

THE NUCLEAR ARJUNA:
A NARRATIVE CRITICISM OF VAJPAYEE'S LOK SABHA ADDRESS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	3
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	4
HISTORIC HINDU-NUCLEAR ASSOCIATIONS	8
METHOD	17
CHAPTER 2: LOK SABHA ADDRESS	25
THE BHAGIVAD GITA'S MORAL DILEMMA	30
NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EINP	39
CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION	57
TRANSCENDENCE AND CONSEQUENCE	58
CONCLUSION	62
VITA	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY	67

ABSTRACT

THE NUCLEAR ARJUNA:

A NARRATIVE CRITICISM OF VAJPAYEE'S LOK SABHA ADDRESS

Thesis under the direction of Alessandra Beasley Von Burg, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Communication.

The thesis is a rhetorical and narrative criticism of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's 1998 pro-nuclear Lok Sabha address. Through Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm, I argue that Vajpayee's rhetoric uses the powerful values of the Hindu myth of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* to justify India's moves towards nuclear acquisition. The myth's function for the Prime Minister's justificatory discourse is to absolve conflicting moral identities of the present pro-nuclear India with the nation's staunch anti-nuclear past. Vajpayee's address, as a narrative containing good reasons for the nation's nuclear transition, elevates the nation's public moral debate to the transcendent values expressed by the 3,000 year old myth. As the greatest warrior of the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna operates as the universal human being who is struggling with moral choices between right and wrong actions. The *Gita's* conclusion with the warrior engaging in the Kurukshetra war becomes a powerful narrative that is made representative of Vajpayee's transition away from India's twenty-four year period of nuclear ambiguity.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the world was introduced to nuclear weapons in 1945, a relationship between the Bomb and the Hindu religion has consistently been articulated. The most famous case is from the American scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who expressed the moral gravity of the Trinity explosion by citing his readings of the ancient Hindu myth, *The Bhagavad Gita (Gita)*, by solemnly quoting the God Krishna, “I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds” (Hijiya 123).¹ Oppenheimer confided to a colleague that “these affairs are hard on the heart” (Hijiya 125). The scientist’s reliance on an ancient myth to express moral concerns about the weapons is notable. For the first time in history humans had acquired the capability to promptly incinerate entire cities, perhaps even civilization itself.

The historic rupture of the devices into the public consciousness resulted in interested individuals across all spectrums of societies locating means to discuss these powerful bombs.² Some argued that these weapons were “new” and “extrawordly,” falling outside the range of the representational capacities of our language systems (Smith 4). Similarly, others argued that the devices were ineffable and incomprehensible

¹ Oppenheimer’s quotation is the first recorded association of the Bomb to Hinduism. See M.V. Ramana (“The Bomb of the Blue God”) on how Oppenheimer’s interpretation of Krishna as “destroyer” is contestable. Krishna could be “time” or “Kali” the last avatar of Vishnu. From the very beginning, nuclear-Hindu associations provided space for debate and resistance.

² After the publicity of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nations and their citizens engaged in heated debates about where their respective governments should stand on the nuclear question. Since 1945, eight nation-states have openly produced and declared nuclear weapons and doctrines for military purposes (Nuclear Weapons Archive).

(Chaloupka 8-9). These perspectives place the Bomb outside of human agency, well beyond our comprehension and moral responsibility. To the contrary, the “awe” inspiring and fear inducing nuclear weapons *are* products of human action, constituted by processes of communication, discursive pathways, and cultural systems (Smith 1-6). The symbolic systems of language, and the ways they are used to identify and “comprehend” the Bomb, are the foundation of the agency scientists, politicians, and publics have used to discuss, argue, and promote their nuclear arsenals.

To make sense of devices with immense power, humans—defined as symbol-using, creating, misusing animals³ (Burke *Language as Symbolic Action*)—utilized their interpretive abilities and the capacity of tropes (metaphor, synecdoche, irony and metonymy) to connect the Bomb’s mysteries (ethical and technical) with culturally embedded mythic stories and symbols (Ungar 65-6; Thistlethwaite 140; Spiritual Perspectives and the Nuclear Age"). Prior to the nuclear-era, cultures in the United States and around the world had crafted stories of great destructive events in their narratives of vengeful God(s), demons, mythic heroes and evil forces (Weart 442). The figures of religion and myth resonated with societies as they made sense of their nuclear weaponry.

In order to test the ways religious myth permeates discourses of nuclear weapons, I direct my research to the case of contemporary Indian’s pro-nuclear discourse. The research question of the thesis is: *How are the contemporary nuclear myths of Arjuna used to promote nuclear proliferation in India?* More specifically, after the 1998 tests, *what are the dominant themes and commonplaces of Arjuna’s story that contemporary*

³ Full definition: “Man is the symbol using, making, and mis-using animal, inventor of the negative, separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy, and rotten with perfection” (*LAS*).

pro-nuclear elites have used to make sense of India's nuclear arsenal? To answer the question, I focus on Atal Bihari Vajpayee's address to India's parliament. I argue that the Prime Minister utilized the significance of the mythic-narrative of Arjuna as political and rhetorical strategy to justify India's nuclear arsenal.

On May 11th, 1998, the India Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, announced the successful detonation of nuclear devices in the Pokhran desert ("Announcement of Nuclear Tests"). Operation Shakti marked a watershed moment for India as a symbolic transition towards the eventual weaponization of nuclear devices. Vajpayee's announcement of the explosions resulted in a heated political struggle to define and make sense of India's newly weaponized nuclear arsenal. Shakti prompted the creation of several rhetorical artifacts, as Indian leaders deployed strategies for persuading the public of their causes (S. Roy 335).

In response to the heated debate, on May 27th, Vajpayee addressed the Lok Sabha, the Indian parliamentary branch of the government, to defend his decision about the nation's nuclear moves. The address, consisting of a speech and a paper laid down on the table in the parliament, signifies a critical moment for the Prime Minister as he struggles to justify India's nuclear agenda to his public. Vajpayee's speech is an important rhetorical moment whereby the leader is seeking to reduce controversy and to promote a nuclear India. I argue that the address is a pro-nuclear narrative that is empowered and informed by the Hindu myth of Arjuna in the *Bhagivad Gita* (Song of the Lord). The moral dilemmas presented to Arjuna prior to the Kuru war offer *topoi* of *substantive* and *relevant* concern for contemporary nuclear debates. In the struggle over the morality of nuclear weapons policies, Vajpayee and pro-nuclear advocates have staked some of their

limited rhetorical resources in strategies that re-inscribe the myth of Arjuna for their rhetorical purposes.

In the mythic narrative of Arjuna, the son of Indra the king of the gods, is a pious-hero who fights on the side of good, the family of the Pandavas, against the Pandavas' cousins, the Kauravas who represent "evil." A family strife over the rightful rule of the throne of Hastinapura lays the foundation of the 100,000 verse *Mahrabharata* epic, which culminates in a major war between the two sibling families. Arjuna, as the most talented archer of the epic, plays an essential role in the eighteen-day Kurukshetra War that result in the fictive death of millions of "golden age" Hindus. Within Arjuna's arsenal of "missiles" and arrows are mystically powerful weapons that he earned through the rigorous "*tapas*" rituals to the gods. The most fearful weapon in his arsenal is the "*brahmastra*," a weapon which when used should re-establish a balance in the world by ridding the planet of evil. During the battle, Arjuna contemplates, discovers, and fights for "good" (*dharma*) against "evil" (*adharma*) and whether to use such terrible devices in battle. Through his struggle, Arjuna gains the favor of the gods. An avatar of the awesome God Vishnu, Krishna, is his friend, brother-in-law, advisor and charioteer during the battle. The dialogue that ensues between Krishna and Arjuna constitutes the famous story of the *Gita*.

Given the cultural importance of religion for Indians, the nuclear debate and the struggle over competing interpretations of Arjuna became a considerable avenue for normalizing and resisting the nation's nuclear agendas. In the end, pro-nuclear movements, lead by political elites, co-opted the hero Arjuna as justification for nuclearization. Arjuna and his war-chariot now operate as a key rhetorical figure for pro-

nuclear advocates. Vajpayee strategically utilizes the story of Arjuna to address moral conflicts over India's nuclear arsenal by presenting value-based arguments that (re)-affirm the state's nuclear program.

In the following sections, I first substantiate the argument that Hindu and nuclear issues have historically been associated with one another in the Indian debate over nuclear weapons. The historic analysis functions as a preview for the tensions between competing interpretations of Hindu-nuclear *mythos*. After the selected history of Hindu-nuclear associations, I describe rhetorical narrative and mythic methods for unveiling *how* instances of Arjuna-nuclear commonplaces function in Vajpayee's Lok Sabha address. The premise of a mythic analysis of Arjuna is that narrative and myth operate as "substantive" rhetorical acts. They are *essential* components in how nations, their elites, and publics make sense of issues of public concern. An investigation through the lens of rhetorical mythic criticism will reveal how the myth of Arjuna operates as a commonplace for nuclear deliberations in India.

HISTORIC HINDU-NUCLEAR ASSOCIATIONS

Hindu-nuclear associations have been a consistent trope⁴ in the Indian nuclear debate. The section shows documented instances of pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear groups utilizing Hindu cultural practices and texts, *Vedas*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata*, to promote their cause.

⁴ See Hayden White, "tropes are deviations from literal, conventional, or 'proper' language use, swerves in locution sanctioned neither by custom nor logic. Tropes generate figures of speech or thought by their variation from what is 'normally' expected, and by the associations they establish between concepts normally felt not to be related or to be related in ways different from that suggested in the trope used" (*Tropics of Discourse* 2).

From 1945 to the present, Indian leaders and public figures have articulated relationships between Hindu religious texts and nuclear issues. An Indian columnist remembers the verbal expressions he overheard after learning about America's destruction of Japanese cities. While attending services at a local temple, the writer describes a religious leader citing nuclear weapons as man rediscovering the dreaded *brahmastra*, a great mythical weapon with the potential of destroying the universe (Gangadhar). The author's recollection of a Hindu cleric mapping his terms of Hindu stories onto the destruction of Japanese cities by nuclear weapons is revealing. The introduction of "nuclear" weapons into Hindu cultural discourse resulted in the articulated bond between sacred text and weapon.

The connection also assumes an explicit moral consideration. As an iconic representation of early anti-nuclear discourses, Mahatma Gandhi's uses the peaceful teachings of Hinduism to condemn American Bombs and future nuclear states:

Often does good come out of evil. But that is God's, not man's plan. Man knows that only evil can come out of evil, as good out of good. ... The moral to be legitimately drawn from the supreme tragedy of the Bomb is that it will not be destroyed by counter-bombs even as violence cannot be by counter-violence. Mankind has to get out of violence only through non-violence.⁵ ("Atom Bomb and Ahimsa")

Despite Gandhi's rhetorical prowess in promoting an anti-nuclear India and world (Cohen 161; Perkovich 14), the dominant attitude of India's nuclear program had shifted

⁵ The "counterbombs" reference is relevant to a story in the *Mahabharata* when instances of two "missiles" intersected one another during the Kurukshetra war. Most mythic weapons in the *Mahabharata* have counter-weapons that disarm the munitions (Priyadarshi). It is debatable whether the *Brahmastra* has a counter-missile.

over fifty years. In 1998, Vajpayee, a self-identified Hindu nationalist, declared: “India is now a nuclear weapon state. This is a reality that cannot be denied” (“Suo Motu Statement by Prime Minister”). The contemporary Prime Minister represented his nation’s nuclear tests as a confident shift towards weaponization. Furthermore, the quotation clearly signals Vajpayee’s marked “end” of deliberation over the question of Indian nuclear acquisition. The question of nuclearization was no longer “whether” or “if” a military Bomb should be built, but was rather a question of *how* and to what *extent*.

