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Ashis Nandy *The Unpredictable Scholar*

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Abstract

Il ya certainement un charme de l'imprévisible en Ashis Nandy, et en ceci très peu peuvent l'imiter. D.R. Nagaraj en est arrivé à la même conclusion. en introduisant Nandy, il a écrit: "A propos de Nandy rien ne peut être dit de manière définitive, il est totalement imprévisible." Il ya évidemment une image plus grande ici. Pour capturer cette image, le document met l'accent sur trois points - la méthode, le contexte et les attentes. Pour Une bonne compréhension de ceux-ci, le document conclut qu' une déclaration sur l'incertitude de l'âge , serait une excuse pour s'attaquer à la pensée de Nandy.

Several years ago, while conferencing in Delhi, Ashis Nandy pressed me to join Ziauddin Sardar, the physicist, Ajaya Dixit, the hydrologist, and him in another conference in Bangalore. I asked him what it was about? Puffing his pipe, he replied casually, 'Science and Epistemology.' I agreed immediately and a day or two later boarded the plane with all of them, reaching Bangalore in the evening. While on the plane, I thought of the conference and decided to speak on the 'Positivist Foundation of Marxist Dialectics in South Asia.' By the time we reached Bangalore, I had jotted down the key points of my presentation and I was quite happy with the topic, but decided not to disclose it until the day of the conference. And then the fun began!

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In the morning, while having breakfast in the hotel coffee shop, Nandy introduced me to some of the members organizing the conference. They came to pick us up. But, to my surprise, none of them spoke or looked like the 'science type'—pardon the stereotyping—that I had expected. We arrived at the conference venue only to find out that the morning session had already started and the banner behind the speakers (who included journalists Kuldip Nayyar, Sanjoy Hazarika, and one or two other known faces) reading: "North East: On Borders and Confinement"! Thoroughly surprised, I began to wonder but quickly concluded that the banner was for the morning session and would change in the afternoon, before we made our presentations. Morning went and afternoon came, but the banner did not change.

Nandy was the first to be called to the podium. He was given the task of presiding over the afternoon session. As the responsibility would dictate, Nandy called Sardar, Dixit and me to the podium. After a brief but colourful introduction of all three of us, Nandy turned his head and looked back at the banner and nonchalantly announced 'Imtiaz will speak first, yes...on the North East borders and confinement'! I still had my notes on 'positivist dialectics' in my hand! However, with no time to lose or correct my self-cultivated ignorance, I started thinking fast, indeed very fast—between the time Nandy announced my name and when I reached the rostrum after a very, very slow walk. Some of the things I had said at the Delhi conference that, to my good fortune, dealt with issues relating to national borders and the state of insecurity in the region. I got away that day, but also had a taste of Nandy's unpredictability, that too, in one of the most unpredictable circumstances, talking about borders in border-insensitive Bangalore! So what happened to the conference on 'science and epistemology'? Not a word was uttered on the subject, but knowing Nandy I am sure it would come one day, may be at a different location and in the midst of a wholly different but equally interesting people.

There is certainly a charm in Nandy's unpredictability, and this very few can excel or even copy.¹ The closest I can find are some of the sequences of Bollywood movies. These moves have now become contagious and unpredictability is what makes them supremely charming. Save the group-photo like happy-ending, it is almost impossible to predict the contents of a Bollywood movie. A hero shot dead could be brought back to life and the

¹ D. R. Nagaraj also came to the same conclusion. Once while introducing Nandy he commented: "About Nandy nothing can be said with any finality; he is totally unpredictable." See, D. R. Nagaraj, 'Introduction' in Ashis Nandy, *Exiled At Home* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xx.

death could be blamed on the bad dream of the heroine or even that of the hero himself. A lovey-dovey Delhi couple can agree to meet in the Delhi's Lodhi Garden, and then suddenly choose a stopover in snow-clad Switzerland, with the heroine saucily dressed to suit the climatic conditions of the South and the erotic eyes of Southerners. Hundreds may join the lovers and passionately dance with them in a battlefield of love and ecstasy, while the very next sequence may show an equally passionate battle of blood and terror between the Hindus and Muslims, in the midst of which a Muslim Juliet reminds her Hindu Romeo the songs and the rendezvous of their childhood.

Bollywood however is not the sole custodian of unpredictability. Our receptivity and response to things of the past also help. Many years ago, a young friend of mine after watching P.C. Barua's *Devdas* (the one which Nandy eulogizes) remarked, "Barua's *Devdas* is absolutely boring.... Do you know *our* Bulbul [of Bangladesh] did a far better job as *Devdas*?" It took me a couple of years to understand why Bulbul appealed to him more than Barua when he abandoned the territorial and psychological domain of 'our Bulbul' by quietly leaving the country for good. His Bulbul now became the Barua of the past. Leaving the country and becoming a self-designed refugee in a faraway country was hard to predict in his case. Unpredictability is in the air.

However, some 'journeys' are not meant to end. Like that of *Devdas*. First, Phoni Burma was the silent *Devdas* in 1928; then came Barua and K.L. Saigal in 1935, Dilip Kumar in 1955, Habib in Pakistan in early 1960s, Bulbul in Bangladesh in 1982, and in 2002, we have two playing *Devdas*, Shahrukh Khan and Prasenjit. Of course, there have been six or seven more, including a Tamil, a Telegu and a Malayali *Devdas*, not to mention the one played by the perennial Bengali romantic, Soumitra. I do not know how Nandy reacts to the latest *Devdas*, particularly the one portrayed by Shahrukh Khan, but I am sure two discontinuities would intrigue him. First, the discontinuity represented by the blabbering of a drunken *Devdas* and, second, the opulence of the milieu and the discontinuity in the classification of the social actors (the *bhadra* Parvati, representing the Bengali gentry, dancing with the *abhadra* Chandramukhi, a sex-worker representing the lower orders). *Devdas*, too, is no longer the lovesick youth brought up in a self-disciplined zamindari; he has been elevated to the position of a lovesick Oxford alumnus, and placed between the nouveau riche and the seductive imagination of a globalized aristocracy. At the end, the twenty-first century *Devdas* justifiably hopes that the fast moving train would help him see 'Paro' for the last time, but the train turns out to be no better than the slow moving bullock cart that novelist Saratchandra Chattopadhyay condemned *Devdas* to ride. Both the discontinuities are products of the uncertainties that have entered our lives and are capable of reproducing them.

There is obviously a larger picture here and Nandy is aware of it. To capture that picture and for the sake of convenience, I shall divide my argument into three parts—*method*, *context* and *expectations*. Together they, we hope, would be as much a statement on the uncertainty of the age as an excuse for grappling with Nandy's thought.

II Method

George Bernard Shaw's play, *Shak vs Shav*, has only two characters—Shakespeare and Shaw himself. The play begins with a verbal duel between the two, each claiming to be the best playwright ever. They exchange verses from each other's plays and Shaw, finding it increasingly difficult to outsmart Shakespeare, finally resorts to fist fighting, arguing that his youth should prevail against the aged and crabbed Shakespeare. Shaw almost succeeds with a left hook until Shakespeare, already down, uses his memorable words from *Macbeth*: 'Out, out brief candle!' And out goes Shaw, vanishing into the thin air! Nandy's battle with the positivists is as Shakespearean in style. Some of its features could easily be identified. I restrict myself to four.

