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Response to Nandy

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Response

Arjun Guneratne

I. Introduction

Dr. Nandy's essay is a thoughtful and stimulating critique of the failure of the modern Indian state by one of India's most important intellectual figures. It is an extended reflection on the part played by India's Westernized political and intellectual elite in the rise of communalism and ethnic chauvinism in modern India. It is this elite (the modern Indians) who are the vehicles for the modern political self that is the subject of Dr. Nandy's essay. He attributes this failure in large part to the dependence of this elite on concepts of the state and statecraft uncritically derived from European political philosophy, which have little to do with actual Indian experience or tradition. Modern India is characterized here as urban, elite, male, and historically informed; its counterpart, traditional India, is rural, subaltern, female, and informed by an understanding of the past shaped by myths and legends. For Dr. Nandy, ethnic chauvinism, or communalism, which is at once intolerant, romantic, utopian, and violent, grows out of the experience of modernization and industrialization. These are the West's legacies to India, and if India is to be whole again, she must merge her modern political self with the traditional and authentic aspect of her identity, which has been marginalized by the rise of a Westernized elite.

Dr. Nandy's argument may be summarized as follows. He attributes to modern Indian civilization an anomie that is the consequence of industrialization and urbanization. This has made Indians vulnerable to the exploitation of politicians, who manipulate the feelings of insecurity and the desire for cultural continuity of many segments of Indian society for political ends. In particular, he is concerned by the phenomenon of Hindu nationalism, which, like the polity it is seeking to replace, draws its notions of identity from European political philosophy rather than from India's own traditions. Dr. Nandy, whose earlier work has also been highly critical of Westernized intellectuals and elites in India, posits the notion of a modern Indian political

self that has become separated and alienated from its own cultural tradition. It is this modern self that is simultaneously the creator of the secular state that emerged at Independence and, in a different guise, the promoter of Hindu nationalism. Thus the modern self, culturally a stranger to the new forces moving India, confronts the possibility of political marginalization as the historically peripheralized Indian, who does not share its political ideology, moves to center stage. The dilemma of the modern Indian self then is how to negotiate the relationship between its threatened modernity, which it identifies with the West, and its lost traditional cultural identity, which it identifies in the culture of what Dr. Nandy calls India's trainee citizens.

Dr. Nandy's discussion of history and the political role that the idea of history plays in the life of contemporary South Asian states is one that I readily recognize, even though he is talking about India and my own experience pertains to Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, perhaps more so than in India, history (and, one might add, anthropology and linguistics) is the stuff of politics; the historian or the anthropologist, whether he or she likes it or not, is dragged into the maelstrom of politics whenever he or she puts forward a point of view (particularly in the deconstructionist mode) that pertains to relations between the country's various ethnic groups. Where I part company with Dr. Nandy (and these remarks are preface to a broader disagreement I elaborate on below) is his position that the historical self that emerges from the crucible of history (in the European sense) is different from that which "emerges from the crucible of myths, legends, and epics."

The dominant paradigm of Sri Lanka's history (essentially a nineteenth-century historiography updated to the needs of the twentieth) is held by many modern Sri Lankan historians and anthropologists to misconstrue the historical relationship between Sinhala and Tamil, to essentialize those identities, and thus to contribute to the development of ethnic nationalism in both communities. But that nineteenth-century paradigm, the product of British colonial historians who sought a model for the island's history that would be compatible with their own model of history and who found it in a sixth-century chronicle called the *Mahavamsa*, is based in part on what we would call myths and legends. Most Sri Lankans, certainly the Sinhalese,

whether modern or traditional, share a common historical self inasmuch as they accept this paradigm as the definitive account of their national past. Sri Lankans hold to their model of history, with its disastrous consequences for ethnic peace, not because of historical memory but because it has been systematically taught to children for more than half a century. Historical memory is firmly grounded in this instance in the specific practice of a state-mandated national curriculum.

In the remainder of this response, I shall elaborate on my differences with Dr. Nandy by discussing his argument under two rubrics. The first is that of culture and memory, the second that of the state.

II. Culture and Memory

Let me turn first to Dr. Nandy's use of the concepts of culture and memory. There is implicit in his argument a vision of a pure, authentic Indian culture to which Western thought, including political concepts first articulated in Europe in the nineteenth century, must remain forever alien. More explicitly, Dr. Nandy observed in his oral remarks that modern nation-states want to manage and domesticate culture (not destroy it); he is clearly using the word *culture* here in the sense of performance or behavior, and not in the sense of the system of ideas, values, and symbols that might generate that behavior. Concomitantly, he believes there is something in that authentic culture that, if recovered, could help to shape a different political self, one tolerant of the other because it incorporates part of the other in itself—a political self where duality is normal and not schizophrenic.