By the end of the 20th century, the pro-nuclear establishment managed to produce and maintain enough public and institutional support to build an image of a nuclear India as either positive or tragically necessary for the Indian polity.⁶ Pro-nuclear groups managed to distance India’s (not foreign)⁷ nuclear weapons from terms of “evil” into the lexicons of national pride. Vajpayee contextualized the act as instilling his society with “shakti” (“Interview with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee”), a great mystical energy of strength. His statements indicate that somewhere along the line, a pro-nuclear ideology had become sufficiently grounded as a *normal* and *practical* reality for India, its citizens, and political, scientific, and military elites. Between an early Gandhian anti-nuclear India and the contemporary Indian nuclear state, national leaders and citizens had located symbolic pathways that facilitated the transformation of a device from the depths of

⁶ The issues of national security and nuclear weapons are not always a present or dominant concern for all Indians with the complexity of their identities and lives. However, the government claims, in their name, while utilizing their resources, and implicating their environment, that the Bombs are a national victory.

⁷ Weapons are domesticated into the culture and terminology of those who wield them. See Kauffman (“Names of Weapons”) for a discussion on how American nuclear weapons are grounded into myths of the “old” west and named after Greek gods. For India, nuclear bombs in general are still detested. However, as homegrown, named, and Hindu mythologized devices the technologies function as a source of pride and protection.

“evil,” to a weapon that reportedly builds an India with “shakti.” Contemporary pro-nuclear activists, to justify a nuclear India, now deploy Hindu discursive and cultural enactments, once utilized to oppose nuclear devices.

Contemporary pro-nuclear advocates have grounded their arguments for nuclearization by referencing *a unified* ancient “Hindu civilization” and the sacred texts attributed to the historic period. Several groups have advanced the notion that the 4000 B.C. Hindus quite *literally* had nuclear weapons technology (Priyadarshi; "Ancient India had spacecraft technology"). After the 1998 nuclear tests, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) published a document that hinted at an early Hindu civilization, after the completion of the *Mahabharata* narrative, that deliberately disarmed their “high technology” to prevent *another* destructive war (Bhatta and Mehta). India is thus situated as the origin of nuclear technology; the Gods graced the region by disseminated the knowledge of atoms into the Ganges River (T. S. Singh). Versions of the technologically advanced nuclear ancient-civilization have been embedded into textbooks read by millions of young students of the Vidya Bharati school system (Bidawi).

The mythic relationship to religion also appears in the manufacturing and maintenance of the weapons themselves. India and the nuclear institutions that produced, tested, and developed weapon delivery vehicles and Bombs have been branded with Hindu concepts and gods. The nuclear tests were respectively titled Operation Smiling Buddha (1974) and Operation Shakti (1998), a Goddess and female principle of divine (Kothari and Mian 518; J. Singh *In Service of Emergent India: A Call to Honor* 62-3; Basu and Basu). The secret 1974 missile program labeled project devil eventually produced nuclear-capable missiles which have been interpreted as symbolic avatars of

Hindu gods: *Agni* (अग्नि) god of fire and *Prithvi* (पृथ्वी) the goddess of earth (Bhatt 1).⁸

The nuclear tests are symbolically molded to Hindu myths with location and time. The tests occurred on the “sacred” Hindu lands of the Pokhran desert, and during the Buddhist festival, Buddha Poornima (Omvedt). The Buddha is also claimed to be a direct descendent of the Hindu religion (J. Singh *Defending India* 4-6).⁹

Present-day Indian scientists, who are well acquainted with technical languages for developing and measuring the Bomb, found it appropriate to use Hindu myths to represent the devices’ power. Abdula Kalam, a leading self-identified Muslim nuclear and missile scientist who has expressed respect for Hindu culture, asserted that he could now understand the extent of Krishna’s power after observing the 1998 nuclear explosions (Chengappa). The BJP, as representatives of the Indian nation, awarded the three leading scientists responsible for Pokhran-II with a silver medal depicting Arjuna and Krishna in the Mahabharata battle-scene (Chengappa; Khandeparkar). Additionally, BJP governmental officials also called for the enactment of a ritual of *guarav yatras* that would have citizens march to Pokhran to acquire sacred nuclear sand. Though this was later scrapped due to radiation concerns, the plan called for pilgrims to return sand to regional Hindu temples throughout the nation so all could enjoy a piece of India’s technological victory (Kaushal; Gottschalk 15).

⁸ *Prithvi* and *Agni* both have more nominal and historic interpretations that are separate from the religious connotation. *Prithvi* can be “earth,” and has also been associated with a twelfth century King, Prithviraj. *Agni* has also been interpreted as secular “fire.” *Agni* symbol as god and *agni* symbol as fire are written differently. A database search of the symbol of *agni* will produce a large return of god-like and missile-like results.

⁹ Jaswant Singh (1999) argues for how influential Hinduism has been for all the religions of the world: “From [Hinduism’s] womb have been born Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism – great religions. Hinduism has influenced the Semitic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam” (4).

Several instances of modern plays and performances of the *Mahabharata* have included nuclear references. During regional festivals, plays have been symbolically transformed from the “old” Hindu mythic narrative with the traditional bow and arrow “missile” (*astras*) with narratives that now have dialogue about nuclear missiles (Kaur 161). The plays also present the Indian civilization and contemporary India as non-aggressive entities who, in their thousands of years of history, have never invaded another territory. India is represented as a nation that does not use the weapons for aggressive purposes (Reddy 4-5; Kaur 160-3).

National politicians like the Prime Minister address (inter)-national audiences that require rhetors to be multivocal when they speak about India’s nuclear weaponry. Vajpayee is also sensitive to the broader implications of foreign national leaders and domestic politicians reacting poorly to a perceived militant-Hindu connection to the Bomb. For the BJP, the primary strategy for appeasing and persuading both domestic and foreign observers, is to frame the nuclearization practice in terms of “objective” data and the dangers of the South Asian security environment (see J. Singh "Against Nuclear Apartheid; J. Singh *Defending India*; Vajpayee "Pm's Letter to Us President Bill Clinton"). While this security terminology saturates the artifacts the government and its leaders present, the very same politicians also use rhetorical strategies that name Hindu symbolism as a motive for nuclear acquisition. This balance and co-ordination of alternative discourses and representations of the nuclear tests provide the Indian government with flexibility when addressing complex audiences.

Therefore, the BJP’s arguments function enthymematically. They can rely on the momentum produced by pro-nuclear movements and texts because they provide the

premises for pro-Hindu-nuclear discourses. When the Prime Minister cites a key Hindu text, his arguments are based on the assumption that his audiences have access to the wellspring of pro-nuclear Hindu myths that have been established outside of his rhetorical act. Audiences can then fill-in the missing premises of speeches with already developed conceptions of “ancient civilization” and Hindu symbols and stories. A speaker, such as Vajpayee, is then provided with rhetorical space to distance the conclusions of his target audience from the conclusions of the external observers. In other words, pro-nuclear advocates can resist assertions that they “manipulated” Hindu symbols for political ends, even as they base their arguments on the power of religious symbolism. As will become apparent in chapter two, Vajpayee utilizes the narrative of Arjuna without referencing the character directly.

The effectiveness of the strategy does create rhetorical challenges for Vajpayee. The Prime Minister addresses critics who claim that India’s nuclear weapons are “Hindu bombs,” by reasserting a symbolic distance between religion and India’s arsenal. He references India’s multi-religious and multi-linguistic demographics (Vajpayee "Prime Minister's Reply to the Discussion in Lok Sabha on Nuclear Tests") and further cites famous Muslims, Chief Minister Farooq and Abdullah and Kalam, as ardent advocates for the nuclear industry (Ved; Bhaumik and Gupta).

While Vajpayee declares a clear divide between religion and nuclear weapons, the Indian government simultaneously rebuilds the relationship between religious values and a strong nuclear state. The strategic use of Hindu related terms such as “action,” “duty,” “shakti,” the symbol of a silver “Gita” replica, quotations from the *Mahabharata*, texts reifying the greatness of the ancients, the names and dates of the nuclear weapons

industry, and a plethora of pro-nuclear advocacy texts, all situate the Indian Bomb well within the powerful symbolism of Hinduism. Pro-nuclear discourses have made Hinduism's texts, teachings, and activities consubstantial with a nuclear India. The result is a transformation of simple references to Hindu concepts by politicians into powerful and persuasive tropes.

Strong associations between Hindu mythology and India's nuclear program are not limited to pro-nuclear advocates, however. Anti-nuclear authors reference Hindu cultural concepts to promote their agenda and to respond to the tactics of their counterparts. The anti-nuclear groups deploy two basic strategies to challenge the Indian nuclear establishment: Some reject Hindu nuclear associations out of hand, dismissing them as pejorative rhetoric. Others attempt to re-appropriate the Hindu religious associations to undermine, derail, and replace the pro-nuclear advocates' agenda.

In terms of the first strategy, oppositional authors label the actions of the BJP as pejorative rhetoric that must be rejected as substance-less. This strategy labels Hindu-nuclear associations as no more than fabrications, or political manipulation. These activists dismiss Hindu-nuclear arguments as irrelevant to the *real* consequences of the 1998 nuclear acquisition. For example, Arundhati Roy, a Booker prizewinner, writes:

Yes, I've heard -- the bomb is in the Vedas [ancient Hindu scriptures]. It might be, but if you look hard enough you'll find Coke in the Vedas too. That's the great thing about all religious texts. You can find anything you want in them -- as long as you know what you're looking for. But returning to the subject of the non-vedic 1990s: ("End of Imagination")

The implication of her article, and other articles which discourage Hindu-nuclear associations,¹⁰ may be the *de-politicization* of alternative interpretations of anti-nuclear Hindu myths. If a rhetor, international or domestic, desires to persuade Indian populations that nuclear weapons are counter to India's interests, a failure to address a strong pro-Hindu-nuclear ideology will stunt the message's applicability.

Anti-nuclear advocates have also deployed the second option, reclaiming the Hindu mythic terrain from their opponents. Lalita Ramdas, a teacher and activist, calls for refitting Hindu-nuclearism to undermine and replace the militancy of the stories:

It is time to discuss how we can and must re-appropriate these cultural spaces for a progressive democratic and peace agenda. So we are trying to make a beginning by re-orienting the upcoming single-most popular festival of this region, dedicated to Ganesha, the Lord of wisdom, of knowledge and auspicious beginnings, and propagating a message of peace and learning, of tolerance and harmony, of *shanty and vidya*. (349)

Similar to Ramdas, other anti-nuclear activists have opted to re-appropriate the Hindu symbolic space. Examples include plays during regional festivals that emphasize the dangers of nuclear war (Kaur 165-6), stories of the *Mahabharata* as a moral and literal warning of what a future nuclear India could produce, and the re-orientation of debates in terms of poetry and narratives that re-characterize the Hindu God's in a less violent and/or peaceful fashion (Goswami 471-4; Hoskote).

¹⁰ Roy is well aware of Hindu identifications with the Bomb. The criticism of rejecting Hindu-nuclearism is more potent for those anti-nuclear advocates, foreign observers for example, who may not know the way nuclear weapons are grounded into the Indian culture and debates.

These instances of Hindu-nuclear associations represent a deep and dynamic symbolic activity that evolves through time as Indian and Hindu-invested populations produce discourses about nuclear weapons. The narratives of the Hindu religion are clearly an active part of nuclear debates in India. However, the ways in which the associations of religion with nuclear weapons operate is less obvious. The intent of the thesis is to unveil how the particular story of Arjuna operates politically in Vajpayee's address.

METHOD

I propose a methodology of narrative and mythic criticism to study how Vajpayee's Lok Sabha address utilizes Arjuna to justify a nuclear India. I argue that Vajpayee's address is an instance of public moral argument that uses the myth of Arjuna to solve apparent ethical contradictions. In this method section, I outline the public moral debate over nuclear weapons and describe the method of my analysis of Vajpayee's address through Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm.