First, the positivist quest has separated writing both from the writer and the reader. A mechanistic model of writing has so pervaded post-twentieth century scholarship that writing is now assumed to be the end product of all research and thought. Seldom is there any recognition that writing is a means of communication, a means of catching up with the mind and the times of the writer and the reader.

Formal and formulaic writing not only makes the text boring, it induces the reader to either skip through the pages, glimpsing occasionally charts and tables, or to stop reading altogether after impatiently glossing over a few pages. He senses that the writer is missing from the text. As a result, both writing and reading become self-defeating, somewhat tragic, ventures, marking a breakdown in communication.

Secondly, creativity of the writer is subverted right from the start. The formal structure of a research paper or report hardly leaves any space for the writer to fashion thought according to his or her choice. Writing becomes a depersonalized vocation, with too many generalities and little scope for personal creativity. Computerized translation is the ultimate product of this trend. Robert Nisbet once said what very few admit in public, that there is hardly one instance of a theoretical breakthrough of some repute that has

resulted from following a formal 'scientific method.'² Yet, this formal scientific method is regularly taught as part of curricula, and many live their lives wholly committed to the method!

There is also question of who will benefit from the writing. The question is different from questions about the goal of writing. For instance, the goal could be to operationalize an idea and it could range from building a road for transporting heavy machinery to establishing a ministry for selling arms. In both instances, people do not figure, but in both the people could be affected. The ethical foundation of writing--and of all other activities--was best formulated by Gandhi when he told the members of the Shanti Sena Dal (Soldiers of Peace) that "Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away."³ Writing empowers, but it ought to empower the disempowered and not the already powerful.

The second feature involves the multi-layered meanings of a concept or a thing. Since the birth of the dictionary, meanings of concepts and things are becoming narrower and more fixed. Critics have pointed out that Samuel Johnson's dictionary sought to fix "univocal meanings in perpetuity, much like the univocal meanings of standard arithmetic terms,"⁴ hoping that an all-time, all-purpose language, with fixed and standard meanings of words, would simplify the understanding of reality. Few thought that, in the midst of changing realities this hope made no sense and was actually doomed. However, there was something more to it.

For instance, the etymology and the dictionary meaning of the word 'colour' differ considerably. Etymologically, the word comes from the Latin *celare*, meaning 'to conceal – more at Hell,' while the meaning, as found in the Webster's, dictionary is simply 'skin pigmentation esp. other than white characteristic of race.' The Webster obviously faithfully reproduces the

² Robert Nisbet, *Sociology as an Art Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 3.

³ See, Raghavan Iyer, ed., *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 609.

⁴ D. N. Levine, *The Flight from Ambiguity: Essays in Social and Cultural Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.4.

viewpoint of the non-coloured whites, at the same time reaffirming the hegemony of the West in the business of communicating across cultures.

From a slightly different perspective, Nandy makes a similar argument when conflating utopia with dystopia. Utopias can end up as dystopias, although commonsense rules out the reverse trajectory: dystopias less easily turn into utopias. An example of the first kind of transformation could be found in the civilizational quests of Europe, particularly the one that sometimes goes in the name of 'discovery,' and in the Christian ethos associated with that quest. Indeed, when faced with the 'American natives,' the very possibility of having groups of people outside the 'Christian brotherhood' became problematic.⁵ To avoid heresy, it was immediately proclaimed that the natives had migrated in earlier times from Eurasia or Africa (guarding thereby the Genesis version of the origin of humankind and the parentage of Adam and Eve) and were in a state of truncated development. Thus, the 'discovery' of American became a divine sanction for 'civilizing' the natives. And we know what went on in the name of that civilizing mission.

To give another example, the conceptualization of the game of cricket too is now multilayered, multiversed. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, we are told, once seeing children playing marbles in the streets, went straight to them and scolded them, saying: 'stop playing marble, play cricket!' This surely would be regarded as the vision of the father of the nation, fully conscious of what the children of the nation of Pakistan would one day excel in internationally. But there are also reasons to believe that Jinnah was familiar with the notion of 'fair and honourable behaviour' that attached to cricket, something that the game of marbles, lacking class, could never claim. But this is still the classical period in the conceptualization of cricket.

When World Cup soccer is played, hoisting a Brazilian or an Argentinean flag on a building top is as acceptable in South Asia as in the rest of the world. The same however is not true when it comes to World Cup cricket. Hoisting a Pakistani flag on the top of a building in India, or vice versa, by a fan or two is out of the question; it would simply amount to sedition. I guess the same would be true for Brazil or Argentina when the two sides play soccer with each other, but the South Asian case, some might say, is *uniquely* complex.

⁵ Arthur J. Vidich and Stanford M. Lyman, 'Qualitative Methods: Their History in Sociology and Anthropology', in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), p.26.

In many of the Muslim dominated areas in India the riot police are brought in when there is a cricket match between India and Pakistan, and this is particularly the case when many Indian Muslims start celebrating a win by Pakistan, often with deafening sounds of crackers. The game of cricket soon boils down to issues of patriotism, communal affiliations, alienation and regional politics. Very few tend to take sides on the merit of the game or on the performance of the cricketers. The line-up however is not always predictable. For instance, in the case of Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim country, support for India and Pakistan in cricket is almost equally divided. Those supporting India mention 1971 for not supporting Pakistan. Yet, many of the supporters of Pakistan are former freedom fighters who directly fought against the Pakistan army. Bangladeshi fans of the Indian team say that communal affiliations of those who support Pakistan have remained intact despite the Pakistan's genocide in Bangladesh in 1971 and that is a shame. There is indeed room for serious thought on how fans are fanned!

The third feature is the non-hierarchical sources of knowledge. Nandy's disdain for the 'experts' is well known. And this not only because these expertocrats—experts and bureaucrats—pretend to know all and resolve all problems, but also because in practice they police the people, equipped with partial and fragmented knowledge and displaying crass confidence. If we take seventeenth century as the starting point of the fragmentation of knowledge, it was this imperial arrogance of the experts that the positivists transformed into a disciplinary quest. Actually the fragmentation led to the mushrooming of the experts.

When Marquis de Condorcet came up with the term 'social science' there was already the hundred-year-old practice of deliberately dividing the 'scientific' from the 'literary.' In fact, by the eighteenth century the attack on the latter by the scientific community was so thorough that even a person of the stature of David Hume went to the extent of calling the poets 'professional liars.'⁶ The goal was to distinguish facts from values and make use of pristine (valueless) facts in the most sophisticated manner possible and call it 'science.' But more the positivists tried to separate facts from values, the more they ended up with *valued* facts—unequivocally subjective, partial and fragmented. On them were grounded the rule of the expertocrats. Unfortunately, as long as there was 'social' in the social science, the discipline as well as the experts had to suffer the weakness of things being value-laden and unpredictable. Only by making social science more scientific could the

⁶ Quoted in from Laurel Richardson, 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry', in Denzin and Lincoln, *ibid.*, p. 518.

hegemony of the expertocrats be finally assured. The rupture between social science and economics is a case in point.

