

Ashis Nandy and the Vicissitudes of the Self: Critique, subjectivity and Indian civilization

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This paper deals with the work of Ashis Nandy, one of the main contemporary Indian intellectuals, social psychologist, psychoanalyst, as well as political scientist, who endeavored to develop what he called a 'critical traditionalism'. His discussion of personality and the individual, within a broad conception of the civilization of India, with modernity being present on the other hand as an explicit threat (and an implicit, more ambiguous element), is crucial in several respects – in particular theoretically, so as to understand India and for a theory of civilization. The multiple composition of the self and its relations both to Indic and Western civilizations stand out in his discussions.

Introduction

India is a country with enormous cultural creativity, with many innovations historically at the religious and philosophical level, to which was added, since its initial contact with modernity, the development of high quality human and social sciences. In this context, Ashis Nandy appears as one of the greater names of psychology, with an output concerned with political and sociological themes. His work, consisting mainly of essays, is at once very rich and radically polemical, especially insofar as it eschews more explicitly modern perspectives. Due to its complexity and length, I shall here select some aspects that seem to me to be central to a general presentation of his outlook and, on the other hand, offer particularly interesting instruments for contemporary social sciences. First we shall discuss his conception of critique, tradition and utopia, civilization and culture. Second, we will deal with his theory of the self and its multiple faces, perhaps his most original contribution, focusing on several topics of Indian culture. Finally, I will dwell on a few more specific, explosive questions, which refer to the debate about modernization and development, state and nationalism, secularism and secularization in India today. We find here what seem to be the limits of Nandy's thought. Before that it is worthwhile drawing a general portrait of the author and his work.

Brought up in Calcutta in the second half of the twentieth century, that is, a witness since his youth to the trajectory of independent India, Nandy graduated and post-graduated in psychology, with strong emphasis on psychoanalysis. He worked clinically until opting definitely for a career as a researcher, at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), in New Delhi. Creativity in science and literature, as well as the articulation between personality and society, were his initial focuses, although from the very beginning he worked on a "political psychology" and the issues of Indian society were at the core of his concerns, partly through the mediation of the figure of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), as well as of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the great poet and composer of the first half of the Indian twentieth century. He has increasingly searched for a recovery of Indian tradition, dwelling especially on what would consist of its popular undercurrents, pitting himself against the notions of secularism and development, strongly critiquing the state and the more explicitly modern intellectuals. In fact, in my view excessive stridency has been doing harm to the elaboration of his ideas and there is indeed a loss of substance in his perspectives more recently, notwithstanding the general relevance of his body of work.

For some, Nandy espouses a Brahminical standpoint, since the traditions he supports do not include and are contrary to a radical progressive perspective, with great ambiguity as to

feminism and being to some extent complicit with Hindu chauvinist nationalism, because of his anti-secularization positions, as well as of neoliberalism, because of his pro-market critique and anti-state critique (Desai, 2002: 78-90). He concentrates, critics argue, his “critical traditionalism” – which we will analyze below, only on attacks against science, sparing traditions and without understanding that India’s problem is the lack of “Enlightenment” (Nanda, 2004: 42-3, 168-9, 211). Nandy was incapable, when he opposed secularism, of grasping the importance of a democratic public sphere for India (Nag, 2002: 535-6). Baber’s (2006: 34-41) critique is deeper: according to him Nandy was formerly connected to modernization theory, with the dichotomies typical of such a perspective having survived, albeit transformed, in his subsequent work, a point with which some who think very high of him tend to agree (Paranjape, 2000: 241).

Vanaik’s (1997: 165-77) view is more nuanced. For him, despite the fact that he does not really understand that India is condemned to modernity, Nandy has a relatively deep grasp of it, but not of tradition, sustaining on the other hand loose notions of secularism and secularization, with many ambiguities in his conceptual formulations. Besides, contrary to T. N. Madan, Nandy has nothing to do with Brahminism and, in contradistinction to that author, is also critical of the ideas of secularization, courageously supported the Mandal Report, which recommended the enlargement of affirmative action so as to advance the position of the dispossessed castes of the country (Vanaik, 1997: 215, note 52). Stressing Nandy’s originality and the fact that he is no “atavist,” Chakrabarty (2000) observes that his critique of modernity is basically modern, since it is “decisionist” when it supposes that a rupture could be brought about by sheer will, and recovering tradition as a heroic self-invention. Nandy has, on the other hand, an extended and sometimes even a-critical group of admirers who tend to stress his originality and genius (Lal, 2000; Sadar, 2000; Buell, 2000; Dirlik, 2000) and tend sometimes to react irritably to criticism directed at him (Lal, 2001). There is no systematic exploration of his concepts anywhere (bar, partially, in what concerns “post-colonial” psychology in Greedhardy, 2008: ch. 2), although directly or indirectly his work is a reference for many debates in the Indian academy today.

By way of conclusion, we shall have the occasion to revisit these discussions, in particular the relation between modernity and tradition in Nandy’s work. Let us now explore its main aspects. This will allow us not only a precise view of his ideas, but also the identification of some crucial themes for the understanding of India, historically and contemporarily.

Critique and traditon, modernity and utopia

Critique, in its immanent form, to which we are mostly used to, starts from modernity itself and takes it to task for the limitations it generates for the consecution of its own normative horizon (Domingues, 2006). It is to this attitude that Nandy refers to when he says that modernity cannot live without its opposite – critical modernism, an internal critique to modernity. There are however criticisms that come from without modernity, rejecting Enlightenment values. They consist of an external critique, in which he includes, curiously, authors such as Carlyle, Emerson, Thoreau, Rushkin and Tolstoy. Nandy’s perspective is closer to the latter, although he wavers somewhat in what concerns its one-sidedness or capacity of synthesis – and that it sounds strange listing western, or almost western, authors who in a different context would hardly be seen as distant from modernity, as examples of another perspective. For Nandy, Gandhi would be the “more consistent and savage” critique of modernity, arousing therefore his admiration; although he refuses to consider himself a Gandhian. Gandhi defended the dynamic tradition of Indian villages, and was willing to strongly criticize tradition, as Nandy believes was the case on occasion of the debates about caste, even though Gandhi himself lived within tradition, incorporating modern elements without further ado. In this and in other cases, this implies “critical traditionalism” (Nandy,

1992 [1981a]: 121-5; 1992 [1981b]: 153; 1987b: 114-6; 2008a). The same way modernity has its own tradition, other traditions may work as a form of “negation,” such as elaborated by Marcuse (Nandy, 2006: 59, 64).

