

“A Conversation with Ashis Nandy”

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Mike Levien: I would like to start by asking you about some of the recent burning political issues in India on which you have taken prominent and controversial stances. For example, you have recently been the target of prosecution in Gujarat for your strongly worded critique of the rise of communalism in the state. To what extent do you think that the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and anti-Muslim pogroms, like those in Gujarat in 2002, have contributed to the recent spate of so-called terrorist attacks?

Ashis Nandy: Indians would like to think – many Indians would like to think – that the terrorist attacks have nothing to do with Gujarat violence or the Kashmir interaction, but that is living in a fool’s paradise. Everybody knows in their heart of hearts that these have had effects, just like earlier pogroms against the Sikhs were one of the main contributing factors to the militancy in Punjab which lasted more than a decade. And I have a suspicion that the effects of these kind of pogroms do not go away quickly, and widen the catchment area for recruitment of terrorists and collaborators.

ML: In your quite controversial article the “Obituary of Culture,” you say that after Modi and the Gujarat violence, “I’m afraid I cannot look at the future of the country with anything but great foreboding.” Is there anywhere in India that you see promising agents of social change challenging the rise of Hindi nationalism and fascistic violence?

AN: Yes, I do see lot of young people who are very active and very committed to the idea of communal peace and coexistence. But even more than that, I have tremendous faith in ordinary Indians and their stand in this matter. I think they have repeatedly shown that communal forces can be resisted at the village level, and that they can often even risk their lives to protect their neighbors without the benefit of ornate theories and ideological positions which are palatable to the urbane middle class elite and the academics.

ML: That brings me to my next question. You’ve been an outspoken critic of the secularism of urban, middle class intellectuals in India. If not in secularism, where do you find the discursive basis, if you will, for resisting the rise of Hindu nationalism?

AN: It is not my job or responsibility to find discursive places for the Indian middle-class and intellectuals like us. Secularism is probably a reasonable discursive place for us. It is just that it either doesn’t reach the Indian population or they cannot make heads or tails out of it. It is not one of their categories, and never will be if we have to judge by India’s record in the last 60 years. And that is quite understandable.... Secularism is bound to the idea of Western history and the battle between the church and the state carried out over centuries. It is based on the

Western experience of communal violence and religious wars, which has nothing to do with India. India doesn't have that kind of structure in its religions. Religion and state are intertwined as well as separate, but by criterion that are part of the cultures of 1 billion Indians, or at least a huge majority of them. And I would suspect that we will gain much more if we use the categories that make sense to people and which have prompted them to risk their lives resisting such violence at the grass roots level, even at times of violent pogroms.

ML: So it is your position that there is already bases in "traditional" Indian culture to resist phenomenon like Hindu fundamentalism...

AN: Communal violence is still predominantly an urban phenomena. Almost all the riots either begin from cities or are consigned to cities. Only three and a half percent of casualties in riots have taken place in villages, though the rural population of India constitutes something like seventy percent of the Indian population.

ML: So it is in urban areas where Western...

AN: Thirty percent of urban India contributes ninety-six and a half percent of the deaths in communal violence, which tells you the entire story. Instead of inviting the Indian population to learn from the categories and ideologies of the urban Indians, I suspect urban Indians should go to the village and learn their categories by which they have kept in check communal violence.

ML: You think that it's the breakdown of traditional culture within urban centers that allows Hindu fundamentalism to flourish and that allows communal violence to occur.

AN: All cultures change. That doesn't mean that they are creating breakdown all the while. Many aspects of Indian culture are under stress, but it doesn't mean that it is collapsing....A hundred TV channels and urban communications of various kinds do not bring down a culture that easily. But after saying that, I must say that the little cultures of India, the cultures that are not pan Indian, but ones which are confined to communities and sectors of the Indian population, they are under tremendous stress and their life support systems in many cases have collapsed. And I suspect that these free floating individuals who have been uprooted and policed out of their cultures and not found a new normative system and have not internalized it—because that takes generations—are a kind of a floating muck available for political mobilization at a massive scale. They are the ones who are looking for readymade packages of Hinduism and Islam which will make sense to them, which will give them meaning in life, and which will give them a false sense of having attained a truth by which they should stand. It is no accident that this is the sector from which many of the suicide bombers and young terrorists have been recruited.