Nuclear weapons as concepts constituted through language, whose material form and capability are rarely seen, but often talked about, are an especially relevant topic for rhetorical criticism. As Derrida (1984) highlights, nuclear weapons are "fabulously textual." The process by which nations and their citizens integrate nuclear weaponry into their culture and discourse as acceptable munitions is through language. Rather than a historical perspective of nuclear weapons, as material objects that followed a series of progressive responses to security threats, the discursive perspective of nuclear weapons affirms human agency to alter text and symbols, to negate and affirm others (Smith 13).

Power of access to critical top-secret information about the nuclear industry creates distinctions between rhetors in terms of public *ethos*. Itty Abraham and M.V. Ramana ("La Trahison Des Clercs: Scientists and India's Nuclear Bomb") define the political leaders and scientists, who constitute a portion of the nuclear weapons industry, a "strategic enclave": an insular group of specialized Indians who make decisions largely without public knowledge or approval. These nuclear scientists along with informed politicians have an *ethos* of expertise, which increases the likelihood that the public will cede discursive means for challenging the development of nuclear proliferation (Ramana 208). Expertise *ethos* and nuclear secrecy are factors that inform how an artifact from the Prime Minister's office will be imbued with added credibility.

The culturally embedded narratives of Hindu myths provide a place for multiple spheres of the Indian society to deliberate and "dwell" on the nuclear issue. These myths are, "Not merely a story told but a reality lived" (Malinowski 111) The transfiguration of past Indian symbolic-experience, in the form of narrative and myth, provide a staple location where Indian leaders and publics can find common-ground as they string together and invent thematic sets of moral argument. For thousands of years, ancient Hindu epics, in various forms (verbal, plays, text, murals, television), have been conveyed to audiences. The epics function as rhetorical moral vessels, which are refashioned, when needed, to help Indian societies maintain a sense of order, morality, and strength during "difficult" situations and dilemmas. The stories transcend individual experiences, elevating the discussion to a higher plane of timeless moral "good" for a society and humanity. They alleviate metaphysical and ontological problems. The scope of the applicability of Hindu mythic-narratives, to explain and make-sense of Indian

issues, seems endless. During *exigencies* of imperfection, such as warfare and death, members of a society can invoke myth to help explain such troubling matters. The contentious issues of nuclear weapons in South Asia, and the danger of a future nuclear war, create an *exigence* that induces the *need* for the application of mythic argument to ease troubled minds.

Rhetorical scholarship on narrative is suggestive that stories are much more than supplemental anecdotes to excite audiences. Rather, narratives and myths lay the foundation for humans and their societies. Walter Fisher goes so far as to *define* humans as story-telling animals, *homo narrans* (“Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm” 7-8).¹¹ He writes, “The narrative impulse is part of our very being because we acquire narrativity in the natural process of socialization” (NHCP 8). Humans quite *naturally* use their symbolic capacity to weave together isolated, atomistic events into *coherent* stories that relate to, and determine how the speaker and audience recognize the world.

The ability of narrative to “solve” problems alternative form of argument fails to adequately address is with moral deliberation. Fisher (NHCP) describes stories as essential places for human experience so that societies can locate commonality and “dwell” together in search of community and the “good” life (NHCP 6). “If narrativity is present,” as Hayden White alludes, “then moral impulse is present too” (26). The social and moral function of narrative is essential for this thesis to explain how a moral anti-nuclear India can simultaneously co-exist with a proliferating Indian state.

¹¹ “Narrative as a Human Communication Paradigm” (NHCP).

Narratives have considerable ability to build commonplaces. The *form* of narrative argument matches *how* humans experience the world by conveying senses, reason and emotion (NHCP 15) These are all forms of knowing that people are in no need of being “taught,” as opposed to formal logic (NHCP 15). While technical reasoning can displace public willingness to engage a topic, narrative based rhetoric can access the faculties of audiences’ minds more readily. Stories function as bridges for nontechnical publics, providing symbolic space for inter-communal negotiations of a particular topic (NHCP 14). The rhetorical prowess of our stories is embedded in their universal nature as a *mode* of discourse (NHCP 14). Rowland writes, “through stories, average people can put into perspective the problems of the world” (“An Elaboration” 268). Narratives provide familiar values, characters, and tropes that offer rhetors and audiences a relatable dwelling place to engage in public dialogue.

While arguments based on narratives can make the nuclear debate relevant for the public, they also function ideologically. Stories are used to justify decisions performed while also determining the moral grounds for future actions (“An Elaboration” 362). How rhetors interpret and apply the myth of Arjuna, may have a goading-ideological effect on how nuclear weapons are framed as both “moral” and “good.” Moore highlights the risk of “formulaic” narratives as they “disguise ideological rigidity and introduce unproductive opposition into political dialogue” (“Rhetorical Criticism of Political Myth” 161-2). Therefore, repeated narratives can be used to maintain a common set of values that justify past, present, and future nuclear activities.

The importance of Fisher’s work lies in what he believes is the need to rehabilitate public moral argument. Previous democratic theories have excluded

narratives as relevant for important matters of public “good.” Fisher’s solution to the great divide between reasoned discursive argument and aesthetic argument is to claim that even limited discursive acts, such as scientific data plots, are *naturally* incorporated into the universal tendency of humans to construct narratives. If all discourses are narrative then the division of what is normally considered “telling stories” versus what is labeled as “arguing” will collapse into narrative reasoning. Within Fisher’s worldview, the tendency of citizens to narrate their discussion of important public issues would then be recognized as legitimate issues of concern for rhetorical scholarship.

Narratives can function as powerful rhetorical strategies in public discourse, at times as “myths.” On the scale of influence and power of narrative, myths have the strongest ability to “build” societies. Myths also function as powerful rhetorical, social and political problem solving devices. The general purpose of myths is to:

[Answer] human problems that cannot be answered discursively. The key point is that through myth we define the good society and solve problems, not subject to rational solution... Discursive reasoning cannot justify the good society, answer basic moral conflicts, or aid the individual in confronting psychological crises.

There are no purely rational answers to such problems; therefore humans have no choice but to turn to narrative forms, the most powerful of which is myth. (“On Mythic Criticism” 102-3)

Myths, like general narratives, are important symbolic activities that have social-connection functions. They characterize what is *unique* about a culture. Warrior myths like Arjuna are retold from one generation of Indians to the next to build sets of, “common ideals, common images ... [and] common behaviors,” (Dorsey 3). Given the

importance of myths, I argue that a pro-nuclear integration of core-Hindu myths into the public debate over nuclear weapons will establish common ideals and behaviors towards the devices. The “problem” of nuclear weaponry, materially, conceptually, and morally will become less troubling to an Indian audience if their mythic system “solves” these issues. The myths may “naturalize” nuclear weapons, as Dorsey writes, “myths can help to alleviate a group’s collective guilt over some of its morally questionable, yet ‘natural’ choices” (3). The source of this guilt is from members of a society, or nations of the global society, that break norms that are accepted as true. In the end, if Indian myths make the weapons appear “normal” or “necessary” due to “natural” circumstances of the situation, the major political leaders and the public can feel less-guilt, or “guilt-less.”

Arjuna, as a political-myth, can make India’s leaders appear “heroic,” and serves to legitimize the state’s nuclear activities. As politically constituted the myth of Arjuna is rarely found in “complete” mythic form. They are enthymematical produced. Moore offers a helpful definition of political myth:

Political myth, then can be described as (1) a fragmented (enthymematic) heroic narrative (2) dispersed through a public from multiple sources that (3) forges a political consciousness in order to (4) promote public policy, legitimize political authority, and gain support for political action. (298)

All of these are characteristics of Vajpayee’s Lok Sabha address. First, the base myth of Arjuna is not retold in its entirety. For one, the *Mahabharata* is far too large to make this possible. Rather Arjuna and his tale in the *Gita* are only slightly referenced by Vajpayee. Secondly, as a universal hero who represents good, Arjuna can be identified with any relevant agent of a narrative. In particular to contemporary India, Arjuna can represent

the Indian nation, Vajpayee, or even the nuclear scientists who conducted Operation Shakti. Finally, the mythic references “order” the world and can be used to legitimize the nuclear industry. The political connection to myth is described well by Bennett (1980), “stripped away from policy discourse, very little of substance remains” (168).

Finally, a functional/structural definition of a myth can set some of the terms and purposes of the narratives. Rowland indicates that myth has five purposes:

- 1) Myths are stories that symbolically solve problems faced by a society and justify social structure.
- 2) Main characters in the myth must be heroic to fulfill their function to “conquer evil” and bestow boons on his society.
- 3) Myths exist in “mythical time” outside the normal historical order of time, “myths take us out of history to solve the problems posed by history.”
- 4) Myths occur outside the normal world or are in a real place possessing special symbolic power.
- 5)

Archetypal language, the same languages and themes are found in myths around the world. (paraphrased, "On Mythic Criticism" 103-4)

Rowland’s definition is useful to give this thesis a base of terms and purposes to understand how the Arjuna myth functions. All of these components unequivocally exist in the myth of Arjuna. However, as the political-myth theory suggests, most artifacts will fail to include “all” of the heroic components of the myth of Arjuna. Rather, audiences must participate in the enthymematic completion of the myth. It is Arjuna’s enduring existence through human communication that empowers Vajpayee to use the myth as a commonplace to promote nuclearization.

In conclusion, narrative-myths provide a commonplace for the Indian society to dwell on the morality of India’s nuclear proliferation. They offer an epistemologically

powerful tool for political leaders like Vajpayee to communicate their activities to publics, and for publics to formulate arguments. However, the myth of Arjuna as political narrative and a mythic device will result in ideological implications in how the public relates to nuclear weapons. A pro-nuclear interpretation of Arjuna's moral decision to ignore his original hesitation to slay his cousins and engage in the Kurukshetra war can function as a powerful ideological device to justify the action of contemporary decisions by the BJP to nuclearize instead of maintaining a policy of "inaction" or a nuclear-taboo. The result of India's public moral argument in producing dominant, repeated, stories to make common public sense about their nuclear devices, will implicate how the nation views the risks and rewards of having a nuclear arsenal.

CHAPTER 2: LOK SABHA ADDRESS

After being in office for roughly two months, Atal Bhari Vajpayee ordered Indian nuclear scientists to conduct tests in the Pokhran desert. Only elite officials in the administrative circles were privy to the minutiae of the decision to perform the clandestine operation. Thus, the announcement of nuclear tests by Vajpayee on May 11th came as a sudden and unexpected surprise to domestic and international audiences. A public dialogue ensued as politicians and citizens sought to make sense of the ruling party's motives as well as the implications of nuclear weapons for the future of India. In an attempt to put a lid on discontent, on May 27, 1998, Vajpayee officially addressed the Lok Sabha parliament for the first time to discuss India's nuclear activities. Until this Lok Sabha address, consisting of a speech and a document, the Prime Minister had yet to use his post, as the head political figure in the Indian government, to publicly deliver extensive and well-articulated "good reasons" for the BJP's nuclear moves.¹² Thus,

¹² Prior to May 27th, Vajpayee had delivered a one paragraph-length May 11th speech to announce the success of the nuclear tests ("Announcement of Nuclear Tests"). After the announcement Vajpayee refused to take questions. On May 25th, Vajpayee completed his first interview with *India Today* (Interview with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee). The first address was limited in detail and analysis, leaving many questioned unanswered. The second was an important rhetorical moment when Vajpayee had to respond "extemporaneously" to questions about motive behind operation Shakti. These events, while key historical moments, do not access the magnitude of preparation in time and energy that would go into the parliamentary address.

Vajpayee responded to an exigence raised by questions of morality, purpose, and motive for the nuclear tests.¹³

Vajpayee highlights the purpose of the address, “In my statement today and in the paper placed before the House, I have elaborated on the rationale behind the Government’s decision and outlined our approach for the future” (“Suo Motu Statement by Prime Minister”). As a defense of nuclear activities and a public explanation of his arguments, Vajpayee’s Lok Sabha speech and the paper, “Evolution of India’s Nuclear Program” (EINP), represent a vital rhetorical moment for the government’s leadership to respond to public questions on *why* the party was motivated to alter a twenty-four year doctrine of nuclear “ambiguity;” better known as the nuclear-option. The speech and paper operate as valuable artifacts for rhetorical criticism. Vajpayee and his assistants spent two weeks to prepare reasons to justify their nuclear ambitions. With the world and domestic audiences listening in, Vajpayee and key administrative officials had to present the moral justifications and reasons for Operation Shakti. In turn, each word of the address was strategically selected to have its due place, purpose and significance. The parliamentary address, constituted of a speech and a paper, operates as a substantive rhetorical juncture for Vajpayee.