I know several economists who do not like to be called ‘social scientists.’ This is a way of telling the economists and the non-economists that the social sciences being more concerned with unpredictable social phenomena, are *less* scientific and less policy-oriented, while economics is more certain in its predictions and, therefore, can claim to be *more* scientific and policy relevant. The rupture between social science and economics did not end there; the field of economics itself got further fragmented.

There have been precise, qualitative transformations of the field of economics—as it has changed its name from *economy* (fifteenth century) to *political economy* (mid-eighteenth century)⁷ to *economics* (late eighteenth century but more widely used in the nineteenth century).⁸ The field actually began its journey as ‘an art of managing a household.’ In the eighteenth century, with the consolidation of the nation-state, it raised its analytical interests to the national level, beginning with mercantilism⁹ and focusing more on commerce, finance and trade. It was then that some ingeniously and appropriately began to call the discipline political economy. In the nineteenth century, however, there came the ‘engineering approach to economics,’ with emphasis on logistics and techniques-oriented analyses. By the twentieth century they had turned the discipline into the ‘science of economics,’ devoid of ethical and political considerations. Although the last phase has dazzled scholars and policymakers more, the field remains a complex reflection of the dialectics of its development. Its various disjointed parts—economy, political economy and economics—now jointly define the field. This only means that the social and the unpredictable are no less a part of the discipline than the seemingly scientific and the predictable. The rupture is in the disciplinary quest; it is more a surreal invention of the economist’s mind. But it is this rupture on which the expertise of economists is based.

⁷ The first time a book appeared with that title was in 1767: *Principles of Political Economy* by Sir James Steuart. See, Lionel Robbins, *A History of Economic Thought: The LSE Lectures* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 122.

⁸ In this regard the contribution of Leon Walrus, a nineteenth century French engineer turned economist, has been highlighted by Amartya Sen, in *On Ethics and Economics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 4-5.

⁹ Eli Heckscher defined *mercantilism* as “...the body of thought which was concerned with nation-building,” coming at the time when the system of the Middle Ages was being transformed into the system of national States. See, Lionel Robbins, *op.cit.*, p. 48.

Economics is only an example here. Indeed, the question one is tempted to ask can be asked about any other discipline—can economics be salvaged from its economism? Or, for that matter, can the social science rebuild bridges with the literary? Amidst modernist goals and the positivist culture of hierarchical relationships, how holistic and defragmented are the non-hierarchical sources of knowledge? One way of answering this would be to take refuge in what Edward Said calls ‘contrapuntal reading’: “a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.... The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it....”¹⁰ Phillip Wegner makes use of this principle when rereading Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*:

The great irony here is that Patusan can serve as a ‘retreat’ for Jim only as long as it remains ‘separate’ from the European sphere of influence; and yet, the very activities that Jim performs guarantee that this spatial autonomy will very quickly come to an end. Indeed, the choice of a coffee-plantation for Jim’s primary ‘experiment’ is not accidental: for coffee is a trade export crop, one whose production cannot sustain the community independent from the larger global networks of exchange (in other words, you can’t eat coffee). Thus, the arrival of [demonic] Gentleman Brown and his men simply accelerates a process that Jim himself had already begun.¹¹

The risk of making oneself a target of the politically correct pedagogue is greater here but, then, this should not deter us from unmasking the veiled and the silent. Even on an issue as politically and civilizationally sensitive as genocide, there is a need to go beyond the victims and the witnesses and have an understanding that includes the perpetrators, too. The perpetrators are not always distinctive or separate from the victims and the witnesses. For instance, a witness, by remaining a silent witness, can end up being a passive perpetrator. Likewise, with non-state and state terrorism and state and non-state counter-terrorism using techniques like suicide bombing and/or indiscriminate aerial bombing, the perpetrator can end up being a victim, the

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 59, 79.

¹¹ See, Phillip E. Wegner, ‘Spatial Criticism: Critical Geography, Space, Place and Textuality’, in Julian Wolfreys (ed.), *Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p. 195.

victim a perpetrator. There is an inbuilt openness in non-hierarchical sources of knowledge, inviting tolerance and humane treatment.

Finally and most intriguingly, there are the creatively anarchic. Watching goddess Durga's three eyes (the third eye, the mind's eye) and ten hands in constant motion is one way of looking at it. The arch or the centre is nowhere but one could make a case that it is everywhere. In Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), the horror inflicted by the Nazi bombers on the town called Guernica seems to be missing in the painting mainly because the horror is everywhere. Rabindranath Tagore once said: 'For once be careless, timid traveller, and utterly lose your way....' As a poet, playwright, novelist, short-story writer, social activist, painter and political essayist, Tagore did manage to defy predictability and use his restless, anarchic mind creatively. Kazi Nazrul Islam could write poetry disowning the divine—'I'll paint my footprint on God's chest'—and at the same time faithfully own the divine, 'Bury me near a mosque where I can hear the *Azan*.'

Nandy would claim that the South Asian reality tends to defy the centralization and linearity. With 2,000 languages and dialects, 250,000 villages, 20,000 castes and subcastes, and having followers of all the major religions of the world,¹² South Asia is uniquely lost—or should I say, placed creatively—in a maze of marginalities and it is futile to force it to conform to a monolithic identity, whether religious, linguistic, or even administrative. But how does one work this out methodologically?

There is a clue in the chaos theory, devised to 'deal with the dynamics of non-linear systems,' and in what is popularly known as the *butterfly effect*: 'the beating of a butterfly's wings in one part of the world could, theoretically, be responsible for the formation of a hurricane thousands of miles away.'¹³ Since in chaotic systems both randomness and determinism are simultaneously present, there is also the simultaneous operation of the predictable and the unpredictable in such systems. This opens up, new possibilities. For instance, the forces unleashed by the end of the Cold War could be both predictable and unpredictable. The hegemony of the lone superpower was predictable, while the genocide in Bosnia and the birth of super-terrorism on 11 September 2002, were hardly predictable. One has to be simultaneously aware of contradictory processes having contradictory beginnings and

¹² See, Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 130

¹³ See, Stuart Sim, 'Chaos Theory, Complexity theory and Criticism', in Julian Wolfreys, *ibid.*, pp. 89-102.

outcomes. And only through creative interventions could one hope to become conversant with the chaotic and the anarchic.

If we could make sense of the above, there is no way one could initiate any significant change by limiting oneself to a particular sphere. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Nandy grappling with issues and topics as diverse as cricket, cinema, medicine, education, state, violence, utopias, and water management, sexuality and childhood fantasies. Recently, I have been told that he is thinking of writing on gastronomy! Indeed, the attack on positivism must be multidirectional, multidimensional, multispheric and multi-layered.

One should not underestimate the positivist attack on such an approach. At the beginning the attack mainly takes the form of a campaign to consciously ignore the material coming out of the approach. Since the material does not die out but multiplies geometrically, and since co-option fails to make a difference, the campaign sinks to a politics of labelling. Nandy, for instance, has been labelled a Gandhian, fundamentalist, radical, anarchist, Marxist, traditionalist, nativist, post-structuralist, and post-modernist. The list goes on. Ironically, the labelling only draws attention to existing pluralities and helps proliferate approaches and worldviews. After a time, the collective weight of the latter only reconfirms that positivism can only be a 'brief candle' in the history of discourses!

