Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War

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Published by Liverpool University Press

Williams, Paul.
Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War: Representations of Nuclear Weapons and Post-Apocalyptic Worlds.
Liverpool University Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/72692.

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In the twenty-first century the connection between religious fundamentalism, nuclear nationalism, and the pauperization of whole populations because of corporate globalization is becoming impossible to ignore.

Arundhati Roy

‘I am become death, the shatterer of worlds’: these words, taken as J. Robert Oppenheimer’s reaction to the Trinity atomic bomb test, have often been repeated in popular culture. They come from the *Bhagavad Gita* (which translates as ‘Song of God’), a lecture given by Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield before the start of the Kurukshatra War. The *Bhagavad Gita* is part of the epic poem the *Mahabharata*, a central text within the Hindu tradition. The nuclear weapon programme that India revealed to the world in May 1998 also invoked Hindu history and culture, in order to justify the righteousness of a nuclear-armed India. These claims were made on the basis of a civilizational superiority whose international pre-eminence necessitated and was reciprocated by the possession of nuclear weapons. To begin with Oppenheimer’s quotation of a Hindu text is to raise a theme that will recur throughout this chapter: cultural borrowing as a form of aggrandizement. The development of nuclear weapons was claimed by many Hindu nationalists as a national status symbol because the country had acquired the military accoutrements of other major powers, not least its former European colonizers. On 18 May 1974, India detonated a nuclear device underground, ostensibly to exploit the technology’s peaceful applicability for mining and excavation. Strobe Talbott, working in the US State Department, recalled a ‘normally reserved Indian diplomat’ in Washington who was delighted at the test and quoted the *Bhagavad Gita* as a reminder of Oppenheimer’s words in 1945:

> If the radiance of a thousand suns
>  Were to burst at once into the sky
That would be like the splendour of the Mighty one...
I am become Death
The shatterer of Worlds.⁴

Talbott’s recollection has the diplomat continuing: ‘You Americans may have expropriated our deity when your scientists broke open this great secret [...] but that did not give you a permanent monopoly on morality or on technology.’⁵

This chapter explores how South Asian writers have understood the possession of nuclear weapons – particularly the testing of India’s nuclear arsenal in 1998 – as being central to the Hindu nationalism which achieved electoral success during the 1990s and 2000s. My discussion centres on Ruchir Joshi’s novel *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (2001), with extended references to the writings of other South Asian novelists and essayists, including Romesh Gunesekera, Arundhati Roy and Vikram Chandra. As their fictional and polemical texts observe, proclaiming nuclear weapons as a way to achieve parity of international importance with former colonizers and other superpowers is inherently problematic. While a nuclear-armed India fulfils Hindu nationalist rhetoric of national autonomy and the privileging of indigenous culture, such nuclear nationalism is predicated on wielding military technology already possessed by the Cold War nuclear powers. Paradoxically, many Hindu nationalists tried to define India’s superior identity as distinct from those nuclear powers.

Appropriately enough for this study, the earliest recorded pieces of Indian prose fiction in English were speculative fictions, namely future narratives of revolution against the British. In one of those texts, Soshee Chunder Dutt’s ‘The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the Twentieth Century’ (1845), the country Orissa (whose Hindu population is enslaved by the British) successfully rebels against its wily imperial masters. In ‘Republic of Orissa’, India is then invited to follow the newly independent nation’s example, since throwing off the chains of ‘slavery’ has allowed Orissa ‘to occupy its orbit on the grand system of civilization’.⁶ This political will for India to take its rightful place in the uppermost echelon of the world order is the avowed goal of contemporary Hindu nationalism, and although Joshi’s novel shares the radical critique of the Raj made by Dutt’s speculative fiction, *Jet-Engine Laugh* is cynical about the quality of freedom after Independence.

*The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* follows the lives of the Bhatt family from the 1930s to the 2030s, cross-cutting between historical periods and employing several narrators. The earliest significant event narrated in the novel is the romance between Mahadevkumar (Mahadev) Bhatt and his eventual wife Suman Pathak – both participants in the Independence movement against
British rule. Their son Paresh, born in 1960, becomes an internationally celebrated photographer, living in India and Europe and marrying a German citizen, Anna Lang. In 1992 their daughter Paramita (Para) is born, and Mahadev passes away. In making references to pivotal events in India’s political and military history (such as the War of Bangladeshi Independence in the early 1970s, the Emergency of the mid-1970s when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended democratic rule, the ethnic violence against Muslims that erupted in 1992 and the nuclear tests of 1998), the novel traces the increasing political power of Hindu nationalism and the nuclear brinkmanship it engaged in during the late 1990s. The novel speculates a future for India that assumes the ongoing presence of Hindu nationalism and militarism.

In the 2017 of Jet-Engine Laugh, a BBC World reporter summarizes the actual historical hostilities preceding the publication of the novel in 2001, and projects a series of future wars:

a quick rundown of the last twenty years of conflict in the subcontinent, things that everybody knows – Kashmir, the Kargil mini-war in ’99, the 2007 attack by China and Pakistan that left parts of the Indian north-east under Chinese control and half of Kashmir and Punjab under Pakistani occupation … the terrorist loose-nuke that devastated south Bombay in ’12, the maverick return strike on Karachi by one Indian missile commander even though there was no direct proof of Pakistani involvement.7

Jet-Engine Laugh projects three future conflicts: a 2007 war between India and allied Pakistani/Chinese forces, limited nuclear hostilities between Pakistan and India in 2012, and a 2017 war launched by India against the combined armies of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in which Para victoriously commands a squadron of Ishir fighter-bombers. A fourth conflict seems about to begin in the last chapter of the novel, set in 2030 on the Varun Machaan Indian space station. US armed forces on board the spacecraft Reagan use a new weapon known as ‘the Carve’ to kill the crew of the Varun Machaan and they prepare to occupy the space station.8 Para has improbably survived the Carve and attempts a dangerous escape to Earth in the space station’s water module, having programmed the Varun Machaan to self-destruct behind her.

