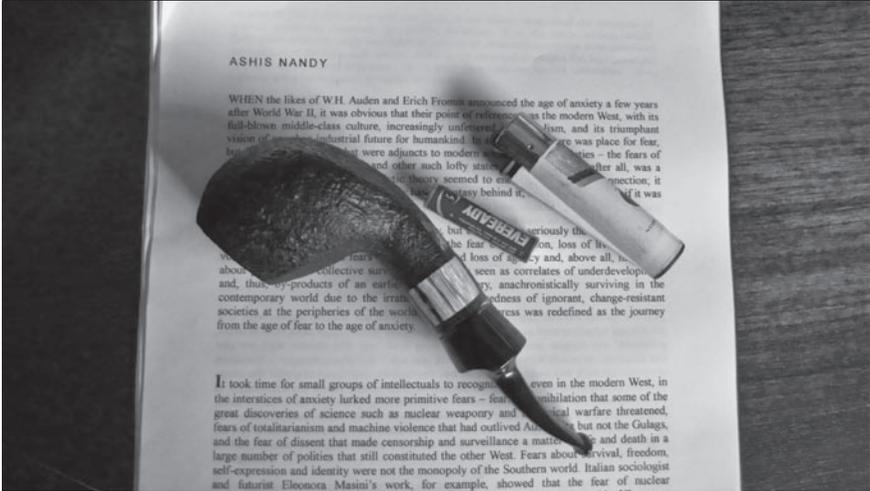


Without Fear or Favour

ASHIS NANDY in conversation with Shuddhabrata Sengupta



Shuddhabrata Sengupta (SS): Professor Nandy, I have been reading two essays of yours recently, again and again. One is “Welcome to the Age of Fear”, and the other is “Narcissism and the Age of Despair”, on terrorism.

Both of these texts seem to me to be speaking very directly to the theme of *Sarai Reader 08 – Fear*. In fact, they are like a kind of conspectus of the emotion, and I want to start by asking you how you think we learn to be afraid. Because what’s interesting in your conception of fear is the place you give, not just to physical, bodily fear, but also to the fear of things we may never experience, and I am quite curious to know about what you think we learn to be afraid of in that which may not even touch us.

Ashis Nandy (AN): I suspect that fear is a quasi-biological, human, learned response to various kinds of danger. A child is not fearful of fire. Unless and until a child gets singed, or associates attempt to go and hold anything on fire by his or her parents, he lacks fear.

Animals have fear. Animals may not have other sentiments associated with fear, but that’s a different story. So the first point in response to what you are asking is that we don’t have to learn to fear, fear is given to us as a tool of human survival. And perhaps because of that, fear in the normal sense, in everyday life, is a normal sentiment. Nobody gets anxious if your son shows fear of things. Unless and until it goes out of the range of normality – and this

happens under two or three circumstances. One is being perpetually afraid of something because that thing has gotten associated with something, it has acquired a symbolic load in the mind, it in a sense hampers your social life or social relationships. People begin to fear you if you are always fearful of certain things. This is not normal or natural.

There is no clinical profile for normal fear because it is part of human normality. There will be clinical profiles for certain kinds of exaggerated fear. Indeed clinicians fear, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts and psychologists fear, things more about anxiety and panic much more than fear.

For a long while, the excess of fear was seen as – not always, but generally, there was a tendency to view the excess of fear as a feature of less developed societies. Fear of ghosts, for instance – that will not be called pathological, it may be a part of a community's belief system, but the belief system itself will be seen as pathological.

SS: At the beginning of “Welcome to the Age of Fear”, you speak of an almost sense of relief with which Auden and Erikson announce the age of anxiety. And you talk now of a return to the age of fear. As if you, Ashis Nandy, are standing at the threshold as a doorkeeper and saying, “Welcome, welcome to the Age of Fear”. What, then, makes those who had this confidence of being sophisticatedly anxious, suddenly fearful again?

AN: This sensitivity was directly a byproduct of the Freudian revolution. Fromm was a psychoanalyst and a Marxist; Auden was deeply influenced by Freud, and indeed wrote a wonderful poem about him, one of his best.

One byproduct of this relationship was the distinction between fear and anxiety that was spelt out. Anxiety is a more diffuse sense of discomfort, with no fantasy in it. Fear usually has a concrete reason of fear, and even when it is vague, even when it is the fear of ghosts or witchcraft, has a clear-cut fantasy beneath or within it. So diseases which had this kind of fantasy were seen as particularly characteristic of more primitive societies, which had not gone through the process of disenchantment that the Enlightenment prescribed.

