapons, but prominent individuals, including scientists, physicians, military officers, and writers have condemned the recent nuclear tests and subsequent posturing. [M&GS 1998;5:86-91]

A group of academics opposed to the nuclear tests conducted by India on May 11 and 13, 1998 convened a meeting in Bangalore on May 19 to discuss the reasons for their opposition. The meeting was disrupted by members of a Hindu nationalist group, who shouted down the speakers and branded them as traitors until the police arrived to restore order. An editorial in the Deccan Herald the next day called the actions of the pro-nuclear Hindu Jagarana Vedike a “shameful” attempt to suppress democratic debate [1].

On June 3, 1998, while Pakistani law students rallied against nuclear weapons in Lahore, the Pakistan-India People’s Forum for Peace and Democracy held a press conference at the Holiday Inn in Islamabad to protest the nuclear tests that had been conducted by the governments of the two coun-

tries during the previous three weeks. The coalition of peace activists and human rights groups stated that “no justification exists on earth for either the initial tests by India or the retaliatory tests by Pakistan.” Twenty minutes into the press conference, as the participants tried to respond to hostile questions and epithets from local journalists, members of an extreme pro-government Islamic group stormed into the room, throwing chairs and punching the speakers.

A few days later, on the afternoon of June 10, more than 200 people assembled in a public square in Mumbai (Bombay) to protest the Indian government’s nuclear weapons tests at a desert site near Pokhran. This was the second demonstration by a group calling itself Anubam Virodhi Andolan (Movement Against Nuclear Weapons), but on this occasion the protesters were unable even to unfurl their banners or begin distributing leaflets before they were stopped by police, who arrested a dozen people and confiscated their signs and antinuclear literature.

Challenges to the pro-nuclear weapons policies of either India or Pakistan, in the wake of the nuclear tests this spring, have

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been called unpatriotic by both Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Pakistani government led by Prime Minister Mohammed Nawaz Sharif. The governments of both countries have claimed overwhelming popular support for their abrupt reversals of nuclear policy, and the media, both local and international, have obliged with stories, photos, and video of euphoric Indian and Pakistani citizens celebrating national entry into the nuclear club.<sup>1</sup> In the weeks and months since the tests, however, a number of vocal, influential, and angry voices have emerged in opposition to the development of nuclear weapons in South Asia. They are making their case at universities and on street corners, in newspaper and magazine columns and on the Internet, at home and in expatriate communities, and in cross-border coalitions. Their goal is to persuade the majority of their countrymen to reconsider their new-found enthusiasm for the "nuclear option."

### Condemnation With an Indian Voice

One of the most visible dissenters from the BJP's reversal of the decades-long moratorium on nuclear tests (India had not exploded a nuclear device since 1974 — its first and only nuclear test prior to the series in May 1998) is Arundhati Roy. Roy's award-winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, has made her a celebrity throughout India, and she is recognized as having brought respect to a country that conducted nuclear tests, at least in part, to gain the respect of the world. When Roy published an essay called "The End of Imagination" in the magazine *Frontline* in July, therefore, her withering condemnation of the pursuit of nuclear weapons was broadcast around the world.

"India's nuclear bomb is the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people," Roy wrote.

If only nuclear war was the kind of war in which countries battle countries, and men battle men. But it isn't. If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself [2].

According to Praful Bidwai, an Indian journalist who has written extensively on

1. *The Times of India* published an opinion poll shortly after the announcement of the nuclear tests, in which 91% of the respondents (more than 1,000 adults questioned in six of the country's largest cities, including Bombay, Calcutta and New Delhi) approved of the tests. The poll also showed that 82% supported the deployment of nuclear weapons.

nuclear issues for *Frontline*, a cross section of India's population has begun to respond negatively to the BJP government's nuclear policies. "The Left has taken a principled stand opposing nuclearization. Large chunks of the political center have demarcated themselves from the BJP. At least three former Prime Ministers have questioned the decision, or expressed reservations about it," Bidwai wrote in June [3].