The novel presents these conflicts as the logical consequence of the wars fought between India and its neighbours up to 2001, and uses them to dramatize the issues raised by India’s nuclear weapon programme and its political function for Hindu nationalism. After providing the historical background for the rise of Hindu nationalism, this chapter will explore
Joshi’s fictional discussion of the damaging psychological fallout of the 1998 tests and how appropriate Hindu nationalism’s stress on indigenous ingenuity is for military technology. The key paradox of Hindu nationalism outlined in *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* is that an independent India remains reliant on the iconic currency of the Anglophone West, because it wishes to borrow their symbols of power. The humane values on the grounds of which Independence was fought for, namely the Gandhian espousal of non-violence (this is something Marxist critics have contested), have been betrayed by Hindu nationalism’s nuclear belligerency. Joshi emphasizes the squandered hopes for peace seeded by the Independence movement.

**The Ascendancy of Hindu Nationalism**

The linkage between Hindu nationalism and India’s nuclear weapon programme – the ‘nuclear nationalism’ referred to by Roy – rests upon race, nation, and civilization to give meaning to the ideology of the Hindu *Rashtra* (nation). In other words, the Hindu nationalism whose political success in the 1990s was manifest in the election victories of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the governments they formed was not driven by exclusively religious concerns, and should not be seen as an Indian turn towards specifically *religious* fundamentalism (although as Roy’s terminology indicates this is a debatable issue). As the subtitle of a 2004 essay by Arun R. Swamy asks, ‘What’s Religion Got to Do with It?’ Hindu nationalism articulates a history of Indian civilization occupying the South Asian subcontinent, a civilization periodically understood as the property of the Aryan race, with that history culminating in the decolonized Indian nation taking its rightful place among the world’s nuclear powers as a modern, powerful, confident state.

Modern Hindu nationalism began in the cow-protection movement of the late nineteenth century. It was also a protectionist response to the Christian missionary activity that grew as the nineteenth century progressed. Hindu nationalism was formally institutionalized in an organization founded in 1915, the Hindu Mahasabha, which promoted cow protection and the Hindi language. One of the Mahasabha’s leaders was V. D. Savarkar, whose advocating of *Hindutva* (Hinduness) has repeatedly characterized Hindu nationalism. The quality of *Hindutva* was not merely religious but ethnic and national, for Savarkar claimed a unique status for India’s Hindus. The geographical congruence of the people and their religion – the fact that Hindus still lived on the land that had produced Hinduism – was the strength of Indian Hinduism. Occupying the same place where their mythological pantheon was located, Savarkar argued
that ‘Hindus are the only people who are blessed with these ideal conditions that are at the same time incentive to national solidarity, cohesion, and greatness.’ In 1925, the founding of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) saw Hindu nationalism take militant form. The RSS was a ‘disciplined cadre-based party’ organized into uniformed paramilitary cells, which trained youths in physical strength and self-discipline. The RSS was against the partition of India or any sort of conciliation with Muslims, identifying India with Hinduism and claiming that only the Hindu is the ‘child of the soil’ of India.9

Against the sectarianism of the RSS, at the centre of the self-rule movement was the Indian National Congress. The figurehead of the INC was Mohandas Gandhi, who believed that Hinduism led away from religious chauvinism and towards tolerance of all religions.10 Gandhi advocated an Indian Independence movement whose primary weapon against the British Empire was non-violence: through principled opposition India would gain its freedom. Withdrawing in 1947, the British Empire partitioned the country into India and West and East Pakistan (the latter now Bangladesh). At least hundreds of thousands of lives were lost and 12.5 million people were displaced in the sectarian violence that erupted as a result of Partition.11 Gandhi’s plea for reconciliation between religious communities was interpreted as weakness by the RSS and on 30 January 1948 he was killed by Nathuram Godse, a trainee of gang leader Madanlal Pahwa, a member of the RSS. The RSS was banned until 1949 and the Indian political mainstream in the 1950s and 1960s was defined by the secularism of the Congress Party and its leader Jawaharlal Nehru; the influence of an Indian nationalism espousing Hindutva was marginalized in the early decades of independence, partly because of its role in Gandhi’s assassination.12

In 1966, Nehru’s daughter Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister, a position she occupied until March 1977.13 In June 1975, amidst strikes, marches, sit-ins and a court ruling of malpractice in relation to her 1971 electoral victory, Indira hung on to power by declaring a state of extraordinary emergency. She announced an election for March 1977, expecting it to return her to power, but she was defeated by a coalition dominated by the Jan Sangh party. Created in 1951, the Jan Sangh’s founder members included Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L. K. Advani, both of whom belonged to the RSS. Although Indira returned to power, from 1977 onwards Hindu nationalism grew within India’s governmental structures. The Jan Sangh was remade as the BJP, a Hindu nationalist party advocating a Hindu state.14 Following the election in February 1998, the BJP took office as part of a coalition government, returning to power in the October 1999 elec-
tion with a slightly greater number of seats in the Indian parliament: Vajpayee was Prime Minister and Advani the Home Minister. The BJP supported the late-nineteenth-century economic principles of *swadeshi* (one’s own land) – the commitment to buy indigenous goods – while continuing to open the Indian economy up to the global free market. Amongst other examples of extending *Hindutva* into Indian society, the BJP Minister of Education appointed scholars professing the Hindu nationalist interpretation of Indian history to national academic bodies. The Jan Sangh and BJP belong to the Sangh Parivar, an umbrella of Hindu nationalist organizations that also includes the RSS, the VHP (a cultural and social service organization) and Shiv Sena, a state political party originally founded to oppose migrant workers entering Maharashtra.¹⁵

