

ASHIS NANDY

Open Pasts, Open Futures

This is the text of Ashis Nandy's opening talk at the Almost Island Dialogues Three, between Indian and Chinese writers--Bei Dao, Li Tuo, Ouyang Jianghe, Zhai Yongming, Xi Chuan, Ge Fei, Shuang Shen and Kunwar Narain, Irwin Allan Sealy, Joy Goswami, Vinod Kumar Shukla, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Vivek Narayanan and Sharmistha Mohanty, with Ashis Nandy.

I wanted to start with two brief excerpts, one from prose and one from poetry. The first I accidentally found in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.

"In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered. And the melancholy and relief of knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding them. There is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at evening...It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin, that corruption's gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our sceptre, that the triumph over enemy sovereigns have made us heirs of their long undoing."

I want to offset this against a couple of lines from Kunwar Narain's poem, *Kafka in Prague*, translated from the Hindi by his son Apoorva.

"At times, a presence
can be more present
in its absence

More alive than a now
more lively, can be its then

More readable
than a city's humdrum calendar..."

I think these two writings in some sense capture--in their contrast--capture, what I want to say today to you.

This is a dialogue between writers from two adjacent civilisations. And the fact that this is the first of its kind, the first unofficial dialogue, is something to be happy about but something to be sad about too. It is a tragic situation that here we can say that we are meeting for the first time unofficially. Because that is the only kind of meeting which matters. Official meetings are all about diplomacy, foreign policy, trade relations, very important things I am sure, but that's no meeting at all, if you ask me. I would suspect that meaningful cultural meetings had taken place between India and China over the last two thousand years. But colonialism has now created a situation where we have to talk to each other through centres of knowledge which are located five thousand miles away. And that is something which is tragic too. And our meeting carries a touch of that tragedy. That is my first proposition.

My second proposition is that we have forgotten the language of mourning. Our literature, our art, they do reflect this mourning of what we have lost. But that is by default. Because, while negotiating modernity both these civilisations have learnt to shed the language of mourning. They have learnt the language of accountancy, the gains and losses from different sectors of modernity as it enters different sectors of our lives. So we are supposed to celebrate only what we have gained from modernity. And not lament the fact that there are crucial elements of ourselves which we have to jettison or reject or discard in accepting modernity. This rejection of the language of mourning is most pronounced in our social knowledge. As I have said in literature it can enter indirectly despite the writer or the artist. Even when the artist is proudly modern there can be that recognition of what we have lost. All works of art after a point create themselves, the writer or artist is only a vehicle. But in social knowledge and even in scientific knowledge--because these civilisations have long traditions of sciences which have a different kind of tradition particularly in areas like agronomy and medicine--there cannot be any language of lamentation, these disciplines do not allow you the luxury of mourning. And I suspect that one of the reasons our social knowledge industry is so impoverished while our other industries are flourishing today is this inability to mourn.

My third proposition is this. That India and China are both in some fundamental sense societies which negotiate the past and the future similarly despite all differences. This similarity lies in the fact that in both countries the past is as open as the future. Psychologically there is no difference between time travel to the past and time travel to the future because both involve movement from the present. And as we all know we live only in the present, even the past when we remember it is in the present, when we conceive the future that also is in the present, we converge in the present. And because our past was more open our futures also are more open. That is why in both these civilisations, utopias are located not only in the future but also in the past. You could locate your utopias in the past. European civilisations once had that capacity. The Garden of Eden was located in the past.

But the process of secularization has closed that door. The past is closed. It can only be unearthed or discovered through history. Whereas history in both these countries is not the only way of constructing the past. It doesn't have that kind of hegemony. The past also lives and is constructed everyday through myths, legends, epics, shared memories, grandparents' tales. Even the humblest citizens in these societies can participate in the construction of the past. The past is not the monopoly of historians.

I am aggressively, unashamedly, anti historical. Not because I think history has no right to exist. But because I believe that history has to be only one way of constructing the past. And that way must not have priority over other ways of constructing. It must compete with other ways of constructing the past. I believe that history has no theory of forgetfulness. It has only a theory of remembrance. History has no theory of ethics. It is value neutral. Other ways of construction often have a built in ethical framework. Both India and China are ahistorical societies according to Marx. And we have been trying for the last two hundred years to desperately prove he was wrong, that we must reorganise our past in the form of formal history. But the past can live in other ways too.

