

Regimes of Narcissism, Regimes of Despair

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As a scholar who is known for his path-breaking observations on the loss and recovery of self under colonialism, Ashis Nandy in this new work examines the corroding impact of current economico-political and fundamentalist regimes across the world on the self of what Nandy calls, 'the globalised middle class'. Nandy aptly characterises the institutionalised dynamics of the prevalent political zeitgeist as *regimes of despair* and *regimes of narcissism* and the entire book analyses the universal sense of anomie and fear that compels all of us to live today a life of repressed angst and a vague sense of loss. The resultant sense of ennui and the consequent escapist mode of self-locked hedonism plague all forms of socio-political culture that we see around. In that way this book is a timely intervention by a towering intellectual in deciphering the enigmas and the predicaments of the present times. Apart from the *Preface* and a brief section named *About the Author*, the book is an anthology of eight essays dealing with wide range of issues such as nationalism and its various shapes; violence and terror; modernity and its discontents; fate of religion and community in the contemporary times; uses of religion for

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nationalist and secular purposes; communalism and secularism; humiliation; happiness etc.

The *Preface* narrates the sad story of farmers' suicide, which has escalated manifold in the last two decades (x). In a sense, it is a death of an old India having a "resilient" agriculture, stupendous enough to survive every historical vicissitude for millennia but now facing severe, if not deadly, challenge under the regimes of global market and global knowledge. The 'despairing' peasants of India are without any avail to launch their fights against the 'narcissistic' turn that the world economic order has triggered India to take in these arguably "postmodern" days.

These essays are about an India that is no longer the country on which I have written for something like four decades. Many things have changed drastically in recent years: the mythos on which modern India built its self-definition is under severe stress.

... [T]he fate of India might be decided not so much by its normal politics or economics but by the large pockets of its political culture that have become the domains of two predominant psychological states: narcissism and despair. To identify their institutionalized forms and inner dynamics, I have begun to call them regimes of narcissism and despair. (ix)

'Regimes of narcissism', however, are not only about "individual psychopathology"— and we are told that the author follows Christopher Lasch here – but also about a state of mind that is social in origin and in its ramifications, so to speak, and they are built on "political-cultural realities" (ix). And, 'regimes of despair' are measures of cultural crisis too that only encapsulate the disorderly psychiatric states.

This collection of essays, however, “does not tell the story that [the] preface seemingly promise[d]. But it might not have been written without an awareness of the issues raised here.” (xiii) To our mind, the essays written with the contemporary times as their backdrop are closer to the *Preface* as well as the title itself.

The first essay, ‘Nationalism, Genuine and Spurious’, is a kind of introduction to the volume as it sets the ideological stage of the modern India, where an unknown India would gradually emerge out of despairs precipitated through the decades after independence— an India that is nothing but an emulation of the now narcissistic North Atlantic societies of the West. That the stage was all set to follow the West in its rationalist, technocratic, narrowly nationalistic and even hedonic version of modernity, could be read off the pages of history that were being written soon after the early days of Independence suffused (wrongly?) with promises. This was evident in how the “spurious” nationalisms of both Tagore and Gandhi were readily rejected by the majority of the Indians. This treatment was expected, as Indians were already seduced to take the “genuine” path to build the nation and its consumer-citizens, the path which did not quite match with the two great minds, namely Tagore and Gandhi, of the late colonial India. This essay renders a great service by distinguishing the idea of ‘patriotism’ from that of ‘nationalism’ proper. Gandhi and Tagore were patriotic enough not to succumb to the call of nationalism. While patriotism is an emotional attachment to one’s home country – *Desha* – nationalism is an ideological construct. Patriotism is more territorially concrete though open-ended; nationalism, on the contrary, builds up closures around the abstract idea of a nation.

As can be found in many of his other books, for example *The Savage Freud*, Ashis Nandy, in this present volume

too, oftentimes knits his arguments around the personality of a very well known or even little-known historical figure. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was a ‘notoriously’ famous man, about whose brand of religious nationalism we read in the second chapter, “The Demonic and the Seductive in Religious Nationalism”. Madanlal Pahwa was a lesser known functionary of Hindu revivalist politics whose serial killing constitutes the subject matter of “Coming Home”— the third essay. Ashis Nandy is not to demonise unconditionally to serve the purpose of “political” and “academic correctness” (23-24). Savarkar was a test case for him to understand “the limits of nineteenth-century modernity, scientific rationality, and political realism rather than ... pathological ethnophobia” (56), for his Muslim-hating was initially a manipulative strategy to bind the Indians together as a nation whose congealment would need a political construct called ‘Hindutva’; and this Hindutva must not be confused with Hinduism as a religion. Therefore it is small wonder, as the perceptive author cogently puts, Savarkar harboured acrid contempt for Gandhi but did not grow personal disliking for Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Actually, both Jinnah and Savarkar were dogged followers of secularism of the European brand and the ‘two-nation theory’ endorsed by each had hardly had any foundation in religious orthodoxy so to speak. However, we are also told that “[i]n politics, if you wear a mask long enough, it becomes your face.”(46) And this was the fate of Savarkar too. He rode the dangerous juggernaut of communalism to build a mighty nation-state and “did not know where to stop.” (56)