In order to be critical, however, traditionalism has to have its theory of oppression and a perception of the sources of evil in modern times. Only native theories can offer concepts to cope with native oppressions, but none of them can be taken seriously if it does not include them, along with a theory of the West as such. Spirit is present therefore in Indian ideas, as well as the notion of internally as well as a socially constructed self. Modern theories, in contradistinction, can or cannot help the oppressed (although they certainly help the theoreticians) (Nandy, 1987b: 117-21). After all, every culture has its pathologies and a dark side (Nandy, 1995 [1994a]: 49). If this is generically true, in terms of his discipline, in particular, he demanded a necessarily political psychology, open to “ethnic” diversity. Critical theory should then be searched for without putting aside cultural and normative plurality (Nandy, 2007 [1983b]: 120-6). This way we could escape psychoanalytic and Marxist ethnocentrism, since these were critics internal to the West (Nandy, 1995 [1990b]: 81). We could above all achieve a critical language that would not be alien to the majority of the Indian population that was being empowered by a democratic opening (Nandy, 1995: vii). Moreover, Nandy (2002 [2000a]: 208-9) identifies a domestication of western critical theory and suggests that the “defeated cultures of the tropics” can offer a positive, renewing contribution. He thereby distances himself from the formerly strong influence of the Frankfurt School (Nandy, 2007 [1997d]: 57; 2006: 16, 18-20). His critical traditionalism accepts science, rejecting however an excessive concern, coordinated by the defense mechanism known as “isolation,” with objectivity, to the detriment or even cancelation of affects and philosophical speculation (Nandy, 1992 [1978]: 125). But one thing becomes clear, the wavering development of the argument and his recognition that we hardly find the disjunction between modernity and tradition in a pure form: “...the choice is between critical modernism and critical traditionalism. It is a choice between two frames of reference and two world views” (Nandy, 1987b: 116).

Nandy’s critique of modernity is connected directly to a vision of the future, to utopia, a difficult topic in the extremely violent twentieth century. Recognizing that implies that any of them must be based on a perception of violence that several “faiths” can unleash. Utopias must be screened bearing in mind their capacity of self-evaluation and responsibility for their “legitimate and illegitimate brain children,” let alone the fact that imperfect societies produce imperfect medicine. Utopians must be prone to engage in dialogue and this cannot work if the “heretics” and outsiders are treated as inferior. In any society, including Indian society, it is necessary to embrace elements of its culture, as well as reject many of its other features (Nandy, 1992 [1984]: 6-9, 22).

In another essay, the theme is treated more profoundly, in a veiled dialogue with Max Weber. He is never quoted in this context, but the themes of salvation and freedom – the latter implicit, but hidden, in Weber’s work, due to his emphasis on rationalization (Domingues, 2006) –, give much of the article’s tenor. When he discusses an “inter-civilizational perspective on oppression,” with a less articulated complement about the “psychology of survival and salvation,” Nandy argues that a Third World theoretician had to convert himself into the “collective representation” of the “victims of man-made suffering everywhere in the world and in all past times.” He also must recognize the external forces of oppression, treating them as internal, and include the “marginalized selves” of the First and the Second Worlds as “civilization allies” in the struggle against “institutionalized suffering.” Moreover, all civilizations share some basic values, derived from “eternal verities of human nature:” apart from that we find merely a variation of gestalt (a term he does not define)

and the weight they receive, distinguishing themselves as “dominant” or “recessive.” The whole history of civilization would consist in an attempt to change or expand its “awareness of exploitation and oppression,” even though imperfect societies yield imperfect medicine, as Marx and Freud realized, since they understood that we could not just dispose of the past, although they were both far too optimistic. This is true also because societies create “powerful inner defenses” against the perception of suffering and the oppressed can, as Erich Fromm note, achieve secondary psychological gains with their predicament. The internal freedom of the self must underpin external freedom in order that the latter can thrive and the humiliation that appears in the relations between master and slave be overcome (Nandy, 1992 [1978]: 21-22; 2007a).

Especially because he shares the disciplinary framework of political psychology, as well as of anti-colonial struggle, it is important for Nandy to distance himself from the iconic figure of Franz Fanon. According to him, violence is no solution at all, even therapeutically for the oppressed: if Fanon had trusted his culture just a bit more he would not need violence to exorcize oppression and internalized violence, this moreover linking more deeply the oppressed to the oppressor, through his socialization in the values of the latter and the opening of aggressive drives in a free manner. As Gandhi had perceived, based both on traditional Indian monism as well as in his conception of renunciation and on Christian values, it was necessary to free also the oppressor. Only the weak and meek can spearhead this process, since they possess the true innocence of which Rollo May spoke, free of the satisfactions of the secondary gratification of the “pseudo-innocents” who absorb the values of oppression. After all he saw freedom as indivisible, with both, oppressed and oppressor captured in the webs of oppression and in need to free themselves (Nandy, 1992 [1978]: 34-5; 1988 [1983a]: 63). It is not a matter of projecting a future consciousness or of activating the guilty of the First World but, rather, of aggregating or synthesizing visions of the future which authentically stem from each “civilization,” acknowledging at once the experience of shared suffering. Basic values are common to all and transcend particularism, which is no cure for ethnocentrism. Cultural relativism is valid only insofar as it accepts “the universalism of some core values of humankind.” An authentic view of each civilization requires, therefore, alliances with external forces in the search for internally recessive elements and with the disposition of getting involved with the other in its own quest (Nandy, 1992 [1978]: 54-5). This is the path to “salvation,” to freedom. There is much here that relates to Gandhi and Indic culture, as we will see below, his goals being outlined with a universal design, though.