In this chapter, I analyze Vajpayee’s speech and paper (EINP) and argue that Vajpayee’s EINP serves as the rhetorical artifact that grounds India’s nuclear ambitions within a historical narrative of India’s nuclear acquisition. The narrative works rhetorically by relying on the values embedded in the myth of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad*

¹³ See Bitzer, “Any *exigence* is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (“The Rhetorical Situation”)

Gita. As Fisher suggests, context is essential “there is no story that is not embedded in other stories” (“An Elaboration” 358). I argue that the narrative Vajpayee presents in the document is based in religious value-laden terms that work enthymematically by accessing embedded Hindu cultural myths. Within the context of the *Gita*, Vajpayee’s address works by grounding India’s transitory move towards nuclearization into a pragmatic and materialistic interpretation of the values embedded in the ancient epic.

Rather than emphasizing the idealistic “internal” process of Arjuna’s moral deliberation to discover whether the war is *dharmic* (good) or *adharmic* (evil), Vajpayee’s paper emphasizes the unequivocal “external” struggle with the physical realities of the *Gita*’s war as *clear* justification for *action*. A reading of the artifact through the myth of Arjuna, reveals how the *dharmic* rules of the universe goaded India towards nuclear acquisition. Vajpayee argues that nuclearization is his unequivocal “sacred duty.” As with the conclusion of the *Gita*, where Arjuna eventually takes hold of his Gandiva Bow and prepares for battle, Vajpayee’s address creates a powerful image of India as a nation that takes hold of their nuclear arsenal by removing ambiguous doubt over its existence. The weapons are then essential for the Indian nation to prepare for evil foes who would dare to *use* such weapons.

The speech Vajpayee delivered and the paper he presented are interconnected and the texts are very similar. In his opening statement, the Prime Minister announced that he was placing a paper on the table for parliament’s records. The speech is half the size of the paper, clearly an edited byproduct of the document. The differences between the two texts are stylistic.

Despite the similar text the key distinction is found in the conclusions of the two artifacts. The speech ends with the following statement:

The present decision and future actions will continue to reflect a commitment to sensibilities and obligations of an ancient civilization, a sense of responsibility and restraint, but a restraint born of the assurance of action, not of doubts or apprehension. Avoiding triumphalism, let us work together towards our shared objective in ensuring that as we move towards a new millennium, India will take its rightful place in the international community. ("Suo Motu Statement by Prime Minister")

The final line of the paragraph appears to be secular. The terms “action” and “apprehension” are only significant in describing the “resolve” of India to be a nuclear nation. Furthermore, the iconic use of a myth of an obligation to an ancient Indian society is not inherently significant for this address. Whether the document refers to a “Hindu” ancient civilization or the general historic people of the Indus valley is polysemic and without clear religious connotation. The end-goal of the speech and nuclear weaponry, as Vajpayee asserts, is to reaffirm India’s “rightful” position in geopolitics.

In contrast to the delivered speech, the paper concludes with the citation of the *Bhagivad Gita*:

The present decision and future actions will continue to reflect a commitment to sensibilities and obligations of an ancient civilization, a sense of responsibility and restraint, but a restraint born of the assurance of action, not of doubts or apprehension. The Gita explains (Chap. VI-3) as none other can: [Sanskrit]

Action is a process to reach a goal, action may reflect tumult but when measured and focused, will yield its objective of stability and peace. (EINP)

The quotation at the bottom of EINP is from the *Gita* chapter, “The Practice of Meditation,” that emphasizes selfless action. The non-secular conclusion of the paper is important for my analysis as I argue Vajpayee’s discourse is grounded in the mythic dialogue of Krishna and Arjuna. Although the speech concludes in a secular manner, the artifact is laden with Hindu-connotative language in terms of duty and action.

The length and detail of the EINP may suggest that the rhetorical purpose for the document is limited to the role of a handmaiden to the speech; a reiteration of its basic arguments. Vajpayee makes it obvious that the document has significance. He refers to the paper twice, first in the introduction, “Sir, in addition to the statement I make, I have also taken the opportunity to submit to the House a paper entitled ‘Evolution of India’s Nuclear Policy’” (EINP). The second citation occurs in the concluding remarks, “In my statement today and in the paper placed before the House, I have elaborated on the rationale behind the Government’s decision and outlined our approach for the future” (EINP). Rather than an extended reference, the document serves to ground *implicit* Hindu codes into the *explicitly* Hindu message of the *Gita*.

On June 14th, the *Organiser* reprinted in its entirety the four-page document.¹⁴

Symbolically, the *Organiser*’s decision to issue the document functions as evidence of a Hindu nationalist conferment and celebration of Vajpayee’s arguments on a

¹⁴ In general, the magazine promotes a heavily masculine and polarizing Hindu nationalist perspective on issues of major national interest. The *Organizer* boasts of being a significant part of India’s political history. It has been in circulation since 1947 despite *multiple* attempts by the Congress party to “ban” its publication (About Us). The magazine admits to a modest subscription base of 500,000.

contemporary nuclear India. The *ethos* of the *Organiser* is well known as the “mouthpiece” of the radical Hindu nationalist organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).¹⁵ The RSS has historically used Hindu symbols and the perceived conflict amongst Hindus, Christians, and Muslims to further their causes. In sum, the appearance of the EINP in a fervent Hindu nationalist magazine that is targeted at audiences who may be more apt to identify with Hindu messages is significant, making it clear that an interpretation of the document within the frame of Hindu theology is appropriate.

THE BHAGIVAD GITA’S MORAL DILEMMA

In this section, I outline the scene and the situation of Arjuna in *Bhagivad Gita* and I present two competing interpretation of the myth that become relevant to the arguments Vajpayee presents in the EINP. I divide the interpretations of Arjuna’s moral dilemma into two categories: the idealistic and materialistic/pragmatic. The divisions are for heuristic purposes. They function to contain competing values of an idealistic interpretation of the *Gita* that typically resists ideologies of war in favor of an “internal” struggle, as opposed to values of a materialistic interpretation that emphasizes the

¹⁵ As a “radical” Hindu nationalist group, the RSS contrasts with the more “moderate” BJP Hindu nationalists. The BJP has obtained higher levels of office (the Prime Minister in 1996 and again in 1998). Thus, the BJP most often speaks to audiences in terms that can identify with secular and non-secular audiences. The RSS has a base of fervent conservative Hindu voters. The parties tend to feed off of one another for political and ideological gains. Both are members of the Sangh Privar (Hindu nationalist coalition). On the nuclear issue, the two parties’ agendas lined up. Gottschalk (2000) writes, “The BJP, along with the VHP and the [Association of National Volunteers or RSS] ... celebrated the event as a national victory and memorialized it through Hindu rituals, beliefs, and symbols” (248). In terms of Hindu nationalism, the Bomb has proven to be a popular achievement.

dharmic and “external” struggles to combat forces of evil.¹⁶ The categories become relevant in the nuclear debate as anti-nuclear advocates stress the “internal” and personal struggle to avoid actions of evil in favor of the “good.” The pro-nuclear interpretation on the other hand prefaces the necessity of action against forces of evil that are clear and discernible.

The mythic stage that was set for the final Kuru conflict, towards the end of the *Mahabharata*, is nothing but impressive. At the precipice of the Kurukshetra war, a grand scene of two sizeable armies, equaling four million in size, amassed on polar-sides of the battlefield (Chaturvedi 70). This moment marks the beginning of the end of a long quarrel between the two Kuru clans for the rightful division of power of the vacated Hastinapura throne.¹⁷ The two militaries function as the mythic backdrop for one of the most popular narratives of the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagivad Gita*. With these two armies prepared and on the brink of war, the mythic battlefield and its pieces are set for Arjuna to answer his heroic calling to right wrongs and vanquish forces of evil.

On the verge of the conflict, Arjuna broke rank with the Pandavas forces. He ordered Krishna to move his war-chariot between the two militaries so that he could further examine his predicament. Amidst the two largest armies ever (mythically)

¹⁶ The division is premised on Fisher’s (1985) evaluation of the competing values of the Socratic idealist and the egotist/materialist Callicles. Like Fisher, I too recognize the ability of audiences to live within the grey lines of the two divisions.

¹⁷ Most famous of Kauravas’ shenanigans is a dice game where Sakuni, one of the hundred Kauravas cousins, swindles the oldest Pandava, Yudhishtira out of everything he cherishes (family, land, wealth). As an honorable hero, Yudhishtira could not pass over his cousin’s challenge. The conclusion of the game found the Pandava family banished to the forest for thirteen years. Upon their return to the Kingdom, the Kauravas refused to return to the Pandavas their possessions. The Kauravas’ insatiable greed resulted in the final clash on the field of Kuru between the two great armies.

accrued, Arjuna could see the familiar faces of the Kauravas more clearly than before. At this moment, Arjuna is confronted with a great moral dilemma: Despite the Kauravas committing unpardonably evil acts on the Pandavas throughout the *Mahabharata*, the hero resolutely does not wish to kill his blood relatives, teachers, and friends who make up the ranks of the opposing military. Rather than being burdened by the weight of the unconscionable act of killing his kin, Arjuna is willing to consign to the ultimate sacrifice, he would lay his weapons down to allow the Kauravas to take his life. As such, the warrior-hero uncharacteristically questions the purpose of the war. He imagines the battle's end where, even if the Pandavas walked away as the victors, the situation of the kingdom would not have improved. The exploits of the war, as is with any mass bloodletting, are an evil that would enshroud Arjuna's world with destruction, despair and sorrow. Arjuna's mind has become clouded by his predicament. In order to achieve and maintain the "good life," the hero is in need of moral clarity to see through the fog of the impending battle and to take the path that is the *best* course of action.

Krishna, who is the hero's charioteer, friend, and advisor, demands that Arjuna prepare for battle at once, "This despair and weakness in a time of crisis are mean and unworthy of you, Arjuna. ... It does not become you to yield to this weakness. Arise with a brave heart and destroy the enemy" (Easwaran 633-36). Arjuna is nonresponsive to Krishna's initial demands: "My will is paralyzed, and I am utterly confused. Tell me which is the better path for me. Let me be your disciple" (Easwaran, 2007, 637-41). After Arjuna requests enlightenment, Krishna changes his tactics. The god recognizes the rhetorical barrier of the situation. In order to motivate and persuade Arjuna, the hero will need more than a retelling of *all* the sinful acts his Kauravas cousins have committed.

Arjuna is experiencing a moment of intense moral confusion that requires elevated *truths* in terms of life values and the order of the universe. The eighteen chapters of the *Gita* provide the warrior, and the invested believers in the faith, with the *means* to locate the path of the “good life.”

The *cause* of and *solution* to Arjuna’s hesitation is a contestable issue. I divide the interpretations of the *Gita* into two basic categories: the idealistic and material worldviews. The idealistic interpretation seeks the universal moral symbolism of the “war.”¹⁸ The materialistic grounds the moral of the story in a literal interpretation of the war as historically true, or at least representative of true events. The materialistic interpretation emphasizes the *dharmic* role (duty) that Arjuna must play given the external realities of the Kauravas preparing for combat. In contrast, the idealistic interpretation emphasizes the “internal” struggle of Arjuna’s predicament as a spiritual ordeal. He has lost faith in life and is in need of a metaphysical tool to see through the grey lines of morality.¹⁹ The materialists emphasize predetermined roles while the idealists emphasize the process of contemplation and discovering “good” and “evil.”

