Cry for India

What does it say about us when our policymakers squabble about the deadliness of a nuclear bomb?

Pity our bomb makers. They have the difficult job of deciding if one of the devices they tested under the sands of Pokhran in 1998 could be good enough for a thermonuclear bomb that has the power to murder a few million people or if it can murder only a few hundred thousands. (To “murder” is surely the appropriate word to describe the use of a nuclear weapon.)

The squabble, in which our bomb makers have descended to calling each other names, could have been dismissed as a ridiculous turf war if only it had not been about something as horrific as the potency of a nuclear bomb. Everyone from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh onwards has deemed it important enough to have a say on the “yield” of the thermonuclear device tested on 11 May 1998.

Pity then the issues of bread and butter, social tensions and environmental degradation that have been pushed out of the public eye because our legendary club of strategic affairs experts is once more ruling the air waves and pouring ink all over the newspapers on the potency of India’s “hydrogen (H)-bomb”.

The quarrel among serving and retired scientists, defence personnel, political officials and commentators would not be worthy of comment if it were not for the larger and very serious issues involved. Whether or not the thermonuclear device of Pokhran lived up to its expectations is irrelevant. Indeed, the international scientific community tracking these matters had expressed an opinion soon after May 1998 that India’s H-bomb test was a “dud”. Those views were dismissed in those heady days of jingoistic fervour. What has come out into the open now is that there were divisions within officialdom at that time as well about the result of the test. (We should not forget though that there is no difference of opinion whatsoever about the “success” of the fission tests for the conventional nuclear bombs, which can murder a few hundred thousands in densely populated centres.)

There is a simple answer to why the spat has resurfaced. Even as they are united in their fervour that India must be a nuclear weapons state, there has always been a certain schism between the nuclear weapon scientists as a group and the strategic affairs/international relations community. For the former, bigger and more is better; for the latter what matters is the quality of a so-called “minimum deterrent”. Some in the scientific community also feel that a few tests as in Pokhran in May 1998 do not make India nuclear weapons capable. The argument is that the established five nuclear powers (the United States, the former Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France and China) carried out dozens of tests before they were confident about their nuclear capability. If in 1998, political considerations – the need not to displease the US too much by going on a spree of nuclear tests – led to a moratorium, the matter has now acquired a new urgency.

The urgency is that unlike the George Bush administration, the Barack Obama presidency gives some importance to controlling what the Americans call “nuclear proliferation”. India may be a bit player in these matters and also call itself “a responsible nuclear power”. However, since the government of India seeks a seat at the high table, it will have to observe the etiquette of that table, and for the US it appears that signing and adherence to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (ctbt) is now once again a priority. If Obama insists and India decides to sign, the option of further testing of the H-bomb device will disappear.

Those inside and outside government who make strategy cite India’s “no first use” policy and the philosophy of a so-called “credible minimum nuclear deterrent” to argue that we need not worry about whether or not we have a H-bomb. And that India’s policy is not to win a nuclear war but to deter a potential attack. What is relevant then is the creation of a “reliable, robust and survivable” nuclear arsenal that can withstand an attack and inflict “unacceptable damage” on the aggressor. Hence, according to this school, whose views form the basis of the Indian Nuclear Doctrine, even if the thermonuclear test was a fizzle, India has a sufficient number of proven 25 kiloton (kt) warheads to constitute a “credible minimum nuclear deterrent”.

In the end, the only question that matters is if nuclear weapons provide or endanger security. Whatever the phalanx of strategic affairs experts may say, the answer is unambiguous. The availability of nuclear weapons does not prevent wars. The history of south Asia since 1998 itself offers sufficient proof – remember Kargil 1999? Nuclear weapons increase risks and provoke war-like behaviour – remember the many threatening statements both India and Pakistan made in 1999, 2001 and 2002 on using the bomb? Nuclear weapons are unique for they inflict immense human suffering – can we ever forget Hiroshima and Nagasaki? And, finally, there is no bigger case against nuclear weapons than the moral argument about the use of this “Destroyer of Worlds”.

After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi said, “The atom bomb has deadened the finest feelings...
which have sustained mankind for ages...It has resulted for the time being in the soul of Japan being destroyed. What has happened to the soul of the destroying nation is yet too early to see.

