

## Session VIII: Open House

### Ashis Nandy

I am not giving a paper. In my brief presentation I want to lay the basis not only for discussion but for a transition from what we are talking about to what we are going to do.

The first point I wish to make is that I want to switch to the non-heroic mode. I have been in this game, like many others here, for 25 years. Our message goes only to those who think like us. My note, which has been circulated, is deliberately low key. I do not need to convince you, because you are already convinced. I want to conceive what we are doing not only as part of a cultish phenomenon or a sect, but as part of a global movement for democratizing knowledge. To democratize knowledge you have to go beyond your own kind, and address people who do not think like you. If they do not immediately change their minds, let us wait. May be their children will.

One of the great achievements of Gandhi was that his methodology of resistance (militant non-violence) did not allow relationships to freeze or become bitter. As a result, in millions of families in India he planted “traitors” - those who rebelled against their own teachers, their own parents. That was a different strategy of anti-imperialism. We have to create traitors amongst our enemies. This needs, at least minimally, some dignity to be granted to those who do not agree with us. They might think entirely wrongly, we might believe, and we do not have to change our opinion an iota or write anything other than what we want to write, but when it comes to dissemination and reaching out, we must have a low-key, non-heroic approach, so that we can permeate to some of the places where there is no space for us, or our own kind. Let them disagree, with us but let them read our newsletter, see our website. At least that much we must ensure.

My second point is that when we say we are anti-West we are not against everything Western. There are two kinds of exports or cultural exchanges: one is *soft exports*, the other is *hard exports*. An example of a *hard export* is Coca Cola. Coca Cola is Coca Cola whether you buy it in Penang or Peking or Panama. Nobody is satisfied if you give them something else even if it claims to be equal to Coca Cola. Similarly Levi's jeans, Calvin Klein, etc. are hard exports.

There are soft exports too and we have made something out of them. Chilly, which is so important to the food of Malaysia, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka is not indigenous to any of these countries. It was not there before the 17<sup>th</sup> century- was brought by the Portuguese from Latin America. Today, chilly is more known by its association with Asian countries than with Mexico. Similarly, potato is a new world food. There are hundreds of preparations of potato in India which I doubt exist in Latin America, the parent country. Onions came to India from Central Asia. Idli, the ultimate marker of Tamil cuisine went from Indonesia to India. These are *soft exports* and we have made something of them.

I think that we have to keep our minds open to these kinds of *soft exports* because these exports take place amongst ourselves also. We have not been swept away with these cultural exchanges. A culture which is swept away or collapses just because you expose it to a few television channels or beauty shows is not worth preserving. We claim our cultures to be old and resilient, so let us behave as if our cultures have strength in them. We should have the confidence that it will survive these onslaughts, these transient distortions.

Thirdly, how do we reevaluate or valorize our civilisations, our cultures? Our main job is to criticize the society we are living in, in order to change it and make it better. Traditional theories of life, traditional social knowledge give us a way of criticizing our regimes, our politicians, in ways that reach out to our own people. That is the main task of traditional knowledge systems. It is immaterial whether they are true or false, good or bad. That comes afterwards. First and most important is that traditional knowledge systems are like language. If we have categories from our own knowledge systems, we can reach out to our people and our voice carries greater weight. We do not have to talk in terms of a Westminster model or the American Presidential system or ideas derived from conventional political science. If you do that you are ineffective and will always perpetually lament the fact that politicians are spoiling an otherwise beautiful country while you remain a spectator on the television of what is happening in the political centres of your country. That, in fact, is one of the aims of conventional democracies – to reduce the citizen to a spectator, where every 5 years he votes, and the rest of the time he consumes to his heart's content or is a tourist, who can appreciate the world as a cosmopolitan. Therefore, social criticism is a very important function of a group like this. When we uphold the cause of certain knowledge systems, we are also upholding the right to converse and allowing the voice of a substantial majority of people to be heard in the public sphere.

Finally, multiversity is not something which one or two individuals represent. In a group like this MV is what you do and are already doing. I hope this is the way we shall define MV. We are not setting up territorial centers of learning, which will compete with Harvard or Princeton or Oxford. MV is primarily in our minds, in our social relationships with each other. Our linkages have grown out of our work. What Pratec has been doing for so many years is actually MV even though the term was not in existence at that time. Pratec was MV before MV was born. I do not know if such thought exists in Latin American societies, but it is certainly possible in Asian thought.

I would therefore suggest that MV is what we make of it. I don't think we have to wait for funds and institutional support. A conference like this should be a platform where we share what we have been doing. If you can find new collaborators or co-conspirators to subvert the ruling systems of knowledge and the reigning structures of academic thought then I think MV would have done its job. It would be wonderful if some of you begin to collaborate among yourselves, taking advantage of this meeting.