The main targets of the BJP have been Muslims, and India’s Muslim population has been victimized and subjected to violent attacks since the 1990s. (Christians, too, were subject to such violence. In the year following Vajpayee’s assumption of office, over a hundred incidents of attacks on Christians took place in India. In the BJP’s terms, Christians were not real Indians.¹⁶) On 6 December 1992, Hindu militants (including VHP activists) murdered 13 Muslims and destroyed the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, supposedly built on the birthplace of the Hindu deity Lord Ram. Police and state authorities stood aside. The mosque’s destruction commenced a series of pogroms against Muslims across India in which thousands of people, almost all Muslims, were murdered; in Pakistan, Hindu communities were subjected to reciprocal violence.¹⁷ While the BJP and VHP dissociated themselves from the violence, they had previously focused national attention on the mosque in Ayodhya and pronounced that reclaiming the site was vital for ‘national honour’. In the autumn of 1990, Advani started a pilgrimage from Gujarat to Ayodhya, collecting bricks for the construction of a Hindu temple on the ground where the mosque stood. Advani posed as Lord Ram and the van he was driven in was decorated like a chariot and draped in the symbols of the RSS (a saffron flag) and the BJP (a lotus flower). His journey garnered extensive national media coverage, and was described by the RSS as a *dharmic yuddha* (holy war). The people following him chanted, ‘The only place for Muslims is the graveyard or Pakistan.’¹⁸

**India’s 1998 Nuclear Tests**

The construction of Indian nuclear weapons had been an avowed goal of Hindu nationalists since the 1960s,¹⁹ a desire stoked by Pakistan’s nuclear weapon programme, active since 1983. India tested five nuclear bombs at Pokhran in May 1998, claiming to be responding to Chinese nuclear tests.
Neither public opinion nor the political leaders in India and Pakistan saw the tests as directed towards any other country than Pakistan. In 1998, the BJP headed a coalition government, and the demands of balancing those competing parties made a nuclear weapon programme for India one of the few ‘high-profile themes’ of Hindu nationalism that had support across the political spectrum. International criticism of the tests only strengthened the BJP’s representation of itself as defending India’s interests against global forces hampering its modernization. Further, the nuclear tests ‘deflected domestic criticism of its economic liberalization as a “sell-out” to the old imperial powers’.

Pakistan responded by testing its new Ghauri intermediate range missile and conducting nuclear tests on 11 and 13 May 1998. More tests followed in April 1999; by 2002, India had around 60 operational nuclear weapons and Pakistan up to 40. Kashmir had been the site of several wars between the two countries in the 1940s and 1960s, and conflict broke out again in 1999. The Kargil War lasted roughly two months. Terrorists attacked the Indian parliament on 13 December 2001, which India blamed on Pakistani-based paramilitary organizations fighting against the Indian presence in Kashmir. India mobilized 700,000 troops to the border with Pakistan, going on a ‘war footing’ that was meaningfully de-escalated in autumn 2002.

The feeling that harnessing nuclear technology was a source of national pride was reflected on a wide scale after the 1998 tests. Unsurprisingly given Hindu nationalism’s stress upon exercises strengthening the male body, the Sangh Parivar’s interpretation of the tests as reversing the power relations of colonization was heavily gendered. Balasaheb K. Thackeray, leader of Shiv Sena, cited the nuclear tests as evidence that Indians were ‘not eunuchs’. Scholar Mark Juergensmeyer argues that Hindu nationalism should be seen as a compensatory display of hypermasculinity in opposition to British colonialism’s perception of Indian men as effeminate. Prime Minister Vajpayee’s words speak for themselves: ‘Let the world know we have a very big bomb.’ One British newspaper headline after the 11 May 1998 test was ‘Explosion of Self-Esteem’. David Cortright understood India’s nuclear nationalism as a facsimile of other nations’ aspirations of international status:

The primary motivations for India’s decision to go nuclear are nationalist. India sees itself as a great civilization with a rightful role to play in world affairs […] India has seized upon the bomb as a shortcut to presumed greatness.

Hindu nationalism’s embrace of nuclear weapons is further rebuke to the pacifism of Gandhi, who described atomic bombs as the most ‘diabolical
use of science’. In August 2000, Advani claimed the most important achievement of his administration had been the development of India’s nuclear capability, bringing India international ‘respect’ – markedly similar to the claims made by the VHP activists who destroyed the mosque in Ayodhya. Where colonial and neocolonial interference had arrested India’s journey to international prominence, nuclear weapon acquisition could reclaim their desired status as a superpower.

**Imagining the End**

In *Jet-Engine Laugh*, Paresh photographs the 1998 antinuclear demonstrators and feels the atmosphere of the time sensually: ‘I can still taste that Delhi May in my mouth sometimes.’ What he remembers above all is the heat: ‘April had already been brutal, and early May worse, but local people were convinced that temperatures went up even more after the first blast on the 11th.’ The pathetic fallacy of the rise in temperature refers to the heat of the collective emotion. Nuclear destruction is implicated through a photographic record of one of the demonstrators, where ‘you can’t even see her face properly, she is in silhouette, back almost fully to camera’. The obscuration of human form to a silhouette echoes the outlines of people burnt into the built environment at Hiroshima. The description of this photograph is weighted with the dawning knowledge that India and Pakistan possess sufficient arsenals to wipe out great swathes of the other’s population.