ML: Talcott Parsons makes a very similar argument in his essay on the rise of Nazism, which he attributes to this kind of social disintegration, atomization, and the great insecurity that comes with it and which prompts people to join movements that provide a very coherent meaning structure. Do you see a parallel...

AN: Yes, certainly. And I'm also influenced in this by my reading of similar movements in other parts of the world, not only in Europe.... The only difference is this. In the 1930s, Europe developed much more of a middle class society than what exists in India. So there are certain strengths in [Indian] society which are not yet lost. The people who constitute this kind of free floating muck are still in the minority and quite a small minority, considering the size of the countries in South Asia. And I suspect that ultimately the societies will triumph...and cultures will triumph.

ML: Would you argue that the growth of the middle class almost automatically brings with it some form of cultural degradation?

AN: No, I don't think so. But in the short run, yes. In the short run, that experience of uprooting, that experience of being policed out of the meaning system which you have lived...being a part of a floating population that is neither committed to the path of the existing value system nor has found the new value system meaningful, but which you have to nonetheless pay obeisance to, pay homage to, instrumentally if you are to pass for a civilized man in the modern sector, these have their consequences and do need time to get resolved. But fortunately, again, this middle class is small. It's the smaller player in the Indian public life. And the democratic process is continuously marginalizing it. [The] process of democratization will itself reveal new forces which will act against or hurt it.

ML: In 1988 article on sati, you said that it is your "critique from within tradition and its counter modernist implications which disturbs many of my critics." Can you say more about how you conceive of this "criticism from within tradition" and how it is different from the kind of criticism that is practiced by secular urban intellectuals?

AN: That is difficult to spell out, but on the whole, if you would allow me to put it very crudely, I would say that I have tried always to link up my interpretations, my analysis, to the categories that are available to the people. I've always provided the benefit of doubt to ordinary citizens who, according to most social science theories, need to be constantly engineered and guided towards the better future because they don't know better. Whether it is the radical theory of the vanguard of the proletariat or the liberal theory of an enlightened elite or even the populist theory of politics where you are constantly hoping that the people will be guided through propaganda and exposure to the right values and will conform to the demands of modern politics and the culture of the nation-state... I think I have always protested against these kinds

of social engineering because I have seen over the last 150 years that the maximum amount of violence has been unleashed by this effort.

ML: Perhaps you will object to this comparison, but it seems to me that your "critique within tradition" bares some similarity to Antonio Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual as someone who elaborates the good sense within common sense. But I wonder how and on what basis you propose separating the good sense and the bad sense within tradition?

AN: I don't. I don't think tradition is an item in a grocery store from where you can pick up the good elements and reject the bad and then bargain with the shopkeeper whether you can have the goods at a discount. I think that whole idea of arrogance which talks of choosing from tradition what is good and rejecting what is bad, is absolutely bogus. Tradition is something configured by the people. In a democratic society, voters bring their considerations into the electoral system itself. So unless you want to close up the system, these values, attitudes, passions of the ordinary citizens matter. And society is where they are constituted, outside the reach of our kind of vocabulary, our kind of idiom. They cannot be just rejected as so much of noise. And it is intelligent, I think, to hitch your analysis to these categories, these opinions, beliefs, values, prejudices—even the ones wrongly held. You cannot just say that I don't want to negotiate with them because I am an organic intellectual like Gramsci, I will negotiate only in terms of Marxist theory and wait for the applause from the auditorium to feel vindicated. It is just not possible. I mean you are then writing for your colleagues and your friends and academic people strewn all over the world and the global university system, you are not writing for the people who you think you will manage to impress by your writing.