If anything can explain the mindset of V. D. Savarkar, it is the paramount place for the instrumental logic. Everything and every being is no more than an expedient mechanism for the achievement of the strong, masculine nation-state in India. Hence, there had to be men like Nathuram Vinayak Godse or Madanlal Pahwa who would devotedly carry out their functions at the altar of their brand of nationalism. The cruelty of a lesser man like Pahwa is to be understood by its compensatory use for the loss of his homeland which is now

inside Pakistan. The utter banishment from the dreamy everyday of the men like him is now being made good by linking that same mundane reality with virulent violence. This is the way they can be brought back to an amorally moral substitution of home—no longer to be found within a utopian whole that is their childhood, but situated, emphatically, in a dystopia of mindless and gory violence that produces nothing but a fragmented being. Only this way some troubled parts of their selves become ‘retrievable’. These three essays can be read together as they have the commonality of being centred on personalities and have a historical tinge to them, for their setting was primarily pre-independent India.

The last five essays are more about the current phase of modernity where India and the world find themselves into the throes of what can be called the ‘discontents of modernity’.

“Humiliation” – an essay which had also appeared in a separate anthology, titled, *Humiliation* edited by Gopal Guru—is a bit different from any other essay of the Ashis Nandy’s book under review. It first attempted to understand ‘humiliation’ as a psychosocial category and then went on for a formidable cultural critique of modern forms and episodes of humiliation. The lesson we learn from this essay is that humiliation, not unlike torture, cannot happen without some recognition and “will” on the part of the humiliated him/herself (154), and while a minimal quantum of self-respect has to be there for being humiliated, a formidable “ego strength” can turn the table onto the person humiliating others, and tell him/ her in the face that it was s/he who is to be ashamed in the eyes of the posterity. However, this is an analytical essay with befitting examples, and we cannot do justice to it by being very brief only.

The same can be said about the last essay, “Happiness”. The author is frankly critical about the way happiness can be

said to be mustered by “mechanomorphic” manners nowadays, the Deepak Chopra books being good examples (179). It appears that now we are in need of “determined search” for happiness with our “conscious pursuit” to earn it (180). Being unhappy is a kind of criticism—if not affront—to this contemporary world, intently obsessed with gathering—or should we say managing?—happiness by whatever means, and ‘normal’, ‘happy’ persons are hard on those who are chronically unhappy—so much so that they are often sent to asylums for ‘treatment’. Perhaps amidst the despairing contexts of the lack of *ananda* or bliss, and bliss was *the* ideal of well being of the mental state in the pre-industrial days the world over, we have turned desperate to go-get happy. This desperation can lead to the narcissistic desire to show others and ourselves that we are happy, that we are living longer, healthier and wealthier life and so forth and so on. With no gods to preside over our fate in the other-worlds, we are prone to squeeze as much as possible out of the only life we have been granted to live. The widespread medicalisation of our physical and mental health as well as the youth-affirming activities and symbolisms are the paradigmatic instances of this reckless attitude. We can add that one may consider the laughable laughter of the ‘laughing clubs’ as a caricaturing as well as graphic instance of such spurious happiness.

If the essay on happiness can be read as a saga of impossible attempts at ‘death denials’, then “‘Terror, Counter-Terror and Self-Destruction” is the dangerously melancholic essay on ‘death defiance’. The article explores the enigma of the suicide squad: how can it be that ordinary people—scores of them—take away their own lives for the cause, which, if fulfilled, they would not even witness. It would be a miscalculation, Ashis Nandy cautions us, to think that the demagogues are the sole reasons behind this conundrum. Perhaps it is the “fear of cultures” (121) that eventually “reveals the nature of this nihilistic, suicidal despair in some parts of the globe” (122). Let us quote:

For the present global political economy has begun to reward all cultivated ignorance of how the unprecedented prosperity and technological optimism in many countries have as their underside utter penury, collapse of life support systems brought about by ecological devastations, threats to cosmologies, and non-specific hopelessness. (122)

It appears that the outcome is much more severe than Andre Gunder Frank's 'development of underdevelopment', for the festering wound lies at a much deeper level than that of the political economy alone; it haunts them at their psychological moorings. This is where a "clash of cultures and civilizations" is taking its grotesque shape. Huntington's prognosis is not to be ignored, though it is another matter which side should we be on. With the ISIS looming large and dark in much of the sky today, we are instigated by the author to ask about the efficacy of the war on the terrorists that "global common sense" now seems to believe in so steadfastly.

