The Media in India and the Indian Nuclear Weapons Policy 1998–2018: An Abdication of Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The media in India did not critically examine India’s decision in 1998 to openly go nuclear. Its coverage reflected the general celebratory mood in society at the time. It has not changed its approach in the decades since 1998; the changes in the media since then and the growth of an aggressive nationalism in Indian politics in the intervening decades have put a value on nuclear weapons which the media has uncritically endorsed. An examination of the coverage by the daily The Hindu over a decade (2000–2009) illustrates the imbalance in coverage and comment. On the whole the media failed to provide a forum for public education on nuclear weapons, or for analysis and comment, or to build an agenda against nuclear weapons.

Introduction

The past quarter century has seen momentous changes in India. Economic, social and political changes have transformed India into a very different country altogether. Some of these changes have been inter-related; some have been independent of each other. Whatever their nature, India in the late 2010s is a very different country from what it was in the early 1990s.

This period has spanned the two decades since May 1998 when India conducted a series of nuclear tests (“Pokharan-II”), effectively announcing that it was now a nuclear weapons state. The larger changes in India’s economy, society and politics have influenced how the media has covered official India’s policy and programmes on nuclear weapons.

Another important set of factors that has influenced the Indian media’s coverage of nuclear weapons since 1998 has been the set of changes within the media in India itself. The media in India today – print, television (TV) and online – is unrecognisable in size, editorial policy, and news practices from what it was in the 1990s. An important shift since the late 1990s has been the explosion of TV in India, with the emergence of multiple channels and 24×7 news.
This paper situates the Indian media’s approach to nuclear weapons, first, against the larger backdrop of a changing India and, second, against a changing media as well. The argument here is that these changes were favourable to the nuclear weapons establishment and allowed policy-makers to determine public opinion. As a result, there has been very little public criticism of India openly deciding to go nuclear.

The paper also examines in detail the coverage by The Hindu, one of India’s leading English dailies, of nuclear weapons over a 10-year period 2000–2009 and then again in 2017 and 2018 (January–June) in the run-up to the 20th anniversary of the Pokharan-II tests.

The discussion is, unfortunately, entirely of the English media. The Indian language media is much larger in its reach. However, it is suggested here that the manner in which the Indian language media treats nuclear weapons is much the same as that of the English language media.

**Media and the “Bomb” in the Immediate Aftermath of 1998**

In news reports, editorial comment and photographs published after Pokharan-II, extending for 6 months and more, the overall tone was celebratory.

Newspaper reports were framed in a manner that celebrated the “achievement” of India conducting the five nuclear tests; editorial opinion was almost entirely laudatory and most editorial/op-ed pieces also congratulated the government of India on its decision to go nuclear. The newspapers reflected the times. Political groups of almost all hues hailed the arrival of nuclear weapons in India and even scientist groups acclaimed the “successful” testing of nuclear devices.¹

Since the press chose not to be critical, the narrative was easily controlled by the Government, and by the nuclear establishment (consisting of scientists, bureaucrats in policy-making positions and strategic affairs commentators) in particular. The dominant refrain in the media when it came to nuclear power had always been overwhelmingly in favour, with the critics kept at the margins.² While the nuclear weapon option did see some debate for and against during the 1960–1980s, there was a change after Pokharan-II. There seemed to be a near unanimous approval among commentators in the media who were drawn primarily from the nuclear establishment.

The press was satisfied with the official news hand-outs from the Government; it give space to all the nuclear/security experts in the Government and outside who argued that this was a bold decision that would enhance India’s security.

To understand the influence that the strategic affairs community exercises in the Indian media one must understand that through much of India’s history as an independent nation (1947 onwards), it has had tense relations with two of its biggest neighbours, China and Pakistan. India has fought four limited/full-scale wars (1948, 1965 and 1971 with Pakistan and 1962 with China) and innumerable stand-offs. This

¹An important aspect of this chorus of praise was that it was seen as a glorious achievement of Indian science. The larger academy (with a few exceptions) did not question the fact that there was very little science in the conduct of the nuclear tests.

²There are at times separate nuclear research reactors where fissile material for nuclear weapons is produced. In other instances spent fuel from nuclear power reactors is re-processed for use as fissile material. In India, the connection between nuclear power and nuclear weapons has always been kept hidden. For a detailed discussion see Ramana (2012).
has made external security an extremely important part of political and everyday discourse. This is where members of the strategic affairs community become important – providing analysis, offering advice to the Government and laying out scenarios for India’s relations with its neighbours and in the world at large. They have used the media to make their views known and the media has given them considerable space because they see this as an area where they themselves have very limited knowledge. The media would also never have second thoughts when it came to giving space to writers offering suggestions to “strengthen” external security.

The influence of the strategic affairs community in the media has been particularly strong in the area of nuclear weapons. From the mid-1960s onwards, when China first exploded a nuclear device, there was a regular stream of op-ed pieces in the media by the strategic affairs community about whether or not India should also go nuclear. Academics, scientists, serving members of the nuclear establishment and retired defence personnel used the media for these discussions, even as the official stance was that India was against nuclear weapons.3

Amidst all the uncritical coverage in the media after Pokharan-II, there was very little discussion at the time, either as comment or in the form of explainers, of the many issues that should have naturally suggested themselves: (1) the destructive power of nuclear weapons and the horrors of a war involving these weapons, (2) the risks of possessing nuclear weapons and especially the unique risks when two neighbouring countries go nuclear, (3) on whether nuclear weapons could guarantee peace in South Asia and (4) the financial implications of nuclear weaponisation, and the like.

