Politics of knowledge here and now: A conversation with Ashis Nandy

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Politics of Knowledge Here and Now

A Conversation with Ashis Nandy

ASHIS NANDY / ANANYA VAJPEYI

AV [Ananya Vajpeyi]: Let’s talk about the politics of knowledge.

AN [Ashis Nandy]: But let us not try to handle the main problem it poses without entering the politics of knowledge.

AV: Which problem?

AN: The problem of colonial dominance and its consequences in the knowledge sector. My feeling is that exactly as you need a knowledge of ancient India, you need a knowledge of the little cultures of India -- not an ethnography of one of them but an acquaintance with a number of them -- particularly the way many of them came into their own in the medieval period and crossed caste, religious and sect boundaries to set up a new definition of cosmopolitanism. That provides you with some real clues to the way some of the knowledge systems are likely to go in the future. Simply reading ancient texts or the thousands of previously unread manuscripts will not do, and this responsibility is really shunned by many. I have nothing against the classics. Every society loves its classics, but they do not live by them. They live by their vernacular or popular incarnations.

That is one of the reasons I’ve concentrated mostly on the little cultures, usually the political cultures of communities or of specific knowledge systems, such as law, psychology, environment, modern science, popular cinema or cricket. I’ve never gone into any elaborate interpretation of ancient texts. If a problem originates in the contemporary politics of knowledge such a problem has to be solved politically, within the contemporary context. My friends sometimes grumble about it: “You’re not going into the texts, why don’t you go into the texts?” Why should I go into much-studied, authoritative, ancient texts? Would they give me clues to the contemporary politics of knowledge?

The second point I want to make is this – we should be clear about our vantage point and categories from the beginning. What kind of a great knowledge system is there in India, where you don’t have any negotiation or engagement with the living carriers of knowledge, but engage only with ancient texts or ancient commentators? If it is truly a living knowledge system, then you should be able to deal with contemporaries, with people who are living and working here, now, and in whom the ancients survive, even if in an attenuated form and perhaps unwittingly. If Shudraka, the Sanskrit playwright, exists in contemporary playwrights – surely that is a sign of a living tradition? You might then claim that the tradition of Sanskrit drama is alive and kicking. Many insist that if one digests Abhinavagupta one will get
clues. His categories survive. But even if I get clues, I won’t know why or how to use them! For no contemporary has processed Abhinavagupta for me by writing plays or literarycriticisms of contemporary playwrights, influenced by Shudraka directly or by Shudraka as influenced by Abhinavagupta. What do I do with those clues? Playwrights are playwrights; they write plays not commentaries. They are also not bhashyakaras, fortunately. At most they read who they think are the other relevant or “living” playwrights. A living system survives on living beings.

AV: Yes...

AN: Indian classical music is a good example! It is a living tradition; I’m willing to talk about its culture. I’m willing to talk about its experts, performers, theorists -- from Swami Pragyananda and Dilip Kumar Roy to Dhurjati Prasad Mukherjee and Vamanrao Deshpande. I’m willing to engage with all of them. But you cannot tell me to go into some old text on music to grapple with contemporary politics of music -- that’s not my interest. I am interested in meeting some of the staphathis of Tamil Nadu because they are still building temples. In that way their skill, their knowledge of temple-building is living. But beyond a point I’m not interested in that either, because it’s a highly specialized skill that tells you very little about contemporary politics of architecture.

I am more interested in living practitioners who, by using traditional craftspeople from different communities in different parts of the country, are co-creating new architectural traditions in contemporary India. In this sense, Laurie Baker for me is a more serious candidate for engagement than many Indian architects – Baker being a contemporary architect who engaged with Indian traditions of architecture in practice. I want to know what made him tick as an Indian architect. Does skin colour or blood lines determine the borders of Indian cultures of science or art?

Likewise, if I ever think of writing on Hussain, I shall have to ask why he is not considered one of the greatest iconographers of Hinduism. Is it because of his Muslim name? Geeti Sen, the art critic, tells me that he was a devout Muslim but I am also told that he belonged to the small Suleimani Vora community, a Muslim community that has over generations engaged with Hindu gods and goddesses with deep reverence and piety, somewhat like the Patuas of Bengal. Did the illiterate vandals who destroyed so many of his priceless paintings and their political godfathers know of this other intimacy? Did Hussain have the right to decide how to convey the divinity of goddesses Durga and Saraswati or did that right belong only to the vandals and their political patrons? [[At what point do the small mafia-like bands begin to think that they protect Hinduism and have the exclusive right to speak on behalf of millions of Hindus who believe that Hinduism protects them?]]
Recently, I have written a paper on R L Kumar, an untrained architect who died at a young age a couple of years ago. He was wonderfully creative in many of his works. I have tried to locate the sources of his creativity, his ability to harness the creativity of local artisans in his ventures, his reactions to contemporary politics, how the city of Bangalore shaped him and the politics of his architecture.

