

Interview with Ashis Nandy: psychoanalytic sociology and post-colonial predicament

by Livio Boni

Ashis Nandy (born in 1937 in Bihar into a Bengali family) is a major figure of contemporary Indian critical thought. He is considered to be one of the pioneers of cultural and post-colonial studies in the Subcontinent and his prolific works have, for the most part, been published by Oxford India. His book, The Intimate Enemy. Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism – published in 1983 and translated into French, German and Italian –, represents a turning point in Post-Colonial studies. It builds on the idea (put forward by Octave Mannoni in 1947) of an internalization of the colonial complex by the colonized and the colonizer, and offers a subtle investigation of the dialectical movements brought about by such an interdependency.

Long-time head of the influential Centre for Studies of Developing Societies in New Delhi, Nandy is a clinical psychologist who likes to call himself a «political psychologist» and who constantly applies psychoanalysis to the unconscious dimensions of mass-culture in India and Southern Asia.

Livio Boni (born in Rome in 1973) is a clinical psychologist and philosophy scholar living and working in France. He has conducted several studies on the history of psychoanalysis in India and explored how the issues raised can offer a contemporary articulation of Freudism and Post-Colonial criticism (cf. Livio Boni, L'Inde de psychanalyse. Le sous-continent de l'inconscient, Paris, Campagne Première, 2011, Italian edition by IPOC, Milano, 2014).

Gandhism and Freudism

Livio Boni: *Ashis Nandy, you define yourself as a post-Gandhian scholar and thinker. Not in the sense that you claim to be an ideological or militant follower of Gandhi, but in the sense that you consider that Gandhism has been a kind of anthropological event, a kind of historical invention which has yet to be thought out. And you consider that, from this standpoint, there is an actuality of Gandhism for the post-colonial understanding. Could you take us through your singular intellectual approach of Gandhism?*

Ashis Nandy: Gandhi was scared of fathering something like Gandhism and Freud tried to locate his work within the domain of science and would have been heartbroken if his ‘science’ was pushed any closer to an ideology.

As for Gandhi, he was neither an ideologue nor an Eastern Guru dispensing instant wisdom. He was direct in these matters. Any Western admirer who sought his guidance in the matter of nonviolence, received more or less the same advice. ‘Go to your own religious texts and search out appropriate sections.’ He was an active politician who, as a politician, saw the horrendous forms violence – hitched to the ideas of conquest, statecraft, and social engineering and backed by modern science and technology – was taking. He had the foresight and the ethical passion to pursue the logic of this insight throughout his life. There lay his uniqueness. In a century that saw the ravages of ideology, he alone stood bereft of an ideology to allow his listeners full and equal hermeneutic freedom.

Livio Boni: *In one of your most famous books, The Intimate Enemy (until now the only one translated into French and Italian), you consider that the two crucial transformations introduced by Gandhi in relation to colonial ideology have been, on one hand, the revaluation of childhood, and, on the other, a refutation of History conceived as an intrinsic rationality. These two points are, of course, a kind of catachresis of the colonial discourse, insofar as they displace the topic of the colonized as a child who needs the assistance of the Master, and the idea of a lack of History in the non-European civilizations. But, by stressing this Gandhian revaluation of childhood versus adulthood, as well as its revaluation of “past” versus “history”, you also quite explicitly suggest some affinity between Gandhi and Freud. Does it mean that you read Gandhism from a Freudian point of view? Or Freud from a Gandhian point of view? Or can we imagine some kind of real intellectual encounter between Gandhism and Freudism?*

Ashis Nandy: It is probably my attempt to reintroduce Gandhi and Freud to each other, outside the liberal frame of Erik Erikson, Wolfenstein and Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph. It also is a more self-conscious, South Asian attempt to update Freud for contemporary times by re-equipping him with cultural-psychological sensitivities alien to his European intellectual world but perhaps not to his West Asian ancestors. Psychoanalysis as a critical tool for the new movements of our times then becomes the obverse of the phallogocentric Statism that is becoming the preferred consumable in countries such as China and India.

