

The search for a scientific temper: nuclear technology and the ambivalence of India's postcolonial modernity

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Abstract. This article examines the relationship between India's nuclear programme and its postcolonial identity. In particular, I argue that making sense of the anomalies and contradictions of India's nuclear behaviour, such as the gap of two decades between its nuclear tests, its promotion of nuclear disarmament and its failure to sign non-proliferation and test-ban treaties requires an understanding of the racially gendered construction of India's postcolonial modernity and the central roles given to science and morality within it. I suggest that India's postcolonial identity is anchored in anticolonial discourses that are deeply ambivalent toward what was viewed as a Western modernity that could provide material betterment but was also potentially destructive. What was desired was a better modernity that took into account what was believed to be Indian civilisation's greater propensity toward ethical and moral conduct. India's nuclear policies, such as its pursuit of nuclear technology and its promotion of disarmament cannot be seen in isolation from the successes and failures of this broader project of fashioning an ethical modernity.

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Introduction

In 1996, the Indian government submitted a Memorial to the International Court of Justice in which it concluded that the theory of nuclear deterrence was 'abhorrent' since it was 'dependent on the threat of horrific indiscriminate destruction', that the use of nuclear weapons in a first attack or as retaliation would be illegal under international law and that, if this is the case then, as with biological and chemical weapons, the manufacture of nuclear weapons itself must be considered illegal.¹ Yet, just two years later India conducted nuclear tests and declared itself a nuclear weapons state. In March 2006 India reached an agreement on civil nuclear energy cooperation with the US which, in the words of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, 'offered the possibility of decades-old restrictions being

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¹ Government of India, 'The Indian Memorial Submitted to the International Court of Justice on Status of Nuclear Weapons in International Law', *Seminar* 468 (1998), pp. 72–4.

set aside to create space for India's emergence as a full member of a new nuclear world order'.² On the same day, however, Jayant Prasad, India's Permanent Representative at the Conference on Disarmament was reiterating India's belief that the 'very existence of nuclear weapons, and of their possible use or threat of their use, poses a threat to humanity' and that it 'remained committed to the goal of a nuclear-weapon free world, to be achieved through global, verifiable and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament'.³ Later that year India put forth a set of proposals in the UN General Assembly to further the elimination of nuclear weapons. As these two examples illustrate, India has an ambivalent, contradictory relationship with nuclear technology. It would be easy to dismiss India's advocacy of disarmament as a superficial mask for its realpolitik pursuit of nuclear weapons if disarmament were not such a long-standing and consistent feature of India's foreign policy discourse that governments of all hues have upheld. Even now, as we saw above, when India believes it is on the cusp of being recognised as a nuclear weapons state it still feels obliged to engage in a discourse of disarmament that reiterates a self-image of morality and ethical conduct.

In this article I analyse India's nuclear programme not as an inexorable march toward weaponisation but as a key component of India's postcolonial identity. I argue that taking India's disarmament discourse seriously reveals the ambivalent, and ambiguously gendered, nature of India's postcolonial identity. This ambivalence and ambiguity stems from the need to critique Western modernity and its attendant politics of masculinity while accepting the charge that India's failure to become modern was the reason for it succumbing to colonial rule. In this understanding of India's past, the inability to develop a scientific outlook was a civilisational 'lack' that led to its failure to reach the standard of civilisation set by Europe and, eventually, its subjugation by Britain. In this context, nuclear technology took on a special significance as an explicit example of both the promise and the threat of Western modernity. It promised to instil in India what Nehru referred to as a 'scientific temper' and provide a cheap source of power for India's economic development. Yet, because the nationalist critique of the destructive nature of Western modernity constitutes a vital part of India's postcolonial identity the outright adoption of a technology with an established record for having the potential to unleash an unprecedented level of devastation was untenable. The discourse of disarmament is an attempt to resolve this dilemma by recourse to India's moral strength, which is seen as the innate attribute of an Indian civilisation gendered as feminine and the basis of its postcolonial difference.

By examining India's nuclear discourse as an enactment of its postcolonial identity it becomes possible to explain some of the anomalies in India's nuclear behaviour such as the twenty-four year gap between its nuclear tests and its remarkably consistent and prominent advocacy of nuclear disarmament. Scholars who have attempted 'realist' explanations for India's decision to nuclearise in May 1998 have cited the security threats, both real and perceived, posed by Pakistan

² Manmohan Singh, 'Suo-motu Statement on Civil Nuclear Energy Cooperation with the US', *Hindu* (2006), {<http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/nic/suomotuu.htm>} accessed on 2 May 2006.

³ Jayant Prasad, 'Statement by Mr Jayant Prasad, Permanent Representative of India, at the Conference on Disarmament on nuclear disarmament', Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2006), {<http://www.mea.gov.in>} accessed on 10 May 2006.

and China.⁴ However, the tests were conducted at a time when India-China relations had been steadily improving and given the reactive nature of Pakistan's military policy, there is little to support the argument that Pakistan would have acquired nuclear weapons regardless of whether India had exercised the nuclear option and therefore posed a threat that had to be pre-empted. Moreover, India's nuclearisation was bound to provoke Pakistan into nuclearising, thus making India's edge in conventional forces irrelevant.

Others have sought to explain India's nuclearisation on account of the character of the Hindu nationalist-led coalition government that made the decision to nuclearise.⁵ Indeed, the tests were very much in keeping with the aggressively modernising facet of Hindu nationalism that advocates the creation of a militaristic Indian state. However, as we shall see, it was a Congress government that first breathed life into India's nuclear weapons programme and it was a Congress leader that gave the go-ahead for India's first nuclear test in 1974. Thus, explaining India's decision to nuclearise must go beyond both a strategic rationale and party political ideology and take into account the broader historical and contemporary context that allowed and encouraged the Indian government to undertake this step.

I suggest here that understanding India's nuclear policies requires an analysis of the racially gendered construction of India's postcolonial modernity and the central role given to science within it. In doing so, this article seeks to contribute to a growing body of literature which brings postcolonial studies into dialogue with IR to draw attention to the latter's deep and limiting Eurocentrism and its failure to confront the colonial system and its legacies, of which contemporary state actors are products.⁶ Conventional constructivist approaches to understanding the link between identity and foreign policy assume that state behaviour is shaped by certain pre-existing 'basic interests' and sets of social rules which are the result of the dominance of a particular shared meaning system that has narrowed the ways in which actors understand the world.⁷ In contrast, I highlight the importance of a postcolonial reading of state identity and foreign policy that is sensitive to a state's cultural and historical embeddedness.

While several scholars have utilised postcolonial theory to analyse India's nuclear policies, these engagements have generally not encompassed an examination of the crucial race and gender codings that constitute India's postcolonial identity or an analysis of India's position on disarmament.⁸ Moreover, in suggesting that the 'material' domain of foreign policy has been a key postcolonial

⁴ J. Mohan Malik, 'India Goes Nuclear: Rationale, Benefits, Cost, and Implications', *Contemporary South Asia*, 20 (1998); C. Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Making of India's New Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁵ Achin Vanaik, 'Making India Strong: The BJP-Led Government's Foreign Policy Perspectives', *South Asia*, 25 (2002).

⁶ See Phillip Darby (ed.), *Postcolonizing the International: Working to Change the Way We Are* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair (eds), *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender and Class* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁷ See Ron Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter Katzenstein, 'Norms, Identity and Culture in National Security', in Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁸ Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy and the Postcolonial State* (London & New York: Zed Books, 1998); Shampa Biswas, "'Nuclear Apartheid' as Political Position: Race as a Postcolonial Resource?", *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 26:4 (2001), pp. 485–521; Himadeep Muppidi, *The Politics of the Global* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

site where India's difference has been enacted, the article argues against Partha Chatterjee's influential account of Indian nationalism as being built upon a split between an inner, feminine, 'spiritual' realm – in which the West was considered inferior to India – and an outer, masculine, 'material' domain – where nationalist leaders sought to erase cultural difference by mimicking the superior West.⁹ Instead, I argue that India's mimicry of Western modernity was far more critical, and the distinction between the inner and outer spheres much less clear, than Chatterjee suggests.