ML: Well that's a very interesting point, but raises many difficult questions. I mean, surely one can't say that everything within a "tradition" is good...

AN: Nobody thinks that everything in a tradition is good.

ML: Right, so then the question is how and on what basis do you elaborate a critique of, for example, caste domination or sati? Do you look to anti-brahminical cultural strands? How does one go about...?

AN: You can only participate in it. Major movements in caste have come from people not from the modern sector, but it has come from people who are a part of the system, who suffer from the system and who have to deal with the system. Whether it is Narayan guru, or whether it is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Their attitude to the whole institution of caste also has often been different. They have used, at least the category of caste, to push the reforms very successfully. It is not that constitutional reforms are unimportant. I think constitutional reforms are important. I think the moral critiques are important. But they're important in a different way.... I mean, 60 years of constitutional arrangement has not removed the caste

system in India, has not removed even untouchability in India. At least I would have expected that to have vanished by this time, but it has not. That's because we have not known how to push this category from within the world view with which most people live. It also shows an extremely poor understanding of the caste system. People look at it mechanically, but it cannot be mechanically abolished.

ML I'm curious how you would situate yourself in relation to a famous anti-modern defender of tradition in the West, Edmund Burke. Burke, of course, rejected the abstract notions of human rights and egalitarianism coming out of the French Revolution, and defended the embodied wisdom of England's pre-modern aristocratic institutions. How would you say your defense of traditional Indian institutions differs from Burke's defense of traditional English institutions? Is it that you are defending subaltern traditions within Indian society, or that traditional Indian institutions are more defensible than those of the English?

AN: I don't think that it is given to me to defend these traditions or to critique them. That is not my main interest. My main interest is...my emphasis is finding a meaningful role for the intellectual in Indian society where the main support base for the intellectual is not in the society. It has to include in some ways, a huge number of people who, in the absence of a better term, we will call them public intellectuals. But they don't even call themselves public intellectuals. They are just outside your plane of knowledge. They have their own knowledge system, their own traditions of knowledge, own traditions of argument and so on and so forth. I'm not talking about the titled scholar of India or the Sanskritist Pandit. I am talking about people, the ordinary citizens, who live in a different kind of world. So, after saying that, I would like to point out that I'm not a political actor like Burke...I am merely an intellectual, I don't even call myself an academic. And I think that is good enough because my effort at this point of time is to not be an organic intellectual because I don't believe that that kind of thing can be done by conscious volition. I don't believe in that kind of a self-designed mandate that has to be executed by me. The kind of work I do demands a more intuitive or less self-conscious attempt. I mean if you are always thinking where you will locate yourself, you cannot either think or act.

ML: Could you say more about the role of a public intellectual?

AN: I think there is not one. I would look at it as some kind of an ethical commitment. It is moral, no doubt about that. On the one hand, I think you should be yourself...you have to be yourself to be truly creative. On the other hand, I expect some kind of sensitivity from an intellectual who wants to attain the highest levels of creativity. That sensitivity cannot be had only on the basis of a very well worked out ideological position. That has to come as a product of a dialogue with life. I mean, it has to come from a form of dialogue which is at least partly independent of the most formalized thought that you pick up while you are a student.... The same forces within yourself, the psychological forces, that have pushed you to becoming an academic should also sensitize you to the fact that there is this relatively unknown, uncharted

world of knowledge and relatively less accessible human beings living next door to you as neighbors, and if you live with the principles of an open society and democratic participation then you have to enter their life-world, in some form or other and make sense of it and make your writings reflect that encounter. That's good enough. Let us not play god. Let us not have such a sense of self-importance that our ideas and our ideologies will liberate others. I mean they are good enough for us and that is good enough. You live with your ideologies because you have nothing else to fall back on. In most cases you don't even have a faith. I don't have a faith and I may have to depend on ideology. But I don't have the arrogance to think that Indians should be converted to it. I don't want to act like a missionary. I think that there should be an element of self-destructiveness built into one's theoretical formulations so that it doesn't acquire a stranglehold over the fate of millions. That healthy skepticism, that belief that ultimately your ideas are fragile, that however much it might give you a false sense of immortality and contain your fear of death, it cannot and should not survive any space and time that you navigate. That it should not acquire a certain kind of universal applicability over geographical, temporal, and generational boundaries . . . this is absolutely essential in our times.