The language of the body that so deeply tinted the colonial ideology had another element, masculinization. Gandhi celebrated the androgynous and had a distinctive gender definition that came only partly from the classical traditions of India. It borrowed more heavily from the vernacular ecumenism of Medieval India, in which spirituality and ethics cut across the borders of caste, religion and sects and laid the basis of another cosmopolitanism – more open to radical diversities, greater tolerance of ambiguities, and a robust suspicion of linear theories of progress and the centrality of the state in public life.

Freud becomes relevant to the first part of the story: Gandhi's determined use of a tacit theory of what Western knowledge systems would call reaffirmation of femininity in the public sphere. From his point of view though, it was also a reaffirmation of a different concept of masculinity that did not negate femininity, but had to accommodate aspects of femininity within it to claim to be completely masculine. Such masculinity had its counterpart in an idea of femininity that, to qualify as complete, had to include crucial aspects of masculinity. In addition, Gandhi's femininity too had a special meaning, for he often seemed to stress maternity at the expense of conjugality. Gandhi's androgyny was coloured primarily by motherliness. This androgyny was a subversive project. In the colonial discourse, the language of the body became a way of explaining the inferiority of the subjected races and giving content to the ideas of 'civilizing mission' and the 'white man's burden'. The colonized subject was an incomplete man and an incomplete or lapsed adult. In the Gandhian vision that became a strength.

Freud approached the problem differently but in a way that was consistent with Gandhi's faith. He too did not see gender differences as sharp disjunctions but as necessary and unavoidable continuities. Gandhi may not have been a vendor of Eastern wisdom, but he did respond to a major civilizational gap in the *modern* West. (The West also had its androgynous Christ and powerful maternal deities in the form of white and black Madonnas, but they had become recessive in recent centuries). The appeal

of Gandhi's vision to the ordinary Indian was that it looked grounded simultaneously in India's high culture and in its vernacular traditions. Freud was a rebellious son of the Enlightenment, but he was its son nonetheless. Gandhi was an outsider to that worldview and a constant reminder of (1) how the Enlightenment vision had been used to justify virtually all the major forms of Satanism of our times – from the four-continent slave-trade to the creation of three new White continents through conquests and genocide; and (2) how all major forms of organized dissent in the West have justified their violence by turning to social evolutionism and sundry theories of progress which remain racist, ethnocidal and provincial at their core.

The Reinvention of the Feminine

Livio Boni: *Another crucial point in your interpretation of Gandhism lies in its reinvention of the Feminine. In most of your works you insist on a transversal trend, during the period of decolonization, based on a kind of revaluation of the Feminine as an alternative to the fantasy of a revirilisation, typical of the nationalist discourse. Should we read this revaluation of the Feminine as a cultural element linked to the particular place that maternal deities and symbols occupy in many dimensions of Hinduism, or should we understand this as an original, conjunctural and event-specific invention linked for instance to the names of Rabindranath Tagore, Girindrasekhar Bose and Gandhi?*

To put it in other words, it seems clear to me that you are not suggesting a kind of eternal and almost Jungian archetype of the Feminine, but that you are trying to explore something like a strategic use and a dynamic re-appropriation of this feminine trope in India's recent political subjectivities. Could you elaborate upon this very fundamental point of your research?

Ashis Nandy: I have already given an indirect response to a part of this question in response to your earlier question. Let me supplement that answer.