The pervasive nature of nuclear weapons that Roy identified, ‘bury[ing] themselves like meat hooks deep in the base of our brains’, is also present in *Jet-Engine Laugh* in relation to the after-effects of the 2012 atomic bombing of Mumbai and Karachi. Afterwards, the destruction is described as perpetrated by a ‘Device’. This verbal work, diminishing its awfulness, becomes a psychological defence mechanism for the survivors who lost family and friends. Nuclear weapons have generated an inescapable anxiety – in 2030 the word ‘uranium’ still echoes around Paresh’s head. As the 2017 War unfolds on BBC World, Paresh’s friend Viral watches the Indian invasion of Pakistan visualized on a map:

The map develops three arrows striped orange, white and green, the northernmost curving from Amritsar towards Peshawar, the one in the middle coming out of the Delhi border area and pointing straight towards Rawalpindi/Islamabad and the southern one curving out of Rajasthan to stop almost over Karachi, which is shown in black, as they tend to do cities decimated by nuclear bombs.
As the map begins to track southwards, Viral shuts his eyes. He knows what will come next, the other blackened bit, his bit, south Bombay. He has seen it many times now, but it still knifes into him. The peninsula, the southern half blackened out, as if by a censor’s random black marker. The caption ‘Mumbai’ on one side. He opens his eyes and sure enough, there it is, their-Mumbai-his-Bombay, at the bottom of the screen, at the very edge of the theatre of war.35

The narrative moves into free indirect discourse to indicate how Hindu nationalism was involved in Mumbai’s destruction. The ‘their-Mumbai-his-Bombay’ reflects that the nuclear exchange was a product of nationalist grandiosity on both sides of the border: Hindu nationalists would rather have the living Bombay of Viral’s memories atomized in a standoff with the hated Islamic neighbour than lose face. The city’s name was changed (after Shiv Sena’s success in the Maharashtra state elections in the mid-1990s) because Mumbai was perceived to be more faithful to Hinduism than the foreign name Bombay. It is ‘their’ Mumbai to Viral because the name better reflects their religious-national cause; the devastated city works in the symbolic economy of Hindu nationalism by evidencing the continuing danger and affront to national dignity posed by Muslims. Surveying the ‘modern marketplace of Indian politics’ in 2004, Veera Chandhoke stresses the valuable currency of having ‘been victimized in history’. The ‘self-justifying ideology of the victim’ entitles one to perform acts of ‘vengeance’,36 such as the Indian nuclear retaliation in the novel. In this scene, Mumbai is pushed to the edge of the television’s map and blackened out (as with the euphemism ‘the Device’) but the BBC cannot conceal the absence in the physical world where Bombay used to be. The nuclear exchange haunts Viral; he cannot ‘censor’ his memory of loss.

Given Hindu nationalism’s ideological enshrinement of swadeshi, it would seem appropriate to ask how Joshi represents indigenous weapon technology: are the weapons of one’s own land an emblem of religious, national and ethnic superiority? In the 2030 narrative set on the space station, Para’s quick thinking lays the ground for victory. The space station’s indigenousness is a major factor in her survival only because its construction is old-fashioned. When the Carve hit the Varun Machaan, her crewmates were killed but the material used to build the Ops cabin door protected Para: ‘Good old stolid Indian technology. If this was a French or Israeli craft, something made with all those new alloys, the Carve would have turned her into soup by now. Thank god for Indian obsolescence’.37 This quality of swadeshi is double-edged, as moments previously she had been swearing ‘Fucking Indian technology’ when the same sliding door
stuck. Admiring his Alessi coffee machine in 2030, Paresh comments, ‘the machine has survived well for something that’s thirty-two years old’. In other words, the coffee machine is the same age as India’s nuclear weapons, and was ‘a design marvel in its time – a child’s castle made of shining serious steel’.38 The Alessi’s age invites readers to interpret this description in terms of India’s development of nuclear weapons, where technology originating outside India is appropriated by the Indian government. Paresh’s words figure the coffee machine as a military installation built to flatter the youthful desire for play, with the innocence of ‘child’s castle’ and the unselfconsciousness of childhood it connotes running into the reality of people getting hurt. With the double meaning of ‘steel’ as the alloy and as a blade, the final word in the phrase ‘shining serious steel’ implies the hard and unavoidable repercussion of owning a weapon: someone will get seriously injured, although that weapon remains fascinating, catching the eye with its glister. Even if you are not the one who gets hurt, do not think this is the ultimate solution: Paresh’s coffee machine requires repeated servicing and stutters on its way to performing its function.

The concern with the reliability and safety of weapon technology is applied to the ammunition Para uses in 2017. An interviewee on BBC World discusses the depleted uranium bullets used by the Indian Air Force:

'It is what the US Air Force and the RAF first used in the Gulf War against Iran [sic] in 1991 and then again in the NATO strikes in the Balkans in the late ’90s and early this century. There was a hue and cry at the time, because DU-based bullets and shells supposedly leave radiation and many attributed the ‘Gulf War Syndrome’ and, later, what was called the ‘Kosovo Strain’ to their deployment, but there has never been any conclusive proof connecting DU-based munitions to radiation-related diseases [...] the use of DU was discontinued in 2005 in Europe, but by then Britain had sold the technology and a fair amount of actual ammunition to some countries, and India was one of them.'39

One of the dominant responses to India’s 1998 testing of nuclear weapons in the West was horror and moral outrage. A firm protester against those tests, Arundhati Roy also ‘balked at the hypocrisy of Western nuclear powers’.40 This anger at double standards is voiced in the novel by Viral, who cannot stop verbally attacking BBC World’s presentation of depleted uranium bullets: 'Fuck you, you holier-than-thou hypocrite scumfucks, he thinks, first you make it, then you sell it, then you point fingers when people use it’.41 While Joshi is consistent in rebuking the confident belief of nuclear nationalists that such technology is a quick guarantee of national
power, his novel refuses to adopt the West’s paternalist warning that India should not threaten to use weapons that the USA used in the past and seemingly now regretted. That, too, represents a fallacious linear trajectory of national maturation in which the West has already morally rejected the technologies of war being used by India.

