CROSS-CULTURAL AND CROSS-NATIONAL VENTURES

ASHIS NANDY

Ashis Nandy was born in 1937. He has worked for more than thirty-five years on two diametrically opposite domains of social existence – human potentialities and human destructiveness. The oscillations between these two domains have defined much of his intellectual life. Even in his ongoing study of genocide in South Asia, the work for which he came to Wissenschaftskolleg, the emphasis is not only on human destructiveness, but also on the resistance offered by ordinary people to organised machine violence and ethnonationalism. This has also brought him close to social movements and non-state political actors grappling with issues of peace, human rights, environment, and cultural survival. Originally trained as a sociologist and clinical psychologist, Nandy is also known for his work in political cultures and future studies. However, he has tried hard during the last two decades to allow his work to be contaminated by the categories, worldviews and styles of social criticism that emerge from – or could be built upon – vernacular subjectivities. Some of his books are *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (1983). *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: the Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination* (2001). *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (1987). – Address: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 29 Rajpur Road, 110 054 Delhi, India.

The three months I have spent in the Wissenschaftskolleg have been memorable in many ways. However, I shall remember with especial warmth the new friends and future collaborators in cross-cultural and cross-national ventures I discovered.

I had originally thought of the Wissenschaftskolleg as an escape or respite from the chaotic life I live at the borders of academic and public life and as a place where I would com-

plete at least a rough draft of my projected book on genocide in South Asia during 1946–48. I had been working on the subject for nearly eight years and the sheer grimness of the subject had begun to get at me. A quiet place with a good library, a few unknown faces with whom to exchange occasional pleasantries, a few polite intellectual encounters, and I thought I would get three uninterrupted months to concentrate on the manuscript that has been waiting for a while to be written. I had packed my books, notes and data files with that goal in mind.

It did not exactly go that way. The overall ambience of the Kolleg looked easy-paced at the beginning and the administration exceedingly polite and helpful. That ambience was underwritten by the sheer beauty and the elegance of the institution. But then, it turned out to be only a small part of the story. The Wissenschaftskolleg produced for my benefit a highly diverse group of Fellows and some rather exciting persons of whose existence I was not aware. (For instance, few would deny that a central figure of the intellectual culture of the Kolleg during 2003/04 was not an academic, but a professional musician and composer, Stefan Litwin.) As result, the conversations were sometimes exhilarating. The library service turned out to be not merely good but terribly efficient and disturbingly seductive; to my utter discomfiture, the library staff could produce for me virtually any book I asked for. A former Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg, presently a visiting Fellow at the research centre at Delhi where I work, had warned me about this but I had not taken him seriously. After a while it became obvious to me that I was being left with no excuse for not producing the manuscript I had promised to the Wissenschaftskolleg and to myself.

It was my singular good fortune to meet, during the very first week, a number of Fellows interested in what one could roughly call the politics of knowledge. The subject has been at the heart of my research concerns for many years, cutting across my changing research interests. Asked to name my discipline, I have often tried to get out of the difficulty by describing myself as a political psychologist, one who studies the psychology of politics while being aware of the politics of psychology. A sizeable section of the Fellows during the year seemed sensitive to this issue. Fortunately for me, many of them turned out to be members of a smokers' cabal that had a daily post-lunch session in the club room where ideas were tossed about with more fervour and less discretion than in the formal colloquia on Tuesdays. The stars of the cabal – from Dominique Pestre and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin to Ines Županov and Gil Anidjar – were irreverent towards everyone everywhere, whether in the Wissenschaftskolleg or outside. Raz-Krakotzkin alias Nono was usually the presiding deity, determined to flout all contemporary fashions in the knowledge industry. He not

only acted as the banker of cigarettes but invariably ended up making provocative formulations that ended in spirited exchanges and spicy *ad hominem* arguments from someone or other. The occasional voices of sanity and propriety who joined the group – the likes of Ousmane Kane, Beate Rössler and Pascal Grosse – could hardly contain the free associations of these fascinating unconventional thinkers and scholars who cared two hoots for political correctness and accepted academic wisdom and conventions. These brief post-lunch meetings quickly became my introduction to the collegiate self of the Wissenschaftskolleg.