You are right, I am not talking of an Jungian archetype, though something like that does shape the underside of the Indian pantheon, presided over by powerful mother deities, in a dynamic relationship with the dominance exercised in crucial sectors of life by feared maternal deities of the left-handed sects. This is not something uncommon in agricultural societies, where human productivity and re-productivity, the fertility of land and the fertility of women are often coterminous. Its underside is the ability to heal and protect, an ability that can be sometimes withdrawn. And such withdrawal can

sometimes be seen to converge with the refusal to hold in leash the war horses of epidemics or natural calamities. Power, activity and play remain symbolically the domain of woman. The warrior communities in Hinduism and Sikhs, like the Japanese, usually worship warrior goddesses as supreme goddesses. What you might call the fantasy of re-masculinization paradoxically makes way for the fantasy of access to primal power and to one's own creative and destructive selves.

Psychoanalysis in India

Livio Boni: *Even in the very interesting and insufficiently known history of psychoanalysis in India between the 20s and the 40s of the last century one can find two main trends concerning the relationship with the colonial setting. The first one is embodied by Owen Berkeley-Hill (1897-1944), a British medical officer and psychoanalyst, close to Ernest Jones, who was the head of one of the first psychiatric hospitals in India (in Ranchi, actually in Jharkhand) and who gave a sort of positivist Freudian justification to colonialism . The second trend is associated with the name of Girindrasekhar Bose – “the savage Freud”, as you call him in your brilliant essay dedicated to Bose – the founder of the Indian Psychoanalytical Society in Calcutta (1922), an original and hybrid intellectual and therapeutic figure, who wrote in English and in Bengali, corresponded with Freud and conceived his own theoretical perspective on psychoanalysis through the so called theory of “opposite wish”.*

What do you think of this dual path that psychoanalysis took in India during the colonial era? Could we speak of two different epistemic models, one based on the idea of a simple expansion (a fantasy of conquistador that one can easily find in Freud himself), and the other based on the idea of a translation, or even, in reference to a Derrida's concept, on a “graft”, a “greffe”?

More generally speaking: what can we learn from the epistemological case of the double reception of psychoanalysis in colonial India?

Ashis Nandy: Like many other knowledge systems that came through the colonial connection, psychoanalysis in practice promised a theory of liberation as well as a social evolutionary model of liberation that presupposed deculturation and ethnocide at a massive scale for that liberation to be available to the dark-skinned Africans and Asians. But many Indians too found these theories excellent tools of social and political criticism. They did know that these new theories were being picked up by the dissenters in the colonizing societies and perhaps many Indians felt that they too could make

creative use of them. They might have been wrong in their judgement, but it was not always the fault of individual thinkers or writers. It was the fault of the intellectual culture European colonialism had assiduously promoted over a period of 150 years. Those who escaped its influence were either fortunate or exceptionally gifted and sensitive.

For instance, Indian psychoanalysts, psychiatrists and psychologists never warmed up to Carl Jung as much as they did to Freud. Yet, Jung visited India twice, played a role in establishing two new departments of psychology in two major universities, and was better acquainted with Indian thought than Freud was. But at that point of time, Indians were not looking for testimonials on their cultural ancestry but for new frameworks or baselines that would help them to confront contemporary evil. They found Freud more rebellious and more radical.

Girindrasekhar Bose went further. He believed that not only psychoanalysis had something to contribute to Indian civilization; the 5000-year-old civilisation too might have something to contribute to psychoanalysis. I suspect that this awareness is gaining grounds in the Southern world.

Livio Boni: *Do you see, as Sudhir Kakar does, any actuality of the Girindrasekhar Bose's clinical and anthropological views? According to Kakar, in this actuality lies the "ubiquity and multiformity of the 'primitive idea of being a woman' and the embeddedness of this fantasy in the maternal configurations of the family and culture in India". Do you share this point of view? And what about other possible marks of Bose's influence on contemporary Indian psychoanalytical culture?*

Ashis Nandy: I do not see any serious influence of Bose's work on contemporary Indian psychology. I could see such influence in earlier generations of Indian psychoanalysts. There were fleeting glimpses of such influence in some of the works of Tarun Sinha, Phillip Spratt, Haripada Maity, D. B. Desai and Shib Kumar Mitra. But I am not sure if I would have deciphered such influences before embarking on the study of Girindrasekhar's life and work. Probably I saw them because I was looking for them.