SS: So is the re-entry into the age of fear in advanced, industrial societies, in some way a paradoxical return to an age of enchantments?

AN: Yes, exactly; and there are clear fantasies. Entry into the age of anxiety – vague, diffuse anxiety, which does not have fantasies but rather has psycho-somatic expressions, such as cardio-vascular diseases, skin allergies, asthmas – these are the things that prompted the declaration of the age of anxiety.

Now, according to that theory, we are in a regression. We have not only fear, but one wonders what are the specific fantasies – fantasies may change, from area to area, person to person, there may be a plethora of fantasies, and these may vary.

Some may have the fantasy of meeting the Islamic hordes at the walls of Europe – crusader fantasies are being recreated. Some may have fantasies about hidden agents,

sleepers possessed of inner secrets, who cannot be identified by their looks, who can look like you or me, who can look like anyone else.

For a long time, European and North American society was blind to the presence of their own Muslim minorities. There has been a long history of African American Muslims, for instance, who were like other African Americans, but suddenly, now, people in America have woken up to them because (as Muslims, after September 11) they are surfaces on which their fears can be projected. And now they have to think about them, and they have to think about people who do not necessarily look any different from them. You cannot necessarily make them out by their skin colour or the presence or absence of an epithelial fold. This awareness has come back. And it has brought fears back with it.

SS: A return to the culture of the Inquisition, perhaps, where people were suspect not because they showed outward signs of difference. In fact, the person whom you feared most was the one who may have looked exactly like you, behaved exactly like you, but who was suspected of responding to the commands of some secret power.

AN: Traitors within – the fears of traitors within, and the concomitant wish or desire for an exorcism, is a very important feature of modern life. It had been pushed out of modern life without a recognition of the enormity of the passions that it contains. But now it has returned in full force.

The Nazis were reacting to similar passions in the case of the Jews, also in the case of homosexuals. Of course, you know that Adorno and Horkheimer found in their study of the Authoritarian Personality that people who scored high on their 'F' Scale also exhibited a tendency towards sado-masochism. Even a certain kind of hypermasculinity is associated with a vague sense of homosexual fantasies of various kinds. You fear what you fear not only because it is strange, but also because it reminds you of yourself.

SS: Let us invoke another kind of fear – the fear of annihilation. We are living in Delhi, the capital of a nuclear power, which has gone to war more than once with its neighbour, which is also now a nuclear power. If there is a city that should be the locus of this fear of annihilation, it should be here; and yet, there is a happy or unhappy deferral of the fear of annihilation. In modern metropolitan India, we are beset by many fears, but annihilation does not seem to be one of them.

The fear of the nuclear holocaust was a part of the folklore of contemporary urban life in post-Second World War Europe or Japan or the United States. We are more or less in the same position today. We are exactly where the United States or Europe were in terms of the nuclear arms race in the 1950s, but we don't seem to have the same generalisation of this fear. Though there are a few exceptions, there are comic books and the odd Hindi film, which do seem to obsess with nuclear holocaust fantasies, but there does not seem to be a generalisation of this fear. How do you explain that?

AN: No, I will have to disagree with you here. I think just because you cannot see this fear, it doesn't mean it doesn't in fact exist. Even in Europe and North America, in public life and in public rhetoric, this fear was fully disowned. Everyone went about their business as if nothing had changed, and yet you saw it in fantasy, in novels, in movies, and they were successful by being provocative, they did attract a lot of viewers and readers. Also, that which was hidden by and from adults was not hidden in the case of children, and studies do show that younger children often lived with this fear of annihilation. They had internalised it. And they had not internalised it only from their peers, they must have internalised it from the fears and anxieties of their parents, which in fact were not expressed or communicated but were present all the same. Often these children were very small, and when you asked them to paint and draw, it would express itself directly. I suspect that children in this case were acting as the unconscious of the society as a whole, and so were the artistic and literary products of the time.

Yes, in India, I do see a lesser expression of this fear, partly as a result of the fact that there is always an attempt by modern states to use these weapons as instruments of statecraft, which leads to a tendency to underplay their reality and the fears associated with them. The way, in India, in which nuclear accidents have been well-hidden, including the one that happened recently, say, for instance, the one that happened at the reactor at Narora, on the banks of the Ganga, some of the scientists concerned were sure that they would all die. Even scientists!