The State of Our Unions

The right to unionise is a fundamental one; a weak trade union movement is incapable of defending this right.

According to the pink press and some spokespersons of Indian industry, the year 2009 has seen a revival of the trade union movement in India. The recent strike by pilots of Jet Airways foregrounded the issue of unionisation and the right to strike in public attention. Given the social background of the pilots and that they represent one of the most well-paid sections of India’s workforce, this also helped skew the discussion. There have been other prominent strike actions in recent times in important sectors of the economy. Coal miners threatened to strike work in January this year, port workers in March and bank employees actually went on a two-day strike in August. Other than that, well-known foreign multinationals like Hyundai in Chennai and Nestle in Pantnagar saw strikes which held up their production, while Mahindra and Mahindra and MRF workers also struck work. Industrial action was not limited to blue-collar workers, before the Jet pilots, there was the demonstrations by Jet Airways staff who had been summarily retrenched; Air India as well as Delhi and Mumbai airport employees went on hunger strikes and walkouts, and officials and government doctors in Bihar and Maharashtra as well as officials of public sector oil companies have gone on strike.

With the onset of the economic recession last year, such “labour unrest” was expected by many and these instances only seem to prove this expectation correct. But a closer look at the provisional figures for industrial disputes in the organised industrial sector, compiled by the Labour Bureau of the Ministry of Labour, actually show a decline in the first five months of 2009 in the number of strikes. During January-May 2009, when the impact of the global and domestic economic crisis was the most severe, there were only 41 strikes in the organised sector compared to 96 and 101 strikes in the corresponding months of 2007 and 2008, respectively. In the first five months of 2008, over 3.85 lakh workers went on strike, while this year the number in the same period was just over a lakh. This is a significant decline and shows that rather than any upsurge in working class action, there has been an actual slowdown. (It must be noted though that the decline in the number of lockouts has been even sharper according to the provisional compilation: from 145 and 138 in January-May of 2007 and 2008, respectively, to just four in the organised industrial sector in the first five months of 2009.)

This decline in working class action cannot be attributed to better industrial relations since all indicators suggest a large fall in the growth of employment as well as in wages and working conditions. A survey by the Labour Bureau indicates that in April-June 2009 there was an actual decline in employment in most industrial sectors. In such conditions, trade unions and workers are not surprisingly unable, and perhaps unwilling, to take actions to defend themselves. The weakening of the trade union movement, which has been commented upon and noted for the past two decades has finally rendered these working class organisations incapable of taking advantage of one of the greatest moments of weakness of the capitalists. Labour that does not agitate when employment is threatened and when working conditions deteriorate is labour which has been defeated, at least in the short term.

In any case, such weakening of organised labour does not lead to better industrial relations either. The recent lynching of a company executive in Coimbatore, last year’s lynching of a manager in Noida or the mass police violence on workers in Gurgaon in 2006 are tragic examples of how weak trade unions lead to greater violence and uncertainty in industrial relations.

While the weakening of trade union action may be pleasant music to the ears of those who equate national interest with the interests of “industry” this portends danger for our democracy as well as for the larger struggles for equity and justice. The freedom of association is one of the founding freedoms of democracy and the right to strike has been wrested after decades of intense trade union struggle.

Though the Constitution explicitly provides the right to form unions, this is one right which has been under attack from the governments and courts of the country for long. National interest and the needs of public order have regularly been used to curb union rights. The Essential Services Maintenance Act is used more often than not to break industrial action (as in the case of the oil sector officials’ strike) as are the cruder instruments of police and state violence. The courts too have been wary of protecting this fundamental right. The most recent of their judgments denying workers the right to strike was in 2003 when the Supreme Court ruled that government employees did not have the right to strike. In the past, strong unions meant that, at least in the organised sectors, the workers enjoyed the de facto right to strike but now economic, political and legal forces seem to be converging to reduce this right to a dead letter in our Constitution.

This is dangerous not only for the protection of workers’ rights but for the health of liberal democracy itself. The weakening of the right to freedom of association and to form unions is a weakening of the very foundation of the entire structure of fundamental rights. It is unwise to think that the weakening of one right will not have an adverse impact on the entire edifice of rights on which our political and civil life is based. A strong and capable trade union movement is crucial for sustaining a healthy democracy as well as for the strength of movements for justice and equity.