

Nuclearism is the ideology of nuclear weaponry and nuclear arms-based security. It is the most depraved, shameless, and costly pornography of our times. Such an ideology cannot be judged only by the canons of international relations, geopolitics, political sociology, or ethics. It is also a well-known, identifiable, psychopathological syndrome. The following is a brief introduction to its clinical picture, epidemiology, and prognosis.

Nuclearism does not reside in institutions, though it may set up, symbolise, or find expression in social and political institutions. It is an individual pathology and has clear identifiers. Many years ago, Brian Isley argued in his book, *Fathering the Unthinkable*, that nuclearism went with strong masculinity strivings. Isley was no psychologist, but the works of Carol Cohn's and others have endorsed the broad contours of Isley's analysis. They show that not only the language and

ideology, but the entire culture of nuclear weaponry is infiltrated by hard, masculine imageries and those participating in that culture usually suffer from deep fears of emasculation or impotency. Indeed, that is the reason they participate in this culture with enthusiasm.

Such strivings or drive for potency usually go with various forms of authoritarianism. Even people ideologically committed to democratic governance may vicariously participate

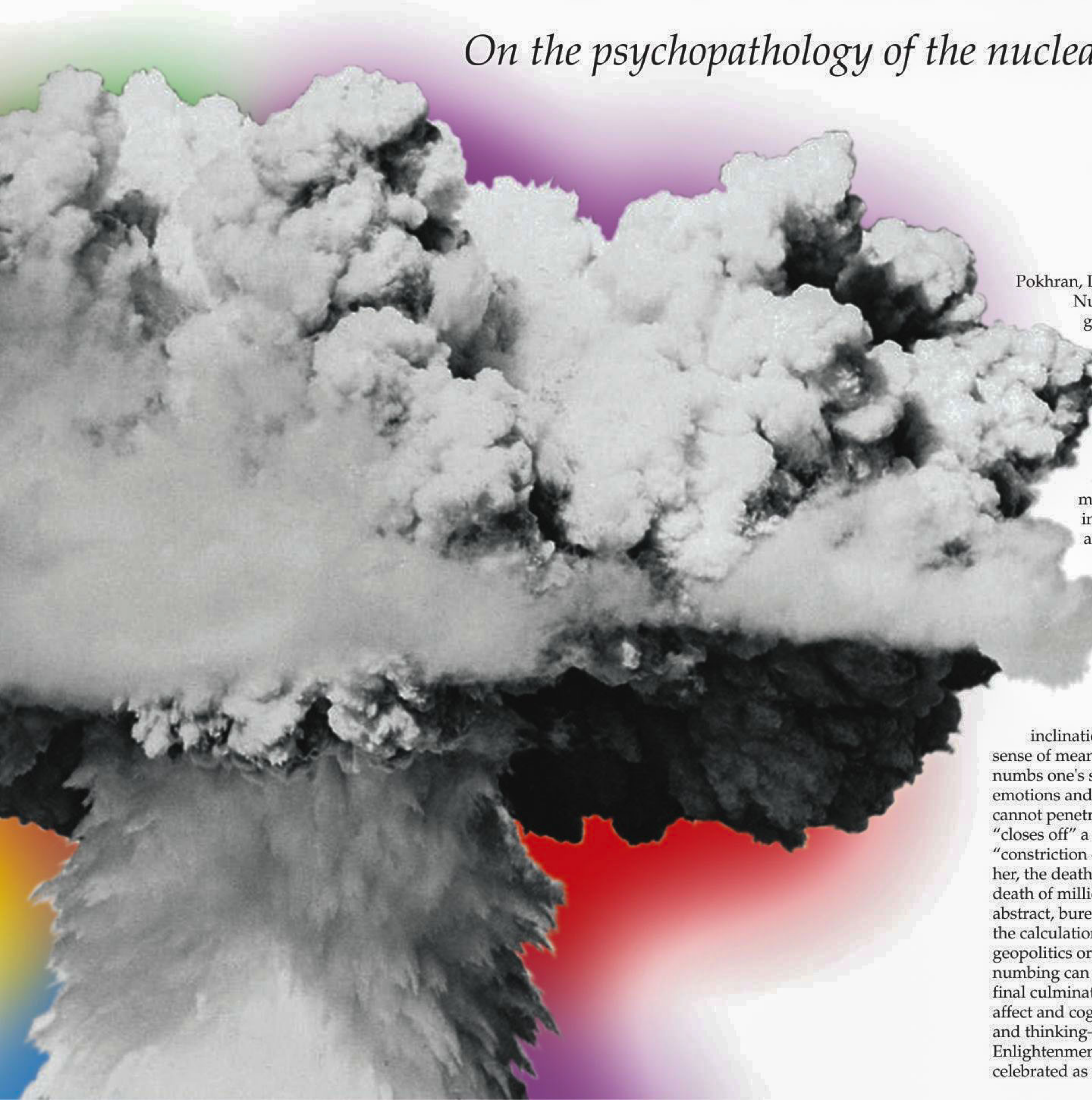
in subtler forms of authoritarianism associated with nuclearism. There is support for this relationship outside psychology, too. Robert Jungk's work on the nuclear state shows that secrecy, security, surveillance, and police state methods invariably accompany the nuclear establishment in every country. In that sense, the culture of nuclearism is one of the true "universals" of our time. Like Coca-Cola and blue jeans, it does not permit cultural adaptation or edited versions. It is the same in Paris and