To begin I take as my point of departure a comment from Bal Thackeray, the leader of the militant Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena party, who declared his support for the 1998 tests on the grounds that 'we have to prove that we are not eunuchs'.¹⁰ I will then look at the importance given to nuclear energy by the postcolonial state and examine India's foreign policy discourse on nuclear weapons and nuclear disarmament as an enactment of India's postcolonial identity.

Science, violence and Indian civilisation

By invoking the figure of the eunuch to describe India's pre-nuclear character, Thackeray was drawing on what Ashis Nandy calls the 'language of the homology between sexual and political dominance' that saturated colonial discourse from the middle of the 19th century.¹¹ This discourse constructed a gendered and racialised hierarchy of effeminated, non-white Indians against masculine, white Europeans. Since masculinity has been constructed as a cornerstone of modernity and white Europeans were thought to be at the pinnacle of modernity, the pathologising of the Indian male as effeminate, due to both mental and physical weakness, became an integral part of the ideology of the British civilising mission and was used extensively in nineteenth and twentieth century writings on India.

Colonial masculinity and native effeminacy

According to James Mill, for instance, the Hindu 'possessed a feminine softness both in their persons and in their address' and 'like the Eunuch, excels in the qualities of a slave'.¹² Mill admitted the existence of Indian scientific learning only to dismiss it because, according to him, Indians had cultivated their understanding of the astronomical and mathematical sciences '[. . .] exclusively for the purposes of astrology; one of the most irrational of all imaginable pursuits; and one of those

Press, 2004); Latha Varadarajan, 'Constructivism, Identity and Neoliberal (in)Security', *Review of International Studies*, 30:3 (2004), pp. 319–341.

⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁰ CNN, 'Indian nuclear test sparks concerns of arms race', CNN (12 May 1998), {<http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/asiapcf/9805/12/india.nuclear.on/>}; accessed 27 October 2005.

¹¹ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹² James Mill, *The History of British India*, vol. 2, 4th edition (London: James Madden, 1848), pp. 465, 517.

which most infallibly denote a nation barbarous [...]'.¹³ Likewise, for Thomas Macaulay 'there never perhaps existed a people so thoroughly fitted for a foreign yoke' because, 'the physical organisation of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy'.¹⁴ Moreover, 'His mind bears a singular analogy to his body. It is weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance [...]'.¹⁵

While all Hindu men were thought to show signs of effeminacy, by the 19th century the label came to be applied most often to the men of Bengal – the capital of British India and the site of the most extensive contact between the British and the 'natives'. The elite, Hindu, Western-educated Bengali man was set apart from both the manly Englishman and the so-called 'martial' races, such as the Gurkhas and the Marathas. The martial race theory – the notion that some communities are biologically and culturally fitted to military occupations – emerged at a time when colonial rule was under aggressive challenge by the same section of the middle class population that had once mediated between the British colonial administration and the wider Indian population.

The martial race theory gained credence from its association with 19th century 'scientific' theories of race, which were initially based on language and then replaced by biology. Colonial administrator and anthropologist Herbert Risley did the most to apply the 'scientific methods' of the time – anthropometry and craniology – to build a race-based ethnography of Indian society. Risley was particularly concerned with aligning race with caste which, for him, reflected the effeminate nature of the 'Indian intellect' with its lax hold of facts, its indifference to action, its absorption in dreams [...] and its remarkable capacity for imitating and adapting social ideas and usages of whatever origin.¹⁶

As Homi Bhabha¹⁷ has suggested, however, the effeminate Indian 'mimic man' was a trope that was deeply unsettling to the colonial imagination in its ability to transgress gender roles and, in its 'capacity for imitating', to threaten the boundary between coloniser and colonised. As we shall see, it was this element of threat that some Indian nationalists tried to exploit in their engagement with the trope of effeminacy.

Reclaiming martial valour and rediscovering Hindu science

The colonial construct of the effeminate Bengali was a product of what Nandy calls the hyper-masculinity of British culture during the colonial period – a culture that:

de-emphasized speculation, intellection and *caritas* as feminine, and justified a limited cultural role for women – and femininity [...] It openly sanctified – in the name of such values as competition, achievement, control and productivity – new forms of institutionalized violence and ruthless social Darwinism.¹⁸

¹³ Mill, *The History of British India*, p. 150.

¹⁴ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays, Contributed to the Edinburgh Review* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1870), pp. 517, 611.

¹⁵ Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays, Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, p. 611.

¹⁶ Herbert Hope Risley, *The People of India* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1999), pp. 275–6.

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817', *Critical Inquiry*, 12:1 (1985), pp. 144–65.

¹⁸ Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, p. 32.

Bengali leaders did not so much refute the charge of effeminacy as internalise it and try to find ways to overcome it by resorting to a hyper-masculinity of their own – hyper-Kshatriyahood – an exaggeration of a sub-tradition of Indian masculinity that emphasised martial valour.¹⁹ As Sinha and Nandy have argued, however, this critique of colonial policies had little to offer by way of a radical challenge to colonial rule for it was thoroughly invested in the politics of colonial masculinity.²⁰

As we have seen, the politics of colonial masculinity was legitimised through the authority of science. It was also the cultural authority invested in science as a vehicle of freedom, power and progress that was behind the drive to ‘rediscover’ an indigenous ‘Hindu science’ – a movement that I argue should also be seen as a response to the labelling of Hindu men as effeminate. The middle of the 19th century saw the emergence of a number of organisations run by Western-educated, upper-caste Indian men aimed at encouraging the development of a scientific culture. By the late 19th century the push for a scientific disposition became widespread in the emerging middle class culture centred on Hindi language and literature and religious revivalism in north India. Key to this was the re-examination of ancient Indian texts and traditions – now identified as ‘Hindu’ – with the goal of finding within them a body of indigenous scientific knowledge. Showing ancient texts like the *Vedas* to be scientific provided proof of Indian civilisation’s basis in universal, timeless laws. As Prakash argues, ‘Hindu’ texts could be ‘projected as the basis for a unitary modern community of Indians, while the contemporary division of Indians into different religions, sects and cults could be seen as corruptions introduced by the passage of time’.²¹ Hence, Hindu science gave Indian civilisation an ontological unity that was crucial for justifying nationalist claims to independent, modern nationhood.

Gandhian nationalism and maternal moral strength

Not all nationalists, however, subscribed to the politics of colonial masculinity. Under the influence of Gandhian movements in the 1920s the charge of effeminacy against Indian men took on a new and disruptive meaning. Gandhi sought to separate courage and activism from aggression by recognising its compatibility with strong femininity, which he associated with motherhood. This was a move that contained truly radical potential to disrupt the authority of colonial rule. In associating courage with femininity Gandhi was building on his idea of non-violence and drawing on a cultural tradition inspired by the Bhakti religious tradition which emphasised positive androgyny and dynamic womanhood to articulate an alternative model of masculinity.²² Thus, as Krishnaswamy suggests, the notion of the effeminate Indian man was not just a false, colonial stereotype but a ‘misvalued and distorted recognition of something real in Indian culture’.²³

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94; Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, pp. 8–11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²² Krishnaswamy, *Effeminism*, p. 45.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Similarly, Nandy argues that by preserving something of India's 'androgynous cosmology and style' Gandhi was able to produce a 'transcultural protest against the hyper-masculine world view of colonialism'.²⁴ However, the androgyny that Gandhi extolled did not involve a transcendence of the gender dichotomy or an equal focus on both femininity and masculinity. Rather, he sought to give men access to an essentialised understanding of femininity that would liberate them from an activism wedded to violence and aggression.