For the idealists then the myth functions as a universal allegory that represents daily human struggles to locate “good” over “evil” actions (Easwaran Kindle 549-57). Within this interpretation, the war signifies the internal Hindu struggle to follow the path to God. The words of Mahatma Gandhi are indicative of this interpretation:

¹⁸ See Easwaran (549-57).

¹⁹ Fisher (“An Elaboration”) writes, “the narrative perspective leads to the conclusion that idealistic stories, Socrates’ story being an exemplar, generate adherence because they are coherent and “ring true” to life as we would like to live it. Such stories involve us in a choice of characters in competition with other characters, leading us to choose our “heroes” and our “villains;” the choice is existential.”

In the characteristics of the perfected man of the Gita, I do not see any to correspond to physical warfare. Its whole design is inconsistent with the rules of conduct governing the relations between warring parties. The [Gita], instead of teaching the rules of physical warfare, tells us how a perfected man is to be known.... The object of the Gita appears to me to be that of showing the most excellent way to attain self-realization (*The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* 100-80).

Within this interpretation, the universal message of Arjuna's dilemma is not relevant to the question of "war" rather it is an issue of moral and spiritual philosophy. Gandhi writes "[the] work was written to explain man's duty in this inner strife over the forces of good and evil" (Gandhi *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* 258-65). The perfect man is one who pauses and reflects on the moral situations that he is confronted with. Distinguishing between evil and good is one of life's most essential goals.

Another property of the idealist interpretation of the *Gita* is that it contains universal values. All life has a *dharmic* role to play in the world; making life sacred and valuable. When Arjuna is told of the interconnection of life through *dharma* he seeks to identify with the beings of the entire universe (the three worlds). In the *Gita*, Arjuna's recognition of his family and the inevitable anguish that the conflict would bring are considered a highly ethical act. Finally, the idealistic and anti-war readings of the *Gita* use the ending of the Kurukshetra war as evidence of the conflicts categorical evil. After eighteen days, the militaries were decimated and the Pandavas, while victorious, had very little to celebrate. The consequences to this battle make it an open question whether Arjuna was in fact correct in refusing to engage in the war. The importance of competing

interpretations, the idealistic and materialistic, on moral (guilt) responsibility for one's actions is key. In reference to the nuclear scientists who conducted the tests, Laxman writes,

They would probably cite Krishna's advice to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, "Stand up and do your rightful duty without worrying about the consequences." It is, however, the consequences that disturb critics of India's atomic and missile programmes.²⁰ ("They piloted N-plans through hostile global weather")

Therefore, an emphasis on one's duty and the need to "act" is in stark contrast to the idealistic interpretation of consequences in terms of higher values.

The alternative materialistic interpretation emphasizes particular situational good and evil over universals. Thus, the materialistic interpretations are based in the pragmatic application of the *Gita's* message. As such, given an exigency that calls for battle, war is condoned and justified despite generally being "evil" (Easwaran 549-57). Within the interpretation, the agency of humans is suppressed by the limitations of *dharmic* rules of the universe. While universals of "good" and "evil" are important, the particulars of political situations require a pragmatic understanding of right and wrong. Krishna's advice to Arjuna is reliant on the notion that no action has absolute value or is good or evil. As Isherwood writes:

The pacifist must respect Arjuna. Arjuna must respect the pacifist. Both are going toward the same goal, if they are really sincere. ... For we can only help others to

²⁰ Laxman was correct: "When asked if he was remorseful as a scientist to have been responsible for developing a weapon of mass destruction - Agni, Dr Kalam quoted from the Bhagavad Gita and said 'I am like Arjuna doing my duty to the country.'"

do their duty by doing what we ourselves believe to be right. It is the one supremely social act. (Prabhavananda and Isherwood 140)

Within the materialistic and pragmatic interpretation of the *Gita*, while war in general is an evil, Arjuna's situation and his identity, as the epic's greatest warrior, requires that he *must* engage in the battle. The consequences of his actions in terms of moral guilt for killing relatives can be suppressed as being outside of his control. Outside of meeting his duty the moral responsibility rests with the situation not the agent. As long as Arjuna follows his *dharmic* path he will be rewarded through subsequent afterlives.²¹

The materialistic Arjuna is a commonplace for the pro-nuclear discussion. Pro-nuclear advocates (see Subrahmanyam) who insert nuclear weapons into the arsenal of Arjuna and narrate the warrior as a perfect representative hero, normalize the nuclear weapons by placing the devices above the moral tensions of the idealists. In the same vein, Vajpayee emphasizes the heroic act of nuclear acquisition and the historic truths of future threats over the moral tensions inherent in nuclear acquisition. The symbolic implication of Vajpayee's discourse then is to connect the respected hero when he chose to take *action* fight in the Kurukshetra battle. The idealistic interpretation of the *Gita*, on the other hand, makes the choice to acquire nuclear weapons a moral issue that is open for deliberation. The emphasis is on the moral struggle to define whether weaponization is "good" for the Indian state. One columnist from the *Times of India* asks the pertinent question, "Imagine the scene in the *Gita* where Arjuna the warrior is reluctant to go into battle. Would Krishna have answered differently if Arjuna's arrows were nuclear missiles?" (Visvanathan).

²¹ In fact, Arjuna's battle was such a successful *dharmic* act that after the war, he ascended to the top of the Himalaya Mountains to join the gods in the heavens.

As a myth, a *real* Krishna will not materialize and produce a universally accepted *dharmic* truth for all India to know. Both pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear advocates can use the two interpretations of the *Gita* to validate their arguments through the story. As a god, Krishna's discourse with Arjuna is essential for the justification of action as *dharma*. After revealing himself as a reincarnation of Vishnu, Krishna tells Arjuna, "Whenever *dharma* declines and the purpose of life is forgotten, I manifest myself on earth. I am born in every age to protect the good, to destroy evil, and to reestablish *dharma*" (Easwaran 811-15). Krishna's role in advising Arjuna is also an important *topos* distinguishable from other Indian religious myths. The substance of the *Gita* has Krishna revealing the most fundamental principles of the Hindu religion to Arjuna, including: immortal *atman* (soul), rebirth, *dharma*, *adharma*, *karma yoga*, and selfless action. While these beliefs exist elsewhere in the *oeuvre* of Hindu epics and texts, the *Gita* offers the most concise collection of the tenets. The *Gita* narrative is the most read, verbalized and well-known Hindu religious documents.

To understand Vajpayee's use of the *Gita* quotation in the conclusion of the EINP document, the concepts that Krishna uses to persuade Arjuna must be defined: *Dharma/adharma*, *karma yoga*, and selfless action. The first concept of *dharma* is defined as:

Generally, *dharma* implies support from within: the essence of a thing, its virtue, that which makes it what it is. ... On a larger scale, *dharma* means the essential order of things, an integrity and harmony in the universe and the affairs of life that cannot be disturbed without courting chaos. Thus it means rightness, justice, goodness, purpose rather than chance (Easwaran 204-14).

The term is foundational for the Hindu belief system and is integrated throughout the *Mahabharata* epic and other Hindu texts. All things that are good in life are in opposition to the chaotic and the unjust. Hindu *dharma* assumes its opposite—*adharma*. As Arjuna’s hesitation suggests, the “good,” especially in difficult situations in life, is not always apparent. Humans must decipher and distinguish *dharma* and *adharma*. Thus, *dharma* is a struggle between right and wrong that all life forms must actively come to terms with. *Dharma*, and Arjuna’s eventual decision to follow the right path, function as a representation of the good life, of “doing the right thing” and following a “code of honor” (Bhattacharya 3)

To follow *dharma* the *Gita* stresses action. *Karma* is the economy of actions or deeds that operate within the competing notions of *dharma* and *adharma*. *Karma* includes the flow of all actions through time. Each karmic act has consequences in terms of future “bad” and “good” *karma*. As an economy of action, *karma* can accumulate to push the physical world towards either poles of *dharma* and *adharma*. To achieve good *karma*, Krishna’s words to Arjuna indicate that he must strive to act not for personal gain, but for the betterment of the world and ultimately for his eventual connection to God, “This is the doctrine of Nishkama *Karma Yoga* that is the doctrine of *Karma* without any desire and done with detachment and in dedication to God” (Bhattacharya 59). Detachment is framed by “selfless” action. Bhattacharya writes, “To perform work is the duty. ... Neither personal nor private benefit should be the motive to perform work. One should perform the work simply because it ought to be performed” (3). Once a Hindu successfully ascends in action to “meet” the level of God, the soul (*atman*) is released

from the cycle of birth. The model of the good life is said to be those actions which provide a pathway for the *atman* to be released from the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*).

Finally, the conclusion of the *Gita* finds Arjuna with the confidence to return to the Pandavas military and prepare for battle. For the idealists, the end of the *Gita* marks the moment when Arjuna's metaphysical and moral worldview was expanded (corrected) to see beyond his immediate material and egocentric perspective. Thus, he was given the *mythic* tools of the Hindu religion to see through moral dilemmas to locate the *dharmic* life-path. Arjuna could now rationalize why the universe had predestined the warrior to face such a perilous situation. The materialist perspective grounds the myth as a representation of present geopolitical concerns and claims that Arjuna's *true* calling was already apparent. The *Mahabharata* makes it clear that the Kauravas were evil and in need of extermination. This perspective undermines the "struggle" aspect of *dharma* and prefaces historic realities to define good and evil action.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EINP

If the purpose of a myth is to solve great societal and personal problems the question is, "what concern(s) does Vajpayee seek to solve with his citation of the *Gita*?" I contend that Vajpayee's purposeful use of the *Gita* is intended to resolve the moral dilemmas of a *dharmic* India acquiring *adharmic* nuclear devices. The essential difficulty for Vajpayee is based on the apparent contradiction with the *ethos* of a moral India, who has historically rejected nuclear weapons, eventually acting to incorporate and celebrate the existence of an Indian nuclear arsenal. To solve the apparent incongruity, Vajpayee must recast Indian nuclear weapons from being unequivocal evil, as "weapons of mass destruction," to objects that are morally acceptable within the Hindu *dharmic* frame.

Once the mysteries of the universe are reordered with Hindu theology, India's contemporary nuclear weapons are transformed from a universal *adharmic* device, to the particular *dharmic* necessary evil.

Therefore, Vajpayee's speech and document seem to connect the 1998 tests to Arjuna's unique case of warranted militant and ethical action. The myth serves to validate his arguments as justification for the BJP party's nuclear tests, and their future nuclear endeavors. The power of the Arjuna hero resides with the myths' values. Vajpayee utilizes the materialistic and pragmatic interpretation of Arjuna to congeal India's pro-nuclear worldview with the embedded cultural myth. Vajpayee bases his argument to the values of security, strength, and resolute belief in order to embolden the tests. Vajpayee uses Krishna's advice to Arjuna as an exemplar for how India *should* act in the nuclear age. From my reading, the address allows Arjuna to live again, as the representative hero of the universal "good" man, by identifying the character with the Indian state. The conclusion of the EINP reminds the audience of the sacred obligation of Arjuna as Vajpayee argues that he is obliged to embrace the *karmic* action of obtaining a nuclear Bomb.

The implications of resolving the moral dilemma are in terms of guilt. To eradicate guilt and normalize nuclear weapons, Vajpayee narrates an interpretation of India's history as consisting of a historic chain of pro-nuclear heroes enacting their duty. What follows from the momentum of India's historical pro-nuclear leaders meeting the duty, of their time and place, is the eventual realization of the 1998 nuclear India. Thus, past *dharmic* actions by pro-nuclear heroes provide the agency for present heroes, the BJP and nuclear scientists, to enact their particular duty. The title of the article,

“Evolution of India’s Nuclear Program,” is indicative of Vajpayee’s historic determinist angle. As agents imbedded in a world largely ruled by forces outside of their control, the contemporary leaders, as well as the Indian public, can be relieved from the “guilt” of incorporating evil weapons into their arsenal. The devices are reluctantly incorporated as a *necessary* evil.