ML: This brings me to one more final question. You've been a critic of modernizing forms of western development. I'm wondering how you envision alternative development or alternatives to development?

AN: I do believe that alternatives to development, or alternative development, or the capacity to evaluate any vision of a different kind of society, will come out of the democratic process. I mean, however much I might shout from the rooftops that I want this, or I find this vision of so and so beautiful and morally acceptable, politically and culturally that will not make any difference at all. My job, as I look at it, is to keep the polarity alive, or to offer a wider set of choices to those who will actually make the choices. Namely the ordinary citizens, in the millions, in the next generation, who have not entered the decision making process, but will do so at one point or another. So that option should be kept open. And the options will be kept open in two ways, not only intellectually but by retaining the diversity at the moment we have, as that diversity allows different baselines to start critical discussions if the present trends are found wanting by the population.

ML: Do you think one of the roles of intellectuals in it is to call attention to or document the already existing alternative forms of social organizations that exist as worthwhile potential bases on which to construct alternative development?

AN: Yes, that's right! In thousands of places there are thousands of experiences. That is why I am so much against the way certain kind of lifestyles are being stamped out. The insecurity of the developmental process is such that if five villages say that they will not join the developmental process, then it is seen as a great calamity. And if you say, leave them alone, then people say, "oh, so you want to keep them backward." You have made it unfashionable,

you have made it almost criminal to think of alternatives. Yet, even then, despite this, thousands of communities are living thousands of different lives. And I would like the development process to at least have the confidence to allow those who want to keep out of it, to keep out of it. The entire global development regime feels that it will be crippled if a few individuals critique development and they have to banish them out of the civilized world as romantic visionaries who are doing so much of harm to mankind by their criticism...I find it vulgar and criminal, frankly. If the developmental process is so good then it should also be looked at with adequate amount of criticism and adequate amount of experiments in alternatives to development. I don't find that kind of self-confidence. And that absence of self-confidence makes me very suspicious that there is something fundamentally wrong with the developmental process. Unique experiments—I mean, the bay area has a lot of such experiments—are seen as somehow the prerogative of eccentrics or of people who are nostalgic or romantic about the past. This is obscene!

ML: I agree. Even as the steel gates are going up on the Sardar Sarovar dam, we're seeing new round of enclosures, as people are being dispossessed for Special Economic Zones, mining, coastal management zones, etc. Talking to Indian activists, there is a strong feeling that the Indian state is becoming even more bold, even more violent, even more aggressive in expropriating peoples resources for large corporations. Is that your analysis of the current conjuncture?

AN: Frankly, I feel that wherever you see spectacular development there is concurrently the entry of authoritarianism and state violence. And this has been the case with the Asian tigers, earlier. Each country which has reached a spectacular growth rate has also shown such authoritarian trends. I am afraid India and China have entered that phase now.

ML: So, all paths to the modern world seem to be through violence?

AN: Yes. But it is another kind of violence. The violence has become more sophisticated, more structural. It is less open. If you take out a gun and go and blow up 50 people and blow yourself up in the process then you are seen as a terrible terrorist. But if you can successfully displace 100 thousand people to build a large dam and destroy a river, that is seen as progress. But doubts have arisen in some sectors and I am glad that it has. I hope to see before I die that these doubts will accumulate and create new opportunities for a different kind of concept of a human future.

ML: Thank you very much.