Gandhi's understanding of femininity followed from his view that women possessed 'moral power' far in excess of men.²⁵ It was women, for Gandhi, who were most suited to his brand of non-violent resistance because they were 'the very embodiment of renunciation and compassion'.²⁶ A man, he argued, 'understands the dharma of non-violence through his intellect whereas a woman has imbibed it even before her birth'.²⁷ Given the superior qualities that Gandhi thought women embodied, he implored men to feminise themselves so as to gain the courage and moral strength that women possessed.²⁸ However, while he wrote in favour of the need for legal and social equality between men and women, Gandhi's focus was not primarily on changing gender roles or challenging gender stereotypes. Rather, he employed an essentialised notion of femininity which held the maternal woman to be the paragon of non-violence and morality to fashion a morally superior counter-model of Indian masculinity in which the feminine would be absorbed by the male. Thus, even though women and femininity had a major role to play in Gandhian nationalism, ultimately it was men (by embodying a maternal masculinity) who had the responsibility to redeem Indian civilisation since it was '[b]ecause the sons of India were found wanting, its civilization had been placed in jeopardy'.²⁹

Keeping science in its place

If Gandhi did not follow the early nationalists by seeking national regeneration through a hyper-masculine search for martial valour, he also departed from them in his attitude to scientific reason and modern technology. As Akeel Bilgrami has argued, for Gandhi, valuing reason above all else would hinder the achievement of non-violence because a technological frame of mind fosters an abstract view of the world and relies on an understanding of truth as cognitive rather than as lived, moral experience.³⁰

Yet a common misunderstanding, Gandhi noted, was that he was opposed to science whereas in fact he thought that 'we cannot live without science, if we keep

²⁴ Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, p. 48.

²⁵ M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 49 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1999), p. 57. (hereafter *CWMG*).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Richard G. Fox, 'Gandhi and Feminized Nationalism in India', in Brackette F. Williams (ed.), *Women Out of Place: The Gender of Agency and the Race of Nationality* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 42.

²⁹ M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1938), p. 39.

³⁰ M. K. Gandhi, *CWMG*, vol. 73, p. 63; Akeel Bilgrami, 'Gandhi, the Philosopher', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38:26 (2003), p. 4164.

it in its right place'.³¹ Keeping science in its right place meant a rejection of what Nandy calls 'scientism' and 'technicism', the former for its promotion of hard materialism and its reduction of human rationality to a narrow objectivity and objectivism and the latter for its instrumental use of technology and its hierarchisation of the relationship between nature and humans and between those that possess technology and those that do not.³² Instead, Gandhi promoted a plural vision of science and technology that did not privilege their modern forms and denounced any technology, including aspects of traditional technology – which he considered ethically and cognitively superior to modern technology – that were alienating or dehumanising.³³

It was for this reason that Gandhi condemned cotton mills and instead celebrated the *charka* or spinning wheel as a morally superior and non-dehumanising traditional technology that could be used to resist colonialism.³⁴ Given that he considered the spinning wheel an exemplary type of traditional technology and regarded spinning to be the natural domain of women, it could be argued that his understanding of ideal technology aligned it with the feminine and was thereby another key part of his radical challenge to the model of colonial masculinity.³⁵

The inevitability of science

Gandhi's views on science and technology won little sympathy from the man he anointed his political heir, Jawaharlal Nehru, who attached enormous significance to the 'scientific temper'. For him, '[t]he scientific temper points out the way along which man should travel. It is the temper of a free man'.³⁶ According to Nehru, Indian civilisation had abandoned scientific methods and rational inquiry for superstition and it was for this reason that it had been left behind. A mastery of modern science was therefore vital if India was to catch up with the West and successfully become modern.³⁷

Yet, Nehru's position was complicated by his status as a nationalist who could not advance an outright mimicry of the colonial oppressor he was trying to cast out. India, he wrote, today 'swings between a blind adherence to her old customs and slavish imitation of foreign ways', but, '[. . .] there can be no real cultural or spiritual growth based on imitation'.³⁸ Thus, while he thought Gandhi's criticisms of 'modern civilization' to be 'completely unreal' he agreed that a large part of the world 'appears to be bent on committing suicide' and that this may be 'an

³¹ M. K. Gandhi, 'Science and Civilization', in Raghavan Iyer (ed.) *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 310.

³² Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 136.

³³ Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias*, pp. 137–8, 60.

³⁴ M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, pp. 93–5.

³⁵ M. K. Gandhi, *CWMG*, vol. 49, p. 92.

³⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Calcutta: The Signet Press, 1946), p. 512.

³⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 28, 2nd series (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 2001), p. 31.

³⁸ Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 564.

inevitable development of an evil seed in civilization that has grown'.³⁹ Unlike Gandhi, Nehru did not identify modern science as being at the root of this 'evil' but he did critique it for ignoring 'the ultimate purposes' and looking 'at fact alone'.⁴⁰ He argued that for all science had achieved in building up a glittering civilisation 'there was some essential lack and some vital element was missing' for 'science had told us nothing about any purpose in life'.⁴¹ Moreover, he feared that man's inability to control himself would result in science running amok.⁴² Still, despite 'realising these limitations of reason and scientific method, we have to hold on to them with all our strength, for without that firm basis and background we can have no grip on any kind of truth or reality'.⁴³

He finally concluded that science itself was not at fault for its limitations. Rather, the problem was that 'the west is still far from having developed the real temper of science. It has still to bring the spirit and the flesh into creative harmony'. India, however, was uniquely placed to develop this 'real temper of science' because: '[...] the essential basis of Indian thought for ages past, though not its later manifestations, fits in with the scientific temper and approach, as well as with internationalism'.⁴⁴ Hence, he sought to draw on India's moral and cultural traditions to create a modern, scientific world-view that was distinctly Indian. This, was a significant departure from Gandhi who subordinated science and technology within a traditional world-view that promoted an alternative model of masculinity in which the feminine was a source of moral power. Nehru, in contrast, was too desperate to hold on to modern notions of reason and science to be in a position to seriously challenge the colonial ideology of progress or its attendant politics of masculinity.

As a consequence, he displayed a profound ambivalence toward the feminine, as can be seen in his treatment of the gendered figure of Mother India in his writings. Following an earlier generation of Indian nationalists, Nehru's writings on India were explicitly gendered and depicted India as a mother – *Bharat Mata* or Mother India. Initially, in his *Autobiography*, Nehru invokes an image of Mother India as a victim: 'woeful accumulations of superstition and degrading custom' had 'borne her down'.⁴⁵ In his later *The Discovery of India* an anxiety emerges that she is not so much a victim as an unruly woman who refuses to be tamed by modernity:

About her there is the elusive quality of a legend of long ago; some enchantment seems to have held her mind [...] There are terrifying glimpses of dark corridors which seem to lead back to primeval night, but also there is the fullness and warmth of the day about her. Shameful and repellent she is occasionally, perverse and obstinate, sometimes even a little hysteric, this lady with a past.⁴⁶

³⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 14, 1st series (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1981), p. 556.

⁴⁰ Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 511.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 511.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 512.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 514–5.

⁴⁵ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1980), p. 429.

⁴⁶ Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 563.

On the other hand, while Nehru's Mother India possessed some dangerous non-modern elements she was also the source of a wisdom that would prevent India's postcolonial modernity from going down the degenerative and violent path of Western modernity:

I was eager and anxious to give her the garb of modernity. And yet doubts arose within me [...] surely India could not have been what she undoubtedly was, and could not have continued a cultured existence for thousands of years, if she had not possessed something very vital and enduring, something that was worthwhile. What was this something?⁴⁷

Nehru never seemed to come to a conclusive answer as to the nature of this 'something', however, he seemed to come close when he later discussed the establishment of a 'certain idealist and ethical background to the whole culture' by the ancient 'Indo-Aryans' which 'persisted and still persists' and helped those 'at the top' to 'help together the social fabric and repeatedly rehabilitated it when it threatened to go to pieces'.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, he put it more poetically: '[b]ehind and within her battered body one could still glimpse a majesty of soul' and now as 'India puts on her new garment, as she must, for the old is torn and tattered, she will have it cut in this fashion, so as to make it conform both to present conditions and her old thought'.⁴⁹ Hence, 'Though her attire may change, she will continue as of old, and her store of wisdom will help her to hold on to what is true and beautiful and good in this harsh, vindictive, and grasping world'.⁵⁰

India's postcolonial identity thus emerges as a woman in drag – a mother that needed to be disciplined (by her best and brightest modern children) into wearing the distinctly masculine garb of modernity while retaining the moral, feminine spirit that is the guarantee that she does not lose her distinctly Indian identity and succumb to copying the hyper-masculine modernity of the West. For Nehru, although 'the West brings science' this does not mean that India must become Western to reap the benefits of science and technology.⁵¹ However, rather than follow his predecessors in trying to identify an indigenous scientific tradition for India, Nehru presented modern science as a neutral product of human history, devoid of ownership by any one particular group and available to all to use for their development. Science, then, was a tool with which to reconcile India to a modernity in which Europe was seen as the pinnacle of material development.