Yet, even within this deafening chorus of uncritical praise and self-satisfaction about India going nuclear, there was a small group of vehement voices that made itself heard, and at least a few sections of the media gave it the space to express themselves.

The critical opinion pieces/features that did manage to appear in the media were prepared by this group of writers based in India and abroad. These articles spoke of the immorality of the nuclear weapon; India’s formal abdication of a disciplined stand on nuclear weapons; the human catastrophe that would befall India (and the rest of South Asia) in the event of a nuclear war; and more. There were reports of groups of scientists protesting the acquisition of nuclear weapons. There were also the occasional and isolated statements by citizens groups that were critical of the decision. A selection of these pieces was meticulously put together and circulated at the time and remains accessible in a couple of archives.4

Ever since these weapons of mass destruction were first used in the world in 1945, critical media analysis in a nuclear weapons country has always been limited. This is to be expected since nuclear weapons have been associated with power, security and “national interest”. Yet the Indian media’s reporting of and discussion on nuclear weapons went to the extreme (as perhaps it did in Pakistan) in being overwhelmingly celebratory and jingoistic in nature. The critical voices in the media were not only very

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3 For a discussion of the influence of the strategic affairs community see Perkovich (1999) and the essays in Ramana and Reddy (2003).

4 This was the work entirely of one person, Harsh Kapoor, and the archives to visit for the articles are (1) http://s-asians-against-nukes.org/and (2) of the South Asian Citizens Wire/Web and available at http://insaf.net/pipermail/sacw_insaf.net/, http://www.sacw.net/peace/index.html.
few, but were also those of commentators external to the newspaper. Within the dailies, the framing of news reports, the news analysis and editorial comment all endorsed India going nuclear. There was hardly a newspaper that found it important to depute its staff to prepare stories on some of the more important questions around India’s decision to acquire nuclear weapons. The media in 1998 endorsed and joined the celebratory national mood on India’s decision to formally assemble a nuclear arsenal.

To understand why the media abdicated its responsibilities immediately after Pokharan-II, one should look at the role of the media in society in three broad terms: (1) as an avenue for public education (providing news and educating the reader); (2) as a forum for analysis, disputation and comment; and (3) as a forum for agenda building.5

It would be difficult to argue that in the aftermath of Pokharan-II, the media diligently carried out its functions in any of these areas. It did not carry out any serious public education, other than provide the news and there again it was largely dependent on the official version, which it accepted at face value. An instance is the coverage of the debate over the successes or otherwise of what were claimed to be thermo-nuclear tests. It did not attempt to educate readers on the very need for tests; or on the risks/dangers the nuclear weapons posed; or on the permanent destructive potential of these weapons.

On analysis, disputation and comment, most of the commentary was positive, and focussed on claims that with the decision to go nuclear India’s relations with Pakistan would move to a new and higher level to the benefit of India, and that the relations with China too would be reset to ensure India’s security. All that the media did do by way of critical analysis – or rather what a handful of newspapers like The Hindu did – was to give a limited amount of space to critical comment that came its way.

On perhaps the most powerful function of the press – building an agenda – the Indian press completely abdicated its role. Not a single newspaper was willing to swim against the national mood and take up the mission of campaigning against a nuclear arsenal for India.

A newly elected right-wing government (the National Democratic Alliance led by the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]) had come to power in 1998 promising a more aggressive assertion of India’s interests. The BJP, which had always prided itself on furthering Hindu nationalism, was able to successfully mobilise widespread support for its decision to go nuclear. The press abandoned its critical functions and allowed itself to be swept along in this current of celebratory jingoism.

This approach of the media to nuclear weapons in the immediate aftermath of the Pokharan-II tests in 1998 was to continue in the subsequent two decades aided by two parallel and at times mutually reinforcing processes.

A Media Transformed

To understand the particulars about how the media in India approached the subject of India as a nuclear weapons state from the late 1990s/early 2000s onwards, one needs to understand the qualitative and quantitative transformation of the press over the past quarter century (Reddy 2018).

5Adapted from N. Ram (2011).
Co-terminus with and related to the transformation of the Indian economy since the early 1990s was a dramatic transformation of the press in India. First, the vast expansion of the availability of new goods and services with economic liberalisation gave a major thrust to consumer advertising. As advertising budgets increased substantially, the press sought to utilise the potential for greater revenue and thence to increased profitability. Since the ability to obtain a larger and larger slice of the advertising market depended on the size of the readership/viewership, newspapers and later TV used a variety of pricing and content strategies to expand their reach. The result was what can only be called an “advertising dominance”, to rephrase the term “advertising subsidy” which was used by scholars Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky to describe the US media of the 1980s (Herman and Chomsky 1994).

Second, as the media business became more and more profitable, the norms and practices of an independent press came to be abandoned. Expansion of circulation/viewership came first. Acting as a watchdog and speaking truth to power came second. Along the way, fact checking, credibility and reliability were given short shrift as news became a commodity that had to be loaded with content and packaged in a fashion that would attract the largest readership/viewership.