PERSPECTIVE

NUCLEARISM, GENOCIDAL MENTALITY AND PSYCHIC NUMBING

On the psychopathology of the nuclear arms race.

ASHIS NANDY



Pokhran, Lahore and Los Alamos. Nuclearism is framed by the genocidal mentality. Eric Markusen and Robert J Lifton have systematically studied the links. In their book, *The Genocidal Mentality*, Markusen and Lifton make a comparative study of the psychology of mass murderers, in Nazi Germany, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and among the ideologues of nuclearism today and find remarkable continuities.

In the genocidal person there is, first of all, a state of mind called "psychic numbing"—a "diminished capacity or inclination to feel—and a general sense of meaninglessness". One so numbs one's sensitivities that normal emotions and moral considerations cannot penetrate one anymore. Numbing "closes off" a person and leads to a "constriction of self process". To him or her, the death or the possibility of the death of millions begins to look like an abstract, bureaucratic detail, involving the calculation of military gains or losses, geopolitics or mere statistics. Such numbing can be considered to be the final culmination of the separation of affect and cognition—that is, feelings and thinking—that the European Enlightenment sanctioned and celebrated as the first step towards

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greater objectivity and scientific rationality.

The genocidal mentality also tends to create an area protected from public responsibility or democratic accountability. Usually such responsibility is avoided by re-conceptualising oneself as only a cog in the wheel, advancing one's own bureaucratic or scientific career like everybody else, by taking and obeying orders from superior authorities faithfully, mechanically, and without thinking about the moral implications of the orders. The Nazi war criminals tried at Nuremberg at the end of World War II all ventured the defence that they were under orders to kill innocent people, including women, children and the elderly, and could do nothing about it.

The other way of avoiding accountability is to remove it from individuals and vest it in institutions and aggregates. As if institutions by themselves could run a death machine without the intervention of individuals! After a while, even terms like the military-industrial complex, fascism, imperialism, Stalinism, ruling class, or American hegemony become ways of

freeing the actual, real-life persons from their culpability for recommending, ordering, or committing mass murders. In a society where genocidal mentality spreads, intellectuals also find such impersonal analyses soothing; they contribute to the creation of a business-as-usual ambience in which institutions are ritually blamed and the psychopathic scientists, bureaucrats and politicians who work towards genocides move around scotfree.

In acute cases, the genocidal mentality turns into necrophilia, a clinical state in which the patient is in love with death. Indeed, he or she wants to sleep with the dead, in fantasy and, in extreme cases, in life. Saadat Hassan Manto's famous story, "Cold Meat" or "Thanda Gosht" is, unknown to the author, the story of an 'ordinary' murderer and rapist who, while trying to satiate his sexual greed during a communal conflict, confronts his own with necrophilia and is devastated by that. Those interested in more authoritative case studies can look up Erich Fromm's *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*.