**Nuclear Nationalism, Ethnic Absolutism and Antagonistic Acculturation**

Thomas Blom Hansen’s study of the Sangh Parivar *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism* (1999) summarizes the importance of completing the journey to nationhood begun in the anticolonial struggle. Despite decolonization, Hindu nationalists are ‘driven by a desire to abandon the location assigned to [India] at the lower steps of the global evolutionary ladder. Through internal cultural purification and moral discipline and awakening’ India’s modernity and sovereignty will be recognized, and the country will take its place as a ‘respected member’ of ‘that elusive global “comity of nations”’.42 The 1998 nuclear weapon tests operate in this context as a confirmatory seal on India’s insertion into the global community at a level appropriate for a nation of its history, culture and contribution to knowledge. Homi Jehangir Bhabha, leader of India’s atomic energy programme earlier in the century, saw (with qualification) ‘all humanity within a single trajectory of progress’ and wanted to elevate India within that trajectory.43 The very assumption that India’s rightful position in international affairs is re-established when it slots itself into a linear narrative of progress established by pre-existing superpowers implicitly confirms the righteousness of the developmental model proposed by the Western capitalist democracies.44 It is particularly ironic that the Hindu nationalists hailed the 1998 nuclear tests as the seminal moment of national pride. Roy ironically applauds the USA, ‘Thank you for showing us the way.’ Far from confirming the end of India’s colonial and neocolonial dependence, India has shackled itself in a costly subjugation to the responsibilities of nuclear weapons, which are ‘are the ultimate colonizer. Whiter than any white man who ever lived. The very heart of whiteness.’45

This paradox is finely reflected in Romesh Gunesekera’s novel *The Sandglass*, wherein the enrichment of Sri Lanka’s international respect is mooted as the corollary to acquiring nuclear weapons. Published in 1998, it is most likely that the reference to nuclear technology in the novel is not a response to that year’s nuclear tests but a general allusion to the intricate cycles of indebtedness that the technology entails. The novel, which is largely spoken through remembered narratives, recounts the twentieth-century
history of two Sri Lankan families. It focuses on the financial competition between the heads of two families, Jason Ducal and Esra Vatunas, and follows the lives of those who outlive them, especially Jason’s wife Pearl, his son Prins (who narrates much of the novel) and his friend Chip (the frame narrator). In order to be recognized as a community leader, Esra Vatunas gains the allegiances of two Members of Parliament, Pucksy Mendis and Fosil Gunasena. Their support for Esra is ensured because of the embarrassing secret he holds over them: both politicians missed an important meeting because they were drunk and involved in a sensitive discussion at Esra’s home. At that meeting Mendis and Gunasena were introduced to Alexis, an investor in arms manufacture from Zurich. Alexis enchants the politicians by prophesying a lucrative future for Sri Lanka in which the ‘surplus labour’ of the coastal strip is utilized in military industries:

Alexis’s vision [was] of rearming the ceremonial troops of the nation, and vitalizing the burgeoning population of the south through rapid industrial growth in munitions manufacturing. ‘All financed through soft loans,’ he had said sotto voce. ‘Let the Americans play with free milk powder, but you people need to grow up now. They’ll never give you atomic power until you show you can fight like a Corregidor [an island in the Philippines, the site of fierce combat during World War Two] veteran.’

Alexis chides the immaturity of Sri Lanka for being satisfied with diversions such as US food aid. He suggests national adulthood is achievable with a robust military-industrial complex, with ‘atomic power’ representing the crowning symbol of Sri Lankan statehood, standing at the telos of the journey of militarization. In a modulation of the symbolism of nuclear weapons, here ‘atomic power’ (rather like the weapons for the ceremonial troops beginning this miniature vision) is a badge of pride awarded to those countries whose military strength compels international recognition.

While the novel does not develop this vision further, it is significant that it is suggested by a European who sees the Sri Lankan economy as an opportunity for investment, a character whose nationality stands as shorthand for the profits to be made from quasi-legal financial activities (the untraceable Swiss bank accounts of innumerable cultural references). These prompts place the parentheses of doubt around Alexis’s picture of national pride. The Sandglass suggests the capitalist West signified as ‘the Americans’ will be the most rewarded beneficiary of any South Asian arms programme. By advancing the money, Western financiers would
reap the economic windfall, and military autonomy would coexist with the compromised sovereignty of interest payments. The international respect accompanying ‘atomic power’ would be undertaken on Western terms, and even this vision of armaments manufacture is a foreign import, introduced into the heads of Colombo’s politicians by the investor from Zurich.

In Jet-Engine Laugh’s 2017 War, India’s victorious strike against the Pakistani and Saudi Arabian armed forces is supported by China because ‘that is where the real Chinese/Japanese economic interests lie’. Joshi’s novel closely allies the growing interdependency of the global and Indian economies, implying another paradox of the Hindu nationalists: their claim to be committed to swadeshi was advanced alongside a privatization regime inviting multinational corporations to invest in India and siphon its wealth outwards. Roy lists the components of the national infrastructure that the BJP want to privatize: ‘water, electricity, oil, coal, steel, health, education, and telecommunications’. She attacks the ‘Disinvestment Minister’ for his collusion. Roy’s thesis is that the most powerful recruiting agents for the RSS are the ramifications of globalization, poverty, frustration and chaos:

The two arms of the Indian government have evolved the perfect pincer action. While one arm is busy selling India off in chunks, the other, to divert attention, is orchestrating a howling, baying chorus of Hindu nationalism and religious fascism. It is conducting nuclear tests, rewriting history books, burning churches, and demolishing mosques.

