

The pillorying of Ashis Nandy: His critics need hearing aids

Written by Priyasha Nair

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by [Shiv Visvanathan](#) Jan 28, 2013 The Jaipur literary festival is almost notorious for creating storms in a teacup.

To its credit though, it offers a different flavor of literary tea every year. Last year, it was a variant of the Rushdie phenomenon, where a group of aspiring litterateurs read out passages from the *Satanic Verses* and then succumbed to political correctness. This year, the controversy came in a session chaired by Urvashi Butalia, publisher

Zubaan,

where the debate was about corruption. The participants were an assorted lot including Ashutosh of *IBN 7*, Tarun Tejpal of *Tehelka*, Philosopher Richard Sorabji, and Political Sociologist Ashis Nandy, who is also author of *The Intimate Enemy*. Tarun Tejpal set the tone of the debate by referring to the hypocrisy of the elite while

arguing how difficult it was to break its coral reef of corruption. Nandy began by taking off from Tejpal's comments. Nandy tried to suggest that corruption is a form of collective competence. The elite feather its nest through rituals of mutuality. One secretary gives a fellowship to a friend's niece and the other in turn offers a cozy

position to the secretary's nephew. Caste almost turns into a cozy club where the elite distribute the goodies of a system. Corruption thus becomes a way of diverting public goods and services to private gain. The elite played this game with great elan. Nandy's argument is a complex one. To understand it, one has to first understand that the electoral system circulates corruption. New groups entering the system therefore, see election as an opportunity for corruption. Indian democracy becomes a game of musical chairs of corrupt practices. Any one reprimanding a Dalit or Tribal for corruption often gets the response that, "it is

our turn now". The performance of a Khoda or a [Mayawati](#) confirms this will to corruption.

The only difference is that their behavior looks more blatant next to the oiled corruption games of the elite. Nandy's statement has to be seen in this context. Ironically he sees corruption as a form of confidence, of new elites entering into a

system. A corrupt Dalit who is milking the system understands and exploits the new rule games as well as a seasoned Brahmin Congressman. Corruption becomes a form of distributive justice in an electoral system, an Index of how well new elites can play the power game. Playing a one-man transparency International, Nandy claimed that the most corrupt

acts now came from OBCs, Dalits and increasing scheduled tribes. It was this statement that sparked the controversy. Political parties and activists had a field day asserting political correctness. Ashok Gehlot

observed that naming a political community, especially an oppressed class was not fair.

Kamal Farooqui claimed it reflected a mindset, and like Brinda Karat stated it reflected certain elitism. [Mayawati](#) was more ruthless in demanding that every legal mechanism

be used to ask for Nandy's arrest. Nandy was surprised by the controversy. He was quick to apologize but his apology was

more in the nature of clarifications. He said he was not trying to hurt people's sentiments.

In fact, he claimed his statement was in support of Dalits and tribals. Corruption, he claimed,

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was a sign of their confidence in handling the system, an ability to face up to the arrogance of the elite. However it did little to clear the air, with TV anchor Ashutosh describing Nandy's statement as "bizarre". How does one look at such a controversy which has Orwellian tones of some one being more corrupt than others? What Nandy defines as agency, as hope, is treated by others as an attribute, or essentialism about lower castes. One wished the critics had a hearing aid. Nandy was claiming that equitable corruption was indicator of the health of the openness of the system. He was implying that the right to corruption is as critical a right as the right to property, development or free speech. It was a nuanced argument probably made in a unnuanced way. A chorus of political correctness cannibalized the quote without any sense of Nandy's writings or his politics. Here was a man who had consistently argued that politics was the most open of systems, more open to new players and new ideas than the economy or education. A systemic comment was misread as a personal statement. There is something about our politics that combines subaltern ideas and populist

statements into a lethal hybrid of political correctness. Dalits and OBCs are treated as sacred cows. We provide them with an official identity kit while trampling their life chances. Nandy was trying to break through that hypocrisy, but unfortunately got caught in a fly trap of populism. Mayawati and Kejriwal both had their field day. One must emphasize that Nandy as a public Intellectual has always been controversial.

His writings on Sati, or the scientific temper or on Gandhi's assassination attracted similar vitriol. Nandy has mellowed but he still remains a 'street fighter,' ready to grapple with the fate of ideas, obsessed with the idea of democracy. This brings me to the last point, the importance of context for text. Maybe Nandy's

statement came on a day when official unity walked in uniform. Republic day presents Indian culture in statist tableaux. Fortunately this sense of order was challenged by the disorderly order of the Kumbh where a civilization festival provided a context to a parade of the nation's state on Republic day. Bollywood turned out at its official best where patriotism from Manoj Kumar to

Lagaan

was the preferred idiom. But Nandy once again proved the joker of conflating levels by reading corruption by Dalits as part of the new agency of democracy. He played the gadfly and public intellectual. The question is, can democracy learn to listen and then respond? A provocation can

be domesticated by an argument. Sadly one heard very few arguments. What one saw instead, was provocation being met by a vigilantism of political correctness. One hopes that more playful minds enter the debate. The Nandy controversy is a perfect fable of our literary and cultural impasse as constructed through politics. *Shiv Visvanathan is a social science nomad.*

<http://www.firstpost.com/living/the-pillorying-of-ashis-nandy-his-critics-need-hearing-aids-603932.html>

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