Nuclearism does not remain confined to the nuclear establishment or the nuclear community. It introduces other psychopathologies in a society. For instance, as it seeps into public consciousness, it creates a new awareness of the transience of life. It forces people to live with the constant

fear that, one day, a sudden war or accident might kill not only them, but also their children and grandchildren, and everybody they love. This awareness gradually creates a sense of the hollowness of life. For many, life is denuded of substantive meaning. The psychological numbing I have mentioned completes the picture. While the ordinary citizen leads an apparently normal life, he or she is constantly aware of the transience of such life and the risk of mega-death for the entire society. Often this finds expression in unnecessary or inexplicable violence in social life or in a more general, high state of anxiety and a variety of psychosomatic ailments. In other words, nuclearism begins to brutalise ordinary people and vitiates everyday life.

Studies by the likes of William Beardslee, J E Mach and Eleonora Masini show that these traits express themselves even in adolescents and children. Even children barely eight or 10 years old begin to live in what they consider to be a world without a future; they are fearful and anxious about their life, but unable to express that fear and anxiety directly, because in a nuclearised society the fear of nuclear death is made to look like an abnormal psychoneurotic state.

Many neurotics and psychotics at first look like charming eccentrics. To start with, nuclearism may appear a smart game and the partisans of nuclear

weaponry may look like normal politicians, scholars, or defence experts. After all, the Nazi killers, too, were usually loving fathers, connoisseurs of good music, and honest citizens. However, beneath the facade lies a personality that is insecure, doubtful about one's masculinity, fearful of the interpersonal world, and unable to love. The mindless violence such a personality anticipates or plans is a pathetic attempt to fight these inner feelings of emptiness, and the suspicion and the fear that one's moral self might already be dead within. You father the unthinkable because you have already psychologically orphaned yourself. You make contingency plans to kill millions because you fear that your innermost core has already been cauterised against all normal feelings and human relations. Acquiring the power to inflict death on millions, and by living with the fantasy of that power, you pathetically try to get some confirmation that you are still alive. However, that confirmation never comes. For in the process of acquiring that power, you may not be dead physically, but you are already dead morally, socially and psychologically.

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LABOUR RIGHTS

ARE MACHINES TAKING OVER THE JOBS OF FEMALE GARMENT WORKERS?

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Last year Dolly Rani was working as a helper at a ready-made garments factory in Jirani bazaar of Savar when the advent of a machine made her useless.

"I used to cut thread," says Rani. She worked in the finishing section, and was one of the women who stood at the assembly line snipping away the loose ends of threads from finished products for hours on end. When the management invested in thread-trimming machines, the number of people needed to do this job dropped drastically. The machine was faster—with one swipe, the hand-held vacuum-like nozzle could trim loose ends quicker than Dolly Rani's scissors and tired hands could.

When she lost her job last year, the middle-aged woman was at a loss. "I have two sons in school and my husband does not do any work. I moved to Savar 11 years ago from my village in Bogura because I was the sole earning member of the family," she says.

"I know of at least four sweater factories that laid off workers in the last few months because they got (electronic) jacquard machines to do the knitting," says Abu Shama Aminul Islam, the organising secretary of labour rights organisation Bangladesh Garments Sramik Samhati. "Each of these machines do the work of eight labourers. One factory got rid of 50 of its workers, for example." He adds that there is actually no real analysis of how many workers lose jobs because of infrastructural changes in the factory.

Luckily, Dolly Rani recently found a job in another factory as a helper in the washing section but she had to endure her wages being cut by a third—she had spent a decade at her last job and was getting up to Tk 9,000 per month; having to start from the bottom again means she only gets Tk 6,000 now.

But at least she found a job. Thousands like her did not. A recent study by the Center for Policy Dialogue found that 8.5 lakh exited the industrial sector from 2015-17. The study titled "Role of Women in Bangladesh's Middle-Income Journey" explores how women are faring in the workplace. There is more. Another ongoing study by CPD found that the proportion of women doing garments work dropped from 64 percent in 2015 to 60.8 percent, due to automation of the factories.