Third, the expansion of the media was not restricted to the English newspapers. In fact, the regional language newspapers grew faster for a variety of reasons (greater literacy, political mobilisation in the regions and also the whipping up of communal passions in the rural hinterland). More important was the expansion of private TV with the change in regulations in 1999/2000. There was an explosion of TV with India by late 2017 having handed out 877 TV licences that were active, of which as many as 389 were for news channels. In this “new” medium, which was more aggressive in seeking to expand its market share and more prone to sensationalism, the conventions of journalism were to be found even less in evidence.

It was in the period under review – the two decades since 1998 – that TV in India began to overshadow that of print in reach. It was also in this period that the internet in India began to come of age. It was only in the second decade of the twenty-first century (the 2010s) that pure news and magazine portals on the internet began to grow and make their presence felt; increasingly they are becoming more vibrant than print and TV. Taking the period as a whole where it comes to strategic affairs, it was print and TV that were more important in their coverage and influence.

Fourth, while this was the larger story there certainly were differences within the media. The smaller publications could demonstrate a greater forthrightness. There were many investigative stories exposing malfeasance. This could also be dangerous, with journalists away from the metropolitan centres running the risk of arrest and losing their lives in the cause of maintaining the freedom of the press.

Yet in this two-faced media, one face was more dominant. This was a media that increasingly saw itself more as “a business opportunity” rather than an institution that was crucial for maintaining democratic practice. Many scholars like Chaudhuri (2010) have made similar arguments about the transformation of the Indian media during the 1990s and 2000s into business enterprises where the freedom of expression was threatened.

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6 This was best expressed in the statement of the publisher of India’s largest selling English daily who in an interview in 2011 said “We are in the advertising business; we are not in the news business” (Auletta 2012).

7 See Chaudhuri (2010, 61, 70 and 74) for a discussion of the growth of the media as a business and the impact on freedom of expression.
It is important to note that even as business considerations became increasingly important and the questioning/adversarial role of the media shrank in importance, there were occasions when the press would seek to establish its legitimacy with aggressive coverage of social and economic issues. In some respects the press in India has truly taken an independent position.

For example, during much of the 1990s and again in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the media – print and TV – did report and analyse in detail many people’s movements such as on struggles against dams and later on protests against acquisition of land for industrial and infrastructural projects. Later it diligently followed up on allegations of corruption by government functionaries and played a major role in discrediting the United Progressive Alliance government of 2009–2014. In all these areas, the press has taken an adversarial stand against the Government demonstrating its independence. Journalists have also paid with their lives when they have taken an oppositional position and have angered powerful business and political groups.

It was a different matter though where external security/defence – loosely described as “national security” – was involved. Even in the past, as elsewhere in the world, the press would pull its punches on national security. It would show a tendency to uncritically accept information from government sources and blindly endorse government policy. As the tabloidization of the Indian media grew after the 1990s, the press went further and acted as cheerleaders of an aggressive kind of nationalism.

The transformation of the Indian media to one where the search for market share and a tabloidization of news were the dominant features were not the only reasons for the media refusing to interrogate India’s nuclear policy in the decades since Pokharan-II. There were wider society-wide changes that persuaded the media to accept the nuclear status quo.

**Emergence of an Aggressive Nationalism**

As the Indian economy began growing rapidly, first in the 1980s, and then again from the mid 1990s, there was a sense articulated by the strategic affairs community that India’s moment on the world stage had arrived. Most of these strategic affairs experts were based in think tanks in the capital New Delhi and had close access to the media and had their views heard in the print media and later on TV as well. This view was articulated by the (western) international community as well, partly because it wanted India to act as a counterweight to China. The description of India as “the fastest growing economy in the world” during some of the years in the first two decades of the twenty-first century fuelled the celebration of India’s arrival as a major economic power.

India as an economic power was projected as India as a military power, again supported in part by the new closeness between India and the US, and military exercises in the Indian Ocean with the US, Australia and Japan.

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8Even here, the press could on occasion perform the functions expected of it. For instance between 2004 and 2008, the Times of India group in India and the Jang group of Pakistan had the joint “Aman ki Asha” (Desire for Peace) initiative. The two publications would reproduce news from each other and promote cross-border exchange of ideas. While this went on sporadically for four years, it died after the re-emergence of tensions between India and Pakistan, following the 2008 terror attacks on Mumbai.
Alongside this greater self-awareness there were major changes taking place in India’s politics. From the late 1980s onwards, there was a mobilisation around a Hindu right-wing, even fundamentalist, agenda. This took the BJP to power first in 1998–2004 and then again in 2014. An important element of this agenda was an expression of an aggressive nationalism.

It is built around a claim that after centuries of neglect and “weakness”, the time had come for India to show its strength to the world. The aggressive nationalism has been more strident since 2014 than it was when a BJP-headed government was in power during 1998–2004 when Pokharan-II was conducted. However, the overall idea that India’s time had come stretched across governments of all hues, going back to the late 1990s.

The media, by and large, articulated and espoused this idea, which often bordered on triumphalism in spite of the many political, social and economic failures at home and abroad. One can therefore see how in this scenario, the notion that nuclear weapons are, as one commentator had earlier said, “a currency of power” was endorsed by the press.