Let us now have a discussion.

**Farid Alatas:** I think one of the things we have to guard against is this anti-Western attitude. We should not be anti-Western and certainly not anti-white. I am still uncomfortable with the term because once you get into black and white and coloured, it becomes a problem. What we are against is a type of mind that wants to dominate in any form. In the West you have this type but you also have those types in other parts of the world. We are against those who want to dominate us and we are with those who are against domination. Therefore, we should not be against knowledge on the grounds of its origins i.e. not reading Western or white authors only because they come from the West, because this not productive at all. There is no simple division between East and West in terms of knowledge systems and traditions. Our tradition comes from the Koran but it also comes from the Greeks, the Persians, the Indians and the divisions are not always so clear. Let us also realize that if we ignore Western works, we run the risk of having to reinvent the wheel. Finally, I would like to say that it is also untraditional to do that. Early Moslem scholars, for example, never ignored knowledge on grounds of its origin. They imbibed it, they transformed it and that should be our attitude.

My second point is that we have to be critical of ourselves. A recent phenomenon, of the past 10 or 15 years, is the problem of nativism which is an extreme reaction to the domination of Orientalism and Eurocentrism in the social sciences. Nativism is a serious problem amongst ourselves and that has to be dealt with.

Thirdly, I feel that some people are knocking academics needlessly. It is perfectly legitimate if you want to leave the university or don't want to work in the university. However academics in the university have a very important role and responsibility. In my case for example, every year I teach about 200 students a course called classical sociological theory where once we taught the usual Marx, Weber and Durkheim. I don't do that anymore. We have now revamped and reviewed the course to include many other scholars (I will talk about that in my presentation later on) and so every year the students are getting a different kind of dosage of the social sciences. So we have a potentially very important role to play.

**Vinay:** I don't think there is any one in this room who will disagree with your call to self-criticism but, to put it very cryptically, I think you have gone far too much to the other side. Let me explain why I think so. Black stereotypes about whites and white stereotypes about blacks are not the same thing at all. There is an enormous disequilibrium in this world today that makes it absolutely impossible in the present conditions of global knowledge to think that one can have an equitable kind of knowledge system. You have only to look at the political economy of knowledge systems and who produces knowledge and under what circumstances, to realize the truth. So, if blacks have stereotypes about whites, the fact of the matter is that they do not carry any political weight, but white stereotypes about black people do carry immense political weight. In any case, the blacks do not have the opportunity to correct their stereotypes by going out and doing ethnography in the white countries.

**Farid:** They may not carry political weight but nevertheless, they are in a position to influence people. I do not know about blacks, but I know the Moslem stereotypes about

whites and about Jews. I do not want my children to be educated in the small Moslem circles that they find themselves, in ways that prejudice them against whites or Jews for that matter. I do not want them to become anti-Semites. This is happening in the Moslem community. It is not a question of how powerful they are or how global their voices are. It is the attitude that matters.

**Vimbai:** I want to suggest how we can move this project forward. One of the things that I am doing with my writings and my community work is simply providing information. If people think we are against whites, that's fine but they need information. Take the case of Africa. Is it a third world? Look at the area of Africa. North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Russia all fit into Africa. Africa is the largest continent in the world – that's geography for you. The Maketa (?) projection which was used to colonise Africa belittles (?) Africa by two thirds. The Peters projection which is closer, leaves (?) Africa by one third. This is an example of information that must be shared so that we can restore the pride of our people. I say that Africa is the first world because the equator which is at the center of the world passes through Africa. The two meridians pass through Africa. So Africa is at the center of the world. So, give them information. That is one of the projects that I want to do.

**Wasif:** I think that the actual overwhelming crisis or problem of knowledge, education or information is that it is extremely unjust and in a state of unprecedented disequilibrium. This conference is not about finding harmony of dialogue. Its purpose is to correct this disequilibrium, to address the core causes of the problem and to try to find some sort of counter dialogue or alternate discourse which can start liberating us from the crippling or disempowering effects of this imbalance. Perhaps, because we did not state this from an institutional perspective upfront, and we got into the secondary issues of curricula or content, there is now a disconnect. So I want to state the problem upfront.

