

Pokhran-Chaghi Audit: Winners And Losers

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Now reduced to silently spewing radioactivity into the desert air, the crater of Pokhran 98 remains a grotesque monument to the folly of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his crew of nuclear adventurers. On this side of the border stands the wretched mountain of Chaghi, so brutalized and disgraced that its face had turned ashen white.

When the month of May returned, it should have been a time to reflect on past follies. Instead diseased minds chose to shamelessly rejoice. On that side they crowed about "Technology Day", and on this side they called it "Youm-e-Takbir". Drunk with the new-found power to commit mass murder, they blew raucous trumpets and beat drums in preparation of macabre, insane, officially sponsored celebrations. Little badges with mushroom clouds were distributed free to children, poetry competitions extolled the greatness of a newly nuclear nation, missile replicas were placed at major intersections, and state television went on a bomb-glory blitz.

It's time for a reality check, to make a tally of the gains and losses, to separate winners and losers. Not every inhabitant of this subcontinent is a loser in this rush towards death and destruction. After all, undertakers prosper hugely in times of plague, famine and disease. So, at least for now there are many winners.

The Nawaz government is a clear winner and Chaghi was a godsend to cover up its misdeeds in all that really matters: economy, governance, law-and-order, education, and health. Hence the need to stoke the fires of nationalist frenzy. How else will they cover up for the fact that this year more than 300 people chose self immolation and death to living yet another painful day of grinding poverty and deprivation? Uranium there was plenty of, but bread and clean drinking water there was little.

The men of faith have won too, although which faith triumphed is not clear. Grains of holy radioactive sand from Pokhran, blessed by Lord Shiva, were sprinkled in temples by the Vishnu Hindu Parisad. In Pakistan the Jamaat-I-Islami transported a cardboard "Islamic Bomb" around the country, while right-wing Urdu magazines like Zindagi wrote about the wondrous miracles of Chaghi. They tell us that divine intervention had protected the mard-e-

momin who prepared the nuclear test-site from poison-spitting snakes, that four chickens sufficed to feast a thousand of the faithful after the tests, and that the Prophet Mohammed took personal charge of protecting the centrifuges of Kahuta.

But it's the Kalams and Khans, the Chidambarams and Mubarikmands, who won like nobody else. Public adulation, unlimited funds, private fiefdoms, they have them all now. Their place in posterity has been reserved, and to their worshippers and admirers they are the Oppenheimers and Tellers, the Feynmans and Bethes. Alas, these subcontinental heroes are quite unknown to those who do real science. No formula or process is known by their names, and no discovery of significance attributed to their efforts. But it is perhaps the kilotons and megatons that matter.

And the losers? They are the people of Pakistan and India, held hostage by civil and military leaders with tunnel vision and bloated pride, now forced to live under the fearful shadow of nuclear tipped missiles that will someday appear without warning from the other side. Over this year bombs have followed bombs, missiles have chased missiles into the stratosphere, and the hawks have flown ever higher, screaming obscene threats while feeding on juicy tit-bits of uranium and plutonium. As weaponization accelerates, missile bearing trucks shall eventually course the highways and lie safely hidden in gullies and ditches. Each crew will have to be fully equipped to send its deadly load across the border. Will some fanatical crew commander someday decide it is time to settle scores once and for all?

It is a tiresome truth that the poor are losers in any big game, and they certainly are in this one too. But let's recall that not long ago some glib-tongued apologists had tried to make their cunning argument in two parts. Nuclear weapons are cheap, we were told, said the first part. Maybe so. But when you add on the costs of delivery vehicles, measures and countermeasures, command systems, and the whole infrastructure, then the cheapness evaporates. Bharat Srinivisan of Columbia University has estimated the total cost of the Indian nuclear program in 1998 currency terms to be between US\$48 billion to US\$72 billion. That is hardly cheap. The second part said that a country won't need expensive armaments of the conventional kind if it goes nuclear. Events have proved this to be complete rubbish. The Pakistani chief of army staff has told us that nuclear weapons are essentially ornamental, unfit for fighting wars of times to come. Hence

we need more conventional arms -- tanks, aircraft, ships, artillery. The sky is the limit.

Xenophobia kills civil society. Declare your nukes and missiles as national symbols, get the slogan-chanting hate-filled crowds on to the streets, and define hate of India as love for Pakistan. He (the Raiwind estate one) and she (the Swiss SGN one) are patriotic Pakistanis by this definition. It matters little that our rulers, feudals, bureaucrats, and soldiers plunder the country's wealth, flout the laws of the land, and reduce its people to destitution. Our pseudo-patriotism gives sanction for harassing, beating, and kidnapping political rivals, any one who exposes corruption, and civil rights and human rights activists. It allows for the abduction of Najam Sethi from his bedroom in the middle of the night and charging him as an agent of evil India. In truth, nucleomania destroys civil society.

I fear that the worst losers of the nuclear game may well be the people of Kashmir. Much suffering lies in store for them. Safely hidden behind their nuclear shields, the brave leaders of India and Pakistan are perfectly willing to fight for their noble principles down to the very last Kashmiri. Clashes along the line of control have reached unprecedented ferocity in recent weeks, prompting the UN Secretary General to appeal for calm. India has been badly stung by the loss of its aircraft and helicopters. Crossing of the LOC is very possible and the Lahore Declaration has been buried. Meanwhile an emboldened Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, based near Lahore, has declared that it will throw acid on the faces of those women who walk on the streets of Srinagar in tight clothes. But I suppose we Pakistanis must still pray that they succeed in liberating Kashmir.

There is one loser for whom one need not feel sorry. Booted out after his party lost support, Pokhran did little good for Atal Bihari Vajpayee. A nationwide survey conducted in December for India Today magazine found the top issue among voters to have been inflation, followed by unemployment. National security was rated among the least important; half the Indians interviewed had forgotten the nuclear tests. Whereas Indian voters had mixed feelings, most of Pakistans' Punjabi officialdom was sorry to see someone in their own image exit the scene. But this may not be for long and Vajpayee may yet return in triumph. After all the Indians are no less drenched in madness than us.