



68th Commemoration of Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima & Nagasaki
Lecture by Ambassador Arundhati Ghose

“The significance of August 1945”

August 13, 2013

“Now I have become Death, the destroyer of worlds”

“..fear (will) grow and grip nations and peoples and each would try frantically to get this new weapon or some adequate protection from it... a dominating factor in the modern world is this possibility of these terrible weapons suddenly coming into use before which our normal weapons are completely useless.”

I cannot recall having ever started a talk with quotations-particularly a misquotation- before even thanking my gracious hosts, Pugwash India, for the honour of having invited me to speak at the commemoration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I do so now, particularly for having given me the opportunity to share some of the questions that arise in my mind on this occasion, specifically on the issues of public morality and individual emotion in the making of policy. But let me explain first, the purpose of the quotations which I would like to highlight in today's talk, the overwhelming feeling towards the atomic bomb, the feeling of raw fear.

As most of you will be aware, Oppenheimer's famous quotation is a misquotation; the actual reference in the Gita is to Time, 'the destroyer of worlds', and not Death. Whether the mistake was intentional or not, what is clear is that he was aware that the device meant death on a massive scale, the emphasis is on the last phrase denoting the extent of destruction; the quotation, to me, expresses immense fear of the consequences of the new development. Nehru's reference, in 1954, in an article called “The Death Dealer” reflects the fear in a much more specific way; fear of the vulnerability of a newly independent nation in asymmetric relationships with the erstwhile colonial powers- but fear it was. The reaction of the scientist was at a level, a personal one reflecting individual morality; on the other hand, the reaction of the Prime Minister of a country newly liberated from the chains of colonialism, reflected a public morality, that of a statesman, responsible to his country. The line between the two sources of fear was, over time, blurred and then extended to all things nuclear, to the technology itself, and like all emotions and technologies, reflect two different strands of life that they impact, the civil and military uses to which it is applied, and it is on this that I wish to speak today.

Almost simultaneously, three recent though discrete incidents coalesced in my mind around this anniversary and they indicate the dilemmas often faced in policy making. The first was a seminar on tactical Nuclear Weapons held here in Delhi. One of our more perspicacious scientists pointed out that while TNWs were battlefield nuclear weapons, the battlefield of the mind should also be taken into account, when developing strategies to cope with these weapons; the second, is the on-going tussle between at least three of our southern states on the sharing of power from Koodankulam, a project that has been delayed by fear, some genuine and some inspired, especially after the disaster, ironically and tragically, in Fukushima, Japan.



Finally, the often repeated story of one Yamaguchi, a 93year old Japanese who had survived the bombings of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Around the world, in many countries, the anniversaries of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are remembered- I have often wondered why. After all, even in that war, other cities were destroyed-Tokyo itself, whose carpet bombing before the sixth of August had brought Japan to offer surrender to the Russians, and Dresden in Germany. New weapons have been developed and used and new technologies employed for military use. We deal these as either regrettable outcomes of war or developments necessary for a country's security.-Then what was it that happened in August 1945 that the impact should be commemorated by so many, more than 60 years after they happened?

Let me try to give you some answers that I sensed rather than found, while examining this query.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki have become icons of, on the one hand the fear of death and destruction, and on the other of resurrection, if you will, of hope and life.

The first strand lies quite expectedly, in the military sphere. After all, the technology was developed for the purposes of war, but this was not just any new weapon. It was aimed not only at achieving mass destruction, but to do so in a single attempt thus inducing fear in the minds of the enemy, forcing them to take decisions palatable to the victors. The creation of fear has always been a part of war, from the days of screaming hordes armed with primitive weapons to the use of weapons to which the other did not have or had inadequate access. The nuclear weapon was a modern and efficient way of creating that fear, and as knowledge percolated into the public sphere, it was known that it was not just those who were killed who were affected by both radiation and fear, but those who lived as well as those who were yet to be born. As other countries acquired these weapons, deterrence theories, based on fear, began being propounded, even as efforts were made to ensure that others-potentially future enemies or allies of enemies did not acquire them. Both these objectives played in the battleground of the mind, through the creation of fear and its coercive capabilities, fulfilling to a large extent PM Nehru's predictions of 1954.