"There have been over 30 demonstrations and meetings in at least eight Indian cities, involving diverse groups of people such as scholars, scientists, social activists, human rights campaigners, feminists, trade unionists and environmentalists, besides political activists. Highly regarded former generals and admirals have joined this growing mobilization," Bidwai reported.

A new Indian organization, the Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament (MIND), emerged following the tests, with participation by journalists, academics, doctors, scientists, and other professionals. The English-language daily newspapers reflected a shift in opinion not long after the tests, with political parties on the left and a growing number of academics, professionals, and even officers in the Indian military expressing opposition to the BJP's nuclear policies. Most of the organized opposition to the tests has taken place in larger cities such as Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay), and has not been so visible in rural areas characterized by poverty, illiteracy, and lack of information.

According to journalist Achin Vanaik, "the general democratic character of the Indian political system makes it both easier and less risky to voice opposition, unlike in Pakistan where we hear...that matters are much more difficult" [4].

"The presence of prominent citizens voicing opposition, including 'establishment figures,' provides a measure of protection," Vanaik told *M&GS*. This greater openness, however, has not prevented the government from harrasing dissenters or questioning their patriotism.

Kamal Mitra Chenoy of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi said there is a consensus around the view that the CTBT and the NPT are discriminatory, supporting the nuclear weapons regime of the US and its allies at the expense of South Asia and all other countries that do not possess nuclear weapons. But he believes there is "considerable opposition" both to the BJP's nuclear tests and to the government's declaration that it will deploy nuclear weapons. "The polls that are cited to show overwhelming public support have an urban\upper class bias," Chenoy told *M&GS*, "as many of the respon-

### Support from Abroad

On 19 June, more than 100 Indians and Pakistanis living in other countries published an appeal in the newspapers *India Abroad* and *India West*, intended to mobilize public opinion against the tests and the further development of nuclear weapons on the subcontinent.

"Other than the danger of possible radioactive fallouts from such tests," they wrote, "we are deeply concerned that the poor citizens of India and Pakistan will have to bear the brunt of the massive expenses to build nuclear weapons...putting their already difficult lives in serious jeopardy."

More than 200 Pakistanis living in Pakistan, Europe, the U.S., and other countries, and representing a wide cross-section of professions, wrote an open letter to the prime ministers of both Pakistan and India on August 11 condemning the tests and calling them "an incalculable danger and threat to peace and stability in the region."

dents are polled over the phone. A significant number of scientists particularly in Bombay, Chennai (Madras), Bangalore, Delhi, and Calcutta have come out against the tests.... Prominent ex-military personnel...have opposed the weaponization program" [5].

Among those military leaders is retired Admiral L. Ramdas, the former Chief of the Indian Navy. In a speech delivered at a convention against nuclear weapons held in New Delhi on June 9 [see sidebar "So many things can fail..."], Admiral Ramdas, who is also vice-president of the India-Pakistan Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy, said:

The public must get to know the stark realities of the indefensible nature of arguments for possessing nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are no longer a deterrence. The time and space that we are confronted with —whether its China, Pakistan, or ourselves in the triad — is in minutes or in some cases, even less. A tactical nuclear missile takes...only seconds. Who will have the time to react, who will have the time to fire an anti-missile missile [6]?

A number of protests took place in India after the tests, providing platforms for dissenting voices:

- On May 14 the National Alliance of Peoples Movements (NAPM, India) condemned India's nuclear tests.
- On May 16 nearly 400 people

### *Making the Hiroshima Connection*

The anniversaries of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki approached soon after the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests, and opponents of nuclear weapons in both countries commemorated the victims of the bombings, focusing attention on the risks and consequences of the pursuit of nuclear weapons. The Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament (MIND) issued a statement on August 6 recalling "the instant destruction of 70,000 people in Hiroshima from a single atom bomb dropped by the U.S." and demanding that India and Pakistan "totally abandon the nuclear weaponisation program" and that the nuclear weapons states "adopt a total nuclear disarmament programme by the turn of the century."