I am inclined to agree with Sudhir's formulation. But it is filtered through Sudhir's own creativity and psychoanalytic sensitivity. I also suspect that some vague awareness of the dynamics you have in mind pervades most psychoanalytic works on India – from Morris Carstairs to Jeffrey Kripal.

Psychoanalysis and criticism of the post-colonial State

Livio Boni: *A point which clearly differentiates your own approach of Freudism from Sudhir Kakar's is your use of psychoanalysis for a metapolitical analysis of the post-colonial State. In one of my favourite books that you wrote, The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics you suggest a pastiche, readable even in the title of the book, between two Freudian concepts: "the family romance" and the "Drives Fate". This mix of Freudian syntagms indicates your idea of a deep connection between the Oedipus complex of the colonised subject, which implies an idealization of the Master, and the fate of the legitimization of [the] mass violence by the post-colonial State.*

Violence in its religious and communitarian form becomes a tool for the post-colonial State to raise itself to the level of the colonial Master's imago and to repress every heterogeneous and feminine component within itself. In a more recent work, Regimes of Narcissism, Regimes of Despair, you consider Indian nationalism as a "compensatory mechanism" destined to build – if I read you correctly – a kind of "secondary narcissism" following the narcissistic wound inherited by the colonialism.

So, my question will be twofold: do you think, beyond metaphors, that psychoanalysis can provide a theory of the State per se? And, if so, can this theory go beyond the classical psychoanalytical critiques of the fascist State already suggested by Freud and Reich with regards to European fascism? In other words: what does Indian nationalism teach us about the relationship between State and mass psychology that we did not already know through fascist European experiences and criticisms?

Ashis Nandy: This question is not easy to answer within the format of an interview. So I shall have to give a brief, suggestive answer. European fascist state was not as disjunctive with the Westphalian nation-state as many European intellectuals like to believe. The psychological bonds between the Europe's earlier record of violence and European fascism were deep though the Fascist political culture did not turn out to be that enduring. In some ways, Fascism took to logical conclusion some strands of consciousness that were already salient under the shadow of the Enlightenment in Europe, that is, *after* the values of the Enlightenment had begun to seep into culture of everyday life in sizeable sections of Europeans. For these Europeans, the older war cries like 'Christianize the world' or the once-important debate on whether the American Indians and Africans had souls or not did not seem an adequate explanation of 200 years of slow genocide in the Americas that some claim took a toll of some 120 million, arguably the world's most successful genocide ever, and the four-continent African slave trade

that might have taken a toll on another 12 million, arguably the world's first attempt at globalization through free trade.

The new slogans were 'knowledge is power' (Francis Bacon) and the social-evolutionist ones, 'struggle for survival' and 'stages of history' (Charles Darwin). Modern colonialism of England and France, which could be called the second attempt at globalization – the sun did not set on the British Empire, we were taught in our childhood – had a civilizing mission and carried the onerous burden of not only educating the world but also cleansing the world of inferior races, which were fit only to serve the superior ones. The German state had already been involved in the genocide of two communities in Africa, the British had already discovered the concentration camp and were to discover area bombing as opposed to strategic bombing, and colonial administrations everywhere used racial categories, ethnicity and skin colour in official classificatory systems. Nazism only built upon this scientization of dominance; its self-justification came not from hatred but, as recent works show, from nineteenth-century biology, eugenics and twentieth-century public hygiene (see Lifton, Bauman, Milgram, for instance). Kant, Hegel, Hume, Jefferson, Marx and Engels are obvious examples of the new racism that came from the brutalization of both the public sphere and the knowledge systems that dealt with the public sphere in Europe and the brutalization of its colonial subjects. The two World Wars, with a toll of about 100 million human lives, only completed this process of brutalization.