III

'We are not poor people, we are Tepitanos!'

Of the two phases of colonialism, physical and intellectual, the intellectual has been more severe and damaging, because the demise of the colonial powers did not see the end of the colonialism of the mind. Indeed, the demise has reinforced the colonized mind, for the colonial power no longer shares its homegrown insights or self-doubts with the formerly physically colonized people on a day-to-day basis. As a result, colonized minds reproduce only colonized minds. Nandy calls this condition 'colonialism proper.' However, it is unfair to restrict the condition of colonialism proper to the formerly colonized, for one can well end up being 'colonized' by an idea or even a campaign without having a history of colonization. Wolfgang Sachs' experience with the Tepitanos is a telling example.

In the wake of the catastrophic earthquake in Mexico City in 1985, Sachs began to walk around Tepito, a dilapidated quarter in the centre of the city, mainly to acquaint himself with the destruction and wondering how best could one help those devastated by the earthquake. While doing so, he once remarked, 'these people are still terribly poor.' As Sachs tells it: "Promptly, one of our companions stiffened: '*No somos pobres, somos Tepitanos!*' (We are not poor, we are Tepitans)." Sachs goes on to say, "What a reprimand! Why had I made such an offensive remark? I had to admit to myself in embarrassment that, quite involuntarily, the clichés of development philosophy had triggered my reaction."¹⁴ Developmental colonialism, if we can label it so, has the power to imprison minds, and only a rebuttal of the kind Sachs received can possibly free one a little, by forcing one to recognize one's imprisonment. Put differently, the indifference of a 'colonized mind' to things outside its worldview can be as contemporary as it is fearful. In South Asia, three politically loaded concepts make this clear: *poor*, *passion* and *politics*.

The word 'poor' in South Asia has been transformed into a noun; it is no longer an adjective qualifying an anthropomorphic identity. This change has been brought about silently but remorselessly by those outside the category, including those responsible for creating the category. The noun is then dressed in statistics. India has 300 million people below the poverty line. Bangladesh some 60 million, that is, 50 per cent of its population, of which 30 per cent constitutes yet another category, the 'hardcore poor.' Pakistan has over 40 million people living in absolute poverty. Similar percentages and numbers can be found for other developing countries as well. What do the numbers signify?

John Ralston Saul has highlighted the unimaginability of numbers after a point. While pointing out that the annual international and national arms sales are worth some \$900 billion, Saul says, 'nobody, whether citizen or banker or minister, has any concrete idea of what \$900 billion means.' He then adds: "The problem involved is not unlike imagining a physical exploit. Almost everyone can imagine what it is like to jump over a bar raised 1 metre high, because almost everyone has done it. Many of us can imagine how we might jump 2.43 meters, which is the current world record, had fate only given us such things as longer legs and better muscles. We can even imagine jumping another metre or so higher. But 10 meters is not an

¹⁴ Wolfgang Sachs, 'The Archaeology of the Development Idea: Six Essays', in *Interculture* (undated). The original version has been published in *EPD-Entwicklungspolitik*, Francfort, June-Sept, 1989.

imaginable jump. It belongs to the world of comic books.”¹⁵ The lumping of the poor into ‘millions’ may not have the effect of being comical, but it certainly has the effect of being tragicomic, it ends up being ineffective. This can be stated in another way.

There is the usual palliative, offered by many that the population growth rate in South Asia has come down, thanks to aggressive government policies and modern birth control techniques. In the case of Bangladesh, for instance, the population growth rate has come down from 2.9 percent per annum in the mid-1970s to 1.5 percent in the late-1990s. A recent governmental report does not fail to take note of this trend and remarks: “Bangladesh has achieved impressive success in the area of population control.”¹⁶ Any literal reading of such comments could make one think that, since the population growth rate has come down, it is now all right to have one or two more children, though the rate has come down in a country that already has a population of 120 million staying in a flood-prone territory of only 55,126 sq. miles. Indeed, if the rate had come down in a country of identical size with 10 million people it would have made some sense. Size and ecology matter. Singapore, for instance, looks at the same growth rate with apprehension, mainly because the three million strong city-state has already reached a point of spatial saturation.

In developing countries, economic statistics tend to signify economic disempowerment, which in turn become an excuse for disempowerment in other areas—social, cultural, educational, and even political. Conversely, economic empowerment, when backed by numbers, has the power to brush aside the disempowerment in other sectors. The United States is a good case. People across the globe hardly notice that ‘72 million Americans are illiterate, the majority of them white.... One-quarter of American children live below the poverty level.... Twice as many children are born to American teenagers as to those of any other democracy. ... forty million Americans do not have access to medical care.’¹⁷ This, we may think, will make many in this region think that we are not that badly off. But the South Asians operate and will continue to operate as citizens of poor countries having low self-esteem, while the Americans, despite the statistics, operate and will continue to

¹⁵ John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire’s Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 142.

¹⁶ See, *Bangladesh: A National Strategy for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction*, (Dhaka: Economic Relations Division, Ministry of Finance, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh), April 2002, p. 2.

¹⁷ John Ralston Saul, *op.cit.*, p. 131.

operate as citizens of a rich country having high self-esteem. That, I believe, is the real achievement of the American Dream!

Such classifications have wider ramifications; they even ooze into the idea of the third world; those in the Third World find themselves downgraded and defeated to start with. As Nandy notes: "The concept of the third world is not a cultural category; it is a political and economic category born of poverty, exploitation, indignity and self-contempt."¹⁸ Even those who end up owning the concept and launch political campaigns in its name do not live up to it. China, for instance, when given the opportunity, joined hands with the "capitalist-roaders" internationally. The resurrection of the once-disgraced Deng Xiaoping was only the final stage of ridding China of the self-contempt of third-worldism.

As the poor may be categorized in terms of GDP, PPP, HCR, MPCE, PCI and other easy, if but baffling acronyms, it ultimately boils down to a simple Cartesian economism: 'I have a fat income, therefore, I am.' The bulk of the poor remain a non-entity; it is easy to ignore them economically and, worse, make them believe that contemporary economics and its categories justify that dismissive attitude. The poor cannot be salvaged or their dignity restored by using their own categories that have defined them but also demeaned them. They need a new method, a new logos and logocentrism, to walk and work with confidence in this world. Leopold Senghor tried to provide this when he declared on behalf of the non-whites: 'I feel, therefore I am.'¹⁹ But as long as such self-assertions recall the pangs and sufferings of the predominantly poor, brutalized non-whites, there is always the possibility of the latter only getting reproduced. This however does not exhaust the possibility of the new and the bold.

Several years ago, I ended up as a consultant of a fact-finding mission of a joint project of the Government of Bangladesh and the UNDP at a place called Kishoreganj in Bangladesh. The task was to find out how a micro-credit project was being run and how much did the target group, mainly women, benefit from the project. At one point, after I got acquainted with micro-credit, micro-disbursement, micro-savings, micro-interest payments and other micro-economic details, I asked some of the locals what would they like to do in the future? To the amazement of all, a woman beneficiary, who had studied up to class V, stood up and replied: "We would like to establish a

¹⁸ Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 21.