So, it is not what the politicians claim, and not what the manifest public culture in this country allows for that we must consider alone. Indeed, I will go further to say that this absence of anxiety is becoming a typical feature of a kind of 'Festive Style' which is the present form of capitalism's attempts to generalise all over the world.

SS: You mean the pressure to be always cheerful and confident?

AN: Yes, the demand that all unhappiness, pain and even the sorrow of death must be immediately forgotten. Such that you are normal, even if your parents die, you act as if nothing much has happened, that you must get on with life as usual, You are required to behave, if you come out of a major surgery which has probably reduced your life-span by three or four years, as if it is a small thing, and you say that you are going to join work in three or four days.

So this style, this 'Festive Style', where you have nothing to mourn and nothing to lament, is something that we have adopted whole-heartedly. And perhaps because this city, Delhi, as we know it today, which is a Punjabi refugee city (not the city that it was before 1947), this city has a cultivated style, which is perhaps a reaction to the suffering and uprooting that people here have had once to go through during Partition, and that memory, they (the inhabitants of Delhi) have been trying to work through rather aggressively. In that process, they have acquired this style, and they found this festive style of capitalism a nice endorsement. It has come as a godsend.

SS: At the same time, nowadays on television, we see public service announcements issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare which talk about depression as a clinical symptom. They used the Hindi word, '*avasad*' to describe an unhappiness without reason. They are often directed at parents, and ask parents to be vigilant about the unhappiness of children and young people; they say there is a cure, that you can take the person concerned to a doctor at your nearby health centre. It is interesting to note that along with the rise of the 'Festive Style', just as the pressure to be happy mounts, there is an acknowledgement of depression as a public health issue.

AN: There is no doubt about that. Data show that depression has become much more common in India than before. Previously, the majority of Indian psychiatric referrals generally featured two common categories: obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCDs) and hysteria. This is understandable; hysteria has psycho-somatic implications underpinned by specific fantasies; with the decline of these specific fantasies, the symptoms also became less common. Freud's first patients were hysterics, but hysteria declined first in Europe, and people teaching psychiatry in European institutions found it difficult to find appropriately hysterical patients to demonstrate to their students. But in India, it was very common.

Of course, OCD was considered to be a typically Indian disease, and it was often explained away; the middle class was very small, and, in upper-caste contexts, it was passed over, it was, how should I put it, not under-emphasised, but incorporated into everyday normality by saying, such-and-such a person has... in Bengali, we would say '*suchibai*', the compulsive and exaggerated observance of purity and pollution taboos and caste-linked prohibitions. It was the standard way of referring to the obsessions of widows. Every upper-caste Bengali household had somebody who suffered from OCD.

Now, the largest number of referrals comes from the sector we call 'depressed'. And many of them are clinically depressed. It is not mere sub-clinical melancholia, which you can easily explain away by referring to incidents and biographical details. But 'depression' per se is a much more serious matter, and maybe part of the load it carries has to do with the kind of issues that you are raising.

SS: Of being already in the age of anxiety even though fear is very much around us? Living in India, you have access to a diachronic sensibility, the experience of living in more than one time at once, which is very uncomfortable for people more used to living in one time at a time. Hence this layering of anxiety with fear, which is now a part of our general life here, which you say the West has to get used to again, but which we have lived with, both fear and anxiety.

AN: You are very right, but this has what I might call a robust side to it also. I remember Ravi Mathai, a former director at IIM [the Indian Institute of Management], Ahmedabad, once told me an anecdote about innovation. There was a cobbler in a village that Mathai was interested in who resisted all attempts to use new methods, techniques and technologies.

Even though his own brother was an 'early adopter'. So Mathai asked him, why don't you do like your brother, and take to the new methods, so that you too can earn more and be more productive. The cobbler said his brother's productivity may have increased, but his needs have also expanded, and that is why he needed all the money he could get, whereas he was content with what he had. "My brother cannot do without the things which I do not need", he said, implying in a way that he was in fact more prosperous, because his needs were more fully met, than his more 'productive' and 'innovative' brother.

As a final gambit, Ravi Mathai said to him, but people are saying that you are backward, traditional, unchanging, that you are stuck in the last century. To which, the cobbler replied by saying, "I decide which century I want to live in".

