

War Talk

Summer Games With Nuclear Bombs

by Arundhati Roy

Dissident Voice, 2 June 2002

Nuclear bombs violate everything that is humane. They alter the meaning of life itself. Why do we tolerate them? Why do we tolerate these men who use nuclear weapons to blackmail the entire human race?

When India and Pakistan conducted their nuclear tests in 1998, even those of us who condemned them, balked at the hypocrisy of Western nuclear powers. Implicit in their denunciation of the tests was the notion that Blacks cannot be trusted with the Bomb. Now we are presented with the spectacle of our governments competing to confirm that belief. As diplomats' families and tourists disappear from the subcontinent, western journalists arrive in Delhi in droves. Many call me. "Why haven't you left the city?" they ask. "Isn't nuclear war a real possibility? Isn't Delhi a prime target?"

If nuclear weapons exist, then nuclear war is a real possibility. And Delhi is a prime target. It is.

But where shall we go? Is it possible to go out and buy another life because this one's not panning out?

If I go away, and everything and everyone -- every friend, every tree, every home, every dog, squirrel and bird that I have known and loved -- is incinerated, how shall I live on? Who shall I love? And who will love me back? Which society will welcome me and allow me to be the hooligan that I am here, at home?

So we're all staying. We huddle together. We realize how much we love each other. And we think, what a shame it would be to die now. Life's normal only because the macabre has become normal. While we wait for rain, for football, for justice, the old generals and eager boy-anchors on TV talk of first strike and second-strike capabilities as though they're discussing a family board game.

My friends and I discuss Prophecy, the documentary about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The fireball. The dead bodies choking the river. The living stripped of skin and hair. The singed, bald children, still alive, their clothes burned into their bodies. The thick, black, toxic water. The scorched, burning air. The cancers, implanted genetically, a

malignant letter to the unborn. We remember especially the man who just melted into the steps of a building. We imagine ourselves like that. As stains on staircases. I imagine future generations of hushed schoolchildren pointing at my stain...that was a writer. Not She or He. That.

I'm sorry if my thoughts are stray and disconnected, not always worthy. Often ridiculous.

I think of a little mixed-breed dog I know. Each of his toes is a different color. Will he become a radioactive stain on a staircase too? My husband's writing a book on trees. He has a section on how figs are pollinated. Each fig only by its own specialized fig wasp. There are nearly a thousand different species of fig wasps, each a precise, exquisite, synchrony, the product of millions of years of evolution. All the fig wasps will be nuked. Zzzz. Ash. And my husband. And his book.

A dear friend, who's an activist in the anti-dam movement in the Narmada valley, is on indefinite hunger strike. Today is the fourteenth day of her fast. She and the others fasting with her are weakening quickly. They're protesting because the MP government is bulldozing schools, clear-felling forests, uprooting hand-pumps, forcing people from their villages to make way for the Man dam. The people have nowhere to go. And so, the hunger-strike.

What an act of faith and hope! How brave it is to believe that in today's world, reasoned, closely argued, non-violent protest will register, will matter. But will it? To governments that are comfortable with the notion of a wasted world, what's a wasted valley? The threshold of horror has been ratcheted up so high that nothing short of genocide or the prospect of nuclear war merits mention. Peaceful resistance is treated with contempt. Terrorism's the real thing. The underlying principle of the War Against Terror, the very notion that war is an acceptable solution to terrorism, has ensured that terrorists in the subcontinent now have the power to trigger a nuclear war.

Displacement, dispossession, starvation, poverty, disease -- these are now just the funnies, the comic-strip items. Our Home minister says that Amartya Sen has it all wrong -- the key to India's development is not education and health but defense (and don't forget the kickbacks, O Best Beloved).

Perhaps what he really meant was that war is the key to distracting the world's attention from fascism and genocide. To avoid dealing with any single issue of real governance that urgently needs to be addressed.

For the governments of India and Pakistan, Kashmir is not a problem, it's their perennial and spectacularly successful solution. Kashmir is the rabbit they pull out of their hats every time they need a rabbit. Unfortunately, it's a radioactive rabbit now, and it's careening out of control.

No doubt there is Pakistan sponsored cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. But there's other kids of terror in the valley. There's the inchoate nexus between jihadi militants, ex-militants, foreign mercenaries, local mercenaries, underworld Mafiosi, security forces, arms dealers and criminalized politicians and officials on both sides of the border. There's also rigged

elections, daily humiliation, "disappearances" and staged "encounters."

And now the cry has gone up in the heartland: India is a Hindu country. Muslims can be murdered under the benign gaze of the state. Mass murderers will not be brought to justice. Indeed, they will stand for elections. Is India to be a Hindu nation in the heartland and a secular one around the edges?

Meanwhile the International Coalition Against Terror makes war and preaches restraint. While India and Pakistan bay for each other's blood the Coalition is quietly laying gas pipelines, selling us weapons and pushing through their business deals. (Buy now pay later). Britain, for example, is busy arming both sides. Tony Blair's "peace" mission a few months ago was actually a business trip to discuss a one billion pound deal (and don't forget the kickbacks, O Best Beloved) to sell Hawk fighter-bombers to India. Roughly, for the price of a single Hawk bomber, the government could provide one and a half million people with clean drinking water for life.

"Why isn't there a peace movement?" western journalists ask me ingenuously. How can there be a peace movement when, for most people in India, peace means a daily battle: for food, for water, for shelter, for dignity? War, on the other hand, is something professional soldiers fight far away on the border. And nuclear war -- well that's completely outside the realm of most people's comprehension. No one knows what a nuclear bomb is. No one cares to explain. As the Home minister said, education is not a pressing priority. Part of me feels grateful that most people here don't have any notion of the horrors of nuclear war. Why should they, on top of everything else they go through, have to suffer the terror of anticipating a nuclear holocaust? And yet, it is this ignorance that makes nuclear weapons so much more dangerous here. It is this ignorance, that makes "deterrence" seem like a terrible joke.

The last question every visiting journalist always asks me is: Are you writing another book? That question mocks me. Another book? Right now? When it looks as though all the music, the art, the architecture, the literature -- the whole of human civilization means nothing to the fiends who run the world -- what kind of book should I write?

It's not just the one million soldiers on the border who are living on hair-trigger alert. It's all of us. That's what nuclear bombs do. Whether they're used or not, they violate everything that is humane. They alter the meaning of life itself.

Why do we tolerate them? Why do we tolerate these men who use nuclear weapons to blackmail the entire human race?

© Arundhati Roy, 2002