AV: It seems to me that, in all the examples you gave of living traditions, you can find that “life” -- in literature, in the performing arts, in the plastic arts, in crafts (so-called), and maybe in architecture and so on. But I think it would be fair to say that you can’t find it in philosophy. You can’t find that living tradition in philosophy; in other words, we possibly aren’t producing contemporary mimansakas or nayayikas or even Buddhists in that discipline or sphere (I mean in philosophy); you are forced to look at old texts because the frontiers of that knowledge have frozen some time ago and they are not evolving. Do you think that’s true, or not really?

AN: It is mostly true. Though we should also acknowledge that the issues we confront in philosophy are not absent in the domains of science, social knowledge, fine arts and architecture. Now to come back to our main concern, I have nothing against going back to traditional texts or ancient texts but that’s a different exercise. You cannot take off from a contemporary politics of knowledge and say that by going to ancient texts you will handle that politics. It’s like going to Chanakya, and hoping to attack problems of contemporary statecraft and geopolitics. Yes, if Chanakya exists within people, in the hearts of people – is a living reality and a continuous presence and not merely a surviving metaphor – then maybe one should take interest in his texts at some point. Ramchandra Gandhi tried to blow life into Vedanta in *Sita’s Kitchen* and Sudhir Kakar into Vatsayana’s gymnastics and cultural geography of sex in *The Ascetic of Desire*. A roughly similar argument can be made about D. Venkat Rao’s recent work on mnemonic cultures. I take them seriously. Sudhir and Venkat usually stay out of politics, but *Sita’s Kitchen* is a direct intervention in the contemporary politics of knowledge.

The basic argument is simple. Because you have to look at the past while you yourself are living in the present, the past and future meet at this point of time. This moment is the moment of engagement. You cannot enter past politics but you have to confront the politics of the past now. When the doctor asks you – “Did you have stomach aches earlier?” Or, “Do you have a history of forgetfulness?” - there is no expectation that you would give precise, technical answers. For, whatever your answers, the doctor has to interpret it and diagnose what is wrong with you now. Your imprecise, nontechnical case history of sickness lives out its life in the diagnosis. After all, the doctor treats a living being suffering from a set of symptoms in the present.
AV: So your fundamental premise is that culture is always living. In as much as we are trying to diagnose culture or diagnose knowledge, we can only do so if we proceed as though these are living things.

AN: Yes and no. Many cultures that demand sustained intensity cannot or did not last very long. The culture of India’s freedom movement is now gasping for breath. The culture of revolutionary violence too now looks doomed. The culture of Third Reich is dead. Its slightly comic version, Italian fascism, is more resilient. In different guises, it sometimes raises its head in Latin America, Africa and now in South Asia. On the other hand, the culture centring on virtual reality is a new entrant on the world stage.

The onus is partly on us to make some cultures part of a living tradition. They are not automatically so. I reiterate that I have nothing against the classical tradition. A classical tradition surviving in a university department is not the same as a classical tradition being a part of a living tradition of literature or philosophy. I am saying that if you are interested in the politics of knowledge, you may have to go to the puranas, some of which are an integral part of life not merely in India but also in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Over the centuries, we have expressed our anxieties, fears, hopes and ambitions through the language of the puranas. In the case of the Ramayana, for instance, a diverse lot of people – ranging all the way from Kamban, Krittivas Ojha and Tulsidas to Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore and Mohammad Iqbal – have kept the epic alive. Valmiki’s Ramayana enters the picture only if you are comparing it with, say, the Ramcharitmanas to show how and why Tulsidas has entered public consciousness more deeply than Valmiki has in our times or to examine how Ramcharitmanas is different from the other vernacular Ramayanas and what does that difference tell us about the changing contours of our cultural life. It is no accident that Iqbal, the great poet and one of the founding fathers of Pakistan, too wrote a brilliant prashasti of Ram. Similarly, the Mahabharata is part of our living culture because of its various vernacular versions and because of the creativity in our times of a whole series of gifted persons such as Rabindranath Tagore, Irawati Karve, Shivaji Sawant, Buddhadev Bose, Shyam Benegal and even theatre persons like Dharmaveer Bharati and Heisnam Kanhailal.

