

that, as far as I know, isn't the same thing.) Reading the papers, it was often hard to tell when people were referring to Viagra (which was competing for second place on the front pages) and when they were talking about the bomb — "We have superior strength and potency." (This was our Defense Minister after Pakistan completed its tests.)

"These are not just nuclear tests, they are nationalist tests," we were repeatedly told.

This has been hammered home, over and over again. The bomb is India. India is the bomb. Not just India, Hindu India. Therefore, be warned, any criticism of it is not just antinational, but anti-Hindu. (Of course, in Pakistan the bomb is Islamic. Other than that, politically, the same physics applies.) This is one of the unexpected perks of having a nuclear bomb. Not only can the government use it to threaten the Enemy, they can use it to declare war on their own people. Us.

When I told my friends that I was writing this piece, they cautioned me. "Go ahead," they said, "but first make sure you're not vulnerable. Make sure your papers are in order. Make sure your taxes are paid."

My papers are in order. My taxes are paid. But how can one not be vulnerable in a climate like this? Everyone is vulnerable. Accidents happen. There's safety only in acquiescence. As I write, I am filled with foreboding. In this country, I have truly known what it means for a writer to feel loved (and to some degree, hated too). In 1997 I was one of the items in the media's end-of-the-year National Pride Parade. Among the others, much to my mortification, were a bomb-maker and an international beauty queen. Each time a beaming person stopped me on the street and said, "You have made India proud" (referring to the Booker Prize I won, not the book I wrote), I felt a little uneasy. It frightened me then and it terrifies me now, because I know how easily that swell, that tide of emotion, can turn against me. Perhaps the time for that has come. I'm going to step out from under the fairy lights and say what's on my mind.

It's this: If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain is anti-Hindu and antinational, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag. I'm female, but have nothing against eunuchs. My policies are simple. I'm willing to sign any nuclear nonproliferation treaty or nuclear test ban treaty that's going. Immigrants are welcome. You can help me design our flag.

My world has died. And I write to mourn its passing.

Admittedly it was a flawed world. An unviable world.

A scarred and wounded world. It was a world that I myself criticized unsparingly, but only because I loved it. It didn't deserve to be dismembered. Forgive me, I realize that sentimentality is uncool — but what shall I do with my desolation?

I loved it simply because it offered humanity a choice. It was a rock out at sea. It was a stubborn chink of light that insisted that there was a different way of living. It was a functioning possibility. A real option. All that's gone now. India's nuclear tests, the manner in which they were conducted, the euphoria with which they have been greeted (by us), is indefensible. To me, it signifies dreadful things. The end of imagination. The end of freedom actually, because, after all, that's what freedom is. Choice.

On August 15, 1997 we celebrated the 50th anniversary of India's independence. May 1999 we mark our first anniversary of nuclear bondage.

Why did they do it?

Political expediency is the obvious, cynical answer, except that it only raises another basic question: Why should it be politically expedient?

The three Official Reasons given are: China, Pakistan and Exposing Western Hypocrisy.

Taken at face value, and examined individually, they're somewhat baffling. I'm not for a moment suggesting that these are not real issues. Merely that they aren't new. The only new thing on the old horizon is the Indian government. In his appallingly cavalier letter to the U.S. President (why bother to write at all if you're going to write like this?) our Prime Minister says India's decision to go ahead with nuclear tests was due to a "deteriorating security environment." He goes on to mention the 1962 war with China and that "we have suffered three aggressions in the last fifty years [by Pakistan]. And for the last ten years we have been the victim of unremitting terrorism and militancy sponsored by it...especially Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir."

The war with China is 36 years old. Unless there's some vital state secret that we don't know about, it certainly seemed as though matters had improved slightly between us. The most recent war with Pakistan was fought 27 years ago. Admittedly, Kashmir continues to be a deeply troubled region, and no doubt Pakistan is gleefully fanning the flames. But surely there must be flames to fan in the first place? Kashmir, and for that matter, Assam, Tripura, Nagaland — virtually the whole of the Northeast — Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and all the trouble that's still to come — these are symptoms of a deeper malaise. It cannot and will not be solved by pointing nuclear missiles at Pakistan.

Even Pakistan can't be solved by pointing nuclear weapons at it. Though we are separate countries, we share skies, we share winds, we share water. Where radioactive fallout will land on any given day depends on the direction of wind and rain. Lahore and Amritsar are thirty miles apart. If we bomb Lahore, Punjab will burn. If we bomb Karachi — then Gujarat and Rajasthan, perhaps even Bombay, will burn. Any war with Pakistan will be a war against ourselves.