In this atmosphere in which India’s relations with China and Pakistan continued to be strained to various degrees, the view took hold that nuclear weapons were necessary for India’s external security and that they were a natural expression of a global player.

However, as will be discussed later, within a continuity, the perspective on nuclear weapons in the Indian media over the two decades between 1998 and 2018 ebbed and flowed with the state of relations with Pakistan and China; with the nature of domestic politics, with important development like the India–US nuclear accord of 2005 and the debate thereafter on domestic approval of the Indo–US accord.

**Coverage of Nuclear Weapon Issues in The Hindu**

As an illustration, this paper examines the coverage of nuclear issues in *The Hindu*, one of India’s leading English dailies. *The Hindu* has traditionally been considered the most comprehensive newspaper and since the late 1980s it has also been considered the most liberal/progressive matters on a range of topics from domestic politics to national security. The newspaper often referred to as one of India’s finest newspapers and most liberal newspaper has for these reasons been used by scholars in the past to assess media priorities and perspectives. The newspaper has always advocated global disarmament of nuclear arms. So *The Hindu*’s coverage would in many ways represent the most critical coverage possibly available in the Indian media on nuclear weapons. If coverage of nuclear weapons after Pokhran in India’s most liberal newspaper were to turn approving of nuclear weapons, then this would indicate how far the media as a whole had

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9While there was a certain continuity in policy across governments, it was a BJP-headed government that first, as a minority government, tried but could not manage to conduct nuclear tests in 1996 during a short-lived 13-day tenure. It did succeed soon after it formed a stable majority government in 1998 and this flowed from a decision the party had long held to go openly nuclear.

10In two volumes separated by more than a decade, the economists Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen studied the front and editorial pages of *the Hindu* to assess media priorities on development vs security matters, as also on the priorities given to health issues. See Dreze and Sen (2000, 300–303) and Dreze and Sen (2013, 143).
become uncritical and approving of nuclear weapons. It is for this reason that *The Hindu* was chosen for analysis. A secondary reason was that it was the only leading English newspaper for which the online archives are available for a period of almost two decades.

Looking at the longer period one can see that while the newspaper frequently reported statements of the political leadership and strategic affairs supporting India’s decision and gave space to commentary of the same kind, critiques were few and sparse in between.

To illustrate with a few reports/commentary: The Prime Minister of India was reported to have spoken of nuclear weapons as a need:

> India believed a credible minimum nuclear deterrent was the basic security umbrella “we owe to our people”.

*The Hindu* often prominently reported on hawkish positions. One report covered in some detail a speech of a leading member of the strategic affairs community, K. Subrahmanyam, where he said:

> … it was not enough for India to have nuclear weapons but it should be able to project a credible deterrence immediately working out strategies, policies and command and control structure.

The opinion pages of *The Hindu*, for the larger part, would publish commentary that pointed out that conducting nuclear tests did not make for an “effective” nuclear arsenal. Thus, V.R. Raghavan, a former defence services officer who frequently wrote in the press, wrote in the initial years after Pokharan-II:

> There are now serious doubts about the nature and quality of the Indian deterrent. The questions on the thermonuclear test, the Government’s ambiguous position on the nuclear doctrine and its inability to put together a credible nuclear command and control structure create serious security problems.

There was no doubt the occasional critique in the same newspaper of India’s decision to go nuclear that also appeared on the opinion pages. But there were few of them. Exceptions were like the one written by Jean Dreze, an economist who was also an activist, in 2002 when India and Pakistan mobilised for war:

> The problem with nuclear war is that grasping its horrors is often beyond our imaginative powers. That makes it possible to talk about nuclear war as if it were a “game”.

Years later when the India–US nuclear deal occupied the headlines, commentary that would look at the implications for India’s weapons programme would only ask if it would endanger the Indian nuclear deterrent. Thus in 2006 one analysis in *The Hindu* came to the conclusion:

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11"We Owe Our People a Minimum N-Deterrent: PM," *The Hindu*, 12 May 2001, [https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2001/05/12/stories/02120009.htm](https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2001/05/12/stories/02120009.htm).

12"N-arms Alone Not Enough: Subrahmanyam Panel," *The Hindu*, 29 October 2000, [https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2000/10/29/stories/02290008.htm](https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2000/10/29/stories/02290008.htm).

13"Dangerous Nuclear Uncertainties," by VR Raghavan, *The Hindu*, 13 March 2000, [https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2000/03/13/stories/05132523.htm](https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2000/03/13/stories/05132523.htm).

14"The Warped Logic of Nuclear Gambles," by Jean Dreze, *The Hindu*, 27 May 2002, [https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2002/05/27/stories/2002052700031000.htm](https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2002/05/27/stories/2002052700031000.htm).
there is nothing in any agreement India has signed that commits it to cap or reduce its weapons-grade fissile material stockpiles.\textsuperscript{15}

Finally, in an illustration that time did not change the media perspective, the only commentary published in \textit{The Hindu} in 2018 on the 20th anniversary of the nuclear tests was definite in its opinion about India’s decision at the time: “...it is certain that the action was timely and inevitable”\textsuperscript{16}

This article has tabulated all the articles (news and opinion) which were published in \textit{The Hindu} during the decade 2000–2009\textsuperscript{17} and classified them to demonstrate the relative neglect of critiques of nuclear weapons as also the unwillingness of the media to take up an agenda building role against nuclear weapons. We have also covered 2017 and January–June 2018, as a representative of the run-up to the 20th anniversary of the Pokharan-II tests.

