

For a Just Peace – The Anti-Nuclear Movement in India

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Peace is a positive value. It is more than the mere absence of strife. Only in genuine peace can we work out the real problems: of hunger and poverty and disease and ignorance; of equitable and sustainable development; of finding the root causes of violence within our society and without; of substituting cooperation instead of competition as the basis of existence.

Surendra Gadekar¹

In his 1990 survey of contemporary social movements in India, Arthur Bonner noted that "India has all the familiar social movements - ecology, women's issues, education, empowerment, equality before the law - except the peace movement."² This is despite India having the world's fourth largest military force (and attendant high military spending), having fought four wars in fifty years (and many more internal armed conflicts), and having tested its first nuclear weapon in 1974. The reasons for this absence are not hard to see. In a country like India that faces a multitude of social problems there are far more immediate issues for concerned citizens to involve themselves in. Except for their more prevalent nature in South Asia, these factors are similar to the reasons for the lack of participation by, for example, African Americans and Native Americans in the US peace movement. It is therefore not surprising that a 1994 elite opinion poll, for example, found that those polled felt that the nuclear issue rated only seventh on a list of problems facing India.³ Only 6% of those polled felt that the nuclear issue was very important.⁴

With India's nuclear tests of May 1998, and in particular Pakistan's nuclear tests in response, the situation in India has changed. The previously hypothetical possibility of

¹ Surendra Gadekar, Editorial, *Anumukti*, August 1988

² Arthur Bonner, *Averting the Apocalypse: Social Movements in India Today* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990) pp. 406-409

³ David Cortright and Amitabh Mattoo, eds. *India and the Bomb: Public Opinion and Nuclear Options* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); Similar poll data for the case of Pakistan can be found in Samina Ahmed and David Cortright, eds. *Pakistan and the Bomb: Public Opinion and Nuclear Options* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998)

⁴ Cortright and Mattoo; For a discussion of how support for nuclear weapons is created in Pakistan despite the low priority accorded to the issue itself see, Zia Mian, "Renouncing the Nuclear Option," *Pakistan and the Bomb: Public Opinion and Nuclear Options*, eds. Samina Ahmed and David Cortright (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998) pp. 52-56

nuclear war suddenly became far more real. On Hiroshima Day of this year, an estimated 400,000 people marched on the streets of Calcutta in opposition to the nuclear tests. Several other large cities in South Asia also witnessed similar rallies. Perhaps even more significant were the large number of spontaneous actions, mostly unreported, from little heard of small towns and villages like Ambicapur, Bhumkapura and Valod. These, and other activities, mark the emergence of a large-scale antinuclear movement.

The world's first anti-nuclear movement emerged in the US after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Its discourse and analysis has shaped peace movements elsewhere. This initial anti-nuclear peace movement was dominated by people, many of whom were involved in the Manhattan project, who based their claims to legitimacy as dissenters on their knowledge of nuclear science and technology.⁵ This led to the formation of groups like the Federation of American Scientists and the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists, as well as the subsequent involvement in the Pugwash conferences, which led in turn to a techno-centric approach to peace, through the pursuit of arms control measures. There is good reason to expect that the Indian peace movement may be significantly different.

India's first generation of anti-nuclear peace activists have markedly different political biographies from the people who set up the US antinuclear movement. As an example, consider the Sampurna Kranti Vidyalaya (Institute for Total Revolution), a Gandhian organization based in Veddchi, a small village in the state of Gujarat, India. For over ten years, this group of activists have been bringing out Anumukti (Liberation from the Atom) – India's only antinuclear journal.⁶

Three chief differences between this journal and its rough equivalents in the United States or Western Europe may be typical of the differences between the emerging peace movements in India and the more established anti-nuclear groups in the west. First, Anumukti has always addressed a broad set of concerns, rather than just finding ways of ridding India of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy. Second, Anumukti has always taken on principled positions rather than popular or “pragmatic” ones. Unlike several western groups who have chosen not to take a stand on nuclear energy fearing that it may divert attention from nuclear weapons issues (or, occasionally, vice versa), Anumukti has taken a principled stand of opposing both and pointing out the interconnections between the two.⁷ Third, Anumukti has attempted to go beyond the politics of expertise that has come to mark the culture of NGOs involved in the nuclear debate in the West. While Anumukti has always prominently laid out the technical arguments against nuclear power,⁸ it has always found place for a variety of articles – moral, philosophical, political and literary.

⁵ Jerome Price, *The Antinuclear Movement* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990) pp.29-31

⁶ For more information on Anumukti, see http://members.tripod.com/~no_nukes_sa/anumukti.html

⁷ On some of the historical associations between India's nuclear energy and nuclear weapons programs, see M. V. Ramana, “The Indian Nuclear Bomb: Long in the Making,” *Precis* 9 No. 3 Fall 1998

⁸ For example, going into the details of the construction of reactors to point out safety problems, or conducting and publishing detailed epidemiological studies that suggest widespread health effects near nuclear reactors.

Anumukti and the activists that bring out the journal are typical of a large number of the new social movements that have emerged in India over the last two decades.⁹ The opposition of these groups to the nuclear program can be seen from the fact that just two days after the tests, one of India's largest coalition of grassroots groups, the National Alliance of People's Movements, came out with a strong condemnation of the nuclear tests.¹⁰

The coming of the bomb and a peace movement has not changed the day to day realities of social life in India, and it is these realities that will shape how the movement evolves. The ruling BJP, which had hoped to bolster its support with the nuclear tests, has recently learned this lesson in the recent state elections – voter discontent over the rising price of basic foodstuffs, especially onions, led to major victories for the opposition Congress Party.

While many of the participants in the movement come with a background of involvement in social activism, a section of the urban middle class elite has joined the movement, and their concerns are largely specific to nuclear issues. However, the radical democratic mass movements are much broader in orientation and goals, and their opposition to nuclear weapons and nuclear energy is situated within those larger social, economic, and political frameworks. Given the history of struggle these groups have, it is quite possible that they may dominate the movement. The emphasis then would be on a just peace, i.e. systemic change and not simply the control or elimination of nuclear weapons while leaving everything else unchanged.

⁹ For an overview of these, see Gail Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India* (Armonk: M.E.Sharpe, 1993); and Arthur Bonner, *Averting the Apocalypse: Social Movements in India Today* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990)

¹⁰ National Alliance of Peoples Movements condemns nuclear tests <http://www.mnet.fr/aiindex/napm.html> May 14, 1998; for more information on the NAPM, see Nikhil Aziz Hemmady, "Globalization-from-Below: The Critical Theory/Praxis of Shudratva in India," (University of Denver, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, November 1998) and <http://www.foil.org/politics/napm.html>