Still with reference to Gandhi, one can concretely discern what in part such critical traditionalism and vision of the future would mean. Although he did not think of himself as a reformer and lived tradition, Gandhi introduced radical changes. He legitimated a collective ethics that altered the concepts of individual salvation, responsibility and action geared to the value of self-perception; he dislocated the concept of merely private self-knowledge; and changed the perspective of political participation, mobilizing the masses, contrary to a traditional Indian view according to which political authorities were not central for social life (Nandy, 1990 [1980c]: 75). In other words, brushing aside an other-worldly directed asceticism, characteristic of the main Hindu religious currents, Gandhi re-localizes transcendence, with freedom duly searched for in this world, in which Nandy’s shared feeling with him are evident, although even in this step, as we will see, he tries to draw a line vis-à-vis the dominant western culture.

In sum, we can fathom two visions from an analysis of Nandy’s texts, about what would be the relation between western critical theory, typically modern, and that which would be articulated starting from other civilizational perspectives, what of course has consequences

for the future. The first would imply an addition to critical theory, or its partial transformation. This would be a weak version of the alternative critical perspective. The second, stronger, in which an external critique has total autonomy and would be on an equal footing with that or would even enjoy some superiority – outside modernity, stemming from other elements, and against it to a great extent, resuming a conception which owes a lot to Gandhi. The first one allows for a clearer future synthesis, the second underlines a separation. What permitted that this internal tension in Nandy's argument was partly solved was his underscoring the universality of the basic values of all civilizations. Nevertheless he has more recently assumed a more unilateral position, with statements about the capacity of human beings to yield "new tools of violence and oppression" from emancipatory ideas, that becomes sharper with modernity. This demands alternative systems of knowledge, consisting the utopias of civilizations such as India and China at least in part in a return to the past, not a move towards the future, contrary to what the Enlightenment supposes (Nandy, 2007b: ix-xv).

But what would be a civilization? This is in fact one of the most common – until at least recently – and vaguer concepts of Nandy's work. They are plural, as traditions, and some of them are capable of accommodating modernity, lending new meanings to older experiences (Nandy, 1990 [1980b]: 47; 1990 [1980c]: 76; 1992 [1981a]). By and large he prefers to speak of the great civilizations, such as the Indian one especially, but can recognize the "insufficiently global" character of civilization today, which makes it both parochial in its occidentalism and a point of reference for other civilizations (Nandy, 2007 [1989b]: 173). Maybe because of his vague definition he has reduced the use of the concept, without stopping to reaffirm that, although the distinction is somewhat artificial, civilizations are always plural, contrary to cultures, which are unified, and can accommodate inauthentic constructions, without succumbing to an inauthentic outlook as such, contrary to cultures (Nandy, 2000b: 44-7, 84). It is worth noting, however, that he repeatedly stresses a dichotomy between modernity and tradition (Nandy, 1987b: 114; 2000b: 64), that is, between civilizations, although aware of the fact that they are counterpoised in India and owing up, in an interview, that this is rather a reaction to what he considers to be the bankruptcy and sterility of modernity (Nandy, 2006: 59). This has inevitable consequences for his work.

Finally, Indian civilization – which is contiguous with its neighbors, showing itself therefore as bigger than state and "nation" – would be especially accommodating and flexible, capable of borrowing from anyone and of living with ambiguities, without losing in fact its identity due to, in particular, its civilizational internal pluralism (which would be able to absorb everything with the "slow, soporific sedativity of everyday Hinduism," so much feared by Islamism in the subcontinent, for example). In this sort of worldview, binary oppositions are rejected. The very term "Hindu" was crafted by Muslims to refer to those Indians that had not converted to Islam and only in the twentieth century would become a self-attributed category, without the overlap of religion and nationality being important for this self-identification (Nandy, 2000b: 76-9; 1988 [1983a]: 103-4, 111, note 84; 1990 [1980b]: 49; 1995 [1992b]).

The vicissitudes of the self

This Indian civilizational universe can begin to become clearer when we explore Nandy's conception of nationalism and patriotism, stemming from Gandhi's and Tagore's thought, in fact his two greater intellectual heroes. We close in the kernel, the most productive centre, of Nandy's work.

The history of English colonialism and the struggle for the independence of India are of course the big themes of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries in South Asia. Nationalism emerged then with enormous strength. Gandhi and Tagore kept, however, a relation at least ambivalent with this sort of ideology, if not openly hostile at times, since it was seen as configuring a particularist and backward perspective. Nor was abstract universalism an alternative, which would in fact be a universalism “embedded in the tolerance encoded in the various traditional ways of life in a highly diverse, plural society” (Nandy, 1994b: vi-vii). Gandhi and Tagore, with different emphasis, and sometimes with bitter public disputes, notwithstanding mutual esteem and respect, shared that vision, the former trying to deal with the divisions between West and East, past and present, modern and traditional, with reference to “low” culture, whereas the latter as oriented to “high” culture. Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), a follower of both and the main practical politician of the period, realized that a combination of them was what could legitimise the young Indian state. Gandhi and Tagore feared nationalism and did not want that the idea of an Indian nation overwhelmed that of an Indian civilization. They therefore opted for patriotism, against nationalism (Nandy, 1994b: 1-3).