The articles surveyed were those on (1) the Front page, (2) National pages (2), (3) Editorial page (1 page, and after 2004, 2 pages). This would consist of reports and opinion articles/news analysis over a total of between four and five pages every day of the week. This pretty much covers everything of importance \textit{The Hindu} may have published on nuclear matters.\textsuperscript{18}

Table 1 lists the number of articles on different aspects of nuclear weapons published in \textit{The Hindu} during these years.

Two distinct phases can be seen in the coverage of nuclear issues. The first is from 2000 to 2004, and the second from 2005 to 2009. The distinction is the emergence of the Indo-US nuclear deal of 2005 (for which preparations began in 2004) as a major topic of news and debate.

In the first phase, the figures speak for themselves. In the years soon after the Pokhran-II tests, reports of official statements/views and an analysis from a “positive” perspective of India’s nuclear weapon policy exceed manifold the number of pieces that critically reported/commented on disarmament, questioned India’s nuclear weapons policy or explained the risks and dangers of nuclear weapons. If one combines all articles published on India’s nuclear weapon policy, on that of China and Pakistan as also on the NPT etc. (Column 5 of Table 1), they dwarf the number of pieces that presented a disarmament/abolition perspective (Column 6).\textsuperscript{19}

There were few news reports of protests/statements/peace meetings. Of course, this reflected in part the fact that there was little opposition or criticism in the public sphere. But there were still many small initiatives around the country that went unreported. These initiatives were covered by the South Asian network cited in footnote (4) above.

The op-ed articles that were critical of the nuclear option were also written by a small number of critical writers from India and outside: Praful Bidwai, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Zia

\textsuperscript{15}“The Nuclear Deal and ‘Minimum Ddeterrence’,” by Siddharth Vardarajan, \textit{The Hindu}, 10 July 2006, \url{https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/The-nuclear-deal-and-%60minimum-deterrence/article15730040.ece}.

\textsuperscript{16}“Pokharan II, Twenty Years Later,” by T.P. Sreenivasan, \textit{The Hindu}, 11 May 2018, \url{https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/pokhran-ii-twenty-years-later/article23843115.ece}.

\textsuperscript{17}The web archives of the print edition of \textit{The Hindu} are now available only from 2000 onwards.

\textsuperscript{18}The few reports left out are those that may have been published on the local and international pages.

\textsuperscript{19}The classification here of the group of articles covering disarmament/abolition and which were critical of the Indian nuclear policy is also very broad such that pieces from a “realist” perspective that accepted India’s decision but spoke of safety, de-mating and risk reduction were included in the group.
Mian, R. Rajaraman, MV Ramana, and Achin Vanaik. On the realist perspective, a frequent presence on the pages of *The Hindu* was VR Raghavan, a former army officer who headed a strategic affairs think tank in New Delhi.

Some would argue that one should look not at all coverage and comment on nuclear weapon issues, but only at comment on the editorial/op-ed pages. The argument is that "news is news" and all news will in any case be covered. This may not be an entirely correct argument since it ignores editorial bias in news selection. Still, Table 2 presents coverage of nuclear weapon issues in only editorials/edit page articles/op-ed articles/news analyses, again in *The Hindu* for 2000–2009.

The numbers are much smaller but the picture is slightly different for a few years where there are around the same number of opinion pieces critical of nuclear weapons (including those with a “realist” perspective) as those that commented on them from the dominant perspective. This owes as much to the persistence of the same handful of commentators mentioned earlier as to the relative openness of the Editors of *The Hindu*.

In the second phase (2005–2009), a completely different picture emerges, one dominated by coverage of the Indo-US Nuclear accord of 2005. The public debate, the dissection by scientists, defence experts and the strategic affairs community attracted a great deal of coverage and analysis. Indeed, the accord was one of the main political issues of the time and led even to a reconfiguration of political forces in 2008.

*The Hindu* may have given more space than the other newspapers at least in its editorial/op-ed pages to the 2005 accord, but all the dailies and TV channels did as a whole extensively cover this aspect. Two aspects about the media attention given to the Indo-US nuclear accord are noteworthy. One, the quantum of coverage (Tables 1 and 2) seems to