AV: Okay, I was going to ask you that. When people, even our colleagues or even in your work, say that the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are relevant to us and epic themes and forms are a part of us... or let us say, Asoka, or Kautilya, or Manuismriti, when people say, or you say, let’s read these because they are already in our heads somehow, then would you say that there is a distinction in reading philologically versus doing that organically? Do we have any organic relationship to these texts? Are we
differently motivated and prepared in approaching different texts – do some texts come more naturally to us than others? Is Chanakya easier than Kalidasa?

**AN:** That is an important and suggestive question. We perhaps don’t have in all cases the organic relationship that you have in mind. We do distinguish between different kinds of texts. Chanakya may be easier than Kalidasa, but I doubt if anyone reads Chanakya except specialist-scholars. Kalidasa is loved though probably not read that much. But you can read vernacular versions of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and read or see novels, plays and films inspired by them; that is more relevant. The organic relationship ensures that you do not have to brainwash people to read texts in the name of nationalism. Sometimes people live with a text without knowing or reading it. It is mnemonically there in us. When Delhi University purged A.K. Ramanujan’s essay on 300 Ramayanas, it exiled a part of the Indic civilization and Hinduism, too, from the campus.

**AV:** By “organic” I mean - can we or do we make them our own or are they already in us, in some sense?

**AN:** In the sense that they are already in us. We recover or access that – but from their cultural presence, not from Sanskrit. The Sanskrit text is not in us; it is in a small section of the population. In this sense, it’s a bogus claim that Sanskrit is the mother of all languages. Many tribal languages, perhaps even some of the Dravidian languages have led parallel lives. Yet, we can recover our sense of organic bonds with these texts -- a sense of owning them, as you call it. That “organic belonging” happens; you do not have to ensure it through the coercive apparatus of the state. Nor do you have to go to Sanskrit to enforce it.

**AV:** I guess, I am just trying to understand to what extent we might have a relationship to certain texts, or might not…

**AN:** I think it is our definitions and starting points. That is why nothing much is coming out of it.

**AV:** Is it our definition?

**AN:** Yes, our definition of what is important. Look, if you want to talk about dialectical thinking in India before Hegel, theory of evolution before Darwin, and differential equations before Newton you read one kind of texts. If Nagarjuna or Lokayata is organically in you and therefore you reach out for Hegel, it becomes another story. Hegel then becomes a very useful critique of our tradition. You are then not willing to wait eternally for all Indians to turn Hegelians for your political project. You yourself are not awed by him; you cannot then miss the presence of racism in Hegel and in many left Hegelians like Marx and Engels.

The ancients might have been very wise, but they did not know of organised genocides, famines used as a genocidal device, concentration
camps and gas chambers. They did not know of a four-continent slave trade justified by social Darwinism, nuclear weapons used to wipe out entire cities of non-combatants, carpet and napalm bombings of civilians, and global warming threatening the survival of the earth itself. They worked with a more innocent concept of evil.

Nor did they know the story of our freedom struggle. That story tells us more about what Indian traditions -- living Indian traditions -- are capable of than any ancient text can do. At the cost of repetition, I shall insist that even if you want to map the presence of epic heroes in Indian society or the location of women and femininity in public life, you may have to go to vernacular, more accessible versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata that have been touched by contemporary life -- and to the changing social sensitivities and the profiles of creativity of our contemporaries -- self-consciously or unwittingly searching for new yugadharmas. Rabindranath Tagore's Kavye Upekshita and Karna-Kunti Sambad, Irawati Karve's Yuganta, Shivaji Sawant's Mrityunjaya, and Dharamveer Bharati's Andha Yug are random examples. Even the popular cinema of Manmohan Desai, who once claimed that all his successful films had plots inspired by the Mahabharata, and the more serious efforts of Shyam Benegal's Kalyug or Heisnam Kanhailal's in Karna help to keep alive a tradition.

AV: So, in other words what you are saying is, what is proximate or recent is always going to take precedence over what is very distant and ancient?

AN: No, but the proximate is likely to give a better clue to the politics of it, because the politics you are talking about is proximate.