I trace most of the world's present ills from the 250 years of Satanism that has infected many of the global institutes we presently work with. The job of psychoanalytic sociology is to work out the inner dynamics of these connections and supply a new baseline of social criticism and epistemic ethics.

Livio Boni: *Let me try a more subjective and lateral question; reading your analysis on fantasies linked to the State in the postcolonial context I often have the feeling that you try to imagine an alternative to the Oedipian State under the form of something like a good-enough maternal State. Even if you never quote Winnicott, you seem to me quite close to the idea of a maternal mode of the State, not, of course, under the form of the fantasy of a phallic and omnipotent Mother, but under the form of an entity which guarantees to the subject an "anaclisis" without pretending to embed him. In other words, a Winnicottian mother-like State that could partially disappoint the unconscious demands of the subject, without necessarily turning into a bad State. Does such a question make sense to you? Can we really imagine a maternal style of the State? And, if so, which political shape could it take?*

Ashis Nandy: A modern State has individual subjects and wants to have only individual subjects. But

whether it wants it or not, a state often has, in the Southern world, thriving communities as its subject. True, the modern State is synonymous with what is called a nation-state, there is no guarantee that it will have within its boundaries only one community. Your question presumes some degree of homogenization and shared fantasy life in a state. How does one answer the question in a country with more than 1200 languages, nearly 30 of which are recognized as national languages and two as official languages? In addition, there are thousands of sects, 330 million gods and goddesses, and an estimated 70,000 castes, which no anthropologist has till now managed to enumerate. There are thousands of varieties of Brahmins and perhaps none who knows the names of a sizeable proportion of them. Yet, there are strains of awareness that cut across these divisions. There can be a psychoanalytic sociology of such diversity and what it does to those living in such a society. Maybe some young sociologist will take it up as his or her life's work.

As for the fantasy or vision of a State in India, I suspect that the ideal State is perhaps not modelled on maternity but on a fortunately distant, frequently absent father who does not want to live through his children but finds them amusing and fascinating in themselves and leaves them alone to work out their own destinies. This is because South Asians do distinguish between the Indian State and India, the motherland. The dichotomy between the State and the nation is not that relevant here, for it is not sharply etched out. As Tagore recognized long ago, the Indian nation exists and also does not exist. The motherland is the mother, not the State. But motherland can also mean small territorial units, even one's birthplace or village.

One throw-away comment at the end on the Indian attitude to the modern State. Every ruler of India must be careful when handling the population they rule, for the subjects they rule remain fundamentally ambivalent towards the State. Not only did Gandhi have a clear anarchic streak in him, there is an anarchic streak in most Indians. In no other area of life they lose patience so easily and quickly as they do with their political rulers. Some rulers have tried to reform the State to counter that ambivalence; others have sought to bypass the State. Still others have experimented with a stricter, more centralized State. Nothing has worked in the long run. The state systems that have lasted long in India have worked with this awareness, knowingly or unknowingly. Perhaps you are not wrong after all. Perhaps this ambivalence towards the state reproduces the ambivalence towards the mother. Perhaps the fear of and hostility towards the state is the underside of the love for Mother India.

Some contemporary issues

Livio Boni: *You are one of the rare post-colonial thinkers who does not come from Marxism or post-Marxism. And you are even, most of the time, very critical towards Indian Marxism. Nevertheless many of your reflections concern, in different ways, the question of what Gramscian Marxism calls “hegemony”. The relationship between political hegemony and cultural hegemony, the role of “common sense” and of “civil society”, the refusal to disqualify religion, the presence of the “Southern question” within the history of Capitalism, and the revaluation of the geographical factor within historical materialism: all these themes, typical of Gramscian Marxism, had a strong influence on Indian Subaltern Studies and, more widely, on contemporary Indian critical thought. Do you have any interest in Gramsci or Gramsci's contemporary readings?*

Ashis Nandy: Yes, I have the curiosity, more so because many of the subaltern scholars are my friends and I consider their work very valuable. Till now we have mostly led parallel lives. I shall like to correct that but that will not be easy.