Tagore was against, moreover, violent methods which tied the culture of the oppressed to the culture of the oppressor – whether they utilized or not the language of Gita, the sacred book of Vedic culture, to justify such behavior. Hyper-masculinity was alien to him, threatening the “authenticity and authority of feminine self” crucial for Indian civilization, as can be seen in his several novels (Nandy, 1994b: 26-42). In fact, the brutal violence of the twentieth century was a paramount topic in Tagore’s intellectual agenda in general, resumed directly by Nandy (2002d). In Gandhi’s case this is even more obvious in what refers specifically to India, attracting the hatred of radical nationalist movements. He always looked for an androgynous identity, typical of the subcontinental view of sanctity, in which the feminine principle was superior, in which maternity, broadly conceived of stood out, although he thought that masculinity was better than cowardice. Gandhi mobilized for that Indian culture and the recessive elements of Christianity, which he believed to be compatible with the main elements of Hinduism and Buddhism, within a decidedly universalist outlook. Critical of forced “normality,” he tried to preserve the infantile aspects of his self and affirmed the superiority of the oppressed, looking for, through Satyagraha, an active and peaceful resistance that challenged the violent and masculine toughness of English imperial culture, although violence could be warranted in a number of occasions. Gandhi abolished thereby the link between activism, potency and aggression that lies at the core of western culture, in contradistinction democratizing and publicizing the former in Indian society (Nandy, 1990 [1980b]: 38; 1990 [1980c]: 74; 1992 [1981b]: 127-9, 143-4; 1988 [1983a]: 4-55).

But Gandhi accepted at the same time a compromise between the nationalism that entered India as an imperial category and the nationalism that emerged from the democratic aspirations of its population. He hoped the second would eventually overcome the former. Tagore, in contradistinction, practiced anti-imperialism rejecting nationalism, since the unity of India was for him a social fact rather than a political agenda. Today, however, it is a sort of tough nationalism that prevails: the vision of patriotism of both of them basically disappeared, which, unfortunately, makes most Indians proud rather than sad (Nandy, 1994b: 77-83). The Hindutva movement view comes to the fore thereby, with its rightwing nationalism and martial display – in passing, typical of the collaborationist princes who were subordinated to the British Empire, as well as of oppositionist terrorism, which was nonetheless also dependent on those powers on a deeper level. In this sort of nationalism the attempt at organizing a state in the western mould and a “semiticized” Hindu religion is crucial. This implies a rigid and delimited self, a closed doctrine, deppluralized, and the

hierarchical organization of the clergy. It would forge a masculine, aggressive, competitive and achievement-oriented culture which would allow for a resurrection of Indian martial cultures and shield Hindus from insecurity vis-à-vis the masculism of the colonizer, which was however totally internalized. That is what we see in the discourse and the politics of Gandhi's murder, Nathuram Godse (1910-1949), as well as of Vinayak Damodar Sawarkar (1883-1966), who embraced their "ego defenses" through an identification with the oppressor – by the way as it often occurs with the Jews in relation to their recent past in Europe, since it is a phenomenon with larger reach (Nandy, 1990 [1980c]; 1988 [1983a]: 4-25; 2007 [1983b]: 147; 1987b: 35; 1994b; 2003b: 21; 2009a).

Imperialism had serious consequences for the British too. Their culture hardened and was homogenized, freezing the intellect and discouraging critique, with the mechanism of isolation of cognition in relation to affect playing a key role. It was a "perversion of western culture" (Nandy, 1988 [1983a]: 4-6, 32-5, 48). That comes out in the analysis that Nandy carries out of the great Anglo-Indian writer Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936). He notes that in relation to Kipling interpreters often suggest a bifurcation, leading to the ambiguity of two voices: a dominant one, martial, violent and moralist, and the other, subjugated, softer, feminine. Raised almost as an Indian, although sent to Great-Britain during adolescence, where he faced great personal difficulties, his problem was that he could not be Indian and western at once; the necessity of making a choice generated clear self-destructivity, insofar as his avowed values were western, but his "undersocialized, rejected self" was Indian. This evinced the unilateral position of the British, since the east remained foreign to them, thereby creating that split in Kipling, while for Indians, by and large, being Indian and western was a fact of daily life, with the common, dominant and recessive, cultures themes cutting across such frontiers (Nandy, 1988 [1983]: 70-6). The moral imperative of freeing also the oppressor becomes clear here.

This takes us to more conceptual discussions about colonialism and its effects in India, as well as to his theory of the self. Colonialism for him is above all a state of mind, demonstrating an inner colonization, with Indians and the colonized overall ending up as accomplices of their own subjugation, even when they challenge it, doing so however within the "psychological limits" imposed by the colonial situation and through the change of their "cultural priorities." If this mental colonialism is produced by external elements, it has a feedback effect upon them. It survives the downfall of Empires in the spirit of the colonized. Political psychology can in this regard play an important role, bringing out how this happens (Nandy, 1988 [1983a]: x-xiv, 1-3). On the other hand, Nandy believes that human subjectivity evinces, more clearly than any other dimension, the state of politics in a society – the self absorbs and "telescopes" the social conflicts and, moreover, in a quick and discrete flirt with Georg Mead, what he calls the "significant others" (Nandy 1990 ([1980f]: vii; 2000b: 41; 2002 [2000a]: 209).

He has therefore two reasons to investigate the construction of the self in colonial and post-colonial India: cognitive and programmatic. It is in the study of singular people, rather than of aggregates, Nandy suggests, that he feels more comfortable. From there, and beyond the intrinsic value of analysis, he can draw upon it to understand the wider social dynamic. But the need to support a particular sort of subjectivity that supposedly characterizes Indian culture specifically comes up. He argues that the self – either individual or collective – is neither well-defined nor clear-cut in the subcontinent; while the other appears "telescoped" in the very self as part of it, including on the other hand parts of the self – this mirroring a multiplicity of the self, in the constructions of the concepts of good and evil that do not amount to dichotomies, as well as in a capacity to live with ambiguities, which, for instance, caused discomfort in Kipling (Nandy, 1988 [1983a]: 104; 2002b: 107, 126-7; 2002 [1997c]:

148-9; 2006: 55-7). Curiously, however, in these passages a deep psychology of psychoanalysis appears modestly, with only mechanisms of defense coming forward more strongly in the explanations Nandy presents. In other writings, mostly prior to that, this was not the case, though. It is worth noting that his theory of social creativity is very rich and socially grounded, since he argues that it is not merely focusing on the sheer internal play of sexual desire or rigid aptitude tests, but instead investigating how it emerges in the encounter of individual needs and the social prototypes offered to scientists, and how they solve the tensions that come up thereby (Nandy, 1995 [1980g]: 18).