I would argue that culture should be understood not as a thing but as a process; as such, it is continually in transformation in a dialectic with the material environment, under which rubric I would include what we term politics, economics, and forms of social organization. What is relevant in the context of Dr. Nandy's argument is that aspect of culture which is *thought*: culture as a system of symbols and values through which experience is organized and made meaningful. It is more difficult for a state to manage or confine culture as thought than it is to do the same with culture as performance or behavior. The authentic

culture of a particular group is its culture as it exists at the moment we encounter it. Every culture, to some extent or another, is shaped by its engagement with other cultures; this is an old Boasian idea that has been resurrected and dignified in contemporary anthropology by the concept of global flows. Dr. Nandy himself has written, in an essay on Gandhi,

It is in the nature of traditional India to maintain a certain openness of cultural boundaries, a permeability which allows new influences to flow in and be integrated as a new set of age-old traditions.¹

The British Empire in India was a major context and conduit for those global flows. I would argue that the legacy of British imperialism in India, notably the English language, the British system of law, and Anglo-Saxon political concepts, are now as authentically Indian as is the culture of the Mughals. What it left behind in India is now Indian or being Indianized; it is no longer simply European, just as what the Mughals and other Islamic rulers left behind is no longer Persian, Turkish, or Afghan. If this is not the case, then, logically, the same must hold true for the cultural legacy of the Mughals—which is, of course, the position that Hindu nationalists hold. In the alternative, we must posit some chronology of indigenization: so many years must pass before these ideas and concepts (and practices) are absorbed into the fabric of Indian culture and become authentically Indian; in which case, it is only a matter of time before Anglo-Saxon ideas become authentically Indian. Indeed, it is the indigenization of Western culture in India that enables an Indian intellectual like Dr. Nandy to critique Westernization from within Westernization itself, using English and the concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis to address himself to an audience that cannot include the vast majority of his countrymen (and this last would have been true had he written in Hindi, Tamil, or Bengali).

I am therefore perplexed by Dr. Nandy's argument that Western ideas are alien to India and that the authentic India is the traditional Indian culture. He thus opposes Tradition to Modernity. But what is the traditional India? Whose tradition and which tradition are we talking about, and what makes it tra-

ditional? How can we be certain that if we select the tradition of one particular group on which to model political and social alternatives to the present situation, we will not offend other groups to whom that tradition will be alien? If the solution is to allow to each group its own traditions, might this not reinforce the Herderian consciousness that Dr. Nandy so deplors? Who decides what the authentic tradition is? What is there in India that is authentically Indian as opposed to authentically Telugu, Tamil, Santali, or Parsi?

Dr. Nandy's argument therefore begs the question, What is authentically Indian? The view of culture implicit in his text is a Romantic one that perhaps has more in common with that of Mazzini and Herder than he might care to admit. For what is this view but the notion that India has a culture or a tradition unique to it that is an expression of its soul or essence? The implication of my own argument is that it may be more fruitful to see the self of the modern Indian not as being divided between traditional and modern but between two ways (and perhaps more than two ways) of being Indian. There are innumerable selves in India, several of which may coexist in the soul of a single individual; why reduce them to this simple dichotomy?

Closely linked to Dr. Nandy's concept of culture is his use of the term *memory*. Memory, as it appears in his argument, seems free floating, not grounded in specific realities. But how does a society or a culture remember? What is the relationship of memory (of collective social and cultural memory) to power? He writes that the various dynasties that ruled India "have not left any significant memory trace behind."² What constitutes a memory trace? Surely, if they are invoked, then they must have left some memory trace behind. Just as individual human memory is not a faithful record of the past, but a certain representation of it that is colored by the concerns of the present, so too, when modern Indians invoke Sivaji, they call up an image of the man and his deeds not as he (and they) actually may have been but as they imagine him to have been; and their imaginings are always colored by contemporary concerns.

As I understand Dr. Nandy's argument, memory seems to be an autonomous aspect of culture, divorced from any sort of praxis: it is something that is just there, albeit hidden today by

the forces of modernity, waiting to be exposed to the light of day once modern India recaptures it. It is conceptualized here as something essential, that we can recapture in its pure form. If we can agree with Paul Connerton³ that social memory is inscribed in commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices, and if, as aspects of culture, both are subject to change, then the notion of lost or stolen memories, with which Dr. Nandy ends his reflections, becomes problematic. How does one steal a memory, and when one has it, what does one do with it? Could it be that memories are lost because they have ceased to be relevant to the lives of people living today? And if we can recapture or resurrect these memories, might it not turn out that while the jar may be old, the wine in it is new.

