

Culturing Radiance: Nationalism, Nuclear Energy, and Popular Culture in 21st-Century India

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In my research, I investigate how sociopolitical focus on science and technology, nuclear energy, weapons, technologies, infrastructures and personnel have had and continue to have a transformative effect on modern Indian nation-thinking. In the twenty-first century, the topic of nuclear technologies has emerged from within elite debates into national, popular discourse. My research thus analyses the depiction of nuclear technologies in imaginative cultural texts—fiction, cinema, webshows, and poetry—to understand how such texts are symptomatic of the way popular culture in India imagines and thinks about science, technology, and nuclear energy.

My work responds to the concept of nuclearity—explained by Gabrielle Hecht as the quality of “being nuclear”, i.e. how and when an object, or a phenomenon, or a biological condition starts being considered “nuclear”. I show how nuclear issues have animated public debates that swirls through Indian life. Before beginning this dissertation and during the process of research, I was particularly struck by the discursive gap that existed in the field of postcolonial nuclear studies in India when it came to literary-cultural narratives—barring interventions by Raminder Kaur and Dibyadyuti Roy in a field otherwise dominated by the disciplines of International Relations, Anthropology, and Sociology.

With a few notable exceptions, there genuinely seems to be an aversion to discussing how literary-cultural texts proliferating since the turn of the millennium reflects the immense subtext of nuclearity and radiance that layers life in modern India.



Aiming to fill this void in existing research, my dissertation shows how the imagination of science, technology, and nuclear energy in India is informed by, and in turn, informs four “great themes”. One finds powerful cultural representations of post-independence geopolitical identity crisis, the intersections between geostrategies and nuclear policies, a focus on the revered figure of the nuclear scientist, and a recurrent interest in espionage. Beyond my dissertation, my published research articles, conference presentations, and public talks have focused on understanding the relationship between scientific modernity and popular culture in India.

Therefore, with my positioning as a postcolonial studies scholar, my project attempts to decolonize what has mainly been an American and Eurocentric (and to an extent Japanese-centric) nuclear criticism and bring to light globally neglected rich nuclear culture(s) in India.

I also fill an absence in Indian literary studies as well as Indian science and technology studies by examining the interesting relationship between postcolonial imaginative art and postcolonial scientific infrastructures.



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