This is clear in his studies of science, specifically of a group of Indian scientists who stood out in the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The first is Jagadis Chandra Bose (1853-1937), physicist and botanist, whose mother was characterized by an obsessive compulsion with cleanliness – a “tolerable angularity” in Hindu culture –, with a mix moreover of anger and the search for perfection. Both cut across her son’s behavior later on. Bose’s occidentalization implied an acceptance of aggressiveness and competitiveness, latent within himself, that led him, through the mediation of his wife and hence of a more mothering feminine figure, to overcome the first, less conflictive, identifications with his dilettante father. He could then dive into his “deepest self” and explore his scientific career in a straightforward manner. Starting from a distinction between brahman (essence) and atman (the essential reality of self), and the search for timeless absolutes through empirical knowledge, Bose translated that into a scientific vision that, bent on monism, mediated by renovated and semiticized Brahmoism, facilitated the integration of his own personality. India could thus also absorb anything, integrating living and non-living forms, aggressive life and pacific death, human violence and nature, whereby his science became a “reparative or restitutive affair,” simultaneously articulating a deeper concern with his own people. In fact, nevertheless, scientifically Bose’s research in plant biology, with his monist animism, did not produce more than international curiosity, contrary to his former, really important work about electricity (Nandy, 1995 [1980g]: 28-43, 62-71).

Srinavasa Ramanujan (1887-1920), a Brahman mathematician from a poor family and living in a secondary village, is Nandy’s main other object of analysis. A very feminine man, who had a clear compulsive disorder, acceptable in Hindu culture, he was brilliant and self-taught. Thereby he mainly rediscovered the mathematic truths of his time, having trouble with technical demonstrations. Psychically he eschewed affect by means of the neutralization of emotions, which a science such as mathematics allows (Nandy, 1995 [1980g]: 88-143). His contact with modernity was, however, more tenuous and threatening, since he did not grapple with the problems which Bose, dealing with disciplines in which the West had unchallenged control, had to face. Ramanujan was capable of integrating his mathematics and his metaphysical philosophy and magical interpretations, a legacy of his mother, while Bose ended up pressed by the colonial situation and nationalism, without achieving adequate solution in terms of Bengal’s high culture at that stage. It is revealing of his attitude and perspective at this point that Nandy rates Bose’s defeat as much more important than Ramanujan’s capacity for self-isolation, insofar as a key contemporary problem was posed to him: how to integrate within Indian culture new (western) elements, aiming for universal knowledge and forging a new identity in the search for India’s “intellectual autonomy” (Nandy, 1995 [1980g]: 143).

This was to some extent the case of the first Indian psychoanalyst, Girindrasekhar Bose (1886-1953), who mixes psychoanalysis with older Indian theories of subjectivity. He cultivated, without exposing himself entirely to Freud and his colleagues of the time in Europe, a “secret self,” more speculative, against a more positivist psychoanalysis, criticizing

both traditional Indian culture and the imitation of western culture by the middle classes (Nandy, (1995 [1990b])).

If in science he seems to devise the issue which, positively in a way, was posed to India, it slowly becomes clear that his view has another prism, tougher and sharper. This would eventually overwhelm the original approach, more accommodating of the West and modernity.

State, nationalism and development, secularism and secularization

Nandy was trained as a psychologist and psychoanalyst, with reasonable knowledge of other areas associated with social and political theory. But it is in his dealings with these other disciplines that, regardless of good insights and a capacity to generally frame some crucial issues, he tends to get lost. It is when we see his critique of modernity become more strident, with little grasp of its processes, which eventually blocks his vision. This obviously contributes to a political and cultural program even more distant, in principle, from modernity, and hostile to it, rooted otherwise in a voluntarism for which social choices not only have merely a moral character, but also constitute a terrain of wide freedom for agents.

Nandy (2009a) is perfectly aware that changes of identity in India, under the impact of modernity and modernization, underlie processes that had to do with colonialism, which however refer more broadly to urbanization and industrialization. Hindutva, as well as Indic Islamism and Sri Lanka's Buddhism (all part of the same Indic civilizational configuration, which embraces Pakistan and that island southwest of the subcontinent, with conflicts between Sinhals and Tamils), has undergone a rationalizing transformation which demonizes the other, as a form of "exorcism" of their rejected selves, even if the price is self-annihilation – proximity, not distance being responsible for this emotional mobilization, as in the "narcissism of small differences" Freud denounced, although he is not quoted in this context. It is exactly to uprooted people, who live a culture of flux and a quest for security and stability at the psychic level, that the idea of an India with cultural continuity and rigidity appeals (Nandy, 2003 [1997a]; 2007 [1997d]: 38). Formerly, following a diagnosis shared by the Indian left and Adorno's theory of the authoritarian personality, Nandy (1990 [1980e]) identified such processes with Fascism. On the other hand, religious fanaticism stems from floating anger and self-hatred generated in people who saw themselves as religiously defeated in an increasingly secular and desacralized world, created by modernity (Nandy, 2002b: 74).

This becomes clear in particular in his discussion about sati, the widows' ritual suicide. It had always been a "pathology" of Indian culture, suffering from a perversion with the advance of modernity, which attacked and disorganized traditional lifestyles and delivered religion, including this specific practice, but also festivals and pilgrimages, to market mechanisms (Nandy, 1995 [1994a]). Already in the eighteenth century there had occurred a "sati epidemics," forced by momentous social and cultural changes in the life of the babus (Brahmin castes) of Calcutta. The massive recourse to sati surged as an attempt to show conformity with a threatened tradition and because masculine fantasies and fears of feminine aggression were unleashed, with the supposition that death was coming about due to their ritual performance. This could be partly fixed by feminine ritual suicide (Nandy, 1990 [1980a]). Let us note that this line of reasoning, although precise in its identification of mechanisms, displaces the responsibility for the answers to causes stemming from modernization, freeing morally those who made recourse – or pushed women to do so – to sati. Voluntarism sometimes is used by Nandy as an argument, on other occasions it is left aside.