¹⁹ Cited in Ashis Nandy, *ibid.*, p. 32.

textile industry!" What imagination! It tempted me to reformulate the Cartesian principle into something more profound and humane: "I dream, therefore I am." That she was not burdened by the economic categorization of her kind, made the insidiously challenging statement all the more charming.

Passions can complicate things further, for it can end up veiling the people. Gandhi once sent 'squads of his disciples' to destroy the erotic relics at Khajuraho. Only a last minute plea by Tagore 'managed to halt this iconoclastic massacre.'²⁰ But there were important lessons to learn from this encounter, not so much from Tagore, who saved the temples, but rather from Gandhi, who wanted them destroyed. Gandhi always sought to overcome passion, but often in his attempt to control and contain them he would end up unleashing them. In this context, his experience with sexuality, spuriously called *brahmacharya*, was no less a passion than the one with which the bulk of his 'disciples' sought and fought for *swaraj*.

It was during Gandhi's courageous campaign to contain the passions of Muslim-Hindu killings in Noakhali in the winter of 1946-47 that his passion of another kind surfaced and became public: 'word leaked out of Gandhi's peculiar practice of having attractive young women share his bed.'²¹ His explanation, which came in stages, shifted from the physiological to a somewhat baffling, but an ingenious, homegrown version of the spiritual. William Shirer writes with respect and awe: "The explanation at first by Gandhi and by his youthful women associates was that in the cold of a winter night he would take a shivering and that he had asked them to lie with him in order to receive their bodily warmth. But by Gandhi's own admission there was more to it than that. With that utter frankness which he had observed all his life, he admitted publicly that he had slept with the young women, often naked, in order to test his ability to keep his vow of *brahmacharya* and not succumb to temptation."²² In the midst of stormy criticism, I find two responses to Gandhi's relationship with sexuality intriguing.

The first came from those who actually had slept with Gandhi. Abha Gandhi, wife of Gandhi's grandnephew Kanu, says: "He [Gandhi] first asked me to sleep next to him when I was sixteen.... But two years later, in Noakhali, I began sleeping next to him regularly.... I think he said he wanted me as much

²⁰ See, too Alain Danielou, tr. Vatsayan, *The Complete Kama Sutra* (Vermont: Park Street Press, 1994), p. 10.

²¹ William L. Shirer, *Gandhi: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 234.

²² *Ibid.*

for the *brahmacharya* experiments as for the warmth. He said our sleeping together was a way of testing that he was as pure in mind as he was in body.”²³ Dr. Sushila Nayar, Gandhi’s personal physician also said:

There was nothing special about sleeping next to Babu [Gandhi].... But before Manu came into the picture I used to sleep with him, just as I would with my mother.... It was just part of the nature cure. Later on, when people started asking questions about his physical contact with women – with Manu, with Abha, with me – the idea of *brahmacharya* experiments was developed.²⁴

There seems to be more sexual passion and moral revulsion in the minds of those reading or hearing of the experiments than in those who actually had the experience of sleeping with Gandhi. There is no doubt that neither Gandhi nor Abha, Sushila, Manu and the rest could understand the fuss about *dispassionate* closeness of naked bodies. The closest example of identical dispassionateness is the Japanese custom of parents bathing naked with their children, including post-puberty daughters and sons. But then the fact remains that in the minds of those who are not party to them, the same situations may arouse passions that may come to rule unchecked, often with unexpected outcomes. Did Gandhi dislike the erotic temples of Khajuraho and seek their destruction for not being a part of them? And many years afterwards, did the Taliban destroy the Buddhist relics in Afghanistan also for not being a part of the relics? Is passion, then, an outcome of a void?

The second response, predating the Noakhali disclosure by some ten years, came from the arch modernist, Jawaharlal Nehru:

... I think Gandhiji is absolutely wrong in this matter. His advice may fit in with some cases, but as a general policy it can only lead to frustration, inhibition, neurosis, and all manner of physical and nervous ills.... I do not know why he is so obsessed by this problem of sex, important as it is... he takes up an extreme position which seems to me most abnormal and unnatural.... I presume I am a normal

²³ Cited in William L. Shirer, *ibid.*, p. 236.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

individual and sex has played its part in my life, but it has not obsessed me....²⁵

The same Nehru got 'irritated' when Alain Danielou published photographs of Indian 'sculptures showing homosexual relations dating from the eleventh century,' for Nehru thought that homosexuality and 'vices of such kinds' were a Western invention.²⁶ Nehru did not stop there. When in power, he promulgated a new penal code and brought sexuality for the first time under its purview. Article 377, for instance, punishes "sexual relations against nature with a man, woman or animal, whether the intercourse is anal or oral."²⁷ Was he reacting to his latent homosexuality, as Stanley Wolpert might suggest? It seems that in critiquing Gandhi's alleged obsession with sex, Nehru ended up internalizing the passion with no less intensity and vigour. In fact, he went to the extent of codifying the passion for all times as a state offence! His was only an attempt to fill up the void by making a private passion public. But once passion becomes public there is no way to tell where and how it will end.

There has been no dearth of public passion when it comes to cricketing and rioting. Often one could begin with one or end with the other. Given the majoritarian nature of the states of India and Pakistan, both cricketing and rioting end up being far less secular and much more national. They tend to get communalized, mainly of the Hindu-Muslim variant, and when one needs critical assessment of the game or of street violence, one often sees a rush to defend the state. Cricket star Kapil Dev's visits to the border to boost up the morale of Indian soldiers could be one example. There is hardly the same urgency on his part when the state goes berserk and kills innocents in Gujarat or Kashmir.

More telling nature is the partisan support in cricket. Seldom would a resident Pakistani support the Indian team, even when the game is between India and the former colonial power, England. The same would be the case of a resident Indian, when it comes to a game between Pakistan and England. In both the cases, spectators take the colonial era less seriously than the post-colonial era. There are some signs that prolonged non-residency is making a difference, but then, particularly in the case of England, one also has to take

²⁵ Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography: With Musings on Recent Events in India* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, [1936] 1938), p. 513.

²⁶ Alain Danielou, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

into account diasporic experiences involving the 'ethnically mixed' South Asian and the 'racially pure' English.

One-day cricket has further helped concentrate passion dispersed over five days into a single intense day. Nandy's position that "the game, like Hinduism, has too many options" seems to hold less with the rise of one-day cricket. I must hasten to add that, with the rapid rise of religious conformity, often with the direct connivance of the state, as in India under the BJP, the options are also becoming fewer for Hinduism. The same can also be said about Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh. A day/night long game, when it goes in your favour, also makes victory look more effective, because you have to wait less to relish and celebrate it. On the other hand, if you lose, the pain is intense but you recover from it fairly quickly, thinking of the next one-day match only days away.

A quick victory is also telegenic; it has a high visual impact and is politically prudent. The recent obsession of the United States with a swift and confirmed victory, whether against the secular Iraqis or the fundamentalist Talibans, is critical for capturing the attention and support of the American public. The protracted war in Vietnam is something the United States wants to forget, not so much because it had to pull out its troops from Vietnam hurriedly, but because the war was creating the impression in the minds of the Americans that wars were futile. Peace studies and peace research institutes mushroomed in the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The famous anti-war words of *The Mahabharata* can be read as the last word on protracted war too: "Alas, having defeated the enemy, we have ourselves been defeated.... The... defeated have become victorious.... Misery appears like prosperity, and prosperity looks like misery. This our victory is twined into defeat." This is something the United States, for that matter, all modern states, including India and Pakistan, dread. The fear is that without victory of one kind or another, the very foundation of the state, including the power of the military, may simply collapse.