Like all institutions with diverse disciplinary representation, I also met Fellows whose intellectual concerns could fascinate me only from a distance. However, I soon found out that one could safely make sense of their work in one's own way, though privately. Thus, Raghavendra Gadagkar, the environmental biologist at the Wissenschaftskolleg, who along with his charming environmentalist wife Vijayageeta did so much to make our stay comfortable and, indeed, introduced us to the life of the Kolleg, one day described at some length the theft of his briefcase. He lamented not so much the money and other valuables that might have been there in the briefcase, but the sizeable collection of invaluable, live, experimental ants he was carrying in it. I did not have the heart to tell him that I worried for days about the poor thief who, after a day of hard work, must have been rather surprised by his booty. I wondered if the thief had a family and imagined how embarrassing it must have been to open the briefcase in front of his family or girlfriend and spill the ants on the floor.

I came to work on genocides at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Arguably, Germany is in many ways the best place to study genocides, South Asia the worst. In Germany you do not have to explain to anyone why you are studying such a dismal subject. Nor do you have to elaborate on its scholarly or political-cultural relevance. The volume of work produced on the German tragedy of the 1940s is enormous and the influence of this work cuts across scholarly specialisations and cultural and national boundaries. The books on the subject are easily available. In addition, at the Wissenschaftskolleg there is a steady presence of scholars whose research interests demand some awareness of Germany of the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, I found to my astonishment that I did not have to justify even my usual heavy emphasis on the political-cultural and the psychological, to the exclusion of the social and the historical. The study of genocides from psychoanalytic and cultural anthropological points of view is now part of German academic tradition.

In South Asia, once I am outside the university circuit, I am repeatedly asked in a censorious tone if my work would not stoke ugly memories and deepen inter-religious fissures. South Asians forget not only because they are unable to mourn, but also because they try to forget as a normative statement or a moral gesture. Forgetfulness is linked not so much to a slogan such as "never again" but to slogans such as "forgiveness" and "live and let live". The refusal to mourn openly also probably hides a well-developed concern with what may be called "starting life again" by presupposing – through a tremendous act of will – that the slate has been wiped clean. Many respondents we have interviewed for our study have learnt to mourn in private and their families collude with the silence. Though since the mid-1990s a slow trickle of social studies of the genocide of 1946–48 has begun, they have been almost all done by second-generation witnesses, who have not seen the violence but lived with its presence throughout life. As a result, there are only scraps of data and empirical explorations on which one could build. In addition, in South Asia you have to justify to your fellow intellectuals at every step why you emphasise the cultural and the psychological at the expense of the historical and the social. To many South Asians, the emphasis itself seems a trifle obscene and a moral compromise with evil.

However, it is also possible to easily reverse one's position and claim that Germany is the most difficult country in which to study a genocide and South Asia, particularly India, the most promising. In Germany, studies of the European holocaust tend to provide *the* reference point of all studies of genocides and, for that matter, mass violence in general. There may be conflicting interpretations of the huge mass of data, collected over a period of fifty years, but during these years these interpretations have supplied a broad, if tacit framework within which most studies of genocides are now fitted. Even when there are closer parallels at hand, most African and Asian scholars of genocide fall back upon this framework and on the scholars who have created a space for the Jewish holocaust to be remembered as the paradigmatic human experience of mass violence.

The genocide I have studied, on the other hand, was more open-ended in many ways and allowed a greater play of liminalities. First of all, there is the question whether it can be called genocide at all. Could it have been an exaggerated, pathological version of a tribal feud or of sacrificial ritual? Or was it also an assembly-line violence of the kind which modern nation-states, often wedded to a theory of progress or to a historically determined civilisational mission, have customarily produced as a by-product of nation-building or state-formation? Or can all genocides be plotted on a three-dimensional space where they are simultaneously all three – sacrifice, feud and vivisection – to different degrees? Is that

why in 1946–48, the evidence of grassroots resistance to the violence and help given and received across religious boundaries is so great? As I leave the Wissenschaftskolleg, I have still not found answers to these questions. I hope to find them at some point. In the meanwhile, my thanks to all those who have pushed me to rethink my intellectual framework.