AV: But then that is just the nature of time, isn’t it? That is, anything which was a long time ago cannot know about whatever came later -- the relationship of X reflecting on Y is going to be a one way-relationship, from Y to X and not vice-versa. You can look back on the past, but the past cannot look to the future...We can look back, but the ancients cannot look ... 

AN: Forward...

AV: ...Say anything to us, because...

AN: They say many things to us, in works of literature, social knowledge and philosophy, but if you are thinking of a contemporary politics of dominance in the knowledge sector you have to come back to the question of how that ancient knowledge system has survived till today, if it has survived at all. Or, you can take the position of Max Mueller who made his students promise that they would never visit India. For, contemporary India didn’t reflect or tell anything about ancient India and vice versa.

AV: Really?

AN: Yes. He himself didn’t visit India ever.
AV: Oh, I didn’t know he made his students take a vow!

AN: Even today, there are many enthusiastic Indians who can be called born-again Max Muellers; they don’t want to look at their contemporaries. Because if you move out of the classical frame, they feel, you will go down the global hierarchy -- to the humbler communities of artisans and musicians or to lowbrow artists or to non-modern healers, for instance, who will compromise your status and mess up your categories. If you are an architect, you will move closer to Laurie Baker and R L Kumar; if a musician, you might have to take more seriously your semi-literate guru and his memory-intensive, highly personalized teaching style and lose contact with the heavy-weight historians and theorists of Indian music and their learned treatises.

AV: Because they don’t recognise the improvisational nature of music?

AN: Yes. The first thing you have to recognise is that Indian music is mnemonic and improvisational. Venkat talks about mnemonic cultures, but there are, along with them, mnemonic disciplines and mnemonic parts of our own self. Ravi Shankar was a well-educated, modern man well-exposed to the world. Then he went to learn from Alauddin Khan in semi-rural Maihar, a town in central India unknown to most Indians and had to learn to live with a mnemonic discipline. While learning Indian classical music you internalize your guru in the long run, but in your own terms. The gurus are like walking “universities” and walking “encyclopaedias,” and when they die, this university closes and this encyclopaedia goes out of print. But if you are a worthy student you become a new university and a new encyclopaedia that carry with them the memory traces of older ones. That is what a living knowledge system is.

And I would focus on that kind of resistance to the dominant knowledge system than on the curiosity that takes one to Chanakya on statecraft or strategic studies and Abhinavgupta on aesthetics.

AV: Why?

AN: Well, read some ancient texts on natyasastra, silpasastra or whatever but also please read Ananda Coomaraswamy, the 20th century art historian and philosopher, who tried to bring some of these texts to life for us. Without such mediations classics live only for the classicists. Nothing wrong with that. But then, we are at the moment discussing the politics of knowledge, not the fate of classical studies.

AV: I’m getting your point. I’d say this state of affairs gives rise to two problems. One is that you are not able to ever come up with a satisfactory rebuttal or response or you’re not able to fight back. This is the attitude of many people in the field of theory, or post-colonial theory or people trying to discover: What is South Asian theory? Such people are invested in
equalizing the power imbalance that exists in the discourse of theory. There is colonial domination but somehow you cannot crawl out from under it and assert your equality because a playing field is never even, you know you are doing it in English, you are working out of the colonial university, you have a philological relationship to your text, you have forgotten your own languages, and there are all these problems, right? So what you are saying is that we have to shift the battleground, we have to engage with contemporary living traditions, extant cultures and contemporary forms and take them seriously rather than harping on about the greatness of the ancients.

**AN:** Some bridge between the ancients and today’s thinking and practice is a must. Like Dhrupad, which links *Sama-veda* and Vedic chants and today’s kheyals and Tumris. The dominance of English literature is not exercised in the name of Chaucer or Shakespeare; it’s mostly about modern and contemporary literature in English and its capabilities as a carrier of knowledge.

**AV:** So you think we seem to have a problem in managing the genealogy of our own knowledge?

**AN:** *Now* you are talking about the actual work that needs to be done.

**AV:** We have a problem with that. We haven’t solved that problem; we can’t deal with that genealogy. We can’t even construct it properly because...

**AN:** It’s too diverse and there are very few intermediaries between our presumed ancestors and us. It is like knowing the founders of our families and not knowing our parents and grandparents, not even siblings. We are totally at loss, disoriented and probably going schizoid. But look at music. Look at architecture. These are improvisational forms. They preserve but they also improvise on tradition to address contemporary concerns, even contemporary tastes. Probably the social sciences in the Southern world should experiment with an improvisational style.