I thought this was a lovely reply. In India, this option is still available. From the 6th century to nearly-Stone Age aborigines, like the Onges of the Andamans, to fully modernised sectors of society, we have everything, the whole bloody range. This allows an enormously diverse range of experiments to go on, in Indian cities, in villages too, in Indian society as a whole. This diversity, this experimentation, can only make this society more vigorous and creative without threatening its basic styles, its basic algorithms of life.

SS: At the same time, we are beginning to get more instances of what we might call the psychopathologies of contemporary life. I have always thought that one can measure capitalism and development itself by the instances of serial killing. That serial killers, people who kill for no reason other than the enjoyment, pleasure or the drive to kill, are peculiar features of contemporary capitalism. As we know well from watching American slasher movies, they are, generally, single White men who live alone, are often highly successful, they are not necessarily social outcasts, but are often quite well integrated into society, and that they nevertheless channel the darkest drives of society and are able to camouflage them through their apparent normality. The veneer, or performance, of normality of the psychopath is I think now beginning to present itself in our newspapers.

AN: There is a lovely essay by George Orwell, "The Decline of the English Murder", you must have read it, which, for the first time, argues this case, in non-technical language, and I like it because of that. It conveys everything without using technical language. But if you will allow me to digress a little bit, then I will say that this is a very good measure you are suggesting, because you have in some way captured the spirit of a society where conformity is not demanded explicitly but is always extracted. Indeed, in no other society can dissent be as expensive, especially if dissent does not conform to the standardised, dominant modalities of dissent.

Regardless of the fact that people might make fun of Leninism today, we must remember that Leninism is a product of the modern age. A person who calls himself or herself a Leninist is a natural ally of the state, of society, of the family and the workplace. He might be seen as somewhat old-fashioned, but nobody will see his dissent as infantile or irrational. Whereas certain forms of dissent which do not meet this criteria, which seem insane, infantile and irrational, have very little space in contemporary society. This exclusion cuts across ideologi-

cal boundaries too. There is a consensual affirmation of normality. So some kinds of dissent are almost taboo.

And, as it happens, this is the kind of dissent that many artists and writers, without necessarily knowing it, have taken to, partly because it is acceptable that they should do so. It is not allowed if you are a scientist or a social scientist or a philosopher. I think that these sectors, I mean the sectors of art and fiction writing, remain virtually the only spheres where this kind of dissent has a place. In fact, there (in the arts) you can experiment with the immature, the infantile and the irrational much more openly and dramatically today than you could earlier. Earlier, the conformity extended there too.

Now, the controls are so tight that only in the imaginary can you play with these sensibilities, but in analytical writings, and in your thoughtful writings, you are forbidden access to these dispositions. Only rarely, maybe in the likes of Gandhi, maybe, perhaps partially, in Nelson Mandela or the Dalai Lama, you find an example of that.

There is a kind of strange split. You admire these persons and yet think that they have nothing to say about real, live politics. And that split is within you. And there is an almost desperate attempt to incorporate them in the culture of the state, as iconic figures who are 'too good' to be of any relevance to everyday life.

SS: So they are in a sense domesticated by placing them on a...

AN: On a pedestal... Absolutely!

SS: I'd like to bring you back to the question of normality, violence and pathology.

AN: Let us take the case of the present discomfort with the Naxalites (Maoists). It is almost becoming a sin to mention any larger issues, or think about any long term motivational factors or vectors when considering their opposition. The moment you bring up such matters, you are told, "We are not concerned with that, we are concerned with the immediate threats to India's security and its developmental programme".

The fact of the matter is, that in their irrationality, in their immaturity, and what is the third expression I used? Yes, infantilism...

SS: Infantilism? Lenin's expression, 'the infantile disorder'?

AN: Yes, infantilism. Now they too, the Naxalites (Maoists), I mean in all their immaturity, irrationality and infantilism, have nevertheless hitched upon something which has served them well. Namely, our record vis-à-vis our tribal population. What we have done in 60 years to them has created an enormous reservoir of bitterness and anger. The Naxals have simply stumbled upon that base. They (the Naxals) might have their own motivations for doing so. They might have discovered an ideological vantage point that allows them to vent their anger as legitimate. They might have taken advantage of it to meet the needs of their anger and

hostility, which were looking for a target of a different kind. In other words, this might have become a vehicle of their own private psycho-pathologies, but this does not detract an iota from the fact that they have found a hearing in a very large sector of our tribal population. And I suspect, I am convinced, why should I say suspect, I am indeed convinced that the bitterness and anger of the tribals is not unjustified.