As for the third Official Reason: Exposing Western Hypocrisy — how much more exposed can it be? What decent human being on earth harbors any illusions about it? These are people whose histories are spongy with the blood of others. Colonialism, apartheid, slavery, ethnic cleansing, germ warfare, chemical weapons — they have virtually invented it all. They have plundered nations, snuffed out civilizations, exterminated entire populations. They stand on the world's stage stark naked but entirely unembarrassed, because they know that they have more money, more food and bigger bombs than anybody else. They know they can wipe us out in the course of an ordinary working day. Personally, I'd say it's more arrogance than hypocrisy.

We have less money, less food and smaller bombs. However, we have, or had, all kinds of other wealth. Delightful, unquantifiable. What we've done with it is the opposite of what we think we've done. We've pawned it all. We've traded it in. For what? In order to enter into a contract with the very people we claim to despise. In the larger scheme of things, we've agreed to play their game and play it their way.

All in all, I think it is fair to say that we're the hypocrites. We're the ones who have abandoned what was arguably a moral position, i.e.: We have the technology, we can make bombs if we want to, but we won't. We don't believe in them.

We're the ones who have now set up this craven clamoring to be admitted into the club of Superpowers. For India to demand the status of a Superpower is as ridiculous as demanding to play in the World Cup finals simply because we have a



ball. Never mind that we haven't qualified, or that we don't play much soccer and don't have a team.

We are a nation of nearly a billion people. In development terms we rank No. 138 out of the 175 countries listed in the UNDP's Human Development Index. More than 400 million of our people are illiterate and live in absolute poverty, over 600 million lack even basic sanitation and about 200 million have no safe drinking water.

A nuclear bomb isn't going to improve any of this.

We in India are an ancient people learning to live in a recent nation. The nuclear bomb and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya are both part of the same political process. They are the hideous byproducts of a nation's search for herself. Of India's effort to forge a national identity. To define what being Indian means. The poorer the nation, the larger numbers of illiterate people and the more morally bankrupt her leaders, the cruder and more dangerous the notion of what that identity is or should be.

The jeering, hooting young men who battered down the Babri Masjid are the same ones whose pictures appeared in the papers in the days that followed the nuclear tests. They were on the streets, celebrating India's nuclear bomb and simultaneously "condemning Western Culture" by emptying crates of Coke and Pepsi into public drains. I'm a little baffled by their logic: Coke is Western Culture but the nuclear bomb is an old Indian tradition?

Yes, I've heard — the bomb is in the Vedas. It might be, but if you looked 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.

But returning to the subject of the non-Vedic 1990s: We storm the heart of whiteness, we embrace the most diabolical creation of Western science and call it our own. But we protest against their music, their food, their clothes, their cinema and their literature. That's not hypocrisy. That's humor.

It's funny enough to make a skull smile.

We're back on the old ship. The *SS Authenticity & Indianess*.

If there's going to be a pro-authenticity/antinational drive perhaps the government ought to get its history straight and its facts right. If they're going to do it they may as well do it properly.

First of all, the original inhabitants of this land were not Hindu. Ancient though it is, there were human beings on earth before there was Hinduism. India's tribal people have a greater claim to being indigenous to this land than anybody else, and how are they treated by the state and its minions? Oppressed, cheated, robbed of their lands, shunted around like surplus goods. Perhaps a good place to start would be to restore to them the dignity that was once theirs. Perhaps the government could make a public undertaking that more dams like the Sardar Sarovar on the Narmada will not be built, that more people will not be displaced.

But, of course, that would be inconceivable, wouldn't it? Why? Because it's impractical.

Because tribal people don't really matter. Their histories, their customs, their deities, are dispensable. They must learn to sacrifice these things for the greater good of the nation (which has snatched from them everything they ever had).

Okay, so that's out.

For the rest, I could compile a practical list of things to ban and buildings to break. It'll need some research, but off the top of my head, here are a few suggestions.

They could begin by banning a number of ingredients from our cuisine: chilies (Mexico), tomatoes (Peru), potatoes (Brazil), coffee (Morocco), tea, white sugar, cinnamon (China) — they could then move into recipes. Tea with milk and sugar, for instance (Britain).

Smoking will be out of the question. Tobacco came from North America.

Cricket, English and democracy should be forbidden. Either kabaddi or kho-kho could replace cricket. I don't want to start a riot, so I hesitate to suggest a replacement for English (Italian? It has found its way to us via a kinder route: marriage, not imperialism). We have already discussed (earlier in this essay) the emerging, apparently acceptable alternative to democracy.