Vajpayee represents the history of the Indian state, from its 1947 birth to the present, as piously moral. A series of continuous anti-nuclear actions on the geopolitical stage suggests that India is a hero who fights against forces of ideological evil that have served to promote nuclear weaponry. Despite continued failures, India practiced restraint by selflessly advocating for the destruction of nuclear devices. While these values are obtainable in a world without nuclear weapons, the EINP paints the idealistic world of disarmament as *presently* inaccessible. Prior to the 1998 tests, nuclear nations consistently refused to heed India’s repeated calls for disarmament and peace. While a nuclear free world is desirable, the EINP makes it clear that the realistic dangers of foreign-nuclear threats on India’s borders *required* the nation to defend itself.

To contrast with the idealistic value system, Vajpayee emphasizes the values of freedom of thought and resolute action, national sovereignty, peace, and security.

Following Fisher, these values have fidelity for an audience who may desire freedom of choice, a sense of security and the protection from fearful forces.²² Those audiences who

²² Fisher’s (“An Elaboration”) distinction of Callicles and Socrates is relevant, “Callicles’ position is informed by the values of pleasure, expediency, self-aggrandizement, courage, strength, political acumen and success, and the will to power. Just as Socrates’ values correspond with the values of the moralistic myth of the American Dream, so do Callicles’ values accord with the values of the materialistic myth of the American Dream: ‘effort, persistence, ‘playing the game,’ initiative, self-reliance, achievement and success’” (362).

want to live life to the fullest, and to embrace the will to power can find fidelity with Vajpayee' description of how geopolitical power is divided (“An Elaboration” 362). Vajpayee’s speech serves to prove that there are groups of nuclear “haves” and those nations who are relegated to the “have-nots.” The narrative indicates that India, despite an egalitarian effort to reduce international nuclear tensions, has been treated as a nation of lesser value. Nuclear weapons then are a form of currency of power that the Indian nation can use to embolden its stance in the world.

Vajpayee’s EINP casts India and its politicians as timeless heroes for the valuable cause of peaceful disarmament. The nation’s birth offers an origin of innocence for India in a world that had already witnessed the Bombs development and use:

In 1947, when India emerged as a free county to take its rightful place in the comity of nations, the nuclear age had already dawned. Our leaders then took the crucial decision to opt for self-reliance, and freedom of thought and action.

(EINP).

From India’s naissance, through forty-one years (1947-1998) of history, the EINP documents a tragic and heroic nation that consistently pursues a policy against nuclear weapons development. Despite India’s continued calls for disarmament, each proposal ends with limited results.

To exemplify the history of anti-nuclearism’s failures, Vajpayee cites six cases of India leaders promoting reductions in use and size of arsenals. In 1950, Jawaharlal Nehru, “called for negotiations for prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons and in the interim, a standstill agreement to halt nuclear testing. . . . Our call was not heeded”

(EINP). The document continues, “In 1965, India had put forward the idea of an international non-proliferation agreement” (EINP). While the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty eventually came into being, India fundamentally disagreed with the treaty for failing to take into account the “equal” and “legitimate” security interests of all nations (EINP). Instead, the treaty instilled a division of nuclear “haves and have-nots” (EINP). The consistent theme in the EINP is that while India promotes a resolute message of peace and disarmament, the nuclear powers tend to disfigure the *dharmic* message for strategic gain.

Furthermore, to show India’s persistence after previous efforts had failed, the document cites two cases of an India in 1978 and 1988 calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons:

India proposed negotiations for an international convention that would prohibit the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. ... In 1988, we put forward an Action Plan for phased elimination of all nuclear weapons.... (EINP)

According to the document, each of the examples of international policies that seek to end nuclear use originates from India’s vigilance to reduce the currency and value of nuclear weapons. India refused to accept that these weapons should be used in a war. Instead the nation’s political leaders dubbed the devices “weapons of mass destruction” (EINP). In the EINP, Vajpayee argues that India’s actions for a nuclear free world were not motivated by selfish desires in terms of national security. Rather, a nuclear free world is egalitarian by enhancing the “security of all nations” (EINP).

In the end, for Vajpayee, each proposal of disarmament was a failure since the old and new nuclear states refused to detach themselves from their weapons, “At the global

level, there is no evidence yet on the part of the nuclear weapon states to take decisive and irreversible steps in moving towards a nuclear-weapon-free-world” (EINP).

Vajpayee’s historic analysis promotes a sense of despair with the tragic perspective of India’s nuclear history. Thus, Vajpayee’s narrative must seek out methods for alleviating feelings of helplessness. As a heroic story, the EINP document establishes this scene to highlight the great obstacles that must be overcome to achieve the goal of a secure and proud India. While despair is warranted, Vajpayee can resolve the world of disorder and conflict through the stability and power of the Arjuna myth.

One rhetorical function of the historical analysis is to encourage the audience to identify with an Indian nation who has consistently, but to no avail followed the righteous and idealistic anti-nuclear path. Audiences who value peace can identify with the historical narrative by positioning blame for India’s failures on non-Indian nations.

Vajpayee frames the failures with this statement: “It is our regret that these proposals did not receive a positive response from other nuclear weapon states. ... Had their response been positive, India need not have gone for the current tests” (EINP). Vajpayee and his party’s moves towards nuclear weapons then are a result of the failures of other nations to see the *true* luminosity of India’s professed anti-nuclearism. The consequence of nuclear nations’ ill-informed actions is that the anti-nuclear India had to take steps to defend itself.

Vajpayee’s historical narrative functions rhetorically by highlighting the futility of an idealistic frame, which promotes nuclear disarmament in a vacuum, rather than the materialistic frame that has concern India’s security. The historical analysis assumes the Gandhian *idealistic* interpretation of the *Gita*. Rather than excluding audiences who

identify with the *Gita*'s transcendent values, the historic narrative reveals the foundation of India's nuclear ambitions within the idealistic tradition. Indian audiences can identify with the spirit of disarmament as the "life" they wish India could live. In Vajpayee's perfect world, *all* nuclear nations would agree to dismantle their nuclear devices through an international agreement. In a similar vein, Arjuna's perfect world would result in the Kauravas agreeing to right previous wrongs by sharing the Hastinapura Kingdom. However, as is true in both the myth and the EINP narrative, the persistence of heroes to resolve conflicts *dharmically* (idealistically) with the forces of evil, often fails. The *adharmic* enemies refuse to acquiesce to their egotistical drive for power. Whether the agent of action is India or Arjuna, the hero must identify threats by those evil forces that are beyond moral reasoning and persuasion. Once the threat is identified, the hero must respond by defending him/herself against the established threat.

While the hero is obliged to respond to evil forces, he/she must also maintain resolute and moral action. Otherwise, the narrative would lose coherence as the basic structural distinction between the heroic and evil would collapse. Once operation Shakti was publically announced by Vajpayee on May 11th, a gaping fissure came into being between the symbolic character of India and the alluring disarmament narratives. Regardless of Vajpayee's justification for nuclear acquisition, the power of values in peaceful and idealistic narratives persists. The ideal world of disarmament still holds true for the Indian public. Vajpayee recognized this truth and uses the EINP to bridge the symbolic fissure. To do so, despite his actions to incorporate the devices into the nation's arsenal, the Prime Minister seeks to maintain a semblance of hope in a world without evil weapons and demons. Vajpayee writes, "Disarmament was then and continues to be a

major plank in our foreign policy now. It was, in essence, and remains still, the natural course for a country that had waged a unique struggle for independence on the basis of ‘ahimsa’ and ‘satyagraha’” (EINP).²³ While the idealistic narrative of a non-nuclear India and world are represented as implausible, Vajpayee symbolically maintains the values of disarmament as holding true. Thus, India will continue to promote the idealistic despite the nation’s moves that are counter to its goals.

Like Arjuna, the role India *must* play in the narrative of international politics is determined by the actions of all living beings and nations who are struggling with their own paths of *dharma* and *adharma*. The accumulation of these actions presents the Indian nation with a quasi-determined role and duty. According to Vajpayee’s narrative, the situation of India’s security has eroded to a breaking point due to the unenlightened actions of current and potential nuclear states:

The decades of the 80’s and 90’s meanwhile witnessed the gradual deterioration of our security environment as a result of nuclear and missile proliferation. ...

India, in this period, became the victim of externally aided and abetted terrorism, militancy and clandestine war through hired mercenaries. ... At the global level, there is no evidence yet on the part of the nuclear weapon states to take decisive and irreversible steps in moving towards a nuclear-weapon-free-world. (EINP)

While Vajpayee does not explicitly define an enemy in the document, he paints the picture of India’s security as being on the brink of chaos. The audience can enthymematically insert the enemy that they fear most; whether that be terrorism, nuclear

²³ This line was not included in the speech. The exclusion of Ahimsa and Satyagraha as culturally and religiously imbued terms once again is suggestive that the EINP paper was intended for a domestic audience. Both terminologies were used by Gandhi in his interpretation of the *Gita* (Gandhi 2000).

states (China, US, Russia), or proliferating nations (Pakistan). Metaphorically, the symbol of Arjuna amidst four million soldiers on the precipice of war is made relevant. If Arjuna refuses to pick up his weapons from the floor of his chariot, the hero will undoubtedly be killed. India's wellbeing is also described as being in grave danger. The nation, then *must* prepare itself to vanquish the enemy if one materializes. Thus, India is cast as the hero, who is facing a moral crossroad on the best course of action to defend the Indian people from forces of evil.

The historic examples of failed disarmament, along with the deterioration of India's security environment, place the contemporary nation in a precarious place. Given this predicament, the only option left for India to maintain a sense of order is to locate means to protect itself against growing forces of evil. In other words, India has exhausted all options in terms of idealistic methods for ridding the world of the weapons; the only interpretation that can now find fidelity with the audience is with the pragmatic and materialistic values that promote action through strength. Fisher argues that the reason audiences would believe in idealistic values is that they presume the best in people ("An Elaboration" 363). In the case of Vajpayee's narrative, the "best" of people only exists in the case of the Indian nation; foreign nuclear powers are driven by values that place their own interest first. Thus, Vajpayee's EINP argues that the duty of the nation is to recognize a deteriorating security environment and to take action to protect itself. Vajpayee writes that this obligation to defend the state is his professed "sacred duty" (EINP).

As a sacred duty, little doubt remains for the nation to deliberate on whether India should become a nuclear nation. The nation's nuclear status was predetermined by the

dharmic state of affairs. A *Times of India* article, published the same week as Vajpayee's address, concludes in kind with the EINP's narrative. The Prime Ministers of past and present followed the example of Arjuna, by enacting their duty to protect the nation:

Every Prime Minister since the time of Indira Gandhi was in a position to conduct a nuclear test... None of these Prime Ministers could be described as hawkish; all of them were committed to disarmament and a nuclear weapon-free world. ...But the strategy failed, and his predicament was not unlike that of Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Like the son of Kunti, Rajiv too decided to do his duty... The BJP was the last inheritor of that torch... ("The Nuclear Legacy")

The duty of previous Indian leaders, to preserve and bolster India's nuclear option, is represented as being consistent with the *ethos* of the nation from 1974 to 1998. The values of the nation to protect itself, while consistent with the idealistic *Gita* interpretation, have held fast throughout the long deliberation period of the nuclear option. A sense of duty permeates the history of India's nuclear weapons industry. Following a continuous chain of heroic actions, previous Indian leaders followed their duty to produce a viable nuclear option. Thus, Vajpayee's role was predetermined as the last link in the *dharma* chain.

While Vajpayee never deploys the term *dharma* in the document or the speech, the language of "sacred duty" and the citation of the *Gita* assume its existence. After Vajpayee announced the nuclear tests on May 11th, the residing leader of the BJP organization, Lal Krishna Advani, explicitly deploys *dharma* as the motive for the nation acquiring nuclear weapons:

A coalition government has its *dharma*. ... And that is what is agreed among all parties. Different ideologies do not matter much because of the common agenda. ... Like when we were in government with the Janata Party, we did not talk about the nuclear issue though we believed in it. ("The Prime Minister's Premier Minister")

Within the realm of *dharma*, the events Vajpayee describes as leading up to the contemporary geopolitical stage sets the ground rules for how the nation should act. Vajpayee argues that he must find strength by reevaluating the nuclear option.