**AV:** So you’re saying whatever is worthy of survival will survive or has survived?

**AN:** No, I’m not saying that. I am saying that if you don’t grant dignity to your contemporaries who have often lived out their creative lives under extreme situations – poverty, absence of recognition and indignity – if you cannot converse with them or deal with that, you have no right to talk on the global politics of dominance because that reactive classicism, that return to the Indian classics, it’s a only a way of affirming a new hierarchy.

**AV:** So let me offer a counter example, just to see what happens. Have you seen the Akshardhaam temple?

**AN:** Yes.
AV: The one on the bank of Yamuna on the way to NOIDA, built by the Swaminarayan sect?

AN: It’s a bloody eye-sore.

AV: So, supposing you say this is contemporary religiosity and we must grant it dignity.

AN: I see it as a failed modern attempt to connect to the classic unmediated by living traditions of temple building substituting piety with grandeur and size. If you compare it with the Lotus Temple of the Bahais, which also is not perfect, but being more modest and not seeking grandeur, is still attractive in its own way. Why does the Lotus Temple work better, as opposed to the monstrosity on the river bank? That’s your responsibility to find out. Only then can you grasp the problem we are posing.

AV: But what I’m saying is, if in the name of contemporary temple building, I’m faced with an Akshardhaam temple, and I hate it, even though it has all the classical references – then what do I do?

AN: Frankly, our criteria are not clear. This is neither coming from ancient texts nor from sthapatis still working today nor from places of worship and great temples that have contemporary references and standards of construction. This is pseudo-classicism, an ersatz version of the ancient Indian temple.

AV: In China too you find this. And you always think that it is a “Chinese” version of something if it’s fake or cheap, or nouveau, or kitsch.

AN: Yes. They made an exact replica of the Forbidden City in some other city, so that the Chinese people wouldn’t have to go to Beijing to see the Forbidden City. They also have an exact replica of the White House at some distant corner of China.

AV: No, but this is the question, are we to judge this or are we to be respectful...because there is a marketplace, after all.

AN: You should engage with it, you should be able to say point blank that this is authentic, inauthentic, good, bad, beautiful, ugly, whatever. And I think this is our responsibility. Only then it becomes a part of a living culture. It becomes a living culture by that very exercise of some people rejecting it and some people debating it, and that debate being shared or transmitted and having an effect in the long run in a living culture.

AV: Right, so I guess that brings me to another problem which I see: Why do we fail to do anything useful by way of intervening in the politics of knowledge?

AN: Some people have done it, so we cannot really say it is totally a bleak scene. Even in restoration and conservation, some things are very beautifully done, like Humayun’s Tomb in Nizamuddin near which we both
stay. When I first came to Delhi fifty years ago, there were ugly constructions around it -- temporary baths, toilets and ugly electrical and sanitary fittings, dilapidated mosques, graves, etc. That was understandable because refugees were staying there at the time of Partition. Today the Archaeological Survey of India and the Agha Khan Trust have been doing a nice job.

But there is also Akshardhaam. They threw money at it and tried to make a worthwhile tourist destination out of it, to derive as a by-product some political clout, too. Akshardham is a statement of power. If you don’t handle it just because it is contemporary or ersatz, if you don’t grant that this is what Indian “tradition” has become, then you cannot fight the dominance of a destination like Akshardham and you are shirking your responsibility as an intellectual. Otherwise, I don’t have any objections against traditions, ancient texts, the recognized classics -- I have great fondness for many of them.

People in the West can go and watch contemporary productions of Shakespeare’s plays; they can go and hear different contemporary orchestras perform Beethoven or Bach. It’s not the same thing; this is not the problem we have. We are talking of the politics of knowledge. And when you talk of politics of knowledge systems, if we are unwilling to converse with our contemporaries, the loss is ours. Take D. Venkat Rao; despite the story of a modern-day pandit he has told in The Last Brahmin, despite his marvellous translation, nobody has taken that account seriously!