But a quick victory, as in one-day cricket, also intensifies passion. Once passion intensifies in the minds of the people, it only takes a quarrel or two to organize a riot. Not that there was no passion in the genocidal partitions of British India in 1947 and Pakistan in 1971, but to emphasize that the recent, intensified passion has qualitatively transformed the very nature of violence; it has, for one, further brutalized killings. If the Tamil Tigers have made their contribution with the dispassionate suicide bomb, the recent rioters of Gujarat, have brought psychotic ingenuity to the art of killing:

What can you say about a woman eight months pregnant
who begged to be spared? Her assailants instead slit open

her stomach, pulled out her foetus and slaughtered it before her eyes. What can you say about a family of nineteen being killed by flooding their house with water and then electrocuting them with high-tension electricity? What can you say? A small boy of six in Juhapara camp described how his mother and six brothers and sisters were battered to death before his eyes. He survived only because he fell unconscious, and was taken for dead.... There were reports everywhere of gang rape, of young girls and women, often in the presence of members of their families, followed by their murder by burning alive, or by bludgeoning with a hammer and in one case with a screwdriver.²⁸

There is also a form of political engagement that passionately sustains violence, including mass murder. When passion dictates politics, politics ends up becoming a *passion* and not 'the conscious action or praxis in the pursuit of a common social goal' that Gramsci so fondly propounded and pursued.²⁹ With Gramsci ending up in the prison, many took fancy to his work than in following him. Politics is no longer what it used to be. In place of Aurobindo, Gandhi, Iqbal, and the like, we now have a surplus of Bal Thackerays, Laloo Prasad Yadavs and Joyntal Hazaris, all passionately, often militantly shaping the destiny of their nations and the region. However, there is something infantile in passionate politics or in political expressions of passion. The first in the order of manoeuvres in politics of passions is *humiliation*.

Politicians love to humiliate their opponents—locally, nationally, and even regionally. Lot was made of the pee-drinking of Prime Minister Morarji Desai, particularly when he failed to revitalize the post-Congress India, but still one could claim that there was a touch of the medicinal input in his habit. More importantly, it became an anecdote when Desai was at the helm of the affairs of the state and not when in the opposition. The reverse happens more often. Those enjoying power, especially absolute power, now constantly seek to humiliate and, if possible, *thoroughly* defeat the opposition. The Awami League in Bangladesh, for instance, even with a two-third majority in Parliament, constantly looks for an opportunity to humiliate the opposition, the BNP, especially its leader. The same was true of the BNP when it was in power and the Awami League was in the opposition.

²⁸ Harsh Mander, 'Cry, the Beloved Country: Reflections on the Gujarat Massacre.' Circulated over the Internet on 21 March 2002.

²⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 326, fn.6.

In Sri Lanka, I am told, humiliation has taken an extreme form. There have been instances where the less powerful women candidates in elections have been literally disrobed and made to walk naked in the public. There is also the constant attempt by India and Pakistan to humiliate each other. When over a million troops were almost ready to go to war and possibly kill a million more, now that both countries are nuclear powers, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, amidst laughter in a large rally, sarcastically remarked: "Musharraf wants to talk. But what are we going to talk about? About the weather? Whether it is raining here? About his kith and kin? Do we need to call a meeting to talk such things?"³⁰ Many in that gathering wanted Pakistan to be defeated once and for all. They were happy that Vajpayee rejected talks so dismissively. I am sure that the same would be the mood in a similar gathering in Pakistan. But this is only one aspect of the infantilism in the politics of passion.

The second in order of manoeuvres is *polarity*. I have always been fascinated by the game of polarity. For instance, magnetic buttons are usually coloured black and white, to set them irreconcilably apart. But, then, a slight error in placement could bring them instantly together, with the sound of a click. I have always interpreted the click as an instant 'kiss,' although the game would have us believe that such attractions are marks of disqualification! And it is the latter that has prevailed both in the game and in the mind of the adult that refuses to grow. George Bush is, of course, a worthy exponent of it; he told to the world after the terrorist attack on the twin towers, 'If you are not with us, we would deem it that you are against us.' The timing could not have been more paradoxical. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, few questioned the power of the United States. But it took only a bunch of non-state terrorists to transform the worldview of the most powerful state in the world. Bush ended up affirming passionately the clear polarity of them and us; all fuzziness had to be avoided as a sign of disqualification!

Critics often refer to the colonial invent in the South Asian display of polarity. There is some element of truth in it. Since political society was controlled by the colonial power, it was the civil society that took the responsibility of waging the anti-colonial struggle. But in waging the struggle, the civil society itself became polarized and violent. Gandhi understood this matrix well but, in the end, even his non-violent campaign could not rid South Asia of violence and terror. Independence came against the backdrop of a genocidal

³⁰Author's not-so-literal translation of what Vajpayee said in Hindi. It was televised during the news hour at the height of Indo-Pakistan, crisis in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament.

partition. In the case of Bangladesh, the Pakistan period further accentuated the polarity, and independence came to Bangladesh against the backdrop of yet another genocide in 1971. In the post-independence India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, polarity in the form of polarized politics came to shape and nurture the political and civil spheres. Intolerance became the order of the day. By now, in Bangladesh, things have become hilarious, with the names of streets, parks, hospitals, and even stadiums undergoing changes with changes in regime! Few realize that this of course also means another round of changes with future changes in the regime. This brings us to the final infantilism in politics of passion—*immortality*.

God Dharma, we are told by Vyasa, did not want the Pandava brothers to drink water from the sacred pond without first answering his questions. Save Yudhishtira, none of the brothers heeded the call. In their hurry to quench thirst, and not amused by Dharma's demand, who at that point could not be seen but only heard, the brothers drank the water and died. Only Yudhishtira, despite his thirst, had the patience for a discourse; he began to answer Dharma's questions one by one. At the end, Dharma asked: 'What is the greatest wonder?' To which, Yudhishtira replied, 'Death strikes each day but we live as if we were immortal.' Dharma was satisfied, but that cannot be said about our present-day politicians.

The political campaign for immortality is not new and South Asia is not even an exception. At times, it produces results that the protagonists do not have in their mind or want. I remember once hearing a conversation when walking through the Agra Fort. While entering the bedroom where Shahjahan was interned by his ambitious, fratricidal son, Aurangzeb, a raggedly dressed traveller, wearing worn-out *chappals*, was telling his co-traveller: 'Did the mighty Emperor Shahjahan ever think that we would loiter around in his bedroom?' The other responded: 'And that, too, in our *chappals!*' It was as if Shahjahan had finally attained immortality by making his private domain public!