Within the context of Vajpayee's EINP narrative, in order for the Indian state to maintain a credible nuclear option, the story reaches a pinnacle moment. The paper argues that the nation has to act or else its security would be compromised. Symbolically, Vajpayee has placed the Indian nation within the myth of Arjuna, with Gandiva bow on the ground, in the midst of the Kuru battlefield. Vajpayee's narrative asks whether India should maintain the nuclear option or unequivocally obtain a nuclear deterrent. The choices are two-fold: Should India develop weapons that if used would kill millions? Or, should the nation resolutely defend its values and reject nuclear weapons at the cost of being victimized by a foreign nuclear state? The failures of the idealistic method for dealing with nuclear threats, and the historic realities of India's status quo make the choice of nuclear acquisition the only correct answer.

Emphasizing resolute action without placing limits on the term would end poorly for matters of war. Vajpayee's EINP pays lip service to restraint as suitable in times when doubt and weakness are not present. Vajpayee writes, "Restraint, however, has to arise from strength. It cannot be based upon indecision or doubt. Restraint is valid only when

doubts are removed” (EINP). While action is necessary, restraint is not entirely abandoned. The EINP uses the historical narrative of India’s self-control, and the announced responsibility of India’s nuclear future, as a location to distinguish India’s moral standing from other nuclear nations. Vajpayee’s EINP adheres to a consistency of characters. As a nuclear nation, the good Indian *ethos* is maintained in contrast to the other nuclear states. Vajpayee criticizes the nations as failing to have limits on their use of nuclear weapons, “Some of these countries have doctrines that permit the first use of nuclear weapons... Under such circumstances, India was left with little choice.” (EINP).

Arjuna is made relevant to the question of whether India would “use” nuclear devices. Arjuna, at the end of the 18-day conflict, eventually survived and won the Kuru war without using the powerful *brahmastra* weapons. An article, “Power & Restraint” published by the *Times of India*, on the same day as Vajpayee’s speech, reiterates the Prime Minister’s message:

The most effective use of [nuclear weapons] is to let it be seen as a deterrent and behave with restraint and responsibility. In a sense, we should look for our role models in our own civilizational traditions. Arjuna obtained the *Divya Astras* - the ultimate weapons, but he never used them in war and did not even threaten to use them. He kept them as the ultimate deterrent. The victory in the *Mahabharata* War was won without even having to use them. ("Power & Restraint")

The quotation is an indication that the Arjuna myth functions to suppress the applicability of those arguments that cite potential use of the devices as a reason to halt Indian nuclear acquisition. The responsible Arjuna carried the most powerful weapons in the epic and he never used the devices. The Arjuna-nuclear association then functions to reduce the guilt

of the government's nuclear acquisition. Thus, the EINP quotation from the *Gita* emphasizes action and restraint to access Arjuna's responsible weapon use.

Arjuna's hesitation in the battlefield between two great armies resembles India's twenty-four year period of deliberation over the nuclear option. The narrative of Vajpayee's EINP emphasizes the 1974-1998 period as a significant and unique example of India's morality. According to the EINP however, the moment for deliberation has ended. The nation is on the precipice of a severely weakened security environment. A failure by the BJP to test the weapons would result in the nation avoiding its *dharmic* duty. India would appear weak and without resolve to their foreign enemies. Vajpayee writes:

The restraint exercise for 24 years, after having demonstrated our capability in 1974, is in itself a unique example. Restraint, however, has to arise from strength. It cannot be based upon indecision or doubt. Restraint is valid only when doubts are removed. (EINP)

The myth of the doubting Arjuna, who appeals to Krishna for assistance, illustrates the right and proper path for the hero. In Vajpayee's narrative, Arjuna's hesitation represents India's indecision in the face of the unabated growth of foreign threats. Vajpayee continues:

Under such circumstances, India was left with little choice. It had to take necessary steps to ensure that the country's nuclear option, developed and safeguarded over decades not be permitted to erode by a voluntary self-imposed restraint. (1989b)

Thus, to arise with strength, the nation must remove its “doubt” by preparing itself to defend the nation in the event an enemy materializes who presents a clear existential danger.

The values inherent in the materialistic perspective of India’s predicament are strength, certainty in belief, and action. These values are coherent and make sense to an audience who are knowledgeable of the *Gita*’s setting of war. Strength and conviction in action is what Arjuna lacked when he lost grip of his weaponry. Krishna yelled at the heroic warrior, “This despair and weakness in a time of crisis are mean and unworthy of you, Arjuna. ... It does not become you to yield to this weakness. Arise with a brave heart and destroy the enemy!” (Easwaran 633-36). In order for the nation and Arjuna to maintain their heroic stature they must stand resolute by defending their position on the metaphoric battlefield.

Vajpayee’s narrative is confirmed by the article, “The Message of Gita,” published in *The Hindu* two months after Vajpayee’s address. The editorial responds to continued anti-nuclear discontent with India’s nuclear activities. The text makes it unambiguous that the values of Arjuna, as the strongest warrior in the epic, can operate as a powerful symbolic commonplace to promote India’s strength through nuclear weapon acquisition. Thus, “The Message of the Gita” is consistent with materialistic interpretation of the myth:

It is unfortunate that some Indian intellectuals and political parties have taken upon themselves the task of unsettling the minds of the people regarding the importance and dire necessity of the country's nuclear programme. To them I would refer Arjuna's predicament at the beginning of the Mahabharata war. To

Lord Krishna, he says, "Should the sons of Dhritrashtra, with weapons in hand, slay me, unresisting, unarmed in the battle, that would indeed be better for me."

Arjuna then abandons his bow and arrows and sits on the chair of his chariot.

Whereupon, the Lord admonishes him and says "Whence has this unmanly and shameful dejection come upon you, O Arjuna?" And that was the beginning of the great epic, the Gita, more than 5,000 years ago. (O.P. Modi)

The quotation highlights the potential and power of the Arjuna myth to wipe away contradictions and moral dilemmas. The certainty of what the warrior must do supersedes *any* argument against Arjuna going forth to engage in the war. Thus, the materialistic interpretation of the *Gita* has fidelity for audiences who acknowledge that heroic characters have specified roles to play. Once characters in a narrative are placed within the confines of good and evil, their roles and future actions are foretold. In the case of Arjuna, if the hero fails to act in the face of grave danger the epic would turn out to be a bad story. Thus, mythic narratives cohere to audiences only if the iconic hero manages to overcome obstacles in order to engage and defeat the forces of evil.

Throughout the EINP document, Vajpayee stresses the desirability of freedom of action. The EINP suggests that since the nation's independence, leaders have taken, "the crucial decision to opt for self-reliance, and freedom of thought and action" (EINP). The value to act freely and to rely upon actions for stability, in a world with many unjust constraints, rings true to the Indian audience. Evidence for this claim is found with government officials (see J. Singh *Defending India*) referencing centuries of invasions and colonial powers. The quotation where Vajpayee stresses freedom of action is in reference to the cold war, when the nation chose "nonalignment" rather than to ally with

either Soviet or American ideologies. In the EINP, Vajpayee cites the “ancient civilization” and “strength,” of a leader who acts to raise the nation up to the level of an ancient golden age. Amongst narratives of invading and colonial forces, hegemonic national powers of past, and a myth of return, the notion of non-constrained action makes sense and is desirable.

The notion of freedom of action also operates within the more transcendent sense of values. Arjuna’s ability to do his duty is based on the assumption that he has the option to decide whether to ignore his *dharmic* role. Thus, the narrative requires that humans have a freedom to choose between good and evil action to allow the mythic system to cohere. Otherwise *karma* as an accumulation of all life’s actions would be an irrelevant concept. Agents would be relegated to the level of “motion” rather than action²⁴

Vajpayee’s EINP describes the values of freedom and action as being applicable beyond contemporary India. In response to an unjust NPT, Vajpayee writes, “Our Decision not to sign the NPT was in keeping with the basic objective of maintaining freedom of thought and action” (EINP). And again Vajpayee argues, “... India was obliged to stand aside from the emerging regime so that its freedom of action was not constrained.” (EINP). Vajpayee leaves no room for values that would inhibit the nation’s ability to defend itself. The only event India would disarm their nuclear weapons would be a voluntary agreement where all nations move to remove the weapons. Therefore, in a world with failing regimes and norms against nuclear weapons, the nation’s ideal state is to have the ability to act when called upon. Thus, Vajpayee’s narrative harkens the archetype of a hero. Arjuna as the greatest hero must have freedom to act to conquer

²⁴ See Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives, and a Rhetoric of Motives*, Meridian Books, (Cleveland,: World Pub. Co., 1962).

dangerous and evil forces. In keeping with the plotline of Vajpayee's narrative, to maintain a heroic India, the nation must have a full range of options to exist in the world.

Furthermore, Vajpayee defines the nation's present nuclear actions as representing the values of strength and freedom in thought and action: "Tests conducted on 11 and 13 May are a continuation of the policies set into motion that put this country on the path of self-reliance and independence of thought and action" (EINP). The narrative runs full circle. The actions of India's present leadership match its historic and traditional values.

These calls for freedom of action are framed by Vajpayee's conclusion of the document. The quotation from the *Gita* removes any doubt about whether the moves towards nuclearization should be considered ethical. Prior to the quotation the narrative sets the following scene: By the time Vajpayee and the BJP obtained the power of office, idealistic values have failed, the security environment has deteriorated, and the Indian leaders are endowed with a sacred duty to protect the nation from threats. The narrative's values of strength and action cohere with the scene and function to tilt the odds in favor of pro-nuclear ideology. In the conclusion, Vajpayee uses the myth of Arjuna not only to reiterate what has already been said, but also to inject the power of Krishna's advice to Arjuna into the nuclear debate. The God, as protector of *dharma*, then symbolically confirms the entirety of Vajpayee's EINP document. Vajpayee writes:

The present decision and future actions will continue to reflect a commitment to sensibilities and obligations of an ancient civilization, a sense of responsibility and restraint, but a restraint born of the assurance of action, not of doubts or apprehension. The *Gita* explains (Chap. VI-3) as none other

can: [Sanskrit] Action is a process to reach a goal, action may reflect tumult but when measured and focused, will yield its objective of stability and peace. (EINP)

The conclusion envelopes key terms that I have already analyzed in this chapter.

Vajpayee thus reiterates the emphasis of the nuclear act in terms of “obligation,” “restraint,” “action,” and the opposite of “doubt” “assurance” or belief in action.

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

The premise of my research is based on the assumption that India, a nation who acclaimed their opposition against *all* nuclear weapons development, would find divisive the state's transition towards being a nuclear state.²⁵ My conjecture held that the values underlying India's history of anti-nuclear action would be irreconcilable with values that justify a contemporary nuclear India. Vajpayee's May 27th Lok Sabha address sought to alleviate apparent contradiction by using values of a higher order from the myth of Arjuna. The critical purpose of this thesis is to explain how the myth of Arjuna operates in Vajpayee's pro-nuclear rhetoric.

Using Fisher's narrative paradigm, I read the EINP document as a story that is "composed of good reasons, [and] elements that give warrants for believing or acting in accord with the message" ("An Elaboration" 357). My interpretation of the EINP as a narrative reveals how the document's implicit and explicit values are empowered by the culturally shared narrative of Arjuna in the *Gita*. Chapter two indicates that Arjuna's predicament before the Kuru war permeates the meaning of the entire document and speech. Fisher's narrative paradigm, as a critical lens, allows a reading of Vajpayee's speech via the Arjuna myth, giving unique insight into the rhetorical power of myth. As Fisher reminds us, "no text is devoid of context that is, relationship to other texts" ("An Elaboration" 357). Fisher's theory reveals Vajpayee's EINP document, an ostensibly

²⁵ Polling data, which provide limited metropolitan based data, suggested that the public approved of nuclear devices (Perkovich). Regardless of the popularity, publics still require a method for reconciling entrenched contradictions of values.

political act, fraught with contradiction, becomes whole through the mythic recruitment of coherent moral arguments via the Arjuna myth.