Ambivalence and the postcolonial condition

The adoption of a scientific outlook was central to India's project of postcolonial modernity but nuclear technology, in particular, was acclaimed as 'a symbol of the modern times'.⁵² Yet, Nehru's speeches also revealed apprehension about the uses of nuclear technology. For him, the struggle between the evil represented by the atom bomb and the 'spirit of humanity' was the defining conflict facing the modern

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁹ Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, p. 432.

⁵⁰ Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 563.

⁵¹ Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, p. 432.

⁵² Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 32:2 (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 2003), p. 40.

world. Still, as he made clear in a speech to the National Physical Laboratory in 1947, since ‘atomic energy is going to play a vast and dominating part [...] in the future shape of things’, this concern could not be allowed to hinder India’s pursuit of nuclear energy.⁵³

Thus, Nehru faced a dilemma. How could a potentially violent product of modernity be neutralised into a benign instrument of development for postcolonial India? How could the hyper-masculine garb of nuclear technology not weigh down Mother India and upset postcolonial India’s carefully crafted gender ambiguity – its maternal masculinity? Fortunately, he still had India’s civilisational heritage to fall back on. India would draw on this heritage – an ‘ancient belief’ in an ‘inner, spiritual strength’ – to use a potentially violent technology for peaceful purposes.⁵⁴ In a speech on non-violence and modern India in 1956, he noted that nuclear technology ‘can bring complete ruin upon the world or contribute to progress. It depends on how it is used. But more important, is ultimately the kind of human beings who will use it’.⁵⁵ An attempt to produce Indians as the ‘right kind of human beings’ to have nuclear technology was made in India’s foreign policy discourse through the strong advocacy of global nuclear disarmament, which was presented as the product of the ethical values inherent in India’s civilisational heritage.

Disarmament and discrimination

Together with the policy of non-alignment, disarmament constituted the basis of India’s immediate post-independence foreign policy. The two policies repudiated the notion that there were only two ways of behaving in the world, realist or idealist, communist or anti-communist, and were therefore key elements in India’s attempt to find an alternative way of discursively and practically constructing the international system and India’s place within it – one that (apparently) refused the constraints of Western frameworks. As we shall see however, as a performative enactment⁵⁶ of India’s postcolonial identity, India’s discourse of disarmament is, in fact, an ambivalent discourse that reveals the tension between India’s mimicry of, and resistance to, Western modernity.

Disarmament was vital to the success of non-alignment, and vice-versa, for it offered a way out of the ‘mental military bloc’ of the Cold War.⁵⁷ Nehru ridiculed the idea of nuclear deterrence and argued against the system of instrumental reason that underpinned it: ‘if we aim at right ends, right means must be employed. Good will not emerge out of evil methods. That was the lesson which our great leader Gandhi taught us [...]’.⁵⁸ In establishing India’s authority to moralise to the rest

⁵³ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 1, 2nd series (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1984), pp. 377–8.

⁵⁴ Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 32, p. 42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵⁶ Cynthia Weber, ‘Performative States’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 27:1 (1998), pp. 77–95.

⁵⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, *India’s Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches, September 1946–April 1961* (Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1961), p. 11.

⁵⁸ Government of India, *India and Disarmament: An Anthology of Selected Writings and Speeches* (New Delhi: External Publicity Division, 1988), pp. 75, 110.

of the world, Nehru was careful to note that he did not mean ‘to imply that people in India are more virtuous than others’.⁵⁹ However, ‘the capacity for big scale vice is not with them. And therefore, we can moralise more easily than others can’. India was among the first countries to propose the major non-proliferation regimes in existence today. Among Nehru’s initiatives was the ‘Standstill’ proposal of 1954 for the suspension of nuclear tests and shortly after his death in 1964, India with seven other non-aligned countries put forth a proposal for a nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).⁶⁰

On the other hand, while Nehru saw nuclear technology as a tool for fostering international cooperation and breaking down cultural, political and geographical barriers, he also feared that the restriction of nuclear technology could reinforce global hierarchies and endanger India’s future.⁶¹ In a speech in 1954 Nehru expressed unease over American proposals to establish an organisation for the ‘so-called international control’ of nuclear energy. He suspected that any such organisation would be dominated by certain countries ‘which have adequate power resources to restrain and restrict the use of atomic energy’ at the expense of ‘power-starved’ countries like India.⁶² By referring to the ‘so-called international control’ of nuclear energy Nehru was effectively raising questions about the notion of the ‘international community’ and the hierarchies that this concept conceals. Yet, when it came to disarmament, Nehru was willing to put aside concerns about double standards. In 1963, his government signed the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) which prohibited all types of nuclear testing except underground testing for even though it was aimed more at stopping the emergence of new nuclear powers rather than preventing vertical proliferation, Nehru viewed the signing of the PTBT in the context of his belief that it was possible to work toward disarmament through incremental normative change.

Nehru displayed considerable foresight in anticipating the rise of the discourse of non-proliferation which emphasised the control of nuclear technology rather than the elimination of nuclear weapons and came to dominate the issue of nuclear technology after 1964 – the year that China conducted its first nuclear test. Coming two years after the India-China war, China’s nuclear tests sparked a debate over whether India should seek out a nuclear umbrella or develop nuclear weapons of its own. The secretary of the Congress Party, K.C. Pant, for instance, urged the government in 1966 to follow China and give up its policy of ‘nuclear celibacy’.⁶³ Such a move would be in keeping with realist precepts which would suggest that the China’s nuclearisation would heighten India’s insecurity and lead it to seek out nuclear protection either from an ally or from a nuclear weapons programme of its own. Yet although there is evidence that Nehru’s successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, secretly broached the idea of seeking nuclear protection from the US, he ultimately stuck to the original disarmament script.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60–1.

⁶⁰ Government of India, *Disarmament: India’s Initiatives* (New Delhi: External Publicity Division, 1988).

⁶¹ Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 32, p. 204.

⁶² Government of India, ‘Statement by the Indian Atomic Energy Commission on Nuclear Explosion, May 18, 1974’, *Documents on Disarmament 1974* (Washington D.C.: US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1974), p. 146.

⁶³ Mirchandani, *India’s Nuclear Dilemma*, p. 48.

⁶⁴ Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb*, p. 125.

India's official response to the emerging discourse of non-proliferation came in the negotiations for the NPT. India refused to sign the treaty on the basis that it failed to seek a binding commitment from the five declared nuclear powers to complete disarmament, did not contain a clear ban on the use of nuclear weapons and lacked a specific clause for negotiations on a comprehensive test ban. Moreover, the Indian delegation argued: 'it is unwise to divide the world into a few "haves" and a lot of "have-nots", who would become dependent on the goodwill of the "haves" in regard to development in the vital area of nuclear energy, thereby making them subject to pressures'.⁶⁵ As V. C. Trivedi put it at the 1967 Eighteen Nation Disarmament Commission, the 'civil nuclear Powers can tolerate a nuclear weapon apartheid but not an atomic apartheid in their economic and peaceful development'.⁶⁶ The addition of the language of nuclear apartheid thus reveals India's disarmament discourse as a split discourse signifying the desire for both sameness and difference. Ostensibly it is an assertion of resistance against the continued dominance of the colonial impulse and its attendant politics of racial hierarchy. Yet, it is underpinned by the acceptance of a model of techno-scientific development derived from the very Western frameworks it purports to be resisting.

The peaceful nuclear explosion

During the negotiations for an NPT it emerged that India would be opposed to a treaty that banned 'peaceful' nuclear explosions for nuclear energy programmes. There is little separating peaceful nuclear explosions (PNEs) from their military counterparts other than the question of intent. Yet, since both the US and the Soviet Union had extensive PNE programmes they had long enjoyed a degree of international legitimacy. On 18 May 1974, ten years after Prime Minister Shastri first sanctioned work toward a PNE programme India conducted its first nuclear test at Pokhran in the Rajasthan desert. What might have been construed as a major shift in Indian foreign policy, however, was not even acknowledged as an act of foreign policy.