On the other hand, although he sometimes recognizes that the middle classes produced criticism of both tradition and modernity (Nandy, 1995 [1990c]: 197), he turns against them when he brings up the issue of loss of roots, of wasting popular traditions and the intolerant radicalism of Hindu nationalism, since from it emerges, he thinks, basically all that is negative in contemporary India (Nandy, 2008b). Irrespective of the correction or not of the sociological aspect underlying such statements, we are suddenly transplanted to the plan of morality and voluntary choices, now with a negative signal, though, contrary to what happened with the discussion about the sati “epidemics.” The state and secularism evince even more such a negative appreciation of the middle classes, in opposition to most of the Indian population. Secularism was, he states, introduced in the country by people who were “seduced or brainwashed” in favor the ethnocidal thesis about social and historical evolution, so as to subvert traditional forms of religious tolerance. Precisely the middle classes would bet on that actually ethnophobic and ethnocidal nation state, except if cultures bow to it (Nandy, 2002 [1990d]: 64; 2003 [1997b]: 68).

Nandy has no sympathy for the state, although he is more comfortable with a “moderate” state, shrunken and capable of dealing with a “federation” of cultures. The nation state, the dream of Indian nationalists, was a mere product, the more problematic, of colonialism, starting in the mind to a large extent, even though most people in India had nothing to do with it in daily life. This harks back to an old tradition of aloofness vis-à-vis the state in the subcontinent, an entity which, in addition had no legitimacy, except for a modicum which was lent to it by the generation of independence. In contradistinction democracy has legitimacy now and is expanding, despite many problems and pace of the growing power of the state apparatus. The mode of “accommodation” that prevailed until recently in the country, nourished by Nehru, by the communists in Kerala and West Bengal, as well as by other leaderships, insofar as after all the state had to deal with a non-modern society. On the other hand, “cultures” no longer passively accept impositions (Nandy, 2002a: 36, 51; 2002 [1990d]: 69; 2002b: 104-5; 2003a: xii; 2003 [1991]: 8-12; 2003b: 21, 29; 2003 [1997a]: 111; [1997b] 2003: 77; 2006: 128). Even radical nationalist movements, defeated in the 2009 elections, maybe have learned something about this tendency to accommodation so typical of India, notwithstanding strong inclinations of the electorate to the left, in which radical diversity, contrary to the watered-down tolerance of politics in the United States, yields an untamed cosmopolitanism (Nandy, 2009b).

Development would be another disgrace that befalls the country and is closely connected to that increasingly stronger state (and which, in Nandy’s view, in quite a confused way, wavers between discontinuity with the Nehruvian state and its extension, which does not make sense). Simply put, this legacy of colonialism and its “civilizing mission” works according to binary oppositions (with an inverted signal, let us note, in relation to those now proposed by Nandy himself), in which it is foremost opposed to underdevelopment, whose duplications include however the oppositions between “sanity” (normality) and “insanity” (abnormality), “maturity” (adulthood) and “immaturity” (childhood), besides “rationality” and “irrationality”, everything presented without actual discussion. He argues simply for abandoning development, looking for alternatives rooted in Indian culture – in which traditional forms of environment management come forward as a possibility to be explored (Nandy, 2003 [1991]; 2003a; 2003c).

We approach, finally, the explosive issue of communal conflicts, which in India and the subcontinent refer basically to religious conflicts, whose ethnic character is, let me stress, rather arguable. According to Nandy, secularism – which can thrive only as ideology in non-secularized societies – has two meanings in India: first, the devaluation of religion and the liberation of politics from it – basically the Anglo-Saxon conception; second, to be equally

respectful of all religions – a non-modern use which the “anti-colonial” Indian elite emphasized and made sense for the population. One could expect that he would dwell on the latter. But, to the readers’ surprise, Nandy decides to brush it aside, for obvious strategic-discursive reasons, since it would be easier thereby to propose his alternative as the only viable one. He carries on then and underscores the differentiation of religion as “ideology” and as “faith,” in which he looks for “the inner capacities of faith in the matter of ethnic tolerance,” against religion as ideology and the threats, linked to it, that emerge from modernizing India. These include a state keen on social engineering in this area (Nandy, 2003 [1985]: 34-5, 47-53, 59; 2003 [1997b]: 62, 71). But his reasoning becomes more amorphous when he states that secularism is only a manner of guaranteeing religious tolerance, having become, however, a counterpoint to religious chauvinism, with which it competes (Nandy, 2003 [1997b]: 77). As we have seen, modernity today has moreover nothing positive to offer, except displacements that contribute to the strengthening of religion as ideology. He had already stated, without solid arguments, that communal conflicts are exclusively a damned offspring of modernity, despite minor problems in former periods (Nandy, 1992 [1981b]: 154)

Nandy returned to this theme, lending secularism at once two meanings, as accommodation or expulsion of religion from public life. Besides, he reaffirmed an opposition between religion as ideology – encompassing, monolithic and used with non-religious goals, but instead political and economic, and not relevant privately – and religion as a way of life – with a transcendent character and capable of tolerance. He called himself an anti-secularist because this ideology would have exhausted itself and since the idea of secularism as tolerance, originally espoused by Gandhi, had been rejected by intellectuals as an adulteration, although until recently politicians made recourse to it. In any event, with democratization religion had re-entered the political scene by the backdoor (Nandy, 2002 [1990d]: 61-74). If the exclusive modernity of communal conflicts is rather arguable, more plausible, even though one-sided and prone to exonerate the popular sectors of actual responsibility in disturbances and massacres, is the idea that violence is organized in large measure from the top down, serving specific political interests. Thus Nandy (2002b: 82-3) admits, with Kakar, that ego defense, authoritarian submission and sadomasochism, displacement and rationalization, still provide for a demonology that works on the division between communities and authorizes religious violence. But he argues that these have become less central, since they operate on those who take part in the agitation, not on those who in fact plan, initiate and legitimise them. These people exhibit more primitive defenses such as isolation and denial.