### Table 1. Coverage of Nuclear Weapon Issues in *The Hindu* (2000–2009, and 2017, 2018).

| Year (1) | Nuclear Weapons | Nuclear Weapons | NPT, CTBT, NMD, ABM | Total (Cols 2 + 3 + 4) | India – Disarmament, Abolition, Nuclear-Free South Asia, "Realist" Measures to Safeguard N. Arms (6) | Nuclear Power – India (7) | Others (Int, N. Korea, Iran) (8) | Indo-US Nuclear Accord/ NSG Waiver/ Nuclear (Fuel, etc.) Deals with Other Countries (9) |
|---------|----------------|----------------|----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2000    | 21             | 4              | 18                   | 43                    | 11                                                                                             | 8                         | 18                             | 0                                                                                         |
| 2001    | 21             | 10             | 11                   | 42                    | 4                                                                                              | 3                         | 6                              | 0                                                                                         |
| 2002    | 20             | 6              | 5                    | 31                    | 9                                                                                              | 0                         | 10                             | 0                                                                                         |
| 2003    | 18             | 4              | 0                    | 22                    | 5                                                                                              | 0                         | 6                              | 0                                                                                         |
| 2004    | 6              | 10             | 5                    | 21                    | 6                                                                                              | 8                         | 5                              | 4                                                                                         |
| 2005    | 1              | 4              | 5                    | 10                    | 1                                                                                              | 16                        | 17                             | 26                                                                                        |
| 2006    | 11             | 2              | 0                    | 13                    | 3                                                                                              | 12                        | 26                             | 136                                                                                       |
| 2007    | 5              | 4              | 2                    | 11                    | 7                                                                                              | 9                         | 13                             | 73                                                                                       |
| 2008    | 3              | 5              | 20                   | 28                    | 3                                                                                              | 13                        | 5                              | 92                                                                                       |
| 2009    | 10             | 7              | 9                    | 26                    | 1                                                                                              | 7                         | 2                              | 22                                                                                       |
| 2017    | 9              | 0              | 1                    | 10                    | 5                                                                                              | 4                         | 4                              | 3                                                                                         |
| 2018    | 7              | 0              | 1                    | 8                     | 1                                                                                              | 1                         | 2                              | 2                                                                                         |

*Based on reading of all Front page, National pages (2) and Editorial/Op-ed Pages (1/2) of print edition (Chennai) of *The Hindu*, available at https://www.thehindu.com/archive/.*

NPT: Nuclear Proliferation Treaty; CTBT: Comprehensive Test Ban treaty; NMD: National Missile Defence; ABM: anti-Ballistic Missiles; NSG: Nuclear Suppliers Group.
have been exceptionally high, more even than of nuclear weapons in the early years (2000–2004). Two, it said something about the nature of the discussion that the debate in India was framed entirely around whether India would retain its autonomy in developing nuclear weapons and expanding nuclear power if the accord was operationalized.

Tables 1 and 2 also provide details of coverage by *The Hindu* in 2017 and 2018 (January–June). Was there a revisiting of India’s decision to go nuclear as the 20th anniversary of Pokhran-II approached? Not so. The small spike in coverage in 2017 on the op-ed pages was of articles discussing the 2017 UN nuclear ban treaty. In May 2018 there was only one article on Pokhran-II, and that one favourably reviewed India’s nuclear decisions of the past (Sreenivasan 2018). The anniversary was not used for any critical appraisal.

The Media and Nuclear Weapons: Celebration, Silence, Aggression and Normalisation

A rough periodisation over the 20-year-period of 1998–2018 with respect to nuclear weapons in India would be

- 1998–2002: Pokhran-II tests, Celebrations, focus on Pakistan, Kargil war (1999), preparations for war with Pakistan (2002) following the December 2001 attack on Parliament; Draft nuclear doctrine (1999) and nuclear doctrine (2003).
- 2003–2005: Dip in tensions with Pakistan.
- 2005–2010: Indo-US nuclear accord and domestic debate.
- 2008 onwards: Deterioration of relations with Pakistan, expansion of the nuclear arsenal with a particular focus on China.
- 2005–c.2012: Celebration of India as a “global player”; eye on China.

### Table 2. Coverage of Nuclear Weapon Issues in Opinion/News analysis/Editorials *The Hindu* (2000–2009, and 2017, 18).

| Year (1) | Nuclear Weapons India – Strategy, Number, Delivery (Pakistan, China) (2) | Nuclear Weapons NPT, CTBT NMD, ABM (3) | Total (Cols 2 + 3 + 4) (5) | India – Disarmament, Abolition, Nuclear-Free South Asia, Realist Measures to Safeguard N. Arms (6) | Nuclear Power – India (7) | Others (Int, N. Korean, Iran) (8) | Indo-US Nuclear Ties/ NSG Waiver/ Nuclear (Fuel, etc.) Deals with Other Countries (9) |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2000    | 5 | 1 | 8 | 14 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| 2001    | 3 | 1 | 6 | 10 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| 2002    | 1 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 2003    | 3 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| 2004    | 2 | 4 | 3 | 9 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| 2005    | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 9 |
| 2006    | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 22 |
| 2007    | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 23 |
| 2008    | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| 2009    | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2017    | 4 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| 2018 (Jan–June) | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |

Articles and Editorials on only Editorial and Op-ed Pages (1/2 pages) of print edition (Chennai) and news analysis from https://www.thehindu.com/archive/.

NPT: Nuclear Proliferation Treaty; CTBT: Comprehensive Test Ban treaty; NMD: National Missile Defence; ABM: anti-Ballistic Missiles; NSG: Nuclear Suppliers Group.
2014–2018: Aggressive nationalism; domestic emphasis on military prowess; strained relations with Pakistan and China; talk of re-examination of the No First Use (NFU) strategy.\textsuperscript{20}

When the Indian media’s handling of nuclear weapons is seen against this periodization, certain patterns emerge.

