

SOUTH ASIAN CULTURES OF THE BOMB: Atomic Publics and the State in India and Pakistan. *Edited by Itty Abraham.* *Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009. 222 pp. (Tables, figures.)* US\$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-35253-8; US\$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-22032-5.

For the first time scholars in this book present a multivoiced assessment of the subtle sociocultural effects of the 1998 nuclear tests in India and Pakistan. The etiology of the secretly planned bomb tests is better known in India than in Pakistan but this fine book is not about origins of the tests but instead their permutations and combinations in two societies which are neighbours and cut from one cloth. This book proves conclusively, again, that a partition done haphazardly in 1947 led to very different experiences in the evolution of military–industrial–political complexes in each country. But where others have focused largely on states and strategic cultures, these authors, under Abraham’s able editorship, show how these two atomic publics are constructed and interact with their surroundings.

The constituents of atomic publics are widely defined here, as they should be; they include the nuclear establishment, the press and media treatments, non-nuclear and non-party elites, and the huge half of both populations who simply did not know after 1998 that both countries had declared themselves nuclear powers. Hundreds of millions did not know that their countries were transforming their newly tested bombs into deliverable weapons, even during the deadly Kargil conflict of 1999. Whatever the public faces of nuclear power are, says Abraham, they are unevenly distributed and ambivalent, leading to a “split public” with deep differences between “vernacular and cosmopolitan” publics.

This book shows there is a spectrum of conformity and dissent in both countries, articulated not just in light of the behaviour of nuclear leaders and the differences between the military cultures of both countries but also in response to the probes and pulls of geopolitical forces. Among middle-class households “disgraced” nuclear engineer A.Q. Khan in Pakistan and celebrated aeronautics engineer President Abdul Kalam in India are (or were, at the turn of this century) familiar associations with these tests.

Complemented by excellent photographs of the paraphernalia, medals, statues, signboards, posters, etc., of the nuclear age drawn from pop culture, the author of each chapter addresses in a coherent way their particular specialties, beginning closer to the bombs and moving outward to public opinion.

Concerning Pakistan, Zia Mian writes about the military and political elite’s long and cautious engagement with the possibilities of nuclear power from 1954 and Ammara Durrani describes the pride shown in letters to the editor associated with A. Q. Khan’s far-flung network for technological proliferation revealed in February 2004. Critical assessments of very

interesting regional differences in newspaper-driven opinion surveys of public mood and attitude regarding the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), nuclear accidents, nuclear controls, etc., are well made by Haider Nizamani, and the visualization and interpretation of nuclear power embodied in everyday objects like luggage and buttons is the work of Iftikhar Dadi.

About India, which happens to be editor Abraham's specialty, there is a chapter by M.V. Ramana on the practice of secrecy going back to the 1950s, including reference to agencies refusing to inform the public and the courts backing them up; Sankaran Krishna on the ontology of the middle class and its preoccupation with intellectual achievement (for example, "prize-winning not problem-solving") which was the ripe context for bomb support; Srirupa Roy on the atomic public's variable treatment of voices of opposition and dissent; Raminder Kaur's ethnography of quasi-religious Hindu representations of the imagined nuclear bombs power (with photos); and Karsten Frey's close critical study of the public discourse of expert guardians of India's nuclear mythologies, such as K. Subrahmanyam, as seen in 700 nuclear editorials and opinion articles in major English-language daily newspapers.

The authors make real efforts to compare these two very different public atomic cultures, and one thus sees the Rashomon effect at work, so the chapters do not draw identical conclusions. There is some veiled disappointment about the fact that articulate opposition to the defiant and at times arrogant behaviour of nuclear elites is so muted, reluctant admission and rejection of nuclear secrecy, and different emphasis given to the role of the great powers which have so long played in this theatre. But the achievement in this book is to deconstruct the gross generalizations that are called "India" and "Pakistan," yielding a nuanced landscape of different atomic publics, rural and urban, rich and poor, literate and illiterate, north and south, and so on. The nuclear is contrasted with and embedded in the rest of culture and society in a skilful way.

According to the bios given, all but one of the authors (like this reviewer) live not in South Asia but in North America where the nuclear arrangements have an older and quite different history. In an apparently globalized and cosmopolitan world the atomic publics dwelling under one nuclear umbrella or another construe their situations remarkably differently, but each has to find the ways to exert influence on their nuclear-industrial enclaves and even be shielded from them. What matters more is where their nuclear umbrellas bump into one another and where the publics have been encouraged to be mutually suspicious. The critical research seen here is unwelcome in official circles in South Asia just as it is elsewhere. I hope other scholars will join this trend to make wider comparisons with other countries of these crucial public issues which so many of us would prefer to forget.