For me, the institution of the formal university as it has evolved over the past 200 years is pathological. Its very existence generates this disequilibrium and imbalance. It cannot be reformed from inside because of its purpose. It's like saying that the CIA can be reformed. The purpose of movements like Multiversity should be to bring the influence and the presence of formal academia down to its rightful level, which at best should be as a utilitarian skills center. The process of knowledge generation, wisdom, discourse and dialogue should be a lot freer in multiple diverse forms. It should be legitimized and understood just as academia claim the sole source of legitimacy of knowledge in any society. I don't see any issue with starting a critical discourse on that. It is a bizarre co-relation that if one critiques this extreme injustice, one is protecting oneself from any form of criticism. I don't see any co-relation here. If I am extremely critical of Western universities, it does not mean that I am automatically blind towards injustices committed in the Islamic world. We need to somehow bring out these covert assumptions and underlying hypotheses regarding what critiques and criticisms of the White Studies mean. We need to de-mystify these co-relations. Once extreme injustice exists, it is almost an unaffordable luxury to start thinking about striking a balance before we remove that injustice.

**Hardas:** I have some sympathy with what Farid is saying because if you look at the .... project as anti white studies and create something in response to white studies and that includes the West, what's the place of Asians and Africans in academia who live in the West, people like myself because in this war on White studies we are basically collateral damage, because we are having problems ourselves with Western academia and it seems that we cannot contribute to what is happening here because we are still in that paradigm. So where do we stand.

My second point is that if the problem is with application of social sciences in Asia and Africa and we are trying to deal with biases in existing methodology in social sciences, then I can understand this project. But if the problem is with social science in itself then what is the use of what we are doing now.

**Shao Lung:** I think Farid has brought up a worthwhile point but the reaction that we all feel is in itself is a symptom of the dominated condition in which we find ourselves in. The anger that we all feel and share is undeniable and it is very hard to be reasonable at the same time when you are trying to overcome the force of that domination. But an ethical practice or clarity to the work we are always doing is necessary because if we are going to fight monsters we have to be careful not to become a monster in turn. We know very well from the last generation of decolonization struggles that that's always a problem. At the same time, it is very hard to find a proper space for that anger and a proper space for openness as well. If you struggle with that alone it and you let it consume you alone, it can leave you burnt up. The point of having a network or community is precisely for you to have some mutual support and solidarity with those who have mutual awareness of the problem as well. That is one of the functions that Multiversity can provide.

**Partho:** I do not have a problem with the fears and concerns expressed here. They have to be confronted in some manner. What is somewhat problematic for me is to understand 2 kinds of languages in this discourse. On the one hand we are talking about Gandhiji. On the other hand, we are talking about the enemy, about irreverence, about subversion. We have to be very clear about where we stand when we talk about Gandhi. The Gandhian model is conflict, truth and non-violence. There is no element of subversion. You face the truth face to face and with a non-violent mode of conflict. For Gandhi there was no enemy. There was an adversary, with whom his relations were never sour or bitter but they knew he was an adversary. So are we going to have an adversary model or an enemy model? We have to decide.

My opinion is that the truth, non-violent and adversary model of conflict is much more powerful and mobilizable than the subversive model. I happen to have studied both the Gandhian movement and the Maoist movement and I am familiar with the subversive model, the guerilla model as well the *satyagraha* model. Perhaps we should have some discussion as to what kind of instrument we should use in order to win this struggle.

Another point I wish to make is that we are oscillating between the cultural and the structural. There is a heavier dose of the cultural expressions of deprivation and so on. There is an imperative need for understanding the structural mechanisms by which these asymmetries are sustained, reinforced, questioned and challenged. It is not a frozen situation that today there is asymmetry. Can we identify the process? Are there contradictions in this asymmetry really operating or playing? In many of the examples and illustrations I have heard, apparently the process has already begun. Zimbabwe is an excellent example of this. One of the projects that Multiversity can direct its attention to is to see whether we can identify these processes. Can we get into the structural factors of exploitation, of discrimination, of oppression as they stand in structural terms, and then be able to see whether there is any process by which some changes are taking place.

Finally, we should pay attention to what kind of knowledge should be produced. This will flow from the understanding of contradictions and whether they lie in the realm of exploitation or discrimination or oppression. Therefore production of knowledge in these areas becomes of primary importance. We need to know what is being already done and what further needs to be done. There is also the aspect of dissemination. Neither the production of knowledge alone, nor dissemination of knowledge alone is enough. We have to make both these processes parallel and complimentary.

**Ashis:** I want to very briefly comment on Partho's statement. It is a very interesting way of classifying responses by calling them adversarial model or enemy model. I am perfectly willing to opt for the adversarial model as long as you allow me, like Gandhi, to identify certain forces as "satanic". If in the adversarial model that is possible, then there is no problem.