It is difficult not to be moved by the colonial infrastructures at Gorée. The island, some thirty minutes' ferry ride from Dakar in Senegal, was used for exporting slaves to the American continent. To house, select and trade the slaves, the Portuguese and, later on, the French had built forts, prisons, even torture chambers, the relics of which are still there. For the white American and European tourists and travellers, it has now become a pilgrimage of repentance for the things that their forefathers did to the people of Africa. The keepers of the Gorée Museum told me that even the Clintons were very much moved and a sense of shame seem to have haunted them throughout their trip to the island. Neither the black slaves nor the white slave-owners

ever thought that they too would become immortal, with only their roles in the history of civilization reversed.

Ironically the Communists, who prided on their materialism, too became obsessed with immortality. Not only did they embalm the body of Lenin, they also changed the name of St. Petersburg to Leningrad, replacing the god-fearing saint by a more earthly, atheistic one. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, when people seeking respite from uncertainty became all the more god-fearing, there was an overwhelming plea, particularly among the proletariat, to revert to the old name of the city. Lenin's life-long battle for the proletariat notwithstanding.

The campaign for immortality goes on. Once in power, the belief becomes ingrained in the rulers that they would remain in power forever. The rules they make, the laws they formulate, the educational texts they produce, the dogma they preach, the promises they make, the kind of wealth they seek and accumulate, all seem driven by the idea of permanence, in turn fed by their yearning for immortality. Passion is then built up to guard the domain and counter-passion, no less fearful and ruthless, to displace the domain. At the end, we are left with a politics that Gandhi described long back by saying: 'Eye for eye makes the whole world blind!' This is the context that makes the search for alternatives vital and pressing. Nandy understood this and made the search his life-long passion.

IV

The Future is Ours!

Disasters tend to kill expectations but also often produce different results. The difference between man-made and natural disasters is significant in this context, although there is the argument that the former often comes in the guise of the latter. Gandhi, in fact, went further and blamed an earthquake near his hometown on native sinners who had practiced untouchability! In any man-made disaster the outcome is violent, directly or indirectly. The same however is not true when it comes to natural disaster. During the last major flood in Bangladesh in 1998, for instance, it was found that the average incidents of violence had remained unusually stable. The law and order situation deteriorated only in 13 to 17 per cent of the villages; in over 80 per cent of the villages there was no deterioration.³¹ This possibly tells us that humans can change their being when faced with a non-human crisis.

³¹ See Imtiaz Ahmed, (ed.), *Living with Floods: An Exercise in Alternatives* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1999), p. xviii.

Humans are the only species on earth that can create structures, agencies, systems, regimes, disciplines, and a host of other artefacts for both protecting and destroying their own kind. More importantly, humans can structure, instrumentalize, regiment, discipline and define themselves and end up as human and anti-human at the same time. In fact, they have disciplined and defined themselves so much that Theodore Zeldin now pleads for the decentring of the human and the centering of the 'person': "humans need to be recognized as persons, he says."³² However, both *history* and *censorship*, to take two human artefacts, have constructed the awareness of the modern person in such a way that he or she is less of a 'person' and merely a member of the human species.

History has come to construct the person precisely. Even Rousseau's partial optimism, "*L'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers*" (Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains), is now suspect. Humans have so structured themselves that they are now constructed even before they are born! In the wake of constructing the person, the discipline of history itself has become a victim of organized construction. Some like Partha Chatterjee see this problem more in terms of 'the present' using history, as happened in the case with the Hindu Right and the demolition in 1992 of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya.³³ Actually, the tragedy of history is greater.

Etymologically, history has little to do with the 'past' and in a sense it continues to be so. Having its roots in Latin *historia*, which in Greek meant 'inquiry,' history originally began as the task of 'knowing' the documents of the *present* and only gradually became a field inquiring into the documents thus collected. But history and past remain two different things. Keith Jenkins puts it lucidly:

History is one of a series of discourses about the world. These discourses do not create the world...but they do appropriate it and give it all the meanings it has. That bit of the world which is history's (ostensible) object of enquiry is the past. History as discourse is thus in a different category to that which it discourses about, that is, the past and history are different things. Additionally, the past and history are

³² Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 469.

³³ See, Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh, eds., *History and the Present* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), p. 17.

not stitched into each other such that only one historical reading of the past is absolutely necessary. The past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart. For the same object of enquiry can be read differently by different discursive practices....³⁴

However, gradually history has appropriated the past and now the past is what history is. Humans, as part of the past, are thereby historicized and this historicized human being now makes an entry into the present and, when required, into the future. This being is condemned to history and is therefore less of a person of the past, present and future, that is, less free.

Censorship too is a direct attack on the imagination and free spirit of the person. Its roots are predominantly western. In *The Republic* (fourth century BC) Plato outlined a comprehensive system of censorship, particularly for the arts, coupled with an authoritative notion of what is best for the society. On the other hand, the word censorship is not mentioned even once in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (also fourth century BC). Even when Kautilya proposes an elaborate system of surveillance for the *vijigishu* (one desirous of fresh conquests), the idea of censoring thought never enters. On the contrary, Kautilya proposes that:

Secret agents shall [ostensibly] enter into arguments with each other, whenever people gather together in places of pilgrimage, assemblies, communal gatherings, shows or festivals. One of them shall [start the argument] and say that, in spite of the king's reputation for virtue and nobility, he is totally without good qualities because he oppresses the people with taxes and fines. Other agents shall disagree with him and say that a king uses the taxes and fines for the welfare of the people.... (And also say that) kings shall never be insulted because divine punishment will be visited on whoever slights them. Thus, the people shall be discouraged from having seditious thoughts.³⁵

Since criticising the king is tolerated in public, it will be fair to say eastern wisdom laid more emphasis on openly discussing of an idea and, then, if necessary, discouraging it, rather than on censoring the idea from the

³⁴ Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 5.

³⁵ Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*, edited by L. N. Rangarajan (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 510.

beginning. But the East is now the West and the West still remains the West, both having perfected the system of censorship through state censorship, public censorship and self-censorship.

State censorship is the one most widely known. It mainly comes both through legal acts and promulgations, and through institutions set up to oversee censorship. One of its earliest forms, one that still continues to have official sanction, is the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* of the Roman Catholic Church. Apart from listing proscribed books, including the one that brought Galileo to notoriety in 1633, the *Prohibitorum* acted as a model for the censorship-obsessed modern states. An apparently important, well-publicized exception has been the United States, but even there the provisions of the First Amendment (“Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press”) have long been circumvented by a series of court rulings. More importantly, since state censorship is backed by the power of the state, there is a tendency not only to use it often, but also to abuse it often.