III. On the State

The second aspect of Dr. Nandy's argument that I want to consider is the idea of the state. He is critical of the modern Indian state, which, he says, has failed, in large part due to its adherence to outmoded nineteenth-century political theories. He is surprised that modern Indians are uninfluenced by traditional notions of Indian statecraft. But surely, this should not be surprising in itself. Those ideas developed with reference to a different social context to which few Indians living today would care to return. Similarly, one is not surprised that modern European politicians seem to be wholly uninterested in any practical sense in medieval European theories about kingship.

Before the theory of the state was refashioned in nineteenth-century Europe, there was a fairly simple answer to the question, What is the self where the state is concerned? To put it simply, the king was the state, or the state was personified by the king. The answer is not so simple today. If we are going to talk about the Indian self, we should be clear about whose self we have selected to be representative of the society, and why that particular self has been privileged over others. Even at the level of state power, there are many political selves, and all of them are modern.

It seems to me that there are two aspects of modern India that correspond to two separate nineteenth-century European ideas about the proper constitution of the state. These are the aspects

of ethnic nationalism and state patriotism, both of which are uneasily mediated in the structure of the Indian union. In the official ideology of the Indian state, one is a citizen not in the cultural sense proposed by Mazzini or Herder, but more, I would argue, in terms of Lord Acton's idea: state patriotism. The nation consists of all of the state's population, irrespective of ethnicity or religion. This is the concept of the state promoted by India's leaders at independence, a concept that has allowed Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians, as well as Telugu, Tamil, and Hindi speakers, and all of the other potential ethnically based nations to be incorporated into a common Indianness. Even so, the state has been forced to recognize the power of language-based subnationalisms by demarcating India into linguistic states. As a union, India exists uneasily between these two principles of state organization. Whether the ideology of Hindutva will be viable in the long run in supplanting these other, more narrowly defined cultural identities remains to be seen and is, perhaps, doubtful; a common Hinduness did not prevent the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra from carrying out a campaign to evict South Indians in Bombay, using the slogan "Maharashtra for the Marathis!"

Dr. Nandy has suggested that the modern Indian has an idealized image of the state derived from nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon texts. He writes, "the ideal state in modern India still carries with it a touch of purism and a certain fear of clumsiness, ambiguity, and the dirty imprint of life."⁴ He is discussing here how some Indians view their state; they insist that it carry out its affairs based on principles of morality rather than *realpolitik*. However, these contrasting views of the state are not unique to Indians but are found, probably, in every society. Furthermore, their dependence on nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon texts for their moral vision is conjectural; we must allow for native systems of morality that might inspire criticisms of a statecraft that is seen as being a dirty, hard-eyed game of *realpolitik*. Moral criticisms of the state and of kingship are not restricted by time and place. In Sri Lankan Buddhism, for example, there is the Asokan model of the just king, and children learn the stories of good and wise kings through the Jataka stories (stories of the past lives of the Buddha Gautama). Obeyesekere has described Sinhala village ritual dramas performed

during the time of the Sinhala kings that criticized “evil kingship” — including the ideology of divine kingship that Sinhala villagers in the time of the kings apparently held to be illegitimate, corvée labor that was not in the public interest, and despotic behavior generally.⁵ The historical narratives of ancient Sri Lanka — like the sixth-century *Mahavamsa* — can be read as models for Buddhist (i.e., virtuous) kingship and as critiques of despotic systems of governance. In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru writes of the Bhagavad Gita: “It lays stress on ethical and moral principles in statecraft and in life generally. Without this foundation of *dharma* there is no true happiness and society cannot hold together. The aim is social welfare, not the welfare of a particular group only but of the whole world.”⁶ Nehru was undoubtedly familiar with the writings of nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon political philosophers, but he had read elsewhere as well, and his idealism (and that of others like him) was surely shaped by a number of sources. We should be wary about privileging nineteenth-century European ideas as the source for views held by contemporary Indians without allowing for alternative possibilities. It is too sweeping a claim.

What is the context in which medieval and classical theories of the state developed in India? For one thing, caste as the basic organizing principle of society was recognized by the state, and one of the duties of kingship was to uphold the caste order. An important source of traditional Hindu law are the ancient texts known as the *Dharmashastras*. When the Hindu kingdom of Nepal adopted a legal code in the mid-nineteenth century to organize the culturally heterogeneous population over which it ruled, the Brahmin and Chhetri (high-caste) elite modeled it on the *Dharmashastras*. The state placed every ethnic group in the country into a hierarchy of five status groups, ranging from the twice-born castes to the untouchables, and specified in minute detail the forms of behavior that members of each group should practice in their dealings with others. The traditional principle according to which the state operated was that individuals of unequal status could not be treated in like manner; how you were punished for a crime, for example, depended on where you stood in the status hierarchy. The people of Nepal, until 1951, had no formal rights vis-à-vis the state: they were its subjects and tenants, not its citizens.