The statement from the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) announcing the explosion emphasised that the test had been undertaken for reasons of technological development, particularly in the areas of mining and earth moving operations, and reiterated that India had no intention of producing nuclear weapons and remained strongly opposed to military uses of nuclear explosions.⁶⁷ Official government statements were not provided until three days after the event

⁶⁵ Azim Husain, 'Statement by the Indian Representative (Husain) to the First Committee of the General Assembly: Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, May 14, 1968', *Documents on Disarmament, 1968* (Washington D.C.: US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1968), p. 332.

⁶⁶ V. C. Trivedi, 'Statement by the Indian Representative (Trivedi) to the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee: Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, May 23', *Documents on Disarmament, 1967* (Washington D.C.: US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1967), p. 234.

⁶⁷ Government of India, 'Statement by the Indian Atomic Energy Commission on Nuclear Explosion, May 18, 1974', p. 146.

on 21 May. Echoing the AEC statement, India's Minister for External Affairs called the test an experiment that was 'an important landmark in the development of nuclear technology for peaceful and economic uses'.⁶⁸

As the negative international reaction grew – Japan, Canada, Sweden and the US all released statements of disapproval – the Indian political leadership made more statements insisting on the peaceful nature of the nuclear explosion.⁶⁹ In her first statement on the matter, Indira Gandhi maintained that: 'India is not a "nuclear weapons" country, as we do not have any bombs and we do not intend to use nuclear knowledge or nuclear power for any other than peaceful purposes'.⁷⁰ She also countered claims of economic profligacy and highlighted the indigenously-produced nature of the technology used in the test.⁷¹ A government press note issued on 24 May also pointed out that the test was a 'hundred per cent Indian effort' and was technically novel because it marked the first time in history that a country had tested its first nuclear device underground.⁷²

As for the timing of the test, the leadership left this unexplained. India's technical ability to conduct a nuclear explosion prior to 1974 is not in doubt.⁷³ While various scholars have speculated that the test was an attempt to divert attention away from mounting domestic problems, this seems dubious since the decision to undertake preparations for the test had been made three years prior at the peak of Indira Gandhi's popularity after her sweeping electoral victory and India's defeat of Pakistan in the Bangladesh war.⁷⁴ This suggests that the test should be seen in a broader context – as an attempt to performatively enact India's postcolonial modernity rather than as an opportunistic decision based on domestic political expediency. According to Raja Ramanna, one of the scientists involved in the test, despite facing opposition from some of her advisors up to the last moment, 'Mrs Gandhi decreed that the experiment should be carried out on schedule for the simple reason that India required such a demonstration'.⁷⁵ The military leadership was notably absent from the select group of men privy to the test, which consisted wholly of scientific and political advisors. This was clearly meant to be demonstration of India's techno-scientific ability rather than its military might. However, the fact that Indira Gandhi made her first comments several days after the tests and not in an announcement to the nation, but in an interview with an American newsmagazine indicates that, while the political leadership initially intended the test as a self-explanatory demonstration of Indian science, the adverse international reaction which linked the explosion to military

⁶⁸ Swaran Singh, 'Statement by the Indian External Affairs Minister (Singh) on Nuclear Explosion, May 21, 1974', *Documents on Disarmament, 1974* (Washington D.C.: US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1974), p. 147.

⁶⁹ *Documents on Disarmament 1974*, pp. 150–5; B. C. Mishra, 'Statement by the Indian Representative (Mishra) to the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament [Extract]: Nuclear Explosion, May 23, 1974', *Documents on Disarmament, 1974*, pp. 171–2.

⁷⁰ 'India Not "Nuclear Weapons" Country: Mrs Gandhi's Interview With US Newsmagazine', *Indian and Foreign Review*, 11:17 (1974), p. 7.

⁷¹ 'India Not "Nuclear Weapons" Country', p. 7.

⁷² 'India's Peaceful Nuclear Experiment', *Indian and Foreign Review*, 11:17 (1974), p. 8.

⁷³ M. V. Ramana, 'La Trahison des Clercs: Scientists and India's Nuclear Bomb', in M. V. Ramana and C. Rammanohar Reddy (eds), *Prisoners of the Nuclear Dream* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003), p. 225.

⁷⁴ Ashis Nandy, 'Between Two Gandhis: Psychopolitical Aspects of the Nuclearization of India', *Asian Survey*, 14:11 (1974), p. 966.

⁷⁵ Raja Ramanna, *Years of Pilgrimage* (New Delhi: Viking, 1991), p. 89.

ends meant that it instead marked a critical foreign policy ‘performative moment’⁷⁶ in which India’s self-representation as a distinctly different modern postcolonial state was in danger of failing. In the belated pronouncements of the leadership we see the Indian state confronting the impossibility of enacting its postcolonial difference and, therefore, insisting on its postcolonial subjectivity all the more.

For Abraham, India’s inability to confine the signification of the 1974 test to the domain of development meant that ultimately it was an event that moved India’s nuclear energy establishment and its political leadership ‘from a mythic space of non-alignment and peaceful coexistence [and disarmament] into an every-day realm of naturalised fear, threat, danger and insecurity’.⁷⁷ There is indeed evidence that in the years after the test there was a conscious effort to gear the nuclear programme toward military development. According to Abraham, this shift began in the late 1950s and early 1960s after the completion of India’s first nuclear reactors and was due to the realisation that nuclear energy might not be able to deliver the ideological or techno-economic benefits expected of it.⁷⁸ However, Abraham undervalues the significance of India’s postcolonial difference – the ‘mythic space’ – in its postcolonial identity. What may have been a relatively easy shift in focus for the scientific establishment was far more difficult for a postcolonial state anchored in an identity carefully balanced between the performative enactment of India’s postcolonial difference and a strong desire to imagine itself as modern nation-state. As we have seen above, the nuclear explosion did threaten to upset this balance but, as we shall see, it did not have the power to change India’s self-representation altogether. Hence, in the years after the 1974 test, the nuclear science establishment quietly went about improving the design of India’s nuclear device and lobbying for further nuclear tests without portraying them as the beginning of a nuclear weapons programme, while the political leadership – which in 1977, after the end of a three-year period of authoritarian rule by Indira Gandhi, now consisted of a broad-based coalition government led by the Janata Party – continued to enunciate the discourse of disarmament.⁷⁹

In late 1982 or early 1983, after Indira Gandhi was returned to power, nuclear scientists Raja Ramanna and V. S. Arunchalam presented to her their argument that a nuclear test was necessary for India’s technological advancement.⁸⁰ They were careful to present the test as a scientific experiment rather than the beginning of a nuclear weapons programme. After initially agreeing to the test Gandhi apparently quickly changed her mind.⁸¹ However, the reasons for this are unknown and the allegation of American pressure remains unsubstantiated. It has been claimed that Indira Gandhi’s son and successor as Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, approved the beginning of a nuclear weapons programme in 1988 after the failure of the nuclear weapon states to heed his disarmament proposals, which included an action plan presented to the UN General Assembly to bring about a binding

⁷⁶ Weber, ‘Performative States’, pp. 92–3.

⁷⁷ Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb*, pp. 164–5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁷⁹ Atal Bihari Vajpayee, ‘Shri Vajpayee’s Address to General Assembly Session’, *Foreign Affairs Record*, XXIII:10 (1977), p. 185; Atal Bihari Vajpayee, ‘Shri Vajpayee’s Speech at Seminar on “Continuity and Change in India’s Foreign Policy”’, *Foreign Affairs Record*, XXIV:5 (1978), p. 210.

⁸⁰ George Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 242–3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

commitment by all states to eliminate nuclear weapons by 2010.⁸² Whatever the truth of this claim, it has nowhere been suggested that Rajiv Gandhi contemplated marking this shift with a nuclear test or considered revising his opinions on nuclear deterrence, which he once described as ‘the ultimate expression of the philosophy of terrorism holding humanity hostage to the presumed security needs of a few’.⁸³

Similar sentiments were expressed by P.V. Narasimha Rao when he was External Affairs Minister in 1982. Thirteen years later, in 1995, Rao was Prime Minister and the nuclear scientific establishment was again pushing for nuclear tests in order to improve and demonstrate their technological innovations. Like Indira Gandhi before him, Rao apparently agreed to the tests only to rescind his permission. According to K. Subrahmanyam, Rao explained his change of heart to him as being due to a lack of consensus among his economic, administrative and scientific advisors.⁸⁴ Clearly, even in 1995 when India’s nuclear weapons programme was at an advanced stage, the impetus to cross the nuclear test threshold and risk stripping India’s nuclear programme completely free of its peaceful associations still did not exist.