I have been doing a study of genocide for the last ten years, the one which marked the birth of India and Pakistan. It was a genocide in which more than one million people died. The figure is probably a gross underestimate, in reality it was probably a little more than around two million, if we take into account the collateral damages, the elderly left on the road, the young children who died of dysentery while moving from one country to another. Twenty million were displaced in the first go, and we have talked to roughly 1500 people. We have spoken to most of them in brief interviews, some of them in detailed interviews. I want to draw your attention to three small details of what we have found. First, almost all the persons we have interviewed, have suffered immensely, with a larger number of relatives, parents, brothers and sisters. A huge majority of them have refused to hold any community culpable. They are ordinary people, many not even educated. These are not our kind who are trying to be politically correct. They say it has nothing to do with the Muslims, (many of those interviewed were Hindus) they say it has something to do with the times. Times were bad, people were not. At that time they had gone mad and we had gone mad too. If you look at the nearly two hundred volumes produced on partition, I defy you to produce one book which takes that ethical position, because they are always concerned with finding out the heroes and the villains.

A few victims say that we don't talk about those times because our religion tells us that if you remember ghosts and snakes, they come back. This can be read as superstition, but this can also be seen as an ethical affirmation of the principle of forgetfulness. The principle of principled forgetfulness, what you should forget on ethical grounds, even though you know you cannot forget. The unforgettable that you still must make an effort to forget, an effort to forget, because it is only principled forgetfulness which can liberate you from the past.

My fourth proposition is that China and India are civilisations. And nobody can turn us into full fledged nation states, pigeon hole us into formal nation states. States we have lived with for thousands of years but they were not nation states in the European sense of the term. This concept of nation state we have picked up during the colonial period, we felt that we could correct, we felt we were backward and we could correct our backwardness and our humiliation by being proper nation states and beating the west at its own game. I believe that you do not need to be careful when choosing your friends, but you need to be careful when choosing your enemies. Because in the long run you increasingly become like your enemies whom you are trying to defeat. And the idea, the mirage of creating a proper nation state has pushed us towards being less humane societies, less human societies. I suggest very humbly that any dialogue between Indian and Chinese writers and thinkers must ultimately transcend the limits imposed on us by the demands of a modern nation state, however retrogressive and however backward looking this may sound. No system becomes morally acceptable just because we cannot think of an alternative to it at this point of time. I have no problem if you use your nation state instrumentally, knowing that it has its limitations but I fear the fact that we have increasingly sacralised the nation state, we have sacralised nationalism. Tagore once said, that the attempt of India to build a nation is like the attempt of Switzerland to build a navy. I suspect that was a word of wisdom. Tagore is now India's national poet but he had the courage to say that about nationalism and the nation state.

My final proposition is that there is perhaps an inbuilt ethical frame in the cosmos. Not because I'm a believer, I am not a believer. But by default, because nature perhaps, our biological selves also perhaps, shuns extremes. And the kind of ethical frame I am talking of is also a matter of construction. And I'll offer two examples. I once tried to find out and compare the number of people who died in the Atlantic slave trade, the figure was around three million. These slaves were transported from Africa. The trade touched four continents, it may have been one of the first attempts at globalisation. These slaves were transported mainly to work on North American and Caribbean agricultural farms which produced a number of crops, but the most important crops were sugar and tobacco. I once tried to calculate on the basis of data supplied by the American Medical Association the annual death rates from cancer and cardiovascular diseases, two diseases or syndromes which had been directly identified with sugar and tobacco. In earlier years the figures were not available. But since they became available they are a rising crescendo, so you can extrapolate them into the

past. And that figure also comes to a little over three million. Even if no slave trader was ever persecuted I think the slave trade has been avenged, more than avenged, they are still paying the price.

Incidentally, I have not met a single killer who is happy--we have met some killers--even those who claim they have done nothing wrong, they say they had to do it for the survival of the community, or the cause of the nation. There is also a more direct form of revenge. A somewhat comical one. Sir Francis Bacon, as you all know, was the founder of modern science, he was the one who talked of science as power for the first time and he was a great experimentalist. So one day he wanted to find out what happened to a chicken if you force fed it with snow. I would have thought that this is a rather trivial question and the answer is not unknown,. But he did not think so, he wanted to prove it empirically. He took a live chicken out in front of his house, when there had been a great snowfall, and force fed the chicken with snow, and the expected thing happened, the poor chicken died. But in the process, Sir Francis caught pneumonia and died himself.