What is the secret of the great box office success of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas*? As the epigraph of Italo Calvino to "Modernity and the Sense of Loss" insinuates into, the "empire" that the modernity is, has produced vast tracts of lost worlds. *Devdas* is not only a sentimental hero—a failed lover whose childhood sweetheart had been wedded to someone else—but a young man gone astray from his village and the community on the one hand and from the childhood on the other. The narcissistic modern selves of ours cannot but hanker desperately, even though in the deeper but bitter layers of their (un)conscious, for those past 'golden' days when the social psychopathological sense of eternal loss was much less common; for, those days, unlike today, basking in the security and romanticism of the *Gemeinschaft* had not to be invented within the baroque, fictive world of popular culture which the "sumptuous, Hindi version of the movie *Devdas*" (171)

perhaps is recklessly indicative of, but that could be lived and felt within the everyday world around us. *Devdas* restores us back to those days doubly—by its own narration of attempted yet failed return of the prodigal and wasted hero from the metropolis to his adolescent love ensconced within the rural ambience, and by so many returns of our own damaged souls to their own childhood loves for everything from romance to enchantments to nature to memories through witnessing this kind of storytelling by the writer-film director duo.

Ashis Nandy is never tired of telling us about the retrieval of our secret and lost selves. However, the essay concerning the “Return of the Sacred” is a dangerous story of the imposition of a formalised (to the extent of “official” and even sometimes bordering on being statist) ‘sacred’ on a naturalised sacred, which has always been people’s own thing. Here in India Protestantism had cast a long shadow on the reformist version of Hinduism and Buddhism of India too since the days when *Arya Samaj*, *Brahmo Samaj*, *Ramakrishna Mission* or *Mahabodhi Society* emerged (99). These rationalist and theologically centred sects began to undermine the popular versions of ritualistic religion which had always been rooted in the “worldview” of the multitude. Sacred has always had a promise for resistance from the “oppressed”. The “Liberation theology in Christianity” is a case in point (100). When the intelligentsia shares the lived religion of the people, then that can produce one Bishop Desmond Tutu, but if the “native religion” is pooh-poohed by the elites, the sacred may still return but in a virulent form as the handmaid of the so-called terrorists, who nurture a no-nonsense attitude about the sacred and its indiscriminate sacrifices, or should we say ‘collateral damage’ from their point of view? Speaking about collateral damage we cannot help turning to the shocking information that we are confronted with several times in this book (and including the chapter under review right now):

[W]hatever may have happened in the past, the violence that religion *now* sanctions cannot compete

in range and depth with the violence that modern states sanction in the name of secular ideologies. [However, the author quickly adds that] ...

these differences are getting smudged; in its new incarnation religious violence too is acquiring many of the features of state violence.” [Italics in original] (103)

Consider the acronym: ISIS. They consider themselves no less than one Islamic *state*. Not unlike many other essays of this volume the author, here in this chapter that seems to us as a counterpoint to many of the narcissistic and despairing tendencies that he tells us about throughout the book— since he keeps faith in one form of the ‘return of the sacred’, does not want to hide his sympathy for the everyman whose faith has always been secure with its firm organic connection with the soil of the natural community. Although in another form the sacred inflicting the minds of the bigoted ‘new believers’ nowadays is often dangerous; and its examples are ample if we consider the religious fundamentalists the world over whom we have mentioned only a little ago. But do these novel fundamentalists really vary far from the ‘imagined communities’ that the older nations have often been, particularly when they are being ‘imagined’ in the postcolonial condition with the help of the Europeans— the old discoverers of the ‘noble’ ideology of the nationhood? As Partha Chatterjee had once asked, ‘whose imagined communities’ are they actually?

We can have a flavour of one kind of ‘double session’ through the authorial employment of the phrase, “return of the sacred” in that the author spoke of the religion’s return, albeit in a nuanced sense of the term, in his biographical journey (95-96) as well as of the ‘eternal returns’ of the sacred either in

benevolent or in malevolent forms—as the case may be—throughout the history of humanity. A gifted political psychologist as he is, Ashis Nandy cannot but think through the many selves he has while conversing to, or empathising with, others’ subjectivities. Else, how could he speak favourably about the Marxists who are odd enough to refuse to shed their sympathy in matters of ‘native’ religion so to speak (107)? Is it not a kind of ‘blasphemous’ for a scholar, if we are given the privilege of viewing him **from** a variety of points of view – namely, religious, Marxist, modernist, and, most horrifically, academic? It also seems to us that Professor Nandy will be on the side of Gandhi who always wanted to do one very odd thing to any modernist: he wished to “use” religion “into politics” (107), not the *vice versa*, nor in that sense kept them totally immune to each other too. ■