

[Is India's Nuclear Threat Mere Gorilla Dust?](#)

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EDITORIAL

Is India's Nuclear Threat Mere Gorilla Dust?

Bharat's bombshell stuns the world, but few Westerners heard the explosion of national pride

the Editor

When two male gorillas confront each other, they're too canny most of the time to actually fight, so they resort to the tried-and-true political tactic of intimidation. Both scurry about in a frenzy, grimacing menacingly, beating their chests and tossing clouds of dirt into the air. It's a serious encounter, full of powerful and primitive energies, a test of testosterone. Soon one becomes convinced that the other could win the threatened physical engagement, and retreats. It's called gorilla dust, and nations stir it up all the time.

On May 15 and 17, 1998 a real cloud of lethal dust rose above the stark plains of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan. On those two days the world's largest democracy and arguably the world's oldest continuous civilization and home to half of the world's free population, exploded five devices and announced to a stunned world that it had joined the prestigious Nuclear Family. While Indians danced for joy in the streets, Bill Clinton shared another view from the parapets of the world's most

powerful democracy, announcing on TV that "India is a perfectly wonderful country, a great country. It is not necessary for them to manifest national greatness by doing this." That this was the first time in history that the Man had accused India of being a Great Country is exactly the point, Indians say. Finally, a nation regarded spiritually with virtual reverence was getting some old-fashioned political adulation. In its May 25th issue, Newsweek ran a full 11 pages about Bharat's Bomb--the first serious series on India in recent memory--and New York Time's John Burns wrote, "Whatever else the Indian tests may have meant to a world eager to lessen the menace of nuclear weapons, the reactions abroad and at home showed the existence of two Indias: one that occupies a favored space in the world's consciousness, the India of Buddha and Mohandas K. Gandhi, of ashrams and sacred rivers, of huddled masses of the poor, yearning for relief yet ever serene; and another India, awakening to the modern world, impatient of old indignities and infirmities, eager for symbols of national wealth and power."

America is perhaps at heart secretly happy about India's astonishing achievement. After all, a strong India assures the safety of the above-mentioned half of the free peoples and secures the Asian turf for Coca Cola, Boeing and a thousand other US companies. America knows that India is perilously perched between China and Pakistan, both of which have nuclear capability and have started wars in the past. America knows that its military umbrella (the one that covers South Korea, Australia, Japan and the NATO nations) does not shelter India, and that she has a sovereign right to protect herself. America also knows that India is not a volatile or vicious state, that she has been, in fact, an exemplar of political and military restraint and reconciliation, unlike the rogue states of

Muammar Khadafy and Saddam Hussein. America also knows that India is informed, in her heart, by the gentle ethic of nonviolence, and by spiritual values that are pervasive and prodigious.

Of course, the real worry in the West is not that peace-loving India will actually use the bomb. It is this: If America can't track the nuclear plans of a friendly democracy, what can we expect of its ability to monitor enemy states like Libya, Iran and Iraq? And what about May 27th's tests in Muslim Pakistan? It irks that India has become capable of making such devices, for it implies an enormous sophistication and national will. Suddenly, India is not a shabby, backwater nation worshipping cows and hawking handicrafts at bargain prices. As of May, 1998, India is --dare it be said?--a peer, the nuclear tribe's sixth primate.

Call it the sound of one Indian gorilla knapping, or one Yankee gorilla napping. It's true, the vaunted Virginia spies blinked and missed the whole thing. Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Shelby, an Alabama Republican, deplored what he called "a colossal failure of our intelligence gathering--possibly the greatest failure in more than a decade" of the \$27-billion-a-year intelligence community. I enjoyed the Indian physicist's response to all the hand-wringing and finger-pointing at the CIA and in swiftly-convened what-went-wrong Congressional meetings on US national security. He assured America that it was not their fault: "It's not a failure of the CIA," said Indian nuclear researcher G. Balachandran. "It's a matter of their intelligence being good, our deception being better." Dr. R.R. Subramanian, a nuclear physicist with New Delhi's independent Institute for Defense

Studies and Analyses, said hiding preparations for the tests was merely a matter of choosing the hours when satellites were looking elsewhere to move the necessary people and chemicals. How did they find the times? They are posted daily on the Internet!

Mid-May's explosions were one part military, nine parts psychological. In that atomic tempest Indians won the battle within, the war against their own uncertainty and self-deprecation. It is hard for nations who never had to endure centuries of humiliating occupation from conquerors to imagine the profound impact of these exploits on the national psyche. Little wonder they are celebrating their overnight transformation from pitiable to powerful. Who wouldn't? In Delhi's streets common folk--tired of aping the West and reading all the foreign media monkey-business--exult, "The chimp's turned champ."