

John Hutnyk review continued...

The extended interviews with five city residents are especially intriguing. Suneeta, architect and designer of a reactor – ‘nuclear power stations are underdetermined in terms of buildings ... overdetermined as monstrous death traps’. The reactor gets mandala decoration, but concrete quality is also discussed. Right wing BJP supporter and anti-nuclear bomb science teacher Prakash is where the story thickens. His comments introduce the ambivalent realpolitik that negotiates, worryingly, democracy and authoritarianism as a way out of stagnation. Sheetal, an urban commuter focussed on the threat of bombs (on the trains, and of which Mumbai has more than its share), offers a zero-sum ‘Newtonian’ version of karma as nuclear détente, yet highlighting ‘the pernicious way ideologies can manifest themselves as commonsense’. Mubarak, charity worker anxious not to be profiled as unpatriotic Muslim offers cogent critiques of pogroms and prejudices. Arun, a former auto-rickshaw driver had often fetched workers from the BARC grounds close to his residence – with the BARC reactor as the probable, but tragically unacknowledged, source of his leukaemia.

Then, a blow-by-blow account of the film ‘Fanaa ... Destroyed by Love’, which is cinematic in its scripted detail and followed by an analysis and reception study that locates the film within the spectrum of both Indian cinema studies and a more serious atomic concern. Which then allows us to return to comic heroes, suitably irradiated, to round off the study. We are left in a world of science and fiction that is uncomfortable to say the least. The reassurances of speculation retain a phantom-like mystery, returning again and again as Parmanu hyper-masculine superhero: a ‘muscle-strapped idealization of nuclear power’. The analysis of muscular nationalism in 1998 gathers the themes of the book into a (penultimate) conclusion that indicts atomic India as a monstrous betrayal of ideals and people, and in epic proportions worthy of the battle on the plains of Kurukshetra. That popular traditional and vernacular culture become bound up with ideologies of science and militarism should be no surprise, but the relentless alignment of comic book heroes and the atomic nation simply underlines

the overdeterminaton of an iridescent field. In general, a great read, an explosive text, of seismic importance – all in all a glowing report, with parataxis, does no harm.