"There are two reasons why this happened," says Professor Selim Raihan of the Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka, "one being automation, while the other is the closure of factories that did not meet international standards for doing business."

"The usual life-span of a female garments worker in a factory is between 18 years of age until her middle ages. By then if they are not skilled enough to be promoted, they shed away to take care of family while younger workers replace them," adds Professor Raihan. "The problem however is that new women are not entering the workplace."

He also points out that our RMG industry is dependent on producing clothes which are technologically less complex. "Clothes with variation in design or textures are usually sourced from Cambodia and Vietnam, which have now taken the place of China."

As the factories advance their technology, the cheap labour of the unskilled female garments worker becomes less and less competitive. The women wither away and out of the picture, but the factories keep running, as robust as ever.

"Most women have not gone beyond eighth grade, whereas most men have done up to high school," says Rubana Huq, Managing Director of Mohammadi Group. Huq had earlier told *Business Standard* that her factories removed 500 jobs following automation.



PHOTO: REUTERS

"For every jacquard machines in sweater (factories), there are four jobs lost," she adds. "Unfortunately with limited educational exposure, they can at best become supervisors. This is not a position that requires skills of a rocket scientist. So it's easy to train them and on-job training enables them to volunteer for a supervisory role and accordingly the authorities select them and promote them to their next tier." Mohammadi Group's factories, along with others, also participate in a pre-collegiate programme at the Asian University for Women, where each year, a handful of RMG workers are helped to get back to university.

Sabina Yeasmin is one such student in the programme. This former worker of Simba Textiles is now pursuing higher studies and perhaps knows best what kinds of skills training women would need to play more decisive roles.

"I finished my HSC and so joined as a junior needlemaster. My job was to decide which machines need what needles, and keep stock of our inventory," says Sabina. Because of her educational qualification she held a higher position than assembly line workers.

"If women who have at least finished school are taken at entry, it becomes easier to move up the ranks. There are often women who have not even finished fifth grade," says Sabina. What she meant is that production positions in garments factories are not dependant on

education levels—but having a minimum education from the get-go would ensure that the workers can stick around as the factories themselves change.

"Women are rarely promoted to become supervisors," says Sabina, "and while educational qualifications have a lot to do with it, the demands of the job are also another reason why they never become supervisors."

"A supervisor might have to stay till 10pm at night to sign off on the production. Most women are still the primary caregivers of their families and can rarely take on that role," she says. "Supervisors also have to ensure that unrealistic production demands are met by driving the workers to produce over their limits, so women are less likely to take, or be given, those roles."

Essentially what Sabina is saying is that while systems need to change to make sure the growth of the RMG industry is inclusive of its women.

CPD mentioned in an ongoing study that only about 0.5 percent of managers in RMG enterprises are female. On the other hand, the admission list of Bangladesh University of Textile Engineering had around 330 women only out of the total 1525 students admitted.

Meanwhile, between 2013 till now the government closed down

39 factories in a national initiative to enforce safety standards in workplaces. On the other hand, the standards set by the global safety implementation bodies The Bangladesh Accord for Fire and Building Safety, and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety could not be met by a total of 372 factories. What this means is that these factories can no longer do business with brands which are signatories of the Accord and Alliance.

"Stringent compliance requirements have forced factories to either scale up or close," says Rubana Huq. There is no data available on whether the factories blacklisted by Accord and Alliance have closed down or are working as informal subcontracting factories. The CPD study, however, points out that there are more people than ever in informal employment. In 2002-03, the number of people not holding registered formal jobs was at 80 percent—for 2015-2016 it was 95 percent, followed by 92 percent the next year.

It seems that that this is the beginning of the end, for the unskilled women whose cheap labour had become our greatest asset. Their labour took the RMG industry to the pinnacle of success, but as the scenario becomes more complex, and the contenders more in number, how do we make sure the women are not the ones being thrown out?