In 1996, another one of Nehru’s visions, a global agreement to end nuclear testing, became a potential reality in the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). India’s position at the CTBT negotiations was similar to that taken thirty years ago at the talks for an NPT. According to Arundhati Ghose, India’s chief negotiator, India’s decision not to sign the treaty was based on ‘[...] its approach towards nuclear disarmament, its perception of a potential threat from the existence of nuclear weapons, its strategic circumstances and, above all, the unanimous rejection by the Indian Parliament of what was seen as an unequal, dangerous and coercive treaty’.⁸⁵ If there was a difference in this position and that taken previously with regard to the NPT it was the gesture toward the vocabulary of political realism in the reference to ‘strategic circumstances’. Trivedi and Husain both raised the issue of security in their statements during the NPT negotiations but it was clear that security was conceived of in terms of economic development and the inherent dangers posed by nuclear weapons to all countries rather than as the search for military security in an anarchical world filled with states driven to maximise their power. Even though Ghose breaks with this to an extent it is important to note that she fails to elaborate on what these strategic circumstances are, and that this point is furtively sandwiched between references to traditional concerns about disarmament, the threat from existing stockpiles and discrimination. In highlighting that India is ‘above all’ against an unequal and coercive treaty Ghose emphasised the continuity of India’s identity as a country driven by its commitment to a non-colonial global order more than the imperatives of geopolitical self-interest.

Nonetheless, the appearance of the language of strategy in a discourse that was previously free of it indicates the increasing difficulty of enacting India’s postcolonial difference while at the same time functioning as a modern nation-state in an

⁸² K. Subrahmanyam, ‘India’s Nuclear Policy–1964–98’, in Jasjit Singh (ed.), *Nuclear India* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1998).

⁸³ Government of India, *India and Disarmament*, p. 282.

⁸⁴ K. Subrahmanyam, ‘Narasimha Rao and the Bomb’, *Strategic Analysis*, 28:4 (2004), p. 593.

⁸⁵ Arundhati Ghose, ‘Negotiating the CTBT: India’s Security Concerns and Nuclear Disarmament’, *Journal of International Affairs*, 51:1 (1997), p. 239.

international system in which, despite the end of the Cold War and the supposed rise of human rights norms and ethical foreign policies, the norms of realism continue to dominate. Strands of thinking that promote a coercive international relations have always been present in India and usually come to the fore after times of crises, as can be seen in the debates following China's nuclearisation. Yet, despite brief surges of popularity, such thinking remained necessarily marginalised in a country that sought to anchor its identity in the repudiation of the violent and dehumanising elements of modernity.

In 1996, however, India's postcolonial identity was more open to challenge. After the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1989, India was led by a series of weak coalition governments and the period between May and June in 1996, when the negotiations for a CTBT were at a crucial stage, was a time of leadership flux at the level of the Prime Minister and at the Ministry of External Affairs. Moreover, a vocal pro-bomb lobby had come into existence and included an increasingly strong opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had experienced a steady rise in its electoral fortunes from 1980, and a group of analysts and government officials who, as Cortright and Mattoo put it, used 'the idiom of Western strategic thought to support their arguments in favour of India crossing the nuclear threshold' and have the 'doctrine of nuclear deterrence' as 'an integral part of their world view'.⁸⁶ An ally of sorts emerged in the MEA in the form of arms control advisor, Rakesh Sood, on whose advice Ghose had relied during the CTBT negotiations. According to Perkovich, Sood believed that 'the US and others would pay more attention to Realpolitik presentations than to traditional moralism, whether or not India actually had a clear national security strategy'.⁸⁷ If India's response to the CTBT indicated hesitant signs of an increased willingness to join the nuclear mainstream, the nuclear tests of 1998 seemingly marked its full submission to the international norms of power politics and an end to its ambiguously gendered, ambivalent postcolonial identity. But was this really the case?

The end of postcolonial ambivalence?

For Abraham, 'crossing the test threshold was symbolically significant as it sought to signal identity with dominant international norms of nuclear meaning'.⁸⁸ Indeed, the party in power at the time, the BJP, had long promoted a nuclear policy that was geared toward realist norms of military strength that are in keeping with the Hindu nationalist ideology on which the party was built. The goal of V.D. Savarkar, the founding ideologue of Hindu nationalism, was to 'Hinduise all politics and militarise Hinduism' and he urged 'all Hindus to get themselves re-animated and re-born into a martial race'.⁸⁹ Like Nehru, Savarkar believed that

⁸⁶ David Cortright and Amitabh Mattoo, 'Public Opinion and Nuclear Weapons Policy in India', *Asian Survey*, 36:6 (1996), p. 550.

⁸⁷ Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, p. 379.

⁸⁸ Itty Abraham, 'Notes Toward a Global Nuclear History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39:46 (2004), p. 4999.

⁸⁹ V. D. Savarkar, *Hindu Rashtra Darshan: A Collection of the Presidential Speeches delivered from the Hindu Mahasabha Platform* (Bombay: Laxman Ganesh Khare, 1949), pp. 302, 201.

‘science would lead all material progress and would annihilate superstition’.⁹⁰ However, when he exhorted a group of high school students in 1953 to bring ‘the secret and science of the atom bomb to India and make it a mighty nation’, he had in mind a more militaristic vision than Nehru’s.⁹¹

Hindu nationalism, modernity and nuclear weapons

Savarkar followed the early nationalist leaders in attributing India’s subjugation at the hands of the British to the degeneration of a once strong and masculine Hinduism based on martial valour, courage, physical strength and organisational efficiency.⁹² Savarkar was a mentor to the Mahatma Gandhi’s assassin, Nathuram Godse, who declared at his trial: ‘the teachings of absolute *ahimsa* (non-violence) as advocated by Gandhiji would ultimately result in the emasculation of the Hindu community and thus make the country incapable of resisting the aggression or inroads of other communities, especially the Muslims’.⁹³ According to Godse, it was Gandhi and his feminine, devotional brand of Hinduism that was responsible for the partition of India, which both he and Savarkar referred to as the ‘vivisection of the Motherland’: ‘I as a dutiful son of Mother India thought it my duty to put an end to the life of the so-called Father of the Nation who had played a very prominent part in bringing about vivisection of the country – our Motherland’.⁹⁴ In killing off Gandhi and his ‘old superstitious beliefs’ Godse thought he would be ensuring that India would be ‘practical, able to retaliate, and would be powerful with the armed forces’.⁹⁵ Thus, ‘the nation would be free to follow the course founded on reason which I consider to be necessary for sound nation-building’.⁹⁶

Like Godse, Savarkar needed to masculinise the Motherland in order to put it on the correct path to modern nationhood. Indeed, Savarkar’s interchangeable and inconsistent uses of the terms ‘motherland’ and ‘fatherland’ in *Hindutva* indicates his unease with the feminine. Unlike Nehru’s ambivalence to the feminine, which was partly resolved through the incorporation of Mother India’s wisdom and morality into his vision of Indian modernity, Savarkar’s gender identity crisis is resolved when the beleaguered motherland in need of protection from her loyal sons transforms into a disciplinarian fatherland that tolerates no ambiguity in his children. For instance, writing about the need for Indian Muslims and Christians to convert to Hinduism or forever be positioned outside the nation, Savarkar declared:

⁹⁰ Quoted in Stuart Corbridge, ‘“The Militarization of All Hindudom”? The Bharatiya Janata Party, the Bomb, and the Political Spaces of Hindu Nationalism’, *Economy and Society*, 28:2 (1999), p. 227.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Sikata Banerjee, ‘Armed Masculinity, Hindu Nationalism and Female Political Participation in India: Heroic Mothers, Chaste Wives and Celibate Warriors’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8:1 (2006), p. 67.