Livio boni: *To move closer towards a conclusion, I would appreciate it if you could say a few words on another important side of your Freudian sociology of contemporary Indian society: the urban question. In many of your writings you analyze some crucial anthropological reversals: for example, how the Indian village – idealized by Gandhi – became a dystopia for a part of Indian imagination after Partition (indeed, many slaughters took place in villages); or how the slummers of Indian megalopolis and the Indian diaspora can actually have in common a feeling of uprooting that they try to repress by a demand of identity and homogeneity, thereby creating a new “social bloc” for BJP.*

Ashis Nandy: India has an ancient urban tradition. Oldest ruins of the Indic civilization are all cities (Mohenjodaro and Harappa, for instance). Cities are also important in Indian epics. They were the centres of politics, trade and commerce, and pilgrimages. And these cities and villages were always in touch. The relationship between the cities and villages represented two distinct but parallel lifestyles that constantly criticized and mocked each other. (See, for instance, translations of Shudraka’s ancient Sanskrit play *Mrichchakatika*).

That mutuality and equality began to weaken with the birth of colonial cities like Bombay and Calcutta. These colonial cities, which were sometimes called presidency towns, brought in a different

imagination of the city into play in urban India. This imagination had two coordinates. First, the cities were now seen as a negation of villages, now re-imagined as bastions of Indian tradition and, thus, depositories of superstitions, paganism of all kinds, and the pathologies of a decrepit, decadent Indic civilization. Second, a new evolutionary perspective was introduced which came to see the colonial cities – and the urbanization and modernization that went with them – as the final fate or foreseeable future of all villages. The older mutuality between the village and city was, as a result, disrupted and, the idea of the disowned village was to re-enter the urban consciousness (through a whole series of freedom fighters, creative thinkers and social reformers) as a new, decolonized, pastoral utopia. That is the village of Gandhi, Tagore and film-maker Satyajit Ray.

However, in a majority of the expanding middle class of India, the colonial imagination of the city has persisted and to them the village remains a symbol of backwardness and under-development and all attempts to re-imagine the village as a living critique of the city appear to be forms of romantic nostalgia and attempts to return to a mythic past. This is a clue to many of the ongoing controversies over development and social change in India.

Livio Boni: *Finally, I'd like to take the risk of skipping to current events for a moment. The recent cases of violence against women, following the gang rape and murder of a young woman on a bus in Delhi at the end of 2012, have been widely relayed by the European press as well. In an interview given two weeks after the events, you pointed out the inadequacy of the category of sexual violence to analyze this kind of crime. You put forward the idea of an excess of violence, overtaking the "traditional" function of rape as a means of asserting social status, and you insisted on the idea of generalized anomic violence which worries the social body because, from then on, everybody can become a victim of it. Could you expand on this idea? How to understand the overexposure of women to anomic violence in contemporary India?*

Ashis Nandy: For the moment I shall only say this: Not only did women have power in traditional India, which was a phenomenon natural to all agricultural societies, this power came from the religious and 'magical' equation or continuity made in such societies between women's re-productivity and the fertility of land. In Europe, modern political economy and modern knowledge systems curtailed these powers of women by masculinizing the Christian pantheon and making Protestant Christianity the predominant paradigm of faith (partly because Weber's thesis on the Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism in particular, and modernity in general, had probably become a tacit part of common sense

even before Weber articulated it so clearly). But the traditional fear of women and her access to the primal magical powers of women remained just below the surface. The growing presence, self-assertion and self-confidence of women in the modern sector re-activates these fears and there is a desperate attempt to put the genie back in the box. The violence comes from that fear. It is a bit like the European witch-hunt towards the end of the Medieval period. As modernity spread, witch hunting, instead of decreasing, increased between 13th and 15th centuries (see A.J.P. Taylor and Norman Cohn).