This solicitation of global capital has left India more, not less, dependent on the richest nations of the world. In Joshi’s novel, Paresh observes that the Koji Refrigerator Company is the main sponsor of the 2030 Puja: Japanese capital helps India celebrate its religious festivals. Paresh reflects, ‘They like to remind everyone of basic allegiances, our friends from Little Nippon.’ The double-edged word ‘friend’ suggests that one friend in this relationship has the economic power to remind the other of its allegiances, and the promotional slogan indicates that Japanese capital and Indian indigenousness both bow to American English as the international language of trade: ‘Have a cool Puja, have a Koji Puja.’

The relationship between making money and the ideological agenda of Hindu nationalism is a major theme of Vikram Chandra’s novel Sacred Games (2006). Largely set in Mumbai, the novel follows the life and suicide of Ganesh Gaitonde, an infamous gangster leading a vast criminal family. Gaitonde’s thugs are occasionally hired by the Hindu nationalist politician Bipin Bhonsle to attack and intimidate Muslim families. Bhonsle is a
Rakshak, a reference to the Hindu nation for whom he alleges to speak, and the Rakshaks ‘believed in a golden past, and blood and soil’, but despite being a Hindu, Gaitonde ‘didn’t care for any of those things, not where business was concerned’. The novel forms a circuit linking Hindu nationalism, criminality and commerce, following the example of Salman Rushdie in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995), whose character Mainduck is a Hindu nationalist leader and a boss in Mumbai’s criminal underworld. Prefiguring the language Chandra places in the mouths of the Rakshaks, in Rushdie’s novel Mainduck ‘spoke of a golden age “before the invasions” when good Hindu men and women could roam free’, and his stance is anti-immigration, anti-union ‘and in favour of wealth’.

In the early stages of *Sacred Games*, Gaitonde has no intention of disrupting profitable illegal activities to pursue an agenda of ethnic violence, even after the destruction of Babri Masjid. Having ‘always regarded the would-be attackers of the mosque and its defenders as equal fools’, Gaitonde is reluctant to join the subsequent rioting. His Hinduism is questioned by his subordinates, but his acquisitive allegiances are unshaken: ‘So, inevitably, here it was: us or them. Was I us or them? “I’m with the money,” I said. “And there’s no profit in this.”’ His main rival is the Muslim gangster Suleiman Isa, but like Gaitonde he does not let religion interfere with business, and he employs Hindus just as Gaitonde employs Muslims. Bhonsle offers to pay Gaitonde to eradicate vulnerable Muslim squatter communities in Mumbai. The land they live on ‘belongs to an associate’ of Bhonsle’s who can develop it for profit. This business arrangement is also an opportunity for Gaitonde to bring his unclear religious allegiances up to the standard of his fiscal imperatives. Gaitonde reflects, ‘we were all satisfied, me, the boys, Bipin Bhonsle’. Undertaken for profit, Gaitonde’s actions are publicly perceived to seal his ethnic purity. His wife reports, ‘Yesterday they were saying, now finally he’s showing his true strength. Now we know he’s a true Hindu leader.’ Having adopted the role of a Hindu gang leader, he finds that it defines him. He strives to fulfil it, killing Muslims in his own crew and feeling ‘real’ after accepting his Hindu identity. Gaitonde’s *Hindutva* was bought and paid for by Bhonsle but it assumes the appearance of reality by the actions Gaitonde takes to fit the part (the physical transformations that Indian film stars undergo is a major theme of the novel). Gaitonde’s rise to power in the underworld mirrors the political ascendancy of Hindu nationalism, suggesting that violence and illegality shadow the activities of nationalist politicians who are verbally committed to eradicating corruption. When Gaitonde raises this with Bhonsle, he has the effortless retort of the career politician: ‘you have to get dirty to do any cleaning […] Once we are in
power, it will all be different. We will change everything.’

Like Joshi’s novel, *Sacred Games* warns its readers of the dangers India’s nuclear weapon programme represents. While the politician Bhonsle’s rhetoric is useful for gaining and preserving power, it is also available to ideologues for whom the threat posed by Islam and Pakistan is so great that nuclear war in South Asia appears the only solution. Through Bhonsle, Gaitonde agrees to regularly smuggle arms into India for cadres he later learns report to Swami Shridhar Shukla, a Hindu guru who supports the nationalist cause. Some of those guns smuggled into the country arrive in the hands of ‘an underground Hindu organization called Kalki Sena’ which is ‘getting ready for a war’. After this war ‘there will be a perfect nation, run according to ancient Hindu principles’. Shukla becomes Gaitonde’s guru: when the gangster raises the idea that ‘People who are truly spiritually advanced are peaceful’ he is mocked by Shukla, who retorts, ‘Life feeds on life’ and ‘the beginning of life is violence’. Rejecting Gandhi’s peaceful Hinduism, Gaitonde is taught ‘non-violence never brought peace’. Peace must be fought for, and what India needs (in language reminiscent of muscular Hinduism) is ‘political will’, ‘the right structure’ and ‘discipline’. Shukla draws Gaitonde’s attention to the figures of Hindu mythology who took up violence, particularly the moment when Krishna counselled Arjuna on the battlefield – an incident Oppenheimer would have needed little reminder of, and a premonition of the nuclear war the guru believes necessary for spiritual development. Gaitonde realizes his men have unknowingly carried the components of a nuclear weapon into India. Shukla’s labyrinthine operation includes an ersatz Islamist militant group, the Hizbuddeen (Army of the Final Day), whose literature warns of a great fire starting in Mumbai, spreading and killing unbelievers. This organization is funded by the Pakistani government and will claim responsibility for the detonation of the guru’s nuclear device in Mumbai, theoretically leading to India’s retaliation and nuclear war between the two countries. In the guru’s logic the world must be destroyed before it can be reborn. As a commentary on India and Pakistan’s nuclear nationalism, *Sacred Games* is not subtle: in the novel, despite their professed religious difference, both countries are in thrall to the same self-destructive competition. Hindu and Muslim militants literally serve the same master. They share a demented fealty to purity that is genocidal and wears irrationality in the clothes of reason, just as Shukla easily dominates Gaitonde in their debates about the righteousness of annihilation.