All hospitals in which Western medicine is practiced or prescribed should be shut down. All national newspapers discontinued. The railways dismantled. Airports closed. And what about our newest toy — the mobile phone? Can we live without it, or

shall I suggest that they make an exception there? They could put it down in the column marked "Universal." (Only essential commodities will be included here. No music, art or literature.)

Needless to say, sending your children to university in the United States or rushing there yourself to have your prostate operated upon will be a cognizable offense.

It will be a long, long list. It would take years of work. I couldn't use a computer because that wouldn't be very authentic of me, would it?

I don't mean to be facetious, merely to point out that this is surely the shortcut to hell. There's no such thing as an Authentic India or a Real Indian. There is no Divine Committee that has the right to sanction one single, authorized version of what India is or should be. There is no one religion or language or caste or region or person or story or book that can claim to be its sole representative. There are — and can only be — *visions* of India, various ways of seeing it—honest, dishonest, wonderful, absurd, modern, traditional, male, female. They can be argued over, criticized, praised, scorned, but not banned or broken. Not hunted down.

Railing against the past will not heal us. History has happened. It's over and done with. All we can do is change its course by encouraging what we love instead of destroying what we don't. There is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with grace from others, enhanced, re-invented and made our own. We have to seek it out, nurture it, love it. Making bombs will only destroy us. It doesn't matter whether we use them or not. They will destroy us either way.

India's nuclear bomb is the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people.

However many garlands we heap on our scientists, however many medals we pin to their chests, the truth is that it's far easier to make a bomb than to educate 400 million people.

According to opinion polls, we're expected to believe that there's a national consensus on the issue. It's official now. Everybody loves the bomb. (Therefore the bomb is good.)

Is it possible for a man who cannot write his own name to understand even the basic, elementary facts about the nature of nuclear weapons? Has anybody told him that nuclear war has nothing at all to do with his perceived notions of war? Nothing to do with honor, nothing to do with pride? Has anybody bothered to explain to him about thermal blasts, radioactive fallout and the nuclear winter? Are there even words in his language to describe the concepts of enriched uranium, fissile material and critical mass? Or has his language itself become obsolete? Is he trapped in a time capsule, watching the world pass him by, unable to understand or communicate with it because his language never took into account the horrors the human race would dream up? Does he not matter at all, this man? Shall we just treat him like some kind of a cretin? If he asks any questions, ply him with iodine pills and parables about how Lord Krishna lifted a hill or how the destruction of Lanka by Hanuman was unavoidable in order to preserve Sita's virtue and Ram's reputation? Use his own beautiful stories as weapons against him? Shall we release him from his capsule only during elections, and once he's voted, shake him by the hand, flatter him with some bullshit about the Wisdom of the Common Man and send him right back in?

I'm not talking about one man, of course. I'm talking about millions and millions of people who live in this country. This is their land too, you know. They have the right to make an informed decision about its fate and, as far as I can tell, nobody has informed them about anything. The tragedy is that nobody could, even if they wanted to. Truly, literally, there's no language to do it in. This is the real horror of India. The orbits of the powerful and the powerless spinning further and further apart from each other, never intersecting, sharing nothing. Not a language. Not a country.

Who the hell conducted those opinion polls? Who the hell is the Prime Minister to decide whose finger will be on the nuclear button that could turn everything we love — our earth, our skies, our mountains, our plains, our rivers, our cities and villages — to ash in an instant? Who the hell is he to reassure us that there will be no accidents? How does he know? Why should we trust him? What has he ever done to make us trust him? What have any of them ever done to make us trust them?

The nuclear bomb is the most antidemocratic, antihuman, outright evil thing that man has ever made. If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man's challenge to God. It's worded quite simply: We have the power to destroy everything that *You* have created.

If you're not (religious), then look at it this way. This world of ours is four thousand, six hundred million years old. It could end in an afternoon.

Arundhati Roy is author of the novel *The God of Small Things* (Random House) which won the Booker Prize, Britain's most prestigious literary award. A longer version of this essay appeared in India in the magazines *Frontline* and *Outlook* on July 27, 1998. This version is reprinted from the September 28, 1998 issue of the USA magazine *The Nation*.

ROBERT LOBE

MSW, ASCW

LICENSED CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKER

555 BOND ST.

ASTORIA, OR 97103

(503) 325-8438

FAX (503) 325-4402

RES. (503) 861-1170