

Talking India: Ashis Nandy in Conversation with Ramin Jahanbegloo, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006, pp.xi+149, Rs.395.00

In a world which is slowly resembling the proverbial Tower of Babel where everybody spoke but none listened, *Talking India*, the book under review is based on a series of absorbing conversation between the two leading intellectuals from the East, has come as a refreshing hope that a sober and constructive intercultural dialogue is still possible in spite of all the obvious limitations of the times.

Ramin Jahanbegloo is a prominent Iranian intellectual who received his doctorate from Sorbonne University, Paris and post-doc at Harvard. Although Ramin tells us that he first met Nandy in 1989 when he himself was a Gandhian scholar, he could appreciate Nandy's intellectual depth on a wide range of subjects only in these conversations which took place on January 2000. In all these years Nandy definitely has established a reputation of being an erudite scholar in contentious debates that range from issues such as modern science, political cultures of India, secularism, nation-state, violence, modernity, the politics of development and knowledge and so on. Unburdened with the conventions of universities and intellectual fashions of the day, his is a voice of dissent in search of lost causes and 'defeated systems of knowledge and modes of self-expression'. In his typically polemical style, Nandy confesses, "I don't work with the winners of the world... I try to empower them (defeated systems of knowledge) when they have been supplanted by systems patronized by the powerful and the rich, backed by ideologies that are called patriotic, scientific, or progressive" (65).

What is unique in Nandy and which makes him distinguish from the rest of Indian intelligentsia is that he, being a true dissenter and a 'de-professionalized intellectual', can not be easily identified with any of the numerous political or intellectual camps. Not surprisingly, he has a long list of detractors: from nationalists and Marxists to secularists and feminists. Why this should be so soon becomes obvious when he speaks about his deep 'suspicion of ideologies' because for Nandy, "ideologues usually have a latent hatred for the objects of their ideology". This is the reason why "Marxists hate proletariat" much in the same way as many feminists "despise housewives" (14-15) because the objects of these ideologies remain oblivious to their historical role. He is sometimes accused of being soft on Hindu nationalism but his critics would do well to read his nuanced expatiations on fascism or for that matter any ideology in these conversations. He says the choicest abuses of these Hindu nationalists are not reserved for Muslims and Christian but for Hindus who are "disorganized, effeminate, fractious ... constantly quarreling amongst themselves ... In fact, there is a sneaking respect for Muslims and Christians as people whose religion has made them better equipped to handle modern nation-state and produce modern nationality"(15). It is ideas like these that hardly find him friends in any ideological camp.

The two intellectuals discuss a wide range of issues but one finds Nandy eloquently brilliant when it comes to discussing broader categories like India, Indians and Indianness. The ever present appreciation in his work of the rigid dichotomies between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, self and collectivity, nationalism and colonialism etc has all sharpened his critique leading to some perspicacious insights on all these issues. In order to understand India, he insists on taking it as a civilizational unit rather than a nation-state because the latter was plainly "a compromise with- and a way of negotiating- European domination in nineteenth century and Western domination in the twentieth" and the post-colonial Indian state "basically modeled itself as a successor power to that imperial power and consistently retained the touch of imperiousness" (76). Moreover, looking at South Asian region through the prism of nation-state results in what Nandy says 'absurd situations' for

“we share some of the most important markers of civilization with our neighbouring countries but we have to treat them as foreign countries and they have to treat us like foreigners”. As two nation-states, India and Pakistan may have shared an intensely bitter and acrimonious history but Nandy avers that “Delhi and Agra are more important to Pakistan today than Peshawar and Multan ... in many ways Delhi and Lucknow remain the cultural capitals of Pakistan”. Sad as it may appear but “Pakistani elite can not connect to living cultures of their own people as enthusiastically as they can connect to the memories of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire” (77). These views make sense only if India is taken as a civilizational unit.