The premodern Indian polity was based on the divinity of kingship, on the ordering of society into a hierarchy of castes, and on the quasi-feudal nature of the economic system. All of these features could be observed until 1951 in that last vestige of the “traditional” Hindu state, the Kingdom of Nepal, and until the democratic uprising in 1990 that forcibly secularized him, the King of Nepal was held, in the official ideology, to be an avatar of Vishnu. Rana Nepal suggests why the political precepts of ancient and medieval India have no relevance to the situation of modern Indians; they no longer confront the state as its subjects but as its citizens. This may be a nineteenth-century European concept, but it is no less Indian (and global), and no less liberating, for all that.

What concerns Dr. Nandy and other liberally minded intellectuals and people of good will in India is the ongoing self-destruction of the principle of secularism and its possible replacement by a system of Hindu fascism. But the failure of the Indian state should be attributed not to the irrelevance of Anglo-Saxon political ideas to modern India but to the lack of conviction of Indian elites in their own political project. The timid response of the federal Indian government to the Babri Masjid affair is a case in point, but the rot started much earlier. Nevertheless, as William Rowe and Vivian Schelling suggest in their book *Memory and Modernity*, it is partly in the free flow of ideas and philosophies across cultural boundaries that there is hope for the future.

[T]he vast increase in channels of communication which flow across cultural boundaries has the effect of dismantling old forms of marginalization and domination and making new forms of democratization and cultural multiplicity imaginable.⁷

Now it might be argued that there are aspects of traditional statecraft that may be relevant in the present context. If this is the case, it would be well to elaborate on what they are. Even so, how can we ensure that traditional forms of statecraft will not, if incorporated into contemporary practices, generate their own forms of authoritarianism and oppression? Given that traditional Indian political philosophy developed in the absence of any notion of popular participation in politics, this is, I think, a

relevant question to raise. Dr. Nandy suggests that the image of the ideal state based on Anglo-Saxon texts (rather than the practice of statecraft in Europe) has an aura of purity about it, which hard-headed Indians committed to ideas of realpolitik deplore and which soft-headed Indians enamored of moral ideals embrace; but if the ideal state had been based on Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, its aura would have been very different. If nineteenth-century Europe has given India a utilitarian ideology of the state, Kautilya — with his fourth-century-B.C. advice to Chandragupta to use informers, spies, and secret political assassinations to maintain centralized control over the kingdom — would have given modern India a political ideology no less practical in intent and with an aura far more unsavory. In fact, it would probably not be cynical to suggest that modern Indian politics owes as much to Kautilyan modes of thinking and acting as it does to nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon political philosophy. Traditional culture, in short, does not necessarily provide a solution to the problems of modernity.

Although I share with Dr. Nandy a concern about the nativistic, intolerant, and violent direction that South Asian politics is taking, I do not share his somewhat idealistic and romanticized view of traditional culture as a way to imagine alternative possibilities. We must create those alternative possibilities out of our experience of the present, not by reference to lost or stolen memories. In any case, I do not believe that such a thing as traditional culture exists. Certainly the context in which rituals, practices, and systems of belief that have come down to us from the past no longer do. What we conceive of as "traditional" culture may preserve more or less the outward forms, but their meanings have changed, in part because of what we call "modernity." Furthermore, every culture and every society conceives of modernity in its own way; the modern Indian is recognizably an Indian, no slavish imitation of Western man or woman. If we persist in a quest for "tradition," we are likely to end up like the heroine in Satyajit Ray's film *Agantuk*. As Dr. Nandy has told us, she joins the Santals in an uninhibited dance, casting off the constraints of her modern self and merging it with what seems to be an authentic, nonmodern other. But far from representing a traditional, albeit impoverished India, the Santals represent the other aspect of modernity, an aspect also represented by those

masses moving to the center of the political stage and causing such angst to the modern Indian. The Santals are the victims first of the colonial state and then of the modern Indian state; they are people who were expropriated and forced to become day laborers in lowland Bengal and plantation workers in the tea estates of Assam.⁸ They are the proletarianized, alienated labor force for the plantations and industries of India. What could be more modern than that?

Notes

1. Ashis Nandy, "From Outside the Imperium: Gandhi's Cultural Critique of the West," in his *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 153.
2. Ashis Nandy, "South Asian Politics: Modernity and the Landscape of Clandestine and Incommunicable Selves" in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 224.
3. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
4. Nandy, "South Asian Politics," 225–26.
5. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 325–60.
6. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Calcutta: Signet, 1946), 113.
7. William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1991), 1.
8. Susana B. C. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992).