⁹³ Quoted in Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 96.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Ashis Nandy, *At The Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 83.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Ye, who by race, by blood, by culture, by nationality possess almost all the essentials of Hindutva and had been forcibly snatched out of our ancestral home by the hand of violence – ye, have only to render wholehearted love to our common Mother and recognise her not only as Fatherland (*Pitribhu*) but even as a Holyland (*Punyabhu*); and ye would be most welcome to the Hindu fold'.⁹⁷

The transformation of the motherland into the fatherland was not, however, the destabilising move that it was for Nehru. This is because the Hindu nationalist conception of Indian identity is one in which the masculine is already immanent in the feminine Mother India. Modernity is not a masculine, Western garb that must be put on because all the values that it signifies – instrumental reason, rationality, a 'scientific temper' – can be found in the glorious past of 'Hindu civilization'. It was within this framework that the BJP's nuclear policy was formulated and this was why the BJP had never expressed the kinds of reservations about nuclear technology held by past India governments.

Indeed for the External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, the main value of nuclear technology was its military potential. In a speech given in May 1997 Singh bemoaned the fact that in 1974 'India demonstrated an ability, but disclaimed the intent', instead choosing to go 'into a nuclear trance; pretense replaced policy'.⁹⁸ Like Nehru, Singh argued that India became a subject nation partly because it had missed the industrial revolution. However, the main factor was India's failure to evolve a tradition of 'strategic thought': 'We thought... "What does India, well-meaning India, have to fear from any quarter?" [...] This mentality was the consequence of a failure to evolve an Indian state, and became the cause, in turn, of failing to do so even after Independence'.⁹⁹ India's flaw then, lay in its 'high-civilizational sense of chivalrous warfare, in the belief that our opponents would also fight in the manner to which we subscribed. Invaders down the ages routinely, therefore, outmaneuvered [sic] us because we remained wedded to the tactical doctrines of honor [...]'.¹⁰⁰ Here Singh reiterates the depiction of Indian civilisation as essentially moral and ethical in order to condemn it as a liability. Overcoming this flaw in the contemporary world meant that 'We have to leaven our idealism with geopolitical realities'. Unfortunately postcolonial India had only perpetuated the problem, for 'Gandhian pacifism' and nonalignment had 'relegated strategic thinking to an irrelevancy'.¹⁰¹ To remedy this, the BJP's election platform had promised to carry out a comprehensive strategic defence review, re-evaluate India's nuclear policy, and exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons.

Singh made the comments quoted above only a few days before the nuclear tests were carried out but he gave no indication of what was to come and it is more than likely that he was not aware of just how soon his government would awaken India from its 'nuclear trance'. Comments made at a press conference on 17 May by A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the then Secretary of the Department of Defence Research and Development indicate that the decision to carry out the tests was made in early April, about one month after the BJP came into government. Apart

⁹⁷ V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva* (New Delhi: The Central Hindu Yuvak Sabha, 1938), p. 146.

⁹⁸ Jaswant Singh, 'What Constitutes National Security in a Changing World Order?: India's Strategic Thought', Centre for the Advanced Study of India (1 June 1998), {<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/casi/>} accessed on 31 August 2005.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

from Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (previously External Affairs Minister in the Janata government) and his deputy L. K. Advani, the other political figure involved in the decision to test was Rajendra Singh, an officer of the Hindu nationalist organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.¹⁰² It is probable that, like Defence Minister George Fernandes – the leader of the socialist Samata Party – who was under the impression that a decision on the nuclear option would be made after the strategic defence review, Jaswant Singh – a relative newcomer to the BJP – was not informed of the decision until the very last moment.¹⁰³ The three chiefs of services were also kept uninformed of the decision until the day prior to the explosion. The absence of military leaders and high level ministers in the decision-making process is reminiscent of the 1974 ‘demonstration’ and hints at more continuity between the BJP and previous governments than the likes of Jaswant Singh – who came to office with the expressed intent of making India ‘strategically minded’ – would like to admit. How then, does the post-test foreign policy discourse of the BJP government compare with that following the 1974 nuclear test?

The 1998 nuclear tests

The first statement on the 1998 nuclear tests was made by Prime Minister Vajpayee on the evening of the 11 May announcing the underground explosion of a fission device, a low yield device and a thermonuclear device. Confirmation that these tests were intended as part of a nuclear *weapons* programme was given shortly afterwards by the Prime Minister’s Principle Secretary, Brajesh Mishra, who stated that ‘[t]hese tests have established that India has a proven capability for a weaponized nuclear programme’.¹⁰⁴ Another departure was Mishra’s comments implying that there was now a greater willingness to sign the CTBT.

Two days later, on 13 May two more explosions of low yield devices were carried out. The same day a letter to US President Bill Clinton from Vajpayee explaining the rationale behind the tests was leaked to the *New York Times*. As in 1974, Vajpayee’s first extensive comments on the 1998 tests were made to a foreign audience. In the letter, Vajpayee expressed his deepening concern ‘at the deteriorating security environment, specially the nuclear environment, faced by India for some years past’ and, without explicitly naming them, cited China and Pakistan as nuclear threats to India.¹⁰⁵ It later emerged that this was one of eight identical letters prepared for the Group of Eight countries prior to the test. Clearly, the Vajpayee government had prepared for the test in anticipation of presenting to the world a new India, driven solely by the tenets of political realism. Yet almost immediately after the tests had been conducted there were indications of the government backing away from this position.

¹⁰² Corbridge, ‘“The Militarization of All Hindudom”? The Bharatiya Janata Party, the Bomb, and the Political Spaces of Hindu Nationalism’, p. 241.

¹⁰³ Sukumar Muralidharan and John Cherian, ‘The BJP’s Bombs’, *Frontline* (23 May–05 June 1998), {<http://www.flonnet.com>} accessed on 20 April 2006.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ ‘Nuclear Anxiety; Indian’s Letter to Clinton On the Nuclear Testing’, *New York Times* (13 May 1998), p. 14.

In a contradictory press release on 15 May regarding the UN Security Council's presidential statement rebuking the tests, the government initially stated that '[t]he tests which our scientists carried out are not directed against any country' but then went on to cite 'the continuing threat posed to India by the deployment, overtly and covertly, of nuclear weapons in the lands and seas adjoining us'.¹⁰⁶ In Vajpayee's first attempt to explain the rationale behind the tests to a domestic audience, he explained the timing of the tests as simply delivering on an election promise and said that India had just responded to the 'stark global and regional reality' that it lives surrounded by nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁷ Still, while declaring that 'India is now a nuclear weapons state' he also claimed that '[o]urs will never be weapons of aggression'. Further, 'India has never considered military might as the ultimate measure of national strength. It is a necessary component of overall national strength. 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'.¹⁰⁸ Here Vajpayee seems to be attempting to put to rest the ghost of Gandhi and his identification of strength with non-violence and moral courage while resuscitating the spirit of Savarkar and his exhortation to rebuild a 'martial race'. Yet, when asked whether his government's nuclear policy constituted a radical departure from that of previous governments Vajpayee replied in the negative and distanced his government from previous indications that India would now be more willing to sign the CTBT, stating that '[t]here is no question of India accepting any treaty that is discriminatory in character'.¹⁰⁹

Vajpayee's subsequent statement in the Indian Parliament on the 29 May also cited strategic insecurity as a rationale for 'going nuclear' while still attempting to mark continuity rather than a dramatic departure from the conception of India's postcolonial identity that was constructed in the foreign policy discourse of previous governments. The tests, Vajpayee said, '[...] are a continuation of the policies set into motion that put this country on the path of self-reliance and independence of thought and action'. Thus, the 'present decision and future actions will continue to reflect a commitment to sensibilities and obligations of an ancient civilization, a sense of responsibility and restraint, but a restraint born of the assurance of action, not of doubts or apprehension'.¹¹⁰

The paper submitted to the Parliament as an accompaniment to Vajpayee's statement added a passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* extolling the value of action and depicted India's¹¹¹ 'restraint' as its defining difference: 'This is where our approach to nuclear weapons is different from others. This difference is the cornerstone of our nuclear doctrine. It is marked by restraint and striving for the

¹⁰⁶ Government of India, 'Press Release issued in New Delhi on UN Security Council Resolution on India's nuclear tests', Embassy of India (15 May 1998), {http://www.indianembassy.org/pic/PR_1998/May98/prmay1598.htm,1998} accessed on 20 May 2006.