One, within a larger continuity of the media’s uncritical acceptance of the official view on the value of nuclear weapons for India, there has been a shift in emphasis now and then. Two, at the same time, there been in recent years a greater “normalisation” of nuclear weapons in public discourse. The aggressive nationalism that has increasingly come to mark Indian society and politics is one reason for this normalisation. The other is a willingness to accept nuclear weapons as “a fact of life”, which is reflected in both the silence in the media on these weapons as well as a celebration whenever there is a development marking the expansion of the arsenal.

Immediately after the Pokharan-II tests, there was, as discussed earlier, an overall uncritical endorsement of nuclear weapons and less than wholehearted criticism of dangerous talk by political personalities about the likely use of nuclear weapons.

The initial years also saw the press publishing comment by influential thinkers and writers in the field of strategic affairs which discussed in detail the requirements on the number of nuclear bombs, types of delivery systems and the command and control infrastructure needed. These were rarely if ever accompanied by articles critiquing the very basis of such an approach to defence.

The creeping normalisation was illustrated later in 2002, when India mobilised its troops for war after the December 2001 terror attack on Parliament. Two dangerous statements were made by a couple of the highest decision-makers. One was by the Army chief on the possibilities of a war involving nuclear weapons\textsuperscript{21} and the other by the Defence Minister himself on annihilating Pakistan in the eventuality of a war.\textsuperscript{22} Both were reported in the media, initially without comment. There was subsequently some critical editorial comment in the English press on the irresponsibility of senior functionaries making such statements. But this was not enough to evoke any public condemnation which was warranted given the apocryphal nature of the statements made.

During 2003–2005 there was a kind of “phoney lull” in media reporting on and discussions of nuclear weapons when tensions between India and Pakistan eased temporarily following political initiatives by the leadership of both countries. As illustrated in Table 1, in The Hindu the number of reports and comment on nuclear weapons from within the official perspective came down. However, this period was not used by the Indian media to revisit nuclear weapons in any form. Critical comment too came down in number and there was no attempt at “agenda-building” of any kind against these weapons. This was a “phoney” period because all the while the

\textsuperscript{20}See Kanwal (2017) and Mian and Ramana (2014) for a discussion of the developments in the build up of the Indian nuclear arsenal since 1998.

\textsuperscript{21}"We Are Prepared: Army Chief," The Hindu, January 12 2002, http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2002/01/12/stories/2002011201020100.htm; and "Army Chief’s Statement a Reflection of Ground Reality", The Hindu, 13 January 2002, http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2002/01/13/stories/2002011301270800.htm.

\textsuperscript{22}"Pak Will be Erased if it Nukes India: Fernandes," The Hindu, 28 January 2003, http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2003/01/28/stories/2003012805460100.htm.
development of the nuclear arsenal continued apace as had been planned; and it was a lull because soon the media returned to its familiar editorial policy when relations with Pakistan again deteriorated.

There was an entirely different set of reporting and commentary – often very intense – for the 5 years, from the time the India–US nuclear accord was signed in 2005 and through the legislations passed in the US and India. The discussions and comment in the media were many in number and they were of different shades (Vanaik 2015, 14–18). The core of the discussions was on India’s autonomy vis a vis the US post the deal. The accord was supposed to be about nuclear power, but it did have implications for India’s nuclear weapons programme as well. On weapon-related matters, what was significant was the form most of the commentary took. The comment and analysis in the press either looked at the deal entirely in terms of what it would do to control (or liberate the constraints on) India’s weapons programme (Vardarajan 2006) or ignored the weapons aspect altogether. The media coverage in some ways reflected the wider political discussion. No major political party used the occasion to question the weapons programme, or for that matter India’s nuclear power programme.

In a different dimension, the texture of media coverage and discussions changed significantly around 2005. With the celebration of the growth of the Indian economy (the “9% GDP growth” years of 2003–2008), came the projection of India as a major player on the world stage. Here references were often made to India’s status as a nuclear weapons state. The importance of India’s position as a weapons state came to be stressed as the nuclear weapons delivery systems expanded. The launch (2009), sea trials (2013) and formal induction (2016) of the INS Arihant, India’s first nuclear powered submarine to be fitted with ballistic missiles, and the testing of longer range versions of ballistic missiles (5000 km Agni-V) were seen in the media as making India’s deterrent effective vis-a-vis China. China, rather than Pakistan, became the focus of attention.

There was a new aggression in the public discourse on India’s nuclear weapons stance post 2014. First, the BJP which swept to power in 2014 said initially, ahead of the elections, that it would revisit the “No First Use” (NFU) doctrine claimed by India. This was subsequently denied. Second, the new mood of nationalistic fervour began to be reflected in pride about military prowess, of which nuclear weapon status was an important part. Third, a straining of relations with China led to another round of discussion in the media about the effectiveness of India’s nuclear deterrent vis-à-vis its neighbour to the north.

Over the two decades, in parallel, a different process developed in the political and government arena, which the media made no effort to question. This was a new silence on global disarmament. The Indian position in earlier decades may or may not have been as honest as professed, but what was new was the complete near silence on disarmament. The press reflected this view as in, for example, the very limited coverage of the 2017 negotiations that led to the UN Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The signing and subsequent ratification of the treaty also received only brief mention. Both reflected the Government of India’s own agnostic position on the 2017 treaty, which India has not ratified.