Relatively less known is public censorship. It is different from state censorship in that the members of civil society make it their business to censor things, mainly in the service of the state. George Orwell’s experience at the BBC during the Second World War is a classic instance. So intrigued was Orwell by the experience that he immediately made it a theme in his novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). WJ West, after scanning through Orwell’s ‘lost writings,’ writes:

The BBC was subject to extensive censorship controlled by the Ministry of Information which was located, during the war, in the University of London’s headquarters building, Senate House, Malet Street. The building bears a close resemblance to the Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and acted as a direct model for it.³⁶

What intrigued Orwell most was the role of his colleagues at the BBC:

The fact that the lowest rank of censor, ‘delegate censors,’ were not from the Ministry of Information but colleagues within the BBC, indeed within one’s own department, could make life tense in the sort of situation in which people like Orwell often found themselves. More serious matters,

³⁶ W. J. West (ed.), *George Orwell: The Lost Writings* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), p. 279.

defined by precise instructions cabled every day from the Ministry of Information, were referred to the Ministry either for censorship there or for further consideration by other experts. In effect everyone could be seen as checking on everyone else, just as Orwell describes Comrade Tillotson in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* doing the same task as Winston Smith.³⁷

This seems to nullify the popular belief that Orwell wrote the book to portray socialism or the Soviet system. In fact, after the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell made it clear that 'he was not attacking socialism,' not even 'the British Labour Party.' He was 'giving a warning about deep-rooted fears for the very nature of English life, fears which stemmed largely from his wartime experience at the hands of the Ministry of Information.'³⁸

Yet, what came as a shock to Orwell—he almost found it *unEnglish*—was regularly practised by the English in their colonies, sometimes even in private companies to ensure the continuity of the power of the British Crown. When radio was introduced in British India in mid-1920s, a multi-layered network of censorship was devised to assuage the fear of the colonial power:

Each provincial government was to select a censoring officer, who was expected to work in close cooperation with the company. The needs of imperial control were ensured...the centre must keep the general control of any wireless censorship ... and that, under central guidelines the power of the provincial governments must clearly be a delegated power.³⁹

It is not difficult to relate the Indian experience during the colonial times with that of England during the Second World War. In fact, it can be said that the tradition of colonial censorship was so thoroughly internalized by the colonial power that, when England faced a crisis at home, that tradition re-emerged in the guise of public censorship. That tradition remains as significant for England as for colonial and post-colonial South Asia.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 280.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

³⁹ See Partha Sarathi Gupta, *Power, Politics and the People: Studies in British Imperialism and Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), p. 456.

The most dangerous form of censorship is self-censorship. It has obviously grown from the traditions of state and public censorship, strengthened in South Asia by the colonial experience. Self-censorship does not always bear a relationship with the state; often it is a feature of a person who feels disempowered or threatened. The fear may or may not be real. Examples of self-censorship are many; I shall limit myself to the one that I came across recently.

A mediagenic, eminent, elderly economist once published a collection of newspaper articles. Apart from an edited book, this was his first book and even then it had come out at the fag end of his scholarly life. During the launch of the book, his sycophants were vociferous and the book was reviewed in glorious terms. But not knowing why there was such a big *tamasha*, for some very general newspaper articles now turned into a book, I asked an economist friend of mine who was present at the occasion: Why didn't you say something? He kept quiet. I asked him, 'Have you read the book?' He said: 'Yes.' 'So, what do you think about the book?' He said, 'Pathetic!' 'Then, why didn't you say something?' He stiffened and replied: 'Are you crazy? Do you know how powerful the man is?' In state and public censorship, a human being can at least affirm his personhood; with self-censorship, even that possibility is lost.

Self-censorship prevails everywhere. In dealing with the state, more immediate authorities, in public meetings, research reports, newspaper columns, consultancies, even in dress and etiquette. It is the ultimate Orwellian 'Big brother' watching one and one therefore had to be extra-careful, in whatever one did, wrote and said. In such a milieu, expectations do not go far, nor do they have a chance to be realized. The critical task, therefore, is to rid the self, at least in this case, of its historicized, censored aspects, to restore self-confidence and allow for simultaneous creative interventions in all areas of life. This is, however, easier said than done.

Zeno's paradox about 'the flight of an arrow'—the arrow while in motion if photographed is always static—has for centuries stimulated fresh thought. Hegel too was excited by it and tried to resolve it by means of dialectics, that is, the flying arrow far from being static or motionless is actually a 'contradiction in reality.' The dynamic requires the static as much as the static requires the dynamic. Any exclusive focus on either the motion or the static is bound to make the interpretation of the motion and/or its absence partial. More so in this age of globalization, transcontinental migration and diaspora. It is almost like telling one to try to focus on the *dancing but composed* Shiva. Emmanuel Kant, in many ways, is a classical representation of this static motion or moving static. He is recognized as the 'Father of Modern Geography' but all his life he remained confined to a territory of about three

miles. Similarly, Aurobindo, while practically confined to Pondicherry for most of his life, could think of transcending the cosmic reality of the universe.

Disciplinary focus has always been on the motion and, even when attempts are made to focus on the static, they end up emphasizing motion. Statistics is a good example. Despite its name, the discipline collects and analyses facts and figures on things and events that are in motion. There is no doubt a certain charm in focusing on motion, because that is how all adventures are usually defined and narrated, and uncertainties removed or turned into certainties. Our training mesmerizes us not with the adventures and uncertainties but with exposure and the certainty. The annual flow of transcontinental migration, for instance is less than a million, but the focus remains on this minuscule number and not on the rest 99.83 per cent of the world population that stays home. It is this small number that is ridiculed, attacked, put into ghettos, and stopped at frontiers.

Uncertainties, in turn, tend to produce uncertain outcomes. Diasporic movements have begun to produce such outcomes. I give a few instances. First, there is the debate now taking place in the Dominican Republic of over the allotment of two parliamentary seats to New York's Dominican-American. This has the potential of not only redefining the constituency and residency of the Dominican people but also the Republic's idea of national sovereignty and all that goes by the name of a nationalist agenda.

Such experiments have become possible after the creation of a European Parliament. Though its potentials are yet to be fully realized, some of its outcomes have even caught the Europeans by surprise. One such surprise has been in respect of the Gypsies or, as they now call themselves, *Romas*. The gypsies are now a group with different languages, cultures and physical appearances. Possibly the only commonality that holds them together is their alienation from the host societies and their status as a stateless people in Europe. Apart from the 'Romanis' of the Balkans, central and eastern Europe, the gypsies now includes the 'Gitanos' of Spain, the 'Travellers' of England and Ireland, and the 'Sinti' of Germany and Italy.⁴⁰ It is now increasingly being argued that to resolve their statelessness without compromising their identity and way of life, possibly something like a 'European citizenship' has to be devised. As a group known for its mobility, the *Romas* then may contribute in real terms to the idea of mobility and stability at the same time. Will 'world citizenship' someday come from a creative understanding and combination of the two? It is worth a thought.

⁴⁰ For a detailed exposition see, James A. Goldston, 'Roma Rights, Roma Wrongs', *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2002.

Finally, children tend to create their own journeys, their own sense of life and living, and also of death. Several years back some of us had organized a South Asian children's workshop on alternative water management at Dhaka. Children of Class VIII to X from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka participated in the workshop. I remember on the first day the Indian student was asked, what he thought about Pakistan? The answer was quick: 'Enemy Number One!' The same question was then put to a Pakistani student. Her reply was identical: India was Pakistan's Enemy Number One! On the third day, however, the Indian, Pakistani and other children became indistinguishable; they were all playing and, laughing together, sharing jokes, and roaming together. And when it came to devising plans for the future, they all joined hands and chalked out an action plan, even setting up a website, not from the standpoint of their nation or nationality, but from that of a South Asian. Nandy was present at that workshop. Visibly moved by the event, particularly the way the Indian and Pakistani children had been transformed in less than a week's time, he ended his presentation by saying: "The future is ours!" Amidst the thumping of hands of the South Asian children, I could only silently say that that was one goal worth pursuing in thought and action.