On the question as to whether a tradition is valid if it has an awareness of the nature of evil in modern times, Nandy stresses that “India’s civilizational frame lacks adequate sensitivity to some forms of evil that have emerged in the last century” (59). The reason for this absence is the less sharp demarcation between ‘self’ and ‘not-self’ in Indian consciousness. Indian epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana bear ample testimony to this fact where “concepts of good and evil are not seen as two watertight compartments but as parts of a larger picture, where good, even the divine, may include a touch of the demonic and the demonic, in turn, is touched by the divine” (56). Not that such uncertainty is a weakness- on the contrary, it only reflects the political and philosophical maturity on part of the Indians who, as a people, have learnt to live comfortably with the idea of unknown, even if it may be unpleasant. However, this maturity has a downside in South Asian context where, with this consciousness, the leaders can be quite clueless about the nature and character of the evils of the modern times. For Nandy, this is the reason, “why policy makers can talk glibly about nuclearization- as if they were opening a new cement factory in the neighbourhood” (60).

Similarly, the idea of being Indians also finds a unique treatment in Nandy. For him, the Indian identity is inextricably linked with the history of colonialism, however, with a difference. He refuses to define India and Indians in relation to the West. As a modern construct with a consciousness of an identity, there were hardly any Indians earlier and all we had of Indianness was an average “which very few actually represented”. Indianness was an “ideal-type” with no relation in the real world where what remained of Indianness was fragmented identities of “Bengalis, Tamilians, Maharashtrians and others” (80). Colonialism unleashed forces that produced a category of Indians who became urban, modernized and gradually far too dislocated to be identified with any specific regional culture in India. In what has come as the glaring irony of the post-independent India, the people of this class, according to Nandy, are the modern Indians. Being unable to situate themselves in any of the local cultures, they can not but construct and relate to a pan-Indian character of their identity. Little wonder then that the characteristic feature of this class is its comfortability only in English and Hindi, “which they speak with pan-Indian accent... So even if they are from a Hindi-speaking state and claim Hindi as their mother tongue, there is no touch of any region in their diction.”(80). Perhaps this adds to the array of modern paradoxes that makes India unfathomable for Nandy’s ‘Indians’ represent not more than five percent of the total population.

On the issue of globalization, Nandy has some interesting formulations. In sharp contrast to those who consider the current phase of globalization as the first attempt to integrate the world on a global level, Nandy contends that “in this part of the world, people remember colonialism as the first effort at globalization”. Needless to add that these people call this “globalization a second edition of colonialism” (125). Until recently, ‘democratic

socialism' was seemingly the dominant ideology in this region, although certainly it was not pro-poor and what has been replaced now is the new wave of globalization. Like the former, globalization too is passively accepted by the common people. Nandy asks a rhetorical question: "what kind of stake do we expect vulnerable sections of society to have in the idea of a welfare state?" and gives a simple and straight answer in negative. "You can call them short-sighted; you can call them uniformed. The fact is that globalization has not been and will not easily become an electoral issue in India. People felt cheated and humiliated earlier; they feel cheated and humiliated now" (128). On the dialectics between globalization and the question of language, Nandy, while aware that English has become a lingua franca of globalization and some 80 percent of content on internet is in English, contends that linguistic discrimination does not touch the majority of Indians because of the simple reason that "less than 0.5 percent of Indians have computers, probably around 2.5 percent of Indians speak English, and a little more than 60 percent are literate". Yet, for at least a century now, Indian elites have used English as a mark of status and language of dominance and "those who have been subject to their status game and dominance do not find the new power of the English language strange or alien" (128-129). On this question, the experiences in regions like Asia, Africa and others which were under colonial domination seem similar in terms of increasingly marginalization of vernacular languages and the people who speak them.

While for the uninitiated, *Talking India* offers an exhaustive reading on Nandy's ideas and thoughts on variety of important issues, those who are aware of his entire or substantial body of work will still find the book quite intellectually engaging and thought provoking. At a time when in the name of multiculturalism what is being passed off seems nothing more than a dialogue between West and East in which the former sets the limits of what is acceptable and what is not, it is high time that multiculturalism should indeed involve comprehensive dialogue and conversations within the category called East. We need more of *Talking India* encounters and not less of them.

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