An obsession with ethnic purity is not only an Indian disease and *Jet-Engine Laugh* understands India’s BJP government at the end of the twentieth century as a phenomenon related to the rise of ethnic absolutism.
across the world. Para’s journey from child of a cosmopolitan German-Indian couple living in Paris to a celebrated warrior battling against India’s enemies is sympathetically portrayed in the novel; symbolically mapping on to India’s nuclear militancy, it is the hostility and ethnic absolutism of Europe that compels Para (and to less militant degree, Paresh) to see herself as Indian. Werner Sollors uses Georges Devereux’s term ‘antagonistic acculturation’ to signify the entrenchment of an ethnic identity that takes place ‘through a process of – frequently more than justified – resistance’.59 Antagonistic acculturation is the construction of an ethnic identity that takes place when one group sees itself in distinction to a proximate ethnic group whose activities jeopardize the existence of the resistant group, possibly through physical coercion, legal disavowal or cultural encroachment. Jet-Engine Laugh indicts Europe for paranoia over security that parallels Hindu nationalism’s stress on purity. At the turn of the century, Europe is marking the borders of who belongs and who does not, and like Hindu nationalism the lines drawn are ethnic and religious. As Sollors notes of antagonistic acculturation, ‘in an ethnic confrontation, means and ends may be adopted from the opponent’.60

Paresh returns to India in 1998 ‘in protest against the new European immigration policies’ designed to exclude further those considered foreigners. In its interpretation of the French coast, the novel implies the difficulties which immigrants face: the sea ‘continues to negotiate its arrival against the rocks below, like refugee families at a train terminus’. In this symbolism, the brutalizing experience of seeking refuge culminates not in sanctuary, but the careful act of avoiding destruction against hostile forces arrayed against one’s entry. In Jet-Engine Laugh, the policies that compel Paresh to leave Paris are popularly known as the ‘“Fortress Europa” regulations’,61 drawing on the derogatory use of the term ‘Fortress Europe’. When used in this way, the phrase ‘Fortress Europe’ refers to a white Christian Europe seeking to buttress its identity by expelling elements deemed to be threatening and maintaining rigid border controls. Anne McClintock asks ‘whether the emergence of Fortress Europe in 1992 may not signal the emergence of a new empire, as yet uncertain about the frontiers of its boundaries and global reach’.62 Talking of the Berlin Wall in the 1980s, Paresh’s friend Kalikaku predicts the rise of barriers against migrants: ‘today this is looking like it is torn down, but tomorrow it will reappear somewhere. From inside their Berlin they will put it outside … all around Europe.’63 Kalikaku believes that the end of a divided Germany will mean Europe divided from the rest of the world. In other words, for Kalikaku once the European continent is no longer separated into East and West and starts to see itself as a coherent whole it will soon exclude those who
do not belong to that geographical unity.

Paresh ends his residence in Europe because the privileges afforded to him as a recognized arts practitioner are losing ground to the pejorative associations that European security services attribute to his skin colour. What appears to be the seminal incident in Paresh’s decision to leave Europe is when he is driving in France with his daughter, and their vehicle is stopped at gunpoint by gendarmes who suspect him of being a criminal called Yousouf Ali. When they realize the mistake, they check Paresh’s identification papers and tell Para to get into the back of the car:

‘You don’t need so many guns to tell me to move my child to the back seat. You scared her.’

[…]

‘Zees is a war. You ahre luucki we don’t shoot you. We don’t shoot becoz we see ze girl. Vas-y.’

Joshi’s novel was completed before the events of 11 September 2001: already the apparent threat posed by Muslim Algerians (the text suggests) is figured as a ‘war’ between white Christian Europe and its enemies. The French authorities assume Paresh is an enemy of France, and they declare they would have shot him unthinkingly if Para had not been present. Rather than life being a right, the authorities think Paresh should be thankful for being permitted to retain it. Paresh drives on, and in the novel’s last line the sun shines through the trees lining the road and ‘Light and shadow drum across the car.’

Symbolically, Paresh and Para are living through a period of rapidly oscillating Manichean positions in which they are forced to choose sides. We know by this stage in the novel that Para’s allegiances will fall in line with Hindu nationalism. Because Paresh chooses that day to inform Para about the purchase of a new coffee machine, readers can surmise it is 1998, and the nuclear nationalist context looms again. Indeed, the nuclear nationalism of the BJP—the belief their country’s sovereignty can only be protected if they adopt the murderous violence of their enemies—is more legible after Paresh and Para’s treatment. In the parallel that Jet-Engine Laugh sets up, India’s nuclear nationalism is the logical repercussion—on the national level—of the enforced racial worthlessness of non-whites invoked by the security policies of Europe.