23For an illustrative celebratory comment see this one from the Business Standard in 2013: “How India’s Pride INS Arihant Was Built,” Business Standard, 19 August 2013 http://www.business-standard.com/article/specials/how-india-s-pride-ins-arihant-was-built-113081100745_1.html.
24For a discussion of India’s position on NFU since the late 1990s, see Sundaram and Ramana (2018).
The award of the 2017 Noble Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons also received only perfunctory mention in the press. Those who expected the media to use the occasion to re-examine nuclear weapons and India’s nuclear weapon status were to be disappointed. There was no re-examination in either print or TV media, or for that matter in the increasingly more vibrant on-line media.\(^{25}\) The Hindu was the rare exception in its discussion through a few op-ed articles on the 2017 UN treaty (see Tables 1 and 2, entry for 2017)

**The Media and the Critics**

The press in India did not give adequate coverage of the campaigns against nuclear weapons.

In the initial months after the Pokharan-II, there were organised but isolated and small protests against nuclear weapons. A group of scientists organised petitions and spoke up against nuclear weapons. People’s protests were organised in West Bengal and public meetings in Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. There were other protests and public meetings in a few places across the country.\(^{26}\) While some of these protests, criticisms and meetings were reported in some newspapers; but most were ignored by most of the media.

Later in 2000, coalitions like the CNDP were formed. Some of their meetings as well were reported, but again not by all publications.\(^{27}\) Likewise subsequent statements and press releases by the CNDP were by and large ignored. It was once again left to the handful of commentators in India and abroad to keep writing op-ed pieces in a shrinking space for independent opinion to keep alive the dissenting view.

**Conclusions**

It is not unusual for the press to be in awe of nuclear weapons. Its power of destruction is projected as assuring the permanent protection of a nation’s interest. This can make even the fiercest critics circumspect about questioning the usefulness of nuclear weapons and highlighting their potential for causing immense destruction. This has been so in all countries that have built nuclear arsenals.

However, there have been episodes when sections of the press, for instance in the UK, have questioned the Government’s nuclear weapons programmes. Thus during the

\(^{25}\) Overall, the treatment of nuclear weapons reflects the media’s treatment of nuclear power. Again, the exceptions aside, nuclear power remains a holy cow. Over the decades, in spite of the repeated failure of nuclear power to meet its targets in spite of a vast outlay of money, and in spite of its continued miniscule contribution to total energy, it receives kid-glove treatment from the press. This has continued in recent decades. There has been reporting – sometimes unfavourable – of local protests against nuclear plants as against the Koodnakulam project in Tamil Nadu and Jaitapur proposal in Maharashtra. But there has not been a close examination in the media of the claims made on behalf of nuclear power in India. The 2004 tsunami that killed a group of workers at the Kalpakkam site of the Madras Atomic Power Plant and the Fukushima event of 2011 also did not provoke any critical re-assessment of nuclear power in India.

\(^{26}\) For a comprehensive list of reports on meetings, statements issued and articles published in the editorial/opinion pages, see entries for 1998 and 1999 of South Asians against Nukes at [http://s-asians-against-nukes.org](http://s-asians-against-nukes.org).

\(^{27}\) At times when these gatherings were reported, the reports were casually prepared without any serious attempt to provide a sense of the meeting or the issues raised. See, for instance, the report on the first day’s meeting in November 2000 in New Delhi of the first national convention of groups and individuals against nuclear weapons. “Anti-Dam, Anti-Bomb Activists Join Hands”, The Hindu, 12 November 2000. [http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2000/11/12/stories/02120008.htm](http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2000/11/12/stories/02120008.htm).
high points of the protests by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in the 1950s and then again in the 1980s, the press did report on these activities, which became a platform for it to look more closely at the UK’s nuclear weapons policy.

This has been missing in India (and from the little that is one aware of the situation in Pakistan, this is true of the media in Pakistan as well).

This paper has tried to argue that the unwillingness (even refusal) of the English language media to carry out an examination of India’s nuclear weapons policy or for that matter even educate its audience about the dangers of acquiring nuclear weapons has been the result of three parallel and yet interlinked processes.

One, the nuclear establishment and the strategic affairs community used their privileged access to the media to establish the terms of the debate. There may have been differences among them on the detail but there was unanimity on the importance of nuclear weapons to India. During the years after Pokharan-II and then again during the intense debate on the 2005 Indo-US nuclear accord, there was little questioning of India’s decision to go nuclear. Critics may have been given some space and there were a few reports of protests by the citizens’ groups, but the space in the media was swamped by the dominant view.

Two, over the past two decades the media in India has by and large embraced the general political and national discomfort and even aggressiveness towards both Pakistan and China. Nuclear weapons were supposed to establish India’s superiority over Pakistan and equality with China. With the media unwilling to question decisions that are said to have been taken in the national interest, it was not surprising that there was first celebration and then normalisation of nuclear weapons in India.

Three, the media itself has changed dramatically in India over the past two decades. A booming media market has redefined the purpose of journalism in India. The press in India was never the completely independent institution expected of it, but now more than ever before it takes its educative and adversarial roles less seriously. It has also reshaped its audience to expect a more entertaining and sensational kind of journalism. In this environment, there was little likelihood that the media as a whole would undertake a serious examination of India and nuclear weapons.

Disclosure Statement

The author was a journalist in The Hindu between 1993 and 2004.

Notes on Contributor

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