**Sunil:** Some discussion is required on the paradigms embedded in the educational system or embodied by the educational system. Some discussion is also needed on whether at all one can pursue changes in content, while allowing the form to continue the way it is. We want to change the social science curricula of the universities and introduce new curricula. As far as my understanding goes, all universities are science universities. All the pursuits of the various departments (history, criticism, etc.) are modeled on the natural sciences. Social sciences are sciences by courtesy. They are called social sciences because they want to model them on the paradigms of natural sciences. Universities embody these thoughts and structures of knowledge, or the structures behind knowledge are embedded in the foundational aspects of knowledge. So when we say that we are doing something about the universities, we need to consider all this. Otherwise personal experiences will remain personal experiences only.

Multiversity's strategy cannot be merely increasing numbers from 10 to 12 to 16. Multiversity must have a strategy to approach the universities or to fight the university if necessary. It all depends on what is our objective. At any rate, we have to find a strategy to define our relationship with the university. How can we set ourselves the task of reforming the university? Are we doing atomic energy for peaceful purposes?

At this juncture I think we also have to recognize that in the last 5 years a new phenomenon has taken shape. The computer was once an instrument to be used in the science colleges, engineering institutions, those doing maths, statistics, economics, scientists and so on, for performing certain tasks and for solving problems. But now in the last 5 years we are seeing developments in our part of the world of a virtual society. This is a very recent phenomenon but our deliberations so far have not considered this aspect at all. We have to be able to relate to this concept of virtuality, where managers of knowledge are creating a social space where the management not the production of knowledge will be located.

Universities, right from inception till today, are places of production of knowledge as well as of organization of knowledge through the institutionalization of certain aspects of knowledge. Now the ruling class or the managers of knowledge have made a major transition. A new age has started unfolding where production of knowledge has become secondary. Go into the market and it is immediately apparent. Go into the educational system and watch the way it is changing and it is immediately apparent. Production of knowledge no longer occupies No.1 place. Management of knowledge has taken its position. This is going to rock the university if it has not already done so. So at this point in time, when the developments within the western world have created internal contradictions of colossal dimensions which the western world does not know how to handle, if Multiversity only keeps on debating whether we should be in the university or outside it and if we don't set ourselves the task of defining our objectives at the right level, I am afraid we will only be used by one or another of the major forces that are developing in the world.

**Vinay:** I want to make 2 brief observations. The first is regarding the comments made by Wasif. The proposition that there is no reason whatsoever to think that the university exercises any kind of monopoly over notions of wisdom, knowledge, etc. is absolutely acceptable to all of us. But there would be disagreement from those of us who work in universities to think that universities can simply be done away with, so to speak. They are here to stay. We have to work with them and we have to take very seriously the idea which some people want to resist, namely, that intellectual work is also a kind of activism.

Secondly, I refer to a point made by Farid. One of the comments that I agree with Farid is that there are several kinds of oppositions at work, some of which are not very productive. And they have by-passed all the interesting questions and debates that have been thrown up in the last 30 years. An example of opposition which has been uncritically accepted by those who talk about languages is the opposition between the metropolitan languages (English, French) and other languages for example Bengali, Swahili, etc. Now it is deplorable that there are places where students are penalised for using their local language in their educational system. But to think on the other hand that English is only a language of the colonizers, is to ignore the immense varieties of English that have developed over the course of the last 150 years, some of which may be unrecognizable to the English themselves.

Indians for example have developed their own variety of English. David Crystal, a lexicographer at Cambridge University, has argued that by the year 2020, Indian English will be the dominant form of English in the world. Whether his prediction is right or not is not really the point but what is very clear is that English is not merely, at this juncture in time, a language of the colonizers only. Nor should we think that the battle is only against English. For example in Tamil Nadu in South India there has been an anti-Hindi agitation and Hindi has been seen as a language of imperialism for people who do not speak Hindi. Many of them prefer English rather than Hindi. So, the politics of language is too complex to be simply reduced to an opposition between English as a language of the colonizers and the other languages which are those of the colonised.

**Shao Lung:** One thing that came to my mind today during Gloria's presentation is that it is not just the filthy corporate capitalists, and pharmaceutical corporations which are causing trouble in the Third World with the appropriation of resources. It is also the universities. Universities like MIT and others are turning into huge intellectual property rights manufacturing machines and they are hoodwinking us. They have hoodwinked Malaysia already by giving us a patent for a local version of a herbal viagra and taking the global patent for themselves and we are very happy that we have been recognized by MIT. A clear case of the colonized internalizing the colonizer.