Working against this moment when Paresh and Para are forced to choose between India and Europe, the criss-crossing of cultural dialogue and people elsewhere in the novel confounds the homogeneity that Hindu nationalism or ‘Fortress Europe’ seeks to impose. The narrative suggests Paresh has spent most of his life suspended in planes between Europe and India, which implies the difficulties of slotting oneself into a compart-
mentalized ethnic camp when one’s identity refuses to fit neatly. As Para says with childhood’s eyes, ‘Pappa’s not being an Indian today, he’s being…European.’ *Jet-Engine Laugh* questions the national pedigree of the Indian war machine with its references to Para’s mixed parentage. Her battle-call is enunciated in a ‘slightly German-tinted’ manner, appropriate for Para’s European background on her mother’s side but rather discordant in the context of an India defending itself against foreign invasion. One way that *Jet-Engine Laugh* reminds us of ethnic absolutism’s illusoriness is via a malapropism made by Para’s mother, Anna Lang. In a letter to Paresh, Anna uses the word ‘complexion’ when she meant ‘complexity’. Bringing these words together invites the reader to reflect on how skin colour is not the outward sign of internal racial essence, but something much more tangled. Paresh reuses Anna’s displacement of vocabulary to signify he can see the nuances and intricacy of Para’s decision: ‘As I looked at my daughter’s complexions, things clung on to the cliff edge of my tongue.’ He can see in her ‘complexions’ that she belongs to more than one epidermically marked racial group, which adds to the complexity of her decision.

Para’s embrace of the Hindu nationalist cause emblematizes a common sensibility voiced by the novel’s characters: India has squandered the peaceful future for which the non-violent Independence movement worked. In June 2002, Arundhati Roy wrote that ‘non-violent resistance’ was India’s ‘greatest gift to the world’, but it struggles to survive in an intolerant twenty-first-century India. Paresh’s mother tells him ‘the non-violent freedom struggle [had] brought us Independence’ and his father Mahadev retorts, ‘The Independence to fight amongst ourselves.’ In other words, British rule was replaced by interethnic division. Mahadev is pained by the need and effort of making sense of post-Independence India’s slide away from Gandhian tolerance; towards the end of the novel, prone on his deathbed, Mahadev asks Paresh to explain to the newborn Para ‘the difference between Independence and Freedom. The two are not the same. And one needs both.’ Coming shortly after Para’s birth, readers are able to date this deathbed scene as a night in 1992, the year in which the mosque at Ayodhya was destroyed and pogroms occurred across India. In terms of Para’s absorption into the ideology and military edifice of Hindu nationalism, it seems appropriate she is born at this moment of sectarian violence. Mahadev, as a representative of the secular and inclusive India that the Independence movement fought for in the 1930s, is passing out of this world and the forces of the Jan Sangh are throwing a ‘grand nationwide farewell party’. With dark humour, Mahadev calls the fighting in the streets of Calcutta a ‘party’ – the rioting is the opposite of a joyous celebration.
*Jet-Engine Laugh* combines dramatic tension and natal imagery to arrest the reader’s attention and direct it towards the monumental shifts taking place in Indian society. The mob gets closer to Mahadev’s residence: ‘an aural fever coursing through the dark body of the city. The heat of the sound now closer, […] too close to the house. The roar developing a shape – *Allaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah Ho Akbar! Allaaaaaaaaaaaah Ho Akbar!*’ Calcutta is personified as a heaving body, a heaving body producing a ‘shape’ born out of the screams of the riots. The India Para will grow up in is experiencing its birth pangs. Anna comforts Paresh and once more her malapropism is telling: ‘You have to rip yourself together […] This is just nothing but the beginning.’ Again, the significance of these pogroms as the opening of a new era is verbalized and expressed by colliding ideas, in this case the actions of pulling together and tearing apart. By targeting (primarily) Muslims as internal forces of disorder, the Hindu nationalists profess to bring harmony to India. They will ensure the nation’s coherence by stressing its disunity – in order to purify those heterogeneous elements.

The forces of Hindu nationalism manifested in 1992 had their political corollary in the BJP-led government that came to power in India in 1998. For the BJP and their umbrella of allies, the desired consequence of the 1998 nuclear weapon tests was parity with the world’s pre-eminent nations. Nuclear weapons were celebrated as the seal on India’s journey from colonial oppression to self-determination: never again could the country be subjugated as it was during the Raj or the Mughal rule. Earlier nuclear powers paraded nuclear weapons for national pride and political leverage, and India followed their lead. Significantly, Hinduism provided the glue to weld an ethnic group to this version of nationalism, because nuclear weapons could be presented as the renaissance of an ancient civilization finally being modernized. Oppenheimer’s appropriation of the *Mahabharata* is re-appropriated: Hindu nationalists argued that India deserves nuclear weapons more than any other country because ‘the bomb’ is prophesied in the Vedas and therefore belongs to its religious tradition. Roy retorts this is a matter of perspective: ‘if you look hard enough, you’ll find Coke in the Vedas too. That’s the great thing about all religious texts. You can find anything you want in them – as long as you know what you’re looking for.’ As the novelists and essayists discussed in this chapter suggest, Hindu nationalism can claim nuclear weapons as the culmination of their unique project of religious and ethnic respect in the world but they cannot erase the fact they have already been used by Western nations and former colonizers as remarkably similar signs of international eminence – somewhat qualifying the profession of uniqueness.
Notes


2. Oppenheimer’s biographer Charles Thorpe questions whether his ‘iconic’ response actually took place. The first public reference to his quotation of the *Bhagavad Gita* was on 8 November 1948, gaining greater prominence from the late 1950s onwards, but it was not reported by any journalist before 1948, and neither could Oppenheimer’s brother Frank (who witnessed the test with his brother) corroborate the utterance (Charles Thorpe, *Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago [2006], pp. 161–62).


28. Quoted in Corbridge and Harris, *Reinventing India*, p. xvi.
54. Chandra, *Sacred Games*, p. 244.
60. Sollors, 'Ethnicity', p. 300.
61. Joshi, *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*, pp. 61, 369. It is unclear how far the 'Fortress Europa' regulations in the novel are Joshi's invention. In my research I have been unable to find any legislation that I am confident directly corresponds to the novel's representation of European immigration policies.