Prudence and conventional wisdom calls for stability in a situation where two or more nuclear weapon powers are in adversarial mode; but stability would only be a means to still the fear in the mind of the enemy, which is not usually the desired objective. The issue which therefore arises is how to deal with these threats to the mind? To my mind, the worst reaction and the one most satisfactory to the one seeking to create an impression of instability, is one of a paralysis of will, due to the fear of possible consequences. Threats on the battleground of the mind, therefore, need to be met with countermeasures credible to the mind of the threatening country, and fear is the tool that has to be used. This would be public morality even while individual reactions might dictate otherwise.

Of course, fear would then be master of countries-and not only of those with the weapons. It is this inevitability that flows from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the need for the elimination of nuclear weapons. What the direct impact was, was to introduce the ethical or moral element into the use of weapons of mass destruction. To quote Robert Kaplan, writing in another context, is that foreign and security policy has to be based on public outcomes and not on private intentions. The use of nuclear weapons is almost taboo today not having been used since August 1945.It is one area where public outcomes and private intentions-the interests of



the state and the pressure of NGOs and other activists converge. What is unfortunate today, however, is that even while commemorating August 1945, there is no real agreement on the necessity of nuclear disarmament, much less genuine commitment. The argument stops at one level and does not proceed to a logical conclusion. Some nuclear weapon States seem to accept the inevitability of living in fear-whether in the US, Russia the UK or France and certainly not in Pakistan, probably the only country with nuclear weapons today which seeks to utilise the battleground of the mind in its military policies. Israel, too does so, but with a slightly more nuanced approach.

The second strand of answers to the question I had asked myself about the significance of August 1945 lies in another realm, that of life and not of death. Nuclear technology has produced remarkable results in agriculture and medicine, but the fear, as I have already remarked earlier has tainted the technology of nuclear fission to produce energy. Yet, it is important to always recall that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were firstly attacked and by nuclear weapons; it was not an accident, nor was it a natural disaster, nor an inherent design flaw in the devices. Those worked as they were meant to do. The uses of nuclear technology for medicine and agriculture all well known, but nuclear power plants, particularly after the accident at Fukushima, have faced the ire of anti-nuclear activists, playing on the similarity of the names and taking advantage of the terrible tragedy to hit that one country-Japan. Of course the public requires to be informed in ways that they understand, of course safety precautions need to be implemented stringently and monitored by outside agencies-but the fact is that the power that people crave, cannot be ignored. The tussle between Tamil Nadu Kerala, Puducherry and Andhra (before the Telengana decision) is evidence of this.

In this case, the fear needs to be set at rest-in the minds of the public-and that can be done by communicators who understand the fears and who have the necessary knowledge to assuage them. In this case, public outcomes-the provision of life-giving energy to the people of the country would be at odds to private intention-the keeping alive of fears of the dangers of nuclear technology.

I would like to conclude with the story of Tsutomu Yamaguchi, the resident of Nagasaki who visited Hiroshima on business on the 6th August 1945 and returned to Nagasaki in the 9th. Wounded and deafened, he went on to live a healthy life till he developed cancer and died in 2010 at the age of 93. His wife, who had been exposed to radiation in her home town, was affected but lived to be 88. Like the cities, he resurrected himself and lived with memories of those dreadful days, but came to terms with life. Japan became, as it developed, dependent on nuclear energy to meet 30% of its power needs. Even after the tragedy of the tsunami and earthquake which hit Fukushima, after the initial fears of the people, a popularly elected Prime Minister has decided to restart those nuclear power plants that had been closed in the aftermath. Nothing illustrates better the choices for policy between public outcomes and individual fears.

Finally, the significance of August 1945, I believe, lies in making us see the neutrality of technology-as a weapon, it caused destruction, though it also gives, temporarily, protection against the coercive power of those weapons requiring, logically their complete elimination. It also is a source of energy, and as such, it gives people the hope of a better life. When policy is made, this balance between the interest of the public and the emotional reactions of the individuals or groups has to be balanced-morality can only be a part of national decision making. The lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are complex and need to be remembered.