Atomic Bombay

Living with the radiance of a thousand suns

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The nuclear topic has been of significant concern at global, national and local levels, but has not received adequate ethnographic attention in the inner nuclear weapon states. Much of the existing literature on nuclear debates in South Asia concerns itself with international relations, national policy, science and economics rather than the intricacies of political cultures and vernacular lives.

So how do people interpret nuclear issues? How does radiation affect human lives? Where is it, what is it, how is it imagined and to what ends? The research set out to explore such questions in Bombay (Mumbai) through the thoughts, feelings and experiences of its residents, past and present. The study focused on people from different walks of life, most of whom were based in the vicinity of an atomic research centre in the city. The research concentrated on understanding how nuclear issues penetrated people’s lives, in particular through their engagement with popular culture.

The research

The research is based on 12-month fieldwork in 2006, with one-month follow-up fieldwork in 2010 to update the findings. It consisted of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, archival research of newspapers from 1945, as well as analysis of texts and cultural productions such as historical and contemporary films, advertisements and comic books. The focus of the fieldwork was conducted in the city of Bombay (Mumbai). However, it also included a stay in Nangi-Kamachi District, the vicinity of a nuclear power plant, in order to provide a comparative perspective.

Findings

The project enabled the recording of idiosyncratic and lesser known accounts about atomic science which had been erased from India’s national history. It led to control atomic science to develop the post-independent nation. In particular, Nandi-Kamachi-based JNU in the mid-1940s was formed as a result of the atomic bomb in furthering its campaigns for non-violence and independence from British colonialism in the late 1940s.

The atomic metaphor manifests itself in countless cultural productions and has been used to sell a variety of commodities from the mid-1940s ranging from postcards to nuclear power. In the process, the atom bomb and the atomic metaphor have been simultaneously fetishised as a source of incredible power, and normalised through repeated use in the culture industries.

By analysing the local impact of international treaties such as the Indo-US civilian nuclear agreement (2008) and national decisions on nuclear development, the study provided a unique, “ground-up” perspective on nuclear issues. Rather than scientific rationalisations it allowed for a culturally embedded understanding of nuclear science and politics. The analysis thus looked at how these issues were mediated through vernacular culture, in particular films, advertisements, posters, comic books and popular speech.

Key publications


‘Nuclear Revelations’ in Onassiship in South Asia: Cultural Regulation between Seduction and Seduction, Raminder Kaur and William Masculinity (India University Press, 2009).

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