Pakistani opponents of nuclear weapons published a statement marking the anniversary and criticizing the governments of both countries for "choosing a path that can lead only to mutual destruction....As those who are likely to die if the nuclear threat turns into nightmare, it is our right to be fully aware at this time of the human, environmental and economic costs of a nuclear weapons programme."

participated in a peace march in Delhi.

• At a conference on May 22 sponsored by students from the Hyderabad Central University, academics, human rights activists, journalists, and others condemned the tests and the fact that they had been conducted without a national debate.

• At a convention on June 9 in New Delhi, more than 400 participants, including professionals, military leaders, and politicians, raised the specter of a hate-fueled nuclear arms race on the subcontinent.

• The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, though it represents a very small minority in the mostly Hindu and Muslim country, reiterated a stand that the Catholic church has taken consistently since the height of the arms race between the US and the Soviet Union. In a statement released on June 11 in New Delhi, the governing body of the bishops made "a fervent plea for urgent and universal disarmament." They called on both countries to deescalate tensions and to avoid diverting resources needed for "combating poverty, for waging war on hunger and disease, and for empowering the people through education, shelter and a respect for their human rights," into a costly and dangerous nuclear arms race.

• Prominent Indian environmentalists reacted immediately to the news of the country's nuclear blasts. "An eye for an eye winds up making the whole world blind," Bombay environmentalist Bittu Sehgal told the Pakistani newspaper *The Dawn* [7]. Dr Vandana Shiva, a winner of the "Right Livelihood" award (a kind of alternative Nobel prize), said: "This is not an appropriate response in any ecological sense" [7]. She said that India's real national security was being eroded by damage to the country's biodiversity and the undermining of its food security.

### **Resisting the Pressures to Remain Silent in Pakistan**

Despite the imposition of a state of emergency, during which no political gatherings or political activity were to be allowed, more than 300 people attended a rally in Lahore on June 19 condemning nuclear arms and a South Asian nuclear arms race. Participants included representatives of trade

unions, human rights and womens rights organizations, teachers, economists, lawyers, theater groups and children's rights organizations.

"There are people who accuse dissenters of being traitors," wrote Pakistani journalist Beena Sarwar soon after the tests were conducted, "not just to the nation but to its ideology—Islam, which makes [dissent] very dangerous" [8].

The pressures to remain silent, however, have not prevented opponents of nuclear weapons in Pakistan from speaking out against the tests and against the prospects of a South Asian nuclear arms race. Dissenters are in a minority, but they expect their position to gain ground as people in both India and Pakistan come to understand the true military, social, and environmental costs of the nuclear status they have embraced.

Following the Indian tests, but prior to the Pakistani tests, according to Sarwar, most English language newspapers in Pakistan provided roughly equal space to those arguing for and against nuclear testing, while opinions expressed in the Urdu press, for the most part, were pro-testing.

The news editor of *The Friday Times*, Ejaz Haider, wrote in his paper, "As a recognised threshold nuclear power state with demonstrated missile capabilities, Pakistan's security can be reasonably assured without testing a nuclear device" [9]. A sampling of opinion among readers of *The News* (Lahore) and published on May 18 indicated "an overwhelming concern for Pakistan not to retaliate to India's nuclear tests by conducting one of its own," the editors reported [10]. Among the respondents were 18 retired army officers, all of whom opposed a Pakistani test.

While Pakistani nationalists were urging one course of action in response to the Indian tests, those opposed to the pursuit of nuclear arms drew a different kind of lesson from what had occurred at Pokhran. Defense analyst Eqbal Ahmad wrote that the leaders of the BJP government:

view nuclear weapons as a permit to the club in which India does not belong, and should not enter with a population of half a billion illiterate and four hundred million undernourished citizens...That in 1998 India's leaders still view the possession of nuclear weapons as a necessary element to gain recognition as a world power, speaks volumes about their intellectual poverty and mediocre, bureaucratic outlook [11].