It is not a matter of dismissing Nandy’s thesis offhand, although he presents them in a way such that they sound rather implausible. Everything is blamed on modernity, as if the history of India showed always a benign coexistence between religions (and ethnicities) that modernity has mutually poisoned. Even if that were true, which medicine should be administered is an issue that cannot simply be settled by disqualifying modern alternatives. More sophistication is required also regarding the concept of secularism, whose pair, secularization, as a process, not as an ideology, does not appear in Nandy’s discussions, in particular in the interstices of Indian society. This, however, should not imply that the thematic as such, as proposed by him is irrelevant: there is no reason to disregard the possibilities that, against a sort of dogmatism that cancels out respectful coexistence and reflexive debate, can be found in both popular and rationalized forms of religion in the modern world, in which India is irremediably involved, as Nandy himself is forced to recognize, however grudgingly. No doubt there can be tensions between a process of secularization (loss of importance of religion) and secularism as a world view, on the one hand, and the search for tolerance within religions. Nothing of that implies necessarily that,

as some quoted in the introduction to this article believe, that there is an alliance between the forces of Hindutva and “anti-secularists” such as Nandy. A reaffirmation of an accommodating state, along with the combat to stiff and exclusivist forces of religious nationalism, is likely to be the answer that will prevail in the next years, should a positive way out for these questions are found, whatever the tendencies that shall become predominant in Indian society in the long run. Anti-modernism is surely in this regard more an ideology than a lived practice, since it is in the confluence of these multiple civilizational elements, in a process of fast modernization, that India finds its way through the present.

Conclusion

We have dealt in this article with several themes and concepts presented by Nandy. This has allowed not only for some detailed knowledge of his work, but also for outlining some of the traditions on which Indic civilization is based, a controversial topic of course. No essentialized notion should be accepted of what is truly a historical entity. On the other hand, although Nandy rejects modernity ever more violently, it seems obvious that it is with that he has to pursue his debate. To what extent can it be expelled from a renewed Indian civilization? Not at all, I would like to reply, an answer shared by Nandy in several moments. Moreover, although it not worthwhile putting too much stress on this, since his ideas should be judged in their own right, it is relevant to note that this can speak of Nandy’s own “secret self.” He is from a Christian family, and he is himself a very westernized person on many counts (Maranjape, 2000: 244-46), without becoming, that goes without saying, an “inauthentic” character.

Let us consider, in conclusion, two aspects of the question, one stemming from his own work, the other being external, but directly related to his reflections. We shall then return to the question of the self from a more general standpoint.

When he discusses cricket and its huge and surprising popularity in India, Nandy suggests, with peculiar humor, that this would be “...an Indian game, accidentally discovered by the English.” Cricket could be seen as the dominance of a colonial mentality, but also as an import that met a “vital need of Indian culture” in the attempt to cope with modernity and lend it meaning in terms of “native categories,” beyond the “purely indigenous” (although sometimes he places cricket in the pre-modern tradition) (Nandy, 2001 [1989a]: 1-2). Let us leave aside his detailed analysis, in which the aspects of greater sportiveness and mere playful expression are opposed to competitiveness, whose dominance is becoming overwhelming, and let us focus on the question in which measure a western, modern import can be considered absolutely “authentic,” to use a phrasing by Nandy himself. If this would be the case with cricket, as he stresses, great room is opened for the same question to be posed in any sphere and in relation to any civilizational element with such an origin and which enters the South Asian subcontinent. Even the most radical forms of breaking with Hindu and other traditions are legitimated, since what is at stake is that which is socially required and in some part freely elected by those who adopt this sort of imported innovation. This would be the case of many Dalits (the untouchable in the traditional vocabulary). This seems hardly understandable to Nandy (2007 [1983b]: 149), for these castes had a culture that goes far beyond the oppression they have suffered, which seems to matter less to them than guaranteeing a rupture with the systems of domination and discrimination in which they have been subordinated. All things considered, he is astonished, criticizes, but does not actually indict such agents.

Here a short digression is instructive, derived from arguments proposed by Nigam (2000), with a clear albeit only implicit, inspiration in Nandy. According to him, Dalit politics is cast against binary oppositions, cutting across them, especially in relation to the themes of

nationalism-colonialism and of secularism-communalism. It does not have indigenous inclinations and is decidedly modern, it rejects the abstract universalism of modern citizenship, implying an alternative epistemology and consisting in part a reaction of “little selves” against “Universal man.” This alternative cannot be embraced by homogenizing nationalism, nor by Marxism and its class reductionism, both abstractly universalist. Dalits emphasize both modern emancipation, the language of rights and the secularization of the public space, and the particularist elements of politics, insofar as their self must be, out of necessity, built against the “Brahminical other.” Ambedkar, the great Dalit leader in the fight for independence and one of the fathers of the 1949 Indian Constitution, wavered between universalism and particularism, whereas other leaders rejected it, due to what they saw as its excessive universalism.

It is of course curious that Nandy has never discussed such an overwhelming character such as Bimhoo Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), but that is not what is at stake here. What is to be underlined is how much everything that is modern, such as cricket, ends up being assimilated, in India as well as in other non-western areas and originally distant from modernity, due to the demands of their individual selves and of collectivities, more or less organized and mutually identified this way, that is, due to cultural, political, economic struggles, which cut across these distinct social formations. Nandy perceives these processes, ambiguously in many moments of his work and in particular in his aforementioned analysis of the British-born sport. But he forgets them just too often and increasingly so. Finally, it is valid to note that if an external critique, to some extent in what refers to its original civilizational elements, can be spotted in non-western countries, its modernization engenders “modernizing moves” (Domingues, 2009). They themselves entail, as we see in the Dalit critique of abstract universalism, a critique which is already immanent, although not necessarily western, to modernity.