**AV:** I took it seriously.

**AN:** You took it seriously, because you may be an exception. Let there be no illusion about it. Neither Sanskritists have taken it seriously, nor Indologists, nor even those who talk loudly of traditions. Madhu Khanna would not write a review essay on it, nor would Makarand Paranjape – Why? Arindam Chakrabarti might not even have read it. That is dominance, when we are blinded about living tradition. Those who have brought that to our attention -- let’s engage with them. If you are seriously interested in tradition, that’s what we have to do.

**AV:** So, I guess I was wrong to say that with a few exceptions like, let’s say the restoration of Humayun’s Tomb which is well done, or interventions like those made by Venkat Rao or S. N. Balagangadhara or others, most of the time there is a divorce...

**AN:** In D. R. Nagaraj there was no divorce. I had immense hopes, emotional and intellectual investments in that man, because I thought he carried the future of this kind of sensitivity instinctively. Not so many do so these days; there are not many people who are aware of the politics of the classical and are willing to engage with it at every level.

**AV:** So, while there is paucity of such efforts and of such individuals, the discourse gets hijacked by the political right wing because there is a vacuum.
AN: And we were taught in our childhood that nature abhors a vacuum. The political right-wing never cared for D. R. Nagaraj.

AV: No, they have not cared for D. R. Nagaraj but they have tried to appropriate various aspects of the study of the past, various artefacts, and various texts.

AN: They’re doing it because we are giving them the handle; we are treating the knowledge of ancient texts like apolitical or depoliticized neophytes -- that is why the so-called right finds it so easy to get away with their colonial version of Hinduism. By the way, the Left has not cared for Nagaraj either, outside a relatively small geographical region nor do most Dalit intellectuals outside South India.

That’s why I’m saying I don’t want to study Abhinavagupta. Enough is enough! Everybody, everywhere I go, discusses Abhinavagupta. Why no one the direct or indirect impact of Abhinavagupta on, say, Girish Karnad? Have the Vacanakaras or the tradition of Yakshagana influenced Karnad more? What are the sources of his creativity? Did Karnad have to grapple with the classical and modern simultaneously? How has he done so? I am waiting for someone to work on that kind of issues. There is a living tradition of theatre after all.

AV: Okay, let’s say for example when you see these discussions on ancient science, which are now again gathering some momentum, you see completely bogus arguments made by votaries of the Hindu Right. Many of them say “I’m an engineer, I’m a scientist, I’m telling you that such-and-such traditional practice or folk theory is scientific” -- what are we supposed to do with this?

AN: I should clarify at this point that I have stopped classifying people in terms of the Right-Left dichotomy. I consider those you call the Hindu Right as a left-handed sect, a somewhat perverted bamapanthi sect promoting a rather comical version of, what my friend activist-intellectual Arun Kumar alias Panibaba calls, toady Hinduism. It was a loving gift of European colonialism to South Asia, as was the blood-thirsty version of positivist Marxism that for a long while dominated our intellectual scene. Some of our modern scientists are giving them the scope to get away with their hair-brained ideas because they too, along with the Hindu nationalists, suffer from the same feelings of inferiority.

AV: Okay. This is a question you engaged with for 30 years, at least?

AN: Perhaps longer.

AV: In this time, in dealing with alternative sciences and with the history and politics of science in India, have you seen that there has been some change or some improvement in the discourse, some advances in the argument?
AN: Yes.

AV: Then why are we still in a situation where people are saying “We had airplanes, we had plastic surgery, we had surrogate births, we had genetic engineering, in 5000 BC we had atomic warfare, etc, etc?”

AN: They have to say that. Why is the American Right saying that God created the world 4000 years ago?

AV: Then what are you saying, that these arguments cannot be won?! That the right-wing anywhere will always hold on to stupid, irrational claims?

AN: No, I do not think so. Rightist parties are not as foolish as they may seem. They have brought down mighty leftist empires, not always by the use of arms. China turned to capitalism without being coerced by external forces. They also have won crucial electoral battles not always by buying their votes or through false propaganda or media gimmicks. Nixon and Kissinger between them sealed America’s relationship with China. Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif, both rightists, came very close to doing something similar in the case of India and Pakistan. But they have to play to their constituency, even when they know they are saying something stupid. Never under-estimate your enemies.

In any case, even if the Rightists are irrational and stupid, they do not have a monopoly in the matter of stupidity. Since the middle of the nineteenth century the so-called Left, while fighting class-based inequalities, has consistently collaborated with new hierarchies based on race, culture and ideologies like progressivism. Do you think Frederick Engels was being very intelligent and rational when he wrote after the French conquest of Algeria that was a good thing to happen because Algeria would join civilization? What about the famous radical economist Joan Robinson’s favourite formulation that the only thing worse than being colonized was not being colonized.