¹⁰⁷ Atal Bihari Vajpayee, "'We have shown them that we mean business'", *India Today*, 25 May 1998, <<http://www.india-today.com/itoday/25051998/vajint.html>> accessed 30 October 2005.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Atal Bihari Vajpayee, 'Suo Motu Statement by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the Indian Parliament on May 27, 1998', Government of India (1998), {<http://www.indianembassy.org/pic/pm-parliament.htm>} accessed on 30 August 2005.

¹¹¹ Government of India, 'Paper laid on the table of the House on "Evolution of India's Nuclear Policy"', May 27, 1998', Government of India (1998), {www.indianembassy.org/pic/nuclearpolicy.htm}, accessed on 25 May 2006.

total elimination of all weapons of mass destruction'. Here Vajpayee sought to encompass the discourse of India's postcolonial difference based on civilisational morality into a Hindu nationalist conception of masculine strength based on physical or military power – in this case described as 'the assurance of action'.¹¹² Hence, India's 'restraint', and Pakistan's lack of it, framed Vajpayee's response to Pakistan's retaliatory nuclear tests on 28 May. Emphasising India's responsibility, Vajpayee said that India would abide by a no-first-use policy and would voluntarily declare a moratorium on further testing.¹¹³ As for Pakistan's allegations that India was preparing to attack its nuclear facilities these were nothing but, '[...] crude manifestations of the traditional Pakistani mindset of hostility against India'.¹¹⁴

In the months after the 1998 nuclear tests various other continuities in India's nuclear discourse became apparent. Reiterating a thirty-year old argument Jaswant Singh made the Indian government's case for the tests in an article entitled 'Against Nuclear Apartheid'. Running through all of Vajpayee's statements after the nuclear tests was another key component of India's postcolonial identity – the celebration of its techno-scientific prowess. The draft nuclear doctrine released in August, 1999 seeks to display a hard-headed clarity in India's strategic intentions and yet it also contains a section devoted to disarmament.¹¹⁵ Thus, while the BJP began its term in office determined to discipline the meanings attached to the nuclear programme, its inability to do so indicates that it too was constrained by the ethical project that initially helped to constitute India's postcolonial identity.

Finding legitimacy

Ten years after declaring itself a nuclear power, India finally appeared to gain the legitimacy it has craved as 'a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology' that 'should acquire the same benefits and advantages as other such states'.¹¹⁶ In 2008, the Indian parliament and US Congress both passed the agreement on civil nuclear energy cooperation signed by Manmohan Singh and George W. Bush two years earlier and the Nuclear Suppliers Group agreed to end the moratorium on engaging in nuclear trade with India. These developments were greeted by Singh as heralding the end of the 'era of nuclear apartheid against India'.¹¹⁷ In linking 'nuclear apartheid' with restrictions on nuclear technology rather than the

¹¹² Vajpayee, 'Suo Motu Statement by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the Indian Parliament on May 27, 1998'.

¹¹³ Government of India, 'Paper laid on the table of the House on "Evolution of India's Nuclear Policy"'.

¹¹⁴ Government of India, 'Official Spokesman's statement on Pakistan's allegation', Government of India, (1998), {[http://www.indianembassy.org/pic/PR_1998/May98/prmay28\(2\)98.htm](http://www.indianembassy.org/pic/PR_1998/May98/prmay28(2)98.htm)} accessed 25 May 2006.

¹¹⁵ Government of US and Government of India, 'Joint Statement Between President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh', The White House (2005), {<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/07/print/20050718-6.html>} accessed on 24 April 2007.

¹¹⁶ National Security Advisory Board, 'Draft Report of National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine', Government of India (1999), {http://www.indianembassy.org/policy/CTBT/nuclear_doctrine_aug_17_1999.html} accessed on 25 May 2006.

¹¹⁷ 'Accord will help end nuclear apartheid', *Hindu* (16 July 2008), {<http://www.thehindu.com/2008/07/16/stories/2008071655501200.htm>} accessed on 10 March 2010.

'international community's' prioritisation of non-proliferation over universal disarmament, Singh's comments appeared to indicate a significant shift in Indian foreign policy whereby India was now happy to insert itself into a discriminatory global order. According to Praful Bidwai, for instance, Singh had not ended, but had 'sanctified' nuclear apartheid and turned away from disarmament.¹¹⁸ Yet, contrary to Bidwai and despite Singh's ambiguous statement, disarmament was never far from the foreign policy agenda. In 2008 India submitted working papers on nuclear disarmament to the General Assembly and the Conference on Disarmament containing proposals similar to those in Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 Action Plan and, as in previous years introduced a draft resolution concerning a 'Convention on the Prohibition of the Use of Nuclear Weapons'.¹¹⁹

India's discourse of disarmament, moreover, has been buttressed by the revived support for disarmament in recent years from unexpected sources. In articles published in 2007 and 2008 George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, quoting from Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 Action Plan, called on all governments to work toward the elimination of nuclear weapons and in 2009 Barack Obama committed the US to taking 'concrete steps to a world without nuclear weapons'.¹²⁰ In the words of Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao the 'renewed debate underway on this issue harmonises with our long held positions' and, in response, India has put forward a new proposal for a global, verifiable nuclear disarmament framework.¹²¹ The new US push for disarmament, however, appears to be occurring through the existing non-proliferation regime and, although Singh has recently indicated a desire to sign the NPT as a Nuclear Weapons State,¹²² unless time-bound commitments to disarmament are added to these treaties, it is unlikely that he will gain the domestic support necessary to play a significant leadership role in this renewed debate.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show in this article that making sense of India's nuclear policies – its promotion of nuclear disarmament, pursuit of nuclear energy, testing of nuclear bombs and refusal to sign international non-proliferation treaties – requires an understanding of the ambivalent nature of its postcolonial identity.

¹¹⁸ Praful Bidwai, 'Sanctifying atomic apartheid', *Frontline* (30 June-12 August 2005), {<http://www.fronnet.com/fl2216/stories/20050812003410500.htm>} accessed on 25 May 2006.

¹¹⁹ Vishvjit P. Singh, 'Statement by Mr Vishvjit P. Singh, Member of the Indian delegation at the thematic debate on nuclear weapons in the first committee of the UN General Assembly on October 16, 2008', UNGA (16 October 2008), {www.un.int/india/2008/ind1475.pdf} accessed on 13 March 2009.

¹²⁰ George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, 'A World Free of Nuclear Weapons', *Wall Street Journal* (4 January 2007), p. A15; 'Toward a Nuclear-Free World', *Wall Street Journal* (15 January 2008), p. A13; Barack Obama, Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic' (5 April 2005), {http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/} accessed on 13 March 2010.

¹²¹ 'India For Global Deal on "No-First-Use" of Nukes', *Outlook* (22 February 2010), {<http://news.outlookindia.com/item.aspx?675077>} accessed on 16 March 2010.

¹²² Interview, *Fareed Zakaria GPS* (29 November 2009), {<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/091129/fzgps.01.html>} accessed on 13 March 2010.

Specifically, the ambivalence toward Western modernity that characterised anticolonial thought produced an ethical project driven by a desire for a better modernity that rests on what might be termed the exceptionalism of India's civilisational statehood. India's postcolonial identity moreover, is gendered in ways that produce this ambivalence because, since the dominant discourses of Indian nationalism partly ground resistance in a feminine semiotic, India is produced as a civilisational state that is feminine and masculinised at the same time. Its mimicry of a masculine, modernising state is tempered by a feminine civilisational morality which it upholds as its postcolonial difference. In the realm of nuclear policy this has meant a concerted effort to acquire nuclear technology, the ultimate symbol of modernity, while promoting universal nuclear disarmament. There is however, a fine line between nuclear technology for weapons and for energy and as successive governments have blurred this line, the ethical project that Nehru sought to place at the core of Indian modernity has become increasingly tarnished. Nonetheless, it should be recognised that India's promotion of disarmament and its delegitimisation of the use of nuclear weapons are manifestations of this project that have placed, and will continue to place, important limitations on India's nuclear programme.