As to the question of the self from a more general theoretical standpoint, it is interesting to note that Nandy’s propositions offer us important starting points, which can be moreover linked to Castoriadis’ approach (1975; Domingues, 2000: ch. 2), with his notion of “radical imaginary” (resting on the individual “id”– the Freudian Es) and of a more or less amorphous social magma, which appears as a living deposit of floating meaning. The “selves,” with their creative cores that stem from the force of desire, of life drives, and from how the internal conflicts of each person are organized, can surely be seen as multiple and connected to such a magma, in which we search for significations which they themselves transform when crafting their identities in a more or less stable form. In the interactive processes between individuals and collectivities these changed significations are returned to society in a steady process of development of subjectivities and of the social symbolic universe, magma itself. If what Castoriadis calls the somatic “leaning” of subjectivity on the body must not be forgotten or brushed aside, also because it has Freud’s more simple view of the relation between sexuality and subjective and social life, the idea that desire is mediated by the way people organize their conflicts and those of society in their own selves, as suggested by Nandy, allows us to take the discussion to a superior level in the articulation between body, psyche and society. This is true for India, but also for any formation that has emerged in the history of humanity, of course with distinct characteristics in each of them, for instance more rigid and closed in the western case, more open and fluid in the Indian one.

Everything considered, it becomes clear that, in its virtues, insights and width, as well as in its limits and idiosyncrasies, Nandy’s work can help us a lot in the understanding of Indian society and in advancing social theory. Without a-critical alliances, without his anti-modern stridence, but surely without a rejection either, which would discard its creative and positive aspects. These can be drawn upon for an understanding of the increasingly acknowledged

heterogeneity of modern civilization in its present stage and in its ever more explicit global dimension.

NOTES

¹ Biographical information is found in Nandy, 2000b. As far as possible the quotations of his texts include here the original date of publication – not always explicit in his collected books, also because the texts often have several incarnations.

² His discussions about sati – ritual suicide committed by the wife after her husband’s death, which we will discuss below – are in the origin of such sort of accusation, in my view not well-founded, although his sarcastic critique of “westernized feminists” obscures more than illuminates the question (see Nandy, 1990 [1980a], 1990, [1980b], 1995 [1994a]). According to Nandy, all the debate about social reform in India, as well as conservative discourses, has had the woman question as a key-theme in cultural politics. But, in order not to be confined to small westernized circles, woman emancipation should rest directly on a change in the dyadic relation between mother and son, typical of this sort of civilization, towards conjugality, hence redefining the role of women. An important psychoanalytic elaboration of such questions, centred on sexuality, and which also leans over Gandhi, in this regard curiously neglected by Nandy, is Kakar, 1989.

³ This is linked to his skepticism in relation to historical narrative and to history as a concept (Nandy, 1987b: 121-2), changed into growing hostility and in a, rather unconvincing, narrative based on myths (Nandy, [1983a] 1988: xiv; 2003 [1997a]; 2007b: xvi). This is also connected to his critique of the nation state and of science.

⁴ It is worth noting that, spurned by an interviewer, Vinay Lal, Nandy (2000b: 44-7) could not define by any means what would be “authenticity,” observing in another passage that, when the West imitates, it is called “cosmopolitan,” whereas, when others do so, they are called “unauthentic” (Nandy, 2006: 115). Obvious imprecision and, moreover, ambiguity, come out in these passages.

⁵ Vanaik (1997: 130ff) prefers to point to an open, multidimensional “cultural space,” since one could not speak of a Hindu civilization during centuries and in such a large area. For a detailed discussion of the concept of civilization in contemporary social theory and an alternative proposal that stresses the fluidity and plurality of civilizations, as well as its provisional and historical unity, see Domingues, 2009.

⁶ One must note that, although sometimes an emphasis on religion and spirituality cuts across Nandy’s texts, he states that India is not mainly spiritualism, but rather mundane choices, tough self-interest and “reality testing.” See Nandy, 1988 [1983a]: 81.

⁷ As he notes in other passages, the idea of development and science, as well as notions of secularism, in sum, culture in general, create an “internal colonialism” (which he neither explains nor describes). It moves onto other domains afterwards, such as an economic “internal colonialism.” Cf. Nandy, 2002 (1990d): 85-6; 2003b: 27.

⁸ Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) and Sri Aurobindo (1872-195) are other crucial characters for the Indian intellectual debate and social reforms under British colonialism, as well as for the struggle for decolonization, who Nandy analyses and we shall not dwell on here. Discussing the passage from villages and their imaginaries to the urban world was another means for Nandy (2007 [2001]) to interpret the changes of the self in India during the twentieth century.

⁹ See Kaviraj (2005) for a discussion of Indian state tradition, starting with the ancient Hindu states, followed by the Mughals, who, pace their Islamism, came from a region of Persia where they constituted a minority; and for his, too short, observation that there are differences between the state built in the post-independence period and the recent one. In a nutshell, Nandy knows that, although he polemically insists on continuity, which he belies in several passages, especially in older texts, and very clearly in his analysis of Indira Gandhi's period (Nandy, 1990 [1980e]).

¹⁰ All these themes turn up in his narrative and analyses, with other authors, of the destruction of the centuries-old mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalist Hindus, which was a turning point in Indian politics in the beginning of the 1990s. See Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaran and Yanik, 1997 (1995).

¹¹ The question of secularism involves a tense and complex debate. See Veer, 1994; Vanaik, 1997; Madan, 1997, 2006. Chatterjee (1998 [1994]), for instance, looks for an alternative to secularism, whose capacity of ensuring tolerance he questions, since it is appropriated with an exclusivist bias by the nationalist right; but, contrary to Nandy, it is within modern state institutions that he is wont to tackle the problem. Autonomy in relation to state governmentality, with tolerance and collective rights, linked with groups otherwise internally democratized, is his solution, which maintains, however, a mainly and excessively normative character.

¹² Appadurai (1996) is even more incisive as to the modern character of cricket and its importance for the symbolic organization of modernity in India.

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