Look at our developmental profile. Look at the way in which our factories and our dams have displaced people, and find out the proportions of tribals displaced as compared to the proportions of others displaced in these ventures, and you will always find that we have been ruthless with them.

And even this present nervousness and anxiety and fear centering on the Naxal uprising or upsurge (whatever you would like to call it) is partly born out of the feeling that the tribals are sitting on a goldmine which they cannot use and nor will they let others use. And the best that we would like them to do is to politely, obediently and gracefully vacate their place in history and enter the textbooks of history, so that we can celebrate them as people who were 'once staying here', and whose creativity and colorful life can become remembered exemplars of what India could have been.

Their only crime is that they are, in fact, our next-door neighbours. We would like to talk about them in the past tense.

SS: You have written eloquently about the narrowing space of anguish as some sort of an epi-phenomenon of the expanding space of fear. Perhaps what you are expressing is that the narrowing of the space for the expression of the anguish that these 'neighbours' feel probably transforms them into the vectors of our fear, and the objects of our fear.

AN: Yes. You are probably right. I suspect that we are seeing the beginning of the end of our tribal population. We have always been unhappy that we have not been able to do to them that which the Americans did to the American Indians and what the Australians did to the Australian aboriginals. America and Australia are the best examples of what settler societies can do. And we are psychologically becoming like settler societies. We, urban, middle-class, metropolitan Indians, are becoming like a 'settler society', confronting around us a huge population of people we have consigned to the category of the 'primitive', the 'sub-human', about the existence of whose souls we can debate endlessly, like some European evangelical groups did in the 18th century.

That is exactly the situation which we are in today. I am afraid I see very little sensitivity to this. Only yesterday, I received news of a Gandhian ashram being sacked (by agencies allied to the state) in Chhattisgarh. This is not surprising to me at all. But it is pathetic. It is pathetic on compassionate grounds, but it is also pathetic on intellectual grounds. It shows the utter poverty and shamelessness of the metropolitan culture of India as it is functioning today.

SS: If we relegate a population to a position outside our constructed horizon of humanity, then they become the repositories of all our favourite fears?

AN: Not only of fear, but even of all the categories which we love. They also become the repositories of purity, of honesty, of simplicity, of austerity – of all kinds of things that we have disowned. We feel the need to have them around as ‘categories’ that can act as balancing forces against our greed, our consumerism, our individualism. So, after we have made them extinct, after we have pushed them into the Indian Ocean, after we have ensured that they exist only in the textbooks of history, then we will be invoking them as reminders of possible checks on our lifestyles.

SS: I want you to talk briefly about the absence of fear. That specific kind of absence of fear which translates as impunity.

AN: Impunity in Indian public culture is primarily based on the fact that if you have big money, no one can touch you. The regimes that are central to the system cannot be persecuted, cannot be held accountable. But there is another kind of impunity. And that is, I think, a trickier thing. It is the feeling that you are invulnerable because you are on the side of progress and development, and thus have nothing to fear.

That cultivated sense of invulnerability is constantly threatened by a tacit awareness, a latent awareness, that you are actually very vulnerable. Vulnerable in two senses: one, that electoral fortunes cannot be predicted with certainty, and that this time there are large enough sectors of the population who have paid for the kind of progress, development and modernisation that you have opted for, and these sectors are now demanding an equality that you cannot give them, or a form of representation which can be very threatening. Very threatening. I am afraid that this entire Naxal upsurge is a test of Indian democracy. My feeling is that Indian democracy will emerge triumphant, though it will make a compromise with the elites, and also try to keep its developmental journey unhindered.

SS: To come back now to a different question. When you were growing up, there was fear of social crises erupting and so on and so forth. But I think a recognition needs to be made of a different kind of fear. The fear that somewhere in a market place, a bomb may go off. This identification of the very material structure of urban life – dustbins, cars, tiffin boxes. Now we are told a camera can be a bomb, a tape recorder can be a bomb, phones can be bombs. So what does it do to our ordering of our desires and our ability to construct a day-to-day rationality and commodities?

AN: I think there is a new kind of contamination that is coming in. Anyone, you, me, anyone can be contaminated. Like this man who shot his colleagues in America. We have a fear of contamination of things in cultural terms, in emotional terms.