Ahmad advised Pakistan "do not panic, and do not behave reactively." "Pakistan...must resist falling into the trap of seeking strategic equivalence with India."

"The people of Pakistan will survive if a nuclear weapon is not tested," said physicist Zia Mian in an op-ed article published by *The News* just before the Pakistani tests. "The alternative for them is stark. It is they who will go hungry when there is no money to pay for the massive yearly imports of wheat" [12].

Former finance minister Dr Mubashir Hasan, issued a press statement in which he argued that "a bomb that cannot be used should not be made" [13].

The post-test euphoria seen in the media following the Pakistani tests on May 28 covered over the dissenting voices in that country, but only temporarily. Most supporters of the small antinuclear movement, sensing that a nuclear war between India and Pakistan was now a real concern, seemed to shift their attention to efforts to defuse the tensions created by the tests, rather than issuing direct challenges to the testing itself. A number of events took place soon after the tests.

• More than 200 Pakistani intellectuals and activists signed a declaration rejecting the rationalizations offered by the governments of both countries. "We believe there can be no

### "So many things can fail..."

[Editor's note: The following remarks are excerpted from a speech by retired **Admiral L. Ramdas**, the former chief of the Indian Navy, to a convention against nuclear weapons held in New Delhi on 9 June, 1998. The entire speech is available on the South Asians Against Nukes website, at [/www.mnet.fr/aiindex/NoNukes.html](http://www.mnet.fr/aiindex/NoNukes.html).]

Once you cross over the threshold of nuclear weapons, there are so many things that can fail, that can mislead you, that can take you into disaster....The whole concept of nuclear warfare and the havoc it can create has not been well understood.

Who has thought about the command and control systems?...These systems are highly expensive. Therefore, this will lead to cuts in social programs—health, education, and so on. ...Economically it's going set us back, militarily it has not helped us one bit.

...The public must get to know the stark realities of the indefensible nature of arguments for possessing nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons are no longer a deterrence. The time and space that we are confronted with...is in minutes or in some cases, even less. A tactical nuclear missile takes...only seconds. Who will have the time to react, who will have the time to fire an anti-missile missile? ...[W]hoever is in charge will have 50 or 60 seconds to determine whether the missile is carrying flowers, bouquets, greeting from Pakistan, or a nuclear warhead. So he will press the button as nobody can take the chance. Even if we sign a no-first use agreement, on both sides of the border we have people who are irresponsible enough to start a war. With no safeguards and no fail safe mechanism in the command and control system, with people in power who are all gung-ho, before we know it we will have a nuclear war. And we can not limit it to tactical nuclear weapons—this will rapidly escalate to a

justification for any state to engage in activities that allow it to design, develop, test, and maintain nuclear weapons since these are fundamentally weapons of terror and mass destruction. These weapons are repugnant to civilized society," they stated. "The only acceptable solution to the threats posed by existing nuclear weapons is not more nuclear weapons but the abolition of all such weapons."

• On June 11 in Lahore, a "joint action committee" comprising some 20 NGOs and more than 200 Pakistani trade unionists, representatives of human rights and womens rights organizations, former government officials, teachers, economists, and lawyers condemned nuclear arms and the emerging nuclear arms race in the region, calling the actions of both the Indian and the Pakistani governments "fanatical." The committee expressed concern about the lack of awareness regarding the horrors of a nuclear war and the environmental impacts of nuclear tests.

### From "The End of Imagination" by Arundhati Roy

If only, if only nuclear war was just another kind of war. If only it was about the usual things—nations and territories, gods and histories. If only those of us who dread it are worthless moral cowards who are not prepared to die in defence of our beliefs. If only nuclear war was the kind of war in which countries battle countries, and men battle men. But it isn't. If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself.

Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day—only interminable night.

What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe?...

All I can say to every man, woman and sentient child in India, and over there, just a little way away in Pakistan, is: take it personally. Whoever you are - Hindu, Muslim, urban, agrarian - it doesn't matter. The only good thing about nuclear war is that it is the single most egalitarian idea that man has ever had. On the day of reckoning, you will not be asked to present your credentials. The devastation will be indiscriminate. The bomb isn't in your backyard. It's in your body. And mine. Nobody, no nation, no government, no man, no god has the right to put it there. We're radioactive already, and the war hasn't even begun. So stand up and say something. Never mind if it's been said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally.

• On July 20 a newly formed Pakistani Coalition for Non-Proliferation (CNFP) called on the Sharif government to sign the CTBT immediately, to pledge that it would not deploy nuclear weapons, to join talks on a fissile material cut off treaty (FMCT), and to take other steps to prevent either a nuclear or a conventional arms race in South Asia.

Having failed to persuade the government to refrain from testing, Eqbal Ahmed wrote a plaintive commentary following the announcement of the Pakistani tests:

"The leaders of India and Pakistan have now appropriated to themselves, as others had done before, the power that was God's alone to kill mountains, make the earth quake, bring the sea to boil, and destroy humanity. I hope that when the muscle flexing and cheering is over they will go on a retreat, and reflect on how they should bear this awesome responsibility" [14].

### The Familiar Face of Antinuclear Protest

What forms will opposition to nuclear weapons take in the region in the future? Given the fact that large majorities in both countries have expressed support for their governments' hot pursuit of nuclear capabilities, public education about the risks and consequences of nuclear weapons may be as essential in South Asia now as it was in the US and the Soviet Union in the early 1980s. Any demands that India and Pakistan stand down from a nuclear arms race, however, will be embedded in equally vocal demands that the existing nuclear weapons states take their own disarmament obligations seriously.

Plans discussed at a meeting of the Joint Action Committee for Peoples Rights in Lahore on 26 August suggest that an organized education effort, despite cultural variances, may look very familiar to those in the west who have been engaged in similar work for nearly two decades. The minutes of that meeting included the following ideas:

It was decided to continue the peace offensive through film showings...videos could be shown at public forums...putting up posters in shops was discussed...car stickers designed...gas balloons with messages attached could be released...it could be effective to organise several groups of 5-6 people to stand at several street corners with leaflet[s] and target passers-by...JAC could organise a peace art competition.

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### A Beautiful Day

Over head, the blue is radiant  
Day is light.  
Clear skies reflect transparent waters  
A Good day.

Over head, the few clouds color nacreous apparitions in the blue.  
Visages of well being are carried, ephemeral.  
Chimera, chimera, chimera.  
A fine day.

Over head attributes of man bring silent portents, luminescent.  
The Indus reflects another day not yet seen in these parts.  
Its banks silt murky tides from both sides.  
No nepanthe these reflections bring.

Over head the wafture of clouds do not tell yet of Himalayan winds.  
What weather they will bring the day after tomorrow when the neap tides give way to more roiling exchange.

Over head those ancient winds still circulate bringing tides of civilization.  
The Bay of Bengal is not the only mother of the storm, whose tempest winds may sweep across the land,  
perhaps scoured one fine day by the essence of a sun not in nature's caldron maintained.  
Nature's harmony did, by will, unbend in that maternal triangle of river origin, spawning eddies,  
more tenebrious near Babylon's gardens' wash, precarious in the Arab Sea.

Over head that fateful eastern wind  
settles a faucous score,  
a vindication deemed,  
a fusil panoply for  
an inane covenant  
not  
of  
Abraham's corban.

Over head, one fine day, blue skies may  
convey what heavy waters can no longer contain  
invisibly  
reversibly  
in vainglorious array  
the primordial matter of a,b,c

gamma

beta

alpha

— a.c.samuels  
29 May, 1998