

BOOK - REVIEW

Nandy, Ashis; *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987, pp. 168; Price Rs. 120/-

From the prolific pen of Ashis Nandy comes yet another study in the field of political culture labelled *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias*. The presentation not merely takes to the conclusion, the arguments preferred in his earlier book *The Intimate Enemy* but also raises the fundamental issues of the civilizational/cultural pre-conditions essential for the basic question of survival coming under the onslaught of differing ideologies of capitalism, socialism and technocratism. Yet, the seminal contribution of Ashis is not free from a small sin which is discernible even to the naked eye mostly accustomed to the larger macro-vision that the work offers. But more of that in the end.

It is essential to point out the content and the context of the present work which is an excellent bunching process of ideas that Ashis presented in various forums, seminars and conferences. "Evaluating Utopias" and "Towards a Third World Utopias" are of 1978-81 vintage, while "The Tradition of Technology" originating as a brief note in 1977 at Kathmandu saw its final version in 1984. "Reconstructing Childhood" developed out of a conference-paper in Japan in 1981, with a brief journalistic version in *The Times of India* in 1982, and the present version was originally published for *Alternatives* in 1984. "Science, Authoritarianism and Culture" is the outcome of M. N. Roy

Memorial Lecture at the Gandhi Peace Foundation in 1980, which was published in *Seminar* in 1981, and "From Outside the Imperium" was presented in a conference in Lisbon in 1980, with a "crude early version" in *Alternatives* in 1981, and its framework was discussed in a meeting organised by the Lokayan Group at Delhi in 1982 with extracts published elsewhere from 1983 onwards. Historically each piece has been presented and published in one form or the other on more than one occasion, and it is evident that Ashis had no idea of converting the six divergent efforts into the present format of a book - a realization which may have dawned on him much later in the process of what he calls "a self-exploration while working in two overtly unrelated areas : political psychology and culture of science".

Ashis' sophistication on polarizing the psychology of politics from politics of psychology, as well as a culture of science from culture in Science can be well used to understand the nuances of power at all levels of application - be it nation state or an individual pursuing well defined goals and objectives. In the first set of polarization, Ashis pleads passionately for a viable concept of freedom which must take into consideration the civilizational and cultural preconditions of those who even in their defeat and incognimity dared to reject the physical and technocratic overbearance of the victors "to protect and nurture, however clumsily, alternative concepts of compassion, freedom, justice and dissent". Roger Garaudy, in his forward, hence, notes candidly that "the central and the vital debate of our times is the one outlined by Nandy : that between "alternative perspective" and "modern oppression". Stretching it a little further it is not impossible to determine why Ashis dedicated this book to "those who dare defy the given models of defiance".

Equally evident is the flow of arguments emanating from the second set of polarization : culture of science from culture in science. Ashis observes that no technology is neutral and the dictum that " all that is technically possible is necessary and desirable " cannot be permitted to be super-imposed over the civilizational and cultural preconditions. Ashis' re-reading of Gandhi is not merely an academic routine but to show that for the Mahatma, to change India it was neither essential to strive to copy the West nor dogmatically effect a return to an ancient tradition. Ashis shows clearly that the choice is not between a traditional technique and a modern technique : it is between different traditions of technology. Towards this end, he observes, the attempts by Eastern Scientists and their works to enumerate an alternative philosophy of technology are directed. Hence, for him J. C. Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Kakuzo Okakura and Aurobindo became " mythopoetic figures in a section of the West ". Nevertheless, Gandhi's fundamental theoretical contribution " not to refuse social change, but not to confound social change with Westernization ", remains of seminal importance in Ashis' new reading of the Mahatma. Equally important is his observation on Gandhi by Winston Churchill and George Bernard Shaw where both identified the attempt by Gandhi to attack the basic elements of the culture which held together the modern West. Thus, the section " From outside the Imperium " represents a critical appreciation of the Mahatma, his time and his political culture.

To sum up, one must confess the wide spectrum in which Ashis has played about. At the outset it may give a disjointed appearance if one goes by the label of each essay. However, what comes out unerringly is the necessity of a new world cultural order devoid of the vested interests pursued by the proponents who consider the necessity of maintaining a Western

hegemony. To a desernible reader such a proposition may be much too close to achieving an ultimate utopia for the human-kind. Despite Ashis' elaborate attempt to dissect and evaluate utopias, the cardinal question still remains unanswered : Is it essential to achieve utopia and if not, then to what level will it be practical ? The other question is, how can we incorporate utopias in the modern day political culture ? Perhaps, this will lead to opening a pandora's box in social enquiry. The sin that Ashis has committed, as I mentioned in the beginning, is that he has technically tried to take hostage all those who "dared" to participate in the meetings at which the papers were presented and other friends who may have "commented" making them responsible for the faults which still persist in the present writing. Is he trying to reverse the Vālmikī episode to bring about a new culture in writing ? Perhaps, he has written the sentence in his preface in the same lighter vein as I am doing so now. Ashis remains, as always, provocative, daring and an intellectual who never minces his words.

Dept. of Defence &
Strategic Studies
University of Poona
POONA 411 007

GAUTAM SEN