Talking India

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in Conversation with
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thinker, so that we can look at him, I mean, India can look at him, more profoundly.

AN: I agree with you entirely. It's probably someone like you, someone who has come from outside, who can say that. The Indian élite has shelved Gandhi by calling him a saint and putting him on a pedestal as the patron saint of the Indian nation-state. If you see my tongue-in-cheek essay 'Gandhi after Gandhi', you will find me trying to sabotage that stereotype, because that's a stereotype that has not sprouted spontaneously. It has been cultivated and promoted and sold to the Indian middle classes. They have been brought up on that. Even if I can't break it, the next generation will do so in any case.

Globalization and our Future

RJ: Since we are talking about theories of culture, let's continue with globalization, which is an important event in today's world. I was reading recently an interview with the former managing director of the International Monetary Fund, where he has described globalization as an acceleration of human destiny. According to him, not to see in globalization a formidable opportunity to bring the human race closer to working together for common prosperity is to box with one hand behind your back. Well, I suppose that is not exactly your point of view.

AN: This slogan of globalization sounds a trifle hollow to people like me, not because I do not recognize the pitfalls of the earlier Indian system, which one can call bureaucratic socialism. It was also oppressive in its own way. It was heavily slanted in favour of the urban middle class, and carefully built up the despotism of the salariat. It was not so much anti-business—some business houses wielded enormous political clout—as anti-entrepreneurial and anti-initiative. The previous system was also not pro-poor, though that was the dominant ideology. Otherwise many things would have changed radically in India during the last 50 years.

The easy acceptance of globalization is a reaction to the earlier system. Those hostile to globalization are not lamenting the demise of a welfare state but the death of the dream of a welfare state. The main problem with globalization is that it presumes this is the first such effort, whereas in this part of the world, people remember colonialism as the first effort at globalization. Colonialism was global, both politically and in terms of its values. 'The sun never sets on the British empire' was a common saying. It was a global empire, and, in that global order, Britain dominated. That attempt to globalize ended with the mass violence witnessed in the twentieth century in the form of the two world wars. They were also global. They were called world wars after all. Indians were also exposed to that. In World War II, more Indians died than the citizens of some of the countries that were the combatants.

Because the earlier attempts to globalize were not pleasant in many ways and had violent associations, the general attitude to this globalization is partly shaped by those earlier experiences. It is perfectly understandable when persons call this globalization a second edition of colonialism. Many proponents of globalization get very angry and impatient when they hear this, but I think that this perception is to some extent natural. This is one part of the story.

The second part is that this globalization presumes that it is universal. Whereas it is only global, not universal. By universalism I mean that which has the capacity to transcend cultural, political, and social systems. I don't think this globalization has that capacity. It tries to be universal by excluding a sizeable section of the world by either forgetting them or by declaring them irrelevant or superfluous. It has its own idea of universalism, picked up lock, stock, and barrel from the postwar culture of the United States. But many of the cultures it is trying to displace, marginalize, or corner also have their own ideas of universalism. These versions clash.

One could put it another way. The attraction of globalization for many is that it is spreading the more universal values of their culture. Colonialism began the task but could not finish it. However, there
are other cultures that see this as an attempt to subvert their principles of universalism. For instance, many Islamic cultures feel that the principles of universalism that globalization is sponsoring or emphasizing negate the universalism of Islam. Even protest movements against globalization have begun to feel that they are more truly global and that they represent universal values better than mainstream globalization does.

RJ: Yes, but I have a problem with that. Almost unnoticed, globalization is bringing with itself two packages. One is a new linguistic order; English is becoming the language of one-third of the world’s population, and more than 80 per cent of the content posted on the Internet is in English. Secondly, I think it is destroying the classic welfare state, if not the nation-state. So it’s changing the face of our societies.

AN: Up to a point, I agree with you. I may not regret the weakening of the nation-states, but I do regret the deliberate weakening of the welfare state. My attitude to this globalization is framed by the awareness that, in many countries, globalization will condemn something like 10 to 20 per cent of the population to oblivion and death. In India, I think it will result in the extinction of something like 10 per cent of the population, including many communities and tribes that do not live in a monetized economy and have a different cultural and social order. They don’t have the time to adjust or learn the tricks of the trade. My fear is that it will result in the death of these cultures and the collapse of the life-support systems of many small, isolated communities. Already, one-third of India’s 250 odd tribes have been uprooted due to fifty years of development and fifty years of state capitalism or bureaucratic socialism—it comes to the same thing—that India has practised.

The important thing to remember is that—this is ignored in India—globalization is not built on a deliberate, self-conscious attempt to promote it. That may be the case with some sections of the Indian élite; that may be the case with some of India’s economists, particularly development economists; and it may also be relevant for some of the country’s political leaders. But acceptance of globalization among most sections of the Indian people is a reaction to their hostility or reservations about the earlier system. Ordinary people, even the supposed beneficiaries of the welfare state, found the system oppressive, humiliating, and totally dominated by the bureaucracy.

RJ: Are you referring to Nehruvian times?

AN: Yes, even in Nehruvian times. And the nature of the system was most obvious to those coming in touch with it for the first time. They neither had the style nor the self-confidence to demand what was due to them. Indeed, what was due to them was given to them as a great favour. We had a bank next to our house. When we went there, they treated us in one way and our domestic help in another, even though she probably had a larger account, as we had our main account in another bank. We would see people queuing up to deposit money, deposit their own hard-earned money into the bank, and the bank employees would be busy listening to the cricket commentary on the radio. They were rarely at their desks. Some of them brazenly came to our house to