My reading of the document from the mythic-narrative perspective reveals the foundation of Vajpayee's moral calculus for justifying nuclear devices. Vajpayee's moral framework operates beyond the basic realist security political frame of "will to power" and the idealistic frame of faith in "humanities goodness." Vajpayee's reasoning is based on the values that envelope Arjuna. The values that the Arjuna myth represents function as a form of moral currency. McGee & Nelsen suggest that myths are an equivalent of money, they determine the moral of stories and measures what "counts" in a debate (152-3).

The EINP's enactment of the myth of Arjuna, by simple citation, establishes a moral framework for the audience to weigh relevance of arguments—for or against nuclear acquisition. Scholarship that fails to account for the transcendent values embedded in the Arjuna myth risks rejecting the speech as "illogical," failing to grasp how the Vajpayee government establishes good reasons for nuclear acquisition ("NHCP").

TRANSCENDENCE AND CONSEQUENCE

"Arjuna" and his dialogue with Krishna in the *Gita* contain values that absolve apparent contradictions in secular nuclear debate. Vajpayee's India can advocate for the elimination of nuclear weapons, while also making moves towards nuclear acquisition, without disrupting the coherence of the narrative. The Indian state, according to Vajpayee, has maintained a consistent identity as a good hero under the Hindu frame of *dharmic* duty.

The implication of Vajpayee's use of Arjuna is that he accesses basic Hindu religious values by evoking the overarching story of what the "ideal" life should be. Arjuna operates as the universal human being who is *obliged* to follow his/her *dharmic* duty throughout life. The mythic hero has fidelity as the representation of Hinduism's uplifting values of selfless *dharmic* action. Therefore Arjuna is Vajpayee's commonplace for the transcendent "ideal basis for human conduct" ("An Elaboration" 363).

Hinduism's emphasis on the ordering of the universe in terms of good and evil and *karma* determines what counts as acceptable conduct to achieve the good life. Arjuna in the *Gita* symbolically represents the basic struggle for Hindus to see through mystery and discover the clarity and order of the *dharma*. Arjuna's predicament is more than an interesting history, but is beguiling to dwell with the moral of the narrative. The Prime Minister emphasizes the end of the *Gita*, when Arjuna joins the Kuru battle, to powerfully frame the nuclear tests within embedded Hindu religious values. After the last chapter of the *Gita*, Arjuna prepares for battle. The Prime Minister uses the myth to symbolically unite Arjuna's acts with the historical narrative of an India that must stand and prepare for war. Vajpayee's discourse makes nuclear weapons consistent with the religious frame of good action.

The Arjuna myth works in the following way. First, Arjuna functions as the unequivocal "good" warrior who fights evil. An audience does not need to believe in the tenants of the Hindu religion to identify with a powerful and resolute warrior who matches the archetypal role of a hero. Secondly, Arjuna's hesitation and restraint before the Kuru war is an ethical act of reflection. The moment thus indicates that "good" action must first be grounded in belief and knowledge of what distinguishes *dharma* and

adharma. Third, once *dharma* is known, humans can follow their sacred obligation through *karmic* action. *Dharma* and the *karma* that follows are not universal. Rather, following *dharma* is an individual struggle to elevate one's soul (*atman*) so you can be released from the cycle of *samsāra* (death and rebirth). Fourth, action cannot be based in personal desire, a "will to power." Rather, human action must follow *karma yoga* so the agents can locate and see God's immanent presence. *Karma yoga* therefore stresses that Arjuna should act selflessly and with *dharmic* intent throughout his lifetime.

The *consequence* of the Arjuna myth is that a failure to follow one's duty and obligation will implicate an individual's soul's movement towards transcending the material world. Furthermore, a failure to act will bring *karmic* consequences on the physical self, the world, and the enduring soul. The "currency" that counts the most in the myth of Arjuna is following one's duty to gain *karmic* rewards. The implication of the myth is that Arjuna can look beyond the consequences of slaying his cousins whom he still cherishes. To gain *karmic* currency, the warrior can, without doubt or guilt, follow his role as the hero to vanquish forces of evil.

Vajpayee's use of Arjuna in the EINP functions to justify Indian nuclear weapons in powerful ways. First, Arjuna's predicament makes it clear that the morality of nuclear weapons cannot be placed into an evaluative frame that labels them as absolute evil or good.²⁶ Each agent has his/her role to play as he/she struggles to achieve good *karma*. The particulars of India's situations will alter what should be evaluated as moral action. Therefore, Vajpayee's narrative constructs pre-1998 nuclear India's past actions, in advocating for total disarmament, as patently *dharmic*. The early India nation was

²⁶ See Gandhi ("Atom Bomb and Ahimsa").

following its obligation to seek a peaceful resolution to the world's nuclear dilemmas. The nation sought, for selfless reasons, to cultivate the "good" human spirit that opposes egotistical power politics. Also, the present nuclear India is symbolically represented as *dharmic*, as the nation's insecurity required Vajpayee to follow his "sacred duty" by defending the country from threats. Indian leaders and citizens can find comfort that the nation has followed a strict path of ethical action within the transcendent frame of *dharmic* action.

Vajpayee's rhetorical justification of India's nuclear endeavors is further empowered by the symbol of Krishna. The god is representative of supreme judgment of what constitutes *dharma* in the world. Krishna's expressed purpose is to re-establish the good when evil becomes dominant on earth. Vajpayee's citation of Krishna's words functions rhetorically by elevating judgment on whether India's nuclear weapons are good or evil to the highest metaphysical court. Humans, as lesser beings than Gods, have faults that inhibit clairvoyant sight in distinguishing good and evil. Gandhi's words, in 1946 indicate that humans do not have the agency of God to use "evil" as means to reach "good." He writes, "Often does good come out of evil. But that is God's, not man's plan" ("Atom Bomb and Ahimsa"). Vajpayee therefore deploys Krishna's words to establish the "final" judgment on whether India's nuclear test and future nuclear endeavors are *dharmic*.

The myth of Arjuna addresses the audience's concerns about the consequences of future nuclear use. Vajpayee's interpretation of *dharmic* duty allows the nation to prepare for battle with the enemy without the implied use of the weapons. Arjuna can kill his cousins without breaking foundational moral codes as he is guided by the moral

constraints of action (*karma yoga*). Vajpayee cites Arjuna to reduce the audience's concerns about the potential of an unrestrained militaristic India who seeks to destroy an enemy with nuclear weapons. Arjuna never needed to use the powerful *brahmastra* in the Kuru battle. Like Arjuna, the nation can have strength and resolve while also being a responsible nuclear state. Therefore, Arjuna operates as a role model for India to follow.

In sum, Vajpayee's document established *dharma* as a *transcendent* value of human life. The consequences are in terms of enacting *karma*. India's insecurity obligates Vajpayee and its leaders with a sacred duty to protect their nation. Within the frame of the value of *dharma*, the correct *karma* is for India to rise through strength and action. In order for Vajpayee's India to achieve the ideal state of peace the nation must remove doubt about their existential crisis and embrace nuclear weapons. While a nuclear India will have to "pass through tumult" the ultimate benefit of embracing nuclear weapons is to realize the nation's "objective of stability and peace" (EINP).

Therefore, Vajpayee uses the *Gita* quotation to establish the narrative as justification for Operation Shakti by co-opting the values that operate outside the frame of *dharma*. Vajpayee's EINP determines what is *dharmic* or *adharmic* and provides the Prime Minister with a rhetorical dwelling place to incorporate *all* values (idealistic and materialistic). As such, Vajpayee's document resolves the apparent contradiction of a nuclear India that advocates international disarmament.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has provided an understanding of how Vajpayee uses myth to justify nuclear acquisition. I contribute to existing scholarship on Indian pro-nuclear discourse by applying rhetorical theories of myth and narrative. My rhetorical analysis of

Vajpayee's speech and EINP document unveils their powerful meaning. Other critics have not focused on the connection of Vajpayee's May 27th address with religious myths. For example, Bidwai writes that the EINP document contains:

... "misleading and false" claims of continuity in India's nuclear acquisition. ... On May 27th the government made a feeble but devious attempt to rationalize its reversal of earlier nuclear policies through a paper, entitled "Evolution of India's Nuclear Program." This strings together half-truths and distortions to claim continuity in the evolution of India's policy (Bidwai and Vanaik 57; 66).²⁷

While Bidwai objects to the truth-value of the speech, I provide an alternative explanation of the way in which discontinuities in India's nuclear history make sense within the rhetoric of Vajpayee's EINP. Both readings, the historical analysis of Bidwai and my rhetorical mythic criticism, offer important insights into the text's meaning.

Many critics, whether they are concerned citizens, scholars (domestic or international), or politicians, have made Hindu-nuclear associations the subject of their analysis (Gottschalk; Kaur; Nanda; Rajghatta; S. Roy; Ramana and Rammanohar Reddy). These scholars cite Hindu-nuclear associations for the purpose of emphasizing the author's *more relevant* arguments about nuclear acquisition. The studies have a tendency to label religious myths "interesting" but ultimately "false stories" that have limited relevance to more substantive issues of India's nuclear security. While myth may not be the glue that holds the entire nuclear industry together, I argue that narrative certainly provides fundamental commonplaces for politicians and citizens to rationalize the Bomb.

²⁷ Bidwai is a prominent anti-nuclear advocate who has been involved with multiple major texts on the subject matter since the 1998 nuclear tests (*A Very Political Bomb; New Nukes*).

This thesis presents the way in which dominant pro-nuclear discourses operate in India. To engage a document like the EINP, pro and anti-nuclear activists may be able to reconcile how Vajpayee's mythic narrative implicates argument. If the mythic frame of Arjuna proves substantial in future pro-nuclear discourse, anti-nuclear advocates will have to come to terms with the power of myth to persuade and move audiences.

Furthermore, my analysis of Vajpayee's speech and EINP document is important for future studies of Vajpayee's rhetoric. I would be interested to see whether the myth of Arjuna and the *Bhagavad Gita* operate as commonplaces in other texts, documents and speeches throughout Vajpayee's term as Prime Minister. This thesis suggests ways to find intersections between heroic and anti-heroic figures in the Hindu epics and their deployment to create arguments in future nuclear weapons discourses.²⁸ Finally, the initial investigation of this thesis into how Hindu myths are combined with nuclear discourses resulted in a deep-well of potential artifacts. The results of my investigation culminated into the list of Hindu-nuclear commonplaces outlined in chapter one. Within India's nuclear debates, despite a slew of contemporary issues with nuclear weapons (expense, risks of radioactivity, sanctions, or war), three thousand year old myths have repeatedly been made relevant by politicians and citizens as they discuss nuclear weapons. I believe the list of Hindu-nuclear associations offer a wellspring of artifacts for future rhetorical endeavors.

Presently, India has clearly obtained the Bomb, and for the foreseeable future the nation will continue to defend the weapons' existence. The struggle over the nuclear

²⁸ Ashvatthama is a Kaurava that actually used the *brahmastra* in the Kurukshetra war. The character has made an appearance in nuclear related articles (Hoskote).

present, despite Vajpayee's stated certainty that of India *is* a nuclear state (EINP), is not "closed" or "unchallengeable." The nuclear question for India and its people will continue to be contested. Understanding India's nuclear debate and its inclusion of religious characters may prove to be a critical place where citizens of India make sense of the nuclear weapons, and where the debate will likely return in the foreseeable future.

Visvanathan writes in the *Times of India*:

Any debate about the future of India and the bomb demands a meeting point between science and religion, ethics and politics, nation-state and civilization. It necessitates thought experiments opening out different questions.

While this thesis explains rhetoric of past tactics for justifying nuclear acquisition, the applicability of the project may prove to be relevant well into the future.

VITA

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