The kind of anxiety that people had about contamination in earlier times centred on diseases. Now, that fear of contamination is lessened, but it has been displaced on to the idea of ‘secret enemies’ who are like you (us) and therefore cannot be distinguished. My suspicion is that the global middle class culture will have to live with this fear, because this

culture did try to close all options, imagining (to use that buzz word) an 'end of history' and that human beings have at long last found the final answer to problems of social and political arrangements. I think that the human quest for a perfect public life has not ended and cannot end. That (quest) is in the nature of human beings. Many things that in the past looked as if they were final answers turned out after a point of time to be hollow options that were not worth pursuing. We live in times when, after 70 years of a revolution, the revolutionary regime collapsed, and despite all the violent means at its disposal, this superpower could not sustain itself, what to speak of sustaining an alternative world. The vulgarity of that enterprise was so enormous that you do not find enough numbers of vestigial followers in the societies that they ruled. I mean, the number of Leninists in India is far higher than the number of Leninists in Russia.

SS: Yet Stalin is very popular in Russia nowadays...

AN: That is a nationalist thing. It is seen as a marker of greater certainty. It's like Peter the Great being popular in Russia. Russians would not like to live either under Peter the Great or under Stalin, but still they are popular. Exactly just as Mrs Gandhi or Subhash Bose are popular, posthumously. Their ghosts are popular. That is part of human nature. A desire for a fantasy Stalin or a fantasy Indira Gandhi attracts people because they are safely dead.

SS: I want you to help me think about something you hinted at earlier – the therapeutic possibilities of anguish and despair. You say that the diminishing of space for anguish and fear expands the space of fear. This is an unorthodox thought, one would normally think that anguish and despair are emotions that you would like to avoid in your life, and yet you insist on a place for them.

AN: In fact, they are thought to be psychiatrically marked – anguish and despair – but I would like to see some possibilities there, and I feel (to use the expression of Laing), "Breakdowns can also be breakthroughs". I guess I am more optimistic than others, because I feel that something more creative will come out of this, all these sacrifices will not go in vain, and often the carriers of new messages are not as likable as persons as we would like them to be, but that is okay.

SS: Before we began our interview, in the conversation leading up to it, you spoke of the childhood sources for learning about the unhappiness of the world, and you spoke about the Bengal famine of 1942, you spoke about communal violence, and the World War. What lessons did being very young, in the face of extreme abjection, give to you that you carry through your life?

AN: I think I learnt human cruelty to human beings can be limitless, provided you can close your mind and find in it a larger purpose. Because we have lost faith – because, to use those

much-used words, we have 'killed god' – we feel that we have acquired almost god-like power in dispensing life and death. You might remember, Stalin prohibited any alms, any help, to the famine victims in the Soviet Union (in the Ukraine). It was a man-made famine, everyone knows that. And people swallowed that prohibition. I do not think that it was because it was a police state, but I think it was because, in some sense, it was seen as a 'normal' blood sacrifice for the making of a great nation. One of the tacit messages of development in our times is this, an unsaid formulation of state formation: 'You do to your people what we have done to our people to become what we are today'. And that is why the Indian and Chinese effort to 'equal' the West involves an unacknowledged acceptance of hard statecraft and the glorification of a hard state which will navigate the turbulent waters of international and domestic politics.

SS: Is that something you fear, personally?

AN: Yes, and no. Because I am also fully aware that this cannot pass in India. It cannot pass in India. It has to give way. In the case of China, it will be an enormous struggle. But in India, it just cannot sustain itself. Things have to go to the people for whatever reason (that's another discussion), they will have to go to the people, and ultimately their fate will be decided not the way the Naxals would like it, but the way the fate of despots has been decided earlier in this society, through the ballot box.

The Naxals, though they might think of themselves as the agents of history, have actually stood in the way of a more preferred and more acceptable solution of the problem, in the sense that if, for instance, 12 or 13 percent of Muslims in India are said to affect the results of 110 or 113 constituencies in the general elections, it is unthinkable why you could not think of the tribal population in a non-violent democratic way making a huge electoral impact. It would probably have taken lesser sacrifices, and lesser effort.

SS: In that sense, would you agree that the hard state would always prefer its enemy to be someone like the Maoist insurgent?

AN: Absolutely. For example, the Israeli state is the harshest with those who have opted for non-violent resistance to it, they are the ones who are arrested first, and they (the Israeli state) have taken great pains to ensure that such movements do not take off because they know that, in the present global situation, that could be really dangerous for their power.

SS: Thank you, Professor Nandy, for taking this time out to talk at such length about Fear, without fear or favour!

AN: I am afraid it's been my pleasure.