**Hassan:** I want to talk on Farid's point of being self-critical. Being self-critical as a community causes problems because other people jump on the bandwagon too and they use it for completely different purposes. In Islam, self-criticism is always done privately. It is not necessary that one has to be seen as being self-critical in the public context. Criticism needs to be effective and we need to speak to the people we are criticizing to make them understand our criticism and then they can convince us or we can convince them. But one does not necessarily need to be public about it in our tradition. So we need to establish whether we are being critical for our own purpose or for the purpose of public consumption.

**Yusuf:** In the past hour and a half, a kind of sadness has entered my heart. I am not really sure why but I have learnt to trust my intuition. I got involved with this project right at the beginning, about two and a half years ago. I was very excited about it and I was honoured to be invited to join multiversity. What I saw this project doing was providing a space, not an eternal oppositional entity, but a space that where third world, indigenous knowledge, self, (howsoever we want to call it) can develop on its own. And then perhaps we could think of widening it beyond that which already exists - third world, South - which itself is a very vast circle already to deal with the diversity. That's what I got excited about in this project. I saw it as something new and different and something I wanted to commit to.

Since that meeting we have done quite a bit. We have launched two pamphlet series, we have Multiversity now on the internet, we also have a virtual library, although, from the original group only 4 or 5 persons have really done anything. Most people came, talked a lot and disappeared.

One of the things that I hoped would happen at this meeting is to come to know about other people's experiences. This is what Ashis started out with. He asked that we talk about things that we are doing. I need that kind of information and I suspect that others do too. I need to know that people are doing things and not just intellectualizing them. I want to know what kind of journals are being published, what kind of exchanges are happening between organic farmers in India and Malaysia, what kind of projects are blossoming that can become part of the Multiversity endeavour, instead of us just talking about what we ought to do. I hope this is what we can do in the time that we have left.

**Anwar Fazal:** For me the concept of Multiversity can be understood in 4 words - everything everywhere, and anyone anytime. Multiversity will provide the space to confront the powers that exist. What we need is not a balanced approach but a balancing approach. As far as university goes we should not think of merely changing the university and social science curriculum but we must think of a whole new way of dealing with social sciences and how we teach it. Knowledge does not belong only to the university. It is one of the means but so much knowledge is continuously happening within the community.

We have to bring 3 kinds of people together – one, the Ph.Ds, as a symbol of the persons whose profession is learning, two, the B.S.T.s, the Blood, Sweat and Tears people - also called people of passion, or the activists - who are the engine of change. There are some academics who are both Ph.Ds and BSTs but both these two kinds of people in the real world are unable to make change unless the third category, the GTDs are also there - the Getting Things Done people. These are the people who have the ability to understand how to work the system and how to move the system. Our hope is that with Multiversity we will draw all these three kinds of elements in our transformational struggle. I think we have that type of diversity within the group.

One thing that sustains all the three kinds of people is memory – the memories of things that we have been successful doing is also very important. So, the plea by Yusuf viz. what are the things that are happening is very important. Because the power of success breeds success. So, where is it within the movement globally that we can draw this kind of positive energy that we can share so that it will inspire people to link, to multiply and to accelerate. This information needs to be sent out systematically all over the world so that they can become the building blocks of success.

In Penang, we had two very simple projects to reclaim who we are. The first was called the Penang story where we got all the key components of Penang to tell their story. The initiative did not come from the university. It came from community organizations and they invited academics and lay persons to participate in the project. It became a very inspirational project for the participants as well as those who later viewed the project. It was a 2-year process that galvanized every one of those different sections.

The second project was an exercise on 'where do we want Penang to go'. We used the power of imagination to enable the community decide where we want to go, so that we

could work towards it. Within 2 yrs the community had organized this very systematically and in a very participative way, once again led by people who are community organizers. In every one of the fields, in politics, social justice, ecology not only were we able to identify a vision but also champions who were prepared to take a particular cause forward. And they were supported by other groups who may not have this as a central project but who can see the links with their own work. So, perhaps more of these kinds of things need to be done in Multiversity. And if we do we will find lots of inspirational examples to help us move forward. Multiversity therefore needs to provide that kind of positive future and thinking to enable us to draw on something which is eternally inspiring.

**Edju:** I want to give a proposition to Multiversity. Since Multiversity intends to bring people of different countries together it needs to have a representative in each continent. There has to be a Multiversity site with each representative having one page. The person in charge of each country has to work with the population of his/her country to build the knowledge of each community. The activity will be reflected on the page of the site so that anyone can go on the site and see how people in different countries are presenting their knowledge. This will also be a way of disseminating knowledge which involves very little money and will save costs of having meetings like this where travel is expensive. I am sure that we will find that each Multiversity page will be different from the others and that will give a good example of the diversity of Multiversity.

**END**