



A serviceman stands guard near the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in the course of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the Zaporizhzhia region, in Ukraine. FILE PHOTO

Post Hiroshima: Disquieting accounts of nuclear modernity

Three books put India's nuclear policy under the lens and call for an awareness about the risks involved; a democratic society, they argue, can live with the a-bomb hazard only by doing the opposite of what it encourages: expanding deliberation rather than compressing it

Vasudevan Mukunth

Nuclear power has had a revival in 2025. It's been on people's minds, thanks to Donald Trump's promise to restart U.S. nuclear tests, the U.S.'s strikes in Iran over the latter's plans for a nuke, Israel's aggression in West Asia, the India-Pakistan skirmishes, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Even the SHANTI Bill, while being about civilian nuclear energy, has led to latent fears surfacing about diverting reactors to produce weapons-grade material.

A peculiar unease follows the topic, arriving less as terror and more as after-image: a half-remembered headline about a missile test, a clip of a spokesperson promising "full readiness", a map that reappears every few months in a feed. Then the screen changes. A celebrity divorce. A market chart. A war far away, then closer. Your mind files the bomb away under "real but not immediate".

Absent presence'

In her 2013 book *Atomic Mumbai*, University of Sussex anthropologist Raminder Kaur gives voice to the post-nuclear psychological posture. The book is an ethnography of "the nuclear" as a lived atmosphere. In its pages, Kaur moves between Mumbai's institutional geography, popular culture, and intimate narratives to describe how nuclear risk has become normalised as an "absent presence" the state manages using trust and denial.

The book's strength is the attention it pays to how the state uses the invisibility of nuclear radiation and its own secrecy to shape what people can know, fear or

even ignore. At times its conceptual framing can seem overextended but the empirical material and Kaur's interpretive range make *Atomic Mumbai* a disquieting account of nuclear modernity.

Nuclear risks become "absent presences", Kaur writes, "in that they hang invisibly in the air". In a city close to the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, people live in accommodation rather than dread, with worries about "radiation leaks and a potential site of attacks of terror... relegated to the back of the mind".

The escalation threat

The information age has intensified this. Nuclear dangers operate on long horizons yet they sit awkwardly with algorithms trained to keep the attention flowing. Even when war is open and intercontinental, nuclear perils appear mainly as an expert's rhetorical flare – a threat to "escalate", a reminder that "all options are on the table", a commentariat's now-familiar warning that this conflict is "different" because it involves a nuclear-armed state. Then the feed moves on.

The democratic problem is that the secrecy converts what should be a public question into something specialists insist they have a monopoly to understand. *Prisoners of the Nuclear Dream* (2003) is a great antidote to the faith expected of citizens here. It's a bracing and, in the productive sense, uneven collection of essays that treats India's nuclear weapons programme as a political economy rather than as a mystique. As M.V. Ramana writes, "Secrecy stifles independence, erodes excellence and breeds mistakes (and even lies!)."

Its essays on strategy, institutions, and the human and ecological burdens of bomb-making together argue that nuclear policy has narrowed democratic scrutiny. The collection's strength is its insistence on material consequences, opportunity costs, and analysis over rhetoric.

Without such engagement, however, the result can be an idiosyncratic civilian experience of nuclear power. The people only encounter it through ritualised talk about prestige, pride, "great power" status, technological self-reliance, etc. and through episodic moments like anniversaries and threats. Between them, however, the 'nuclear life' continues in what Ramana describes as the private enclaves of the nuclear establishment, where policy directions harden into ostensibly inevitable strategic imperatives.

Open war further invites the people to treat violence as normal. Nuclear weapons here promise an 'ultimate' insurance policy while flattering a state's sense of control. But to their credit, Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik puncture one of the bomb's most seductive claims in *New Nukes* (2000): "There is no plausible evidence to show that even a single case of attempted nuclear blackmail ever succeeded in its aims."

Dismantling myths

Indeed, the best chapters of *New Nukes* – a forceful polemic against South Asia's 1998 nuclearisation – dismantle the folk logic of deterrence and situate Indian and Pakistani decisions in domestic politics and prestige.

The book's forte is its authors' moral clarity and their ability to link regional danger to the hypocrisies of established nuclear powers. Readers seeking policy

nuance may find its stance uncompromising but as an argument it's rigorous: that the only thing a-bombs do reliably is raise the ceiling of potential harm.

Thus, the vague unease surrounding nuclear chatter becomes clearer. It's a fear of ruin as much as discomfort with the governance model the bomb demands. Nuclear order depends on compressed decision times, compressed chains of command, and compressed information streams that place speed before deliberation. It depends on hierarchy because, in the last instance, someone must have the authority to decide, and on secrecy because the apparatus claims it can't function if it's exposed.

Ultimately, it depends on a public trained to accept that some questions must remain unanswered.

Guarantee, concern

In a time of endless awareness, people often respond to too much catastrophe by rationing their attention. They disengage from the news not because they don't care but because caring constantly becomes harmful. That's a humane response to an inhuman media environment but it's also a politically convenient one for nuclear states.

Kaur's phrase of risks "relegated to the back of the mind" is in this regard a clue about what nuclear politics does to ordinary people.

The bomb is designed to be both everywhere as an ultimate guarantee yet nowhere as an everyday concern. But a democratic society can live with such a hazard only by doing the opposite of what the hazard encourages: expanding deliberation rather than compressing it.