The arguments emerging from the intellectual riffraff of the “Right” cannot be defeated if you try to cope with their emotions cognitively; you are reading symptoms as the illness, because ultimately you have nothing to offer as an alternative to them. Gandhi had; they had to kill him to keep him away from the nascent Indian state and then resurrect him in a safer form in their morning prayers.

AV: So would you say that through the various arguments that you had here, at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, in the 1980s and 1990s - do you feel that you were successful in creating a school of thought?

AN: No, perhaps not. But we sometimes came close to it. It was difficult to sustain a conversation with so many participants, over so many years.
But we did have certain common values and shared concerns. For instance, even those who were not involved in studies of alternatives and futures knew these were a crucial part of the Centre’s research agenda. Similarly, serious quantitative empirical studies of political and social processes were valued by even those who did not do such studies.

**AV:** I’m thinking of PPST (Patriotic People’s Science and Technology Group), Lokayan (a forum created by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies activists, scholars and activist-scholars), Sunil Sahasrabudhey (an activist-scholar engaged peasant studies and peasant movements) and the Lok-vidya Abhiyaan (a movement concerned with the study and recovery of people’s knowledge)... All of these movements were / are within the ambit of what you would call “the politics of knowledge,” movements around science and technology studies, around arts and handicrafts, artisan communities, tribal knowledge, local knowledge, what D.R. Nagaraj called “technological communities,” little traditions and so on -- even these have died a terrible death with globalization... No? And this has occurred within our lifetime. So is there a place in the academy which can preserve some of those radical energies, or is it that capitalism is making it impossible anywhere?

**AN:** Society has a way of throwing up new forms of human ingenuity which can sustain dissent. Capitalism did try to break the trade union movement – look at what Margaret Thatcher did in England. In India, the same task was begun by Indira Gandhi and the Shiv Sena when they crushed the railway strike and Datta Samant’s textile mill workers’ strike at Bombay. Bombay was famous for its trade unions, so was Calcutta. They are now shadows of their old selves. But now so many NGOs have come forward to fill that vacuum. It used to be said during the colonial times that wherever colonialism went, syphilis went with it. Now my activist friend Fred Chiu claims that nowadays wherever capital goes, NGOs go with it. It is not that easy to suppress dissent. Nature abhors a vacuum, physicists say....

**AV:** Venkat [Rao] has a very interesting theory that basically until we completely change our understating of what caste is, what *jatis* are, we can’t proceed in our knowledge.

**AN:** He has a point. Everybody confuses caste with the caste system and then fixates on the hierarchical nature of that system. But many communities are also castes – look at the Manganiyars. They are a community, they are a caste, they are Muslims, they follow their traditional vocation, and they live by their music. They used to live in poverty, but they have been “discovered,” so to speak, and now they have a huge international fan following. They too are a “caste,” at least they themselves claim so.

**AV:** Venkat Rao says that the *jati* is a repository of memory; it’s a mnemonic entity of some sort...
AN: That probably is true.

AV: He says *jatis* are “lively archives,” they are bodily embodiments of knowledge traditions and individual members of the *jatis* make, preserve and transmit knowledge.

According to Venkat [Rao], until you completely discard the idea of the caste system as being about social hierarchy, and replace it with an understanding of *jati* as the carrier of cultural memory – which is a completely different model -- you can’t make sense of Indian society.

AN: Maybe, but that point has to be pushed harder research-wise.

AV: He says: How you are going to record anything if your culture is alithic? – It is basically not a culture of writing, so it’s all recorded in the body itself, in the memory and the mind.

AN: In the mind, yes, people don’t forget these things. A different black history of America has come down to us through the memories of the black people. That history is not as hilariously funny as the Hindu nationalist history. Hence it is taken more seriously. That is why I have tried my hand in a serious critique of the political status of history as a discipline in the Southern hemisphere.

AV: That’s what Venkat is saying; let’s displace the text from the centre of our culture...

AN: We should be grateful to him for that. That’s not so easy in a predominantly Brahmanic culture, which values text, writing and literacy so highly. I have an essay called Memory Work which has been inspired by Venkat’s work. Freud introduced the concept of “dream work;” “Memory Work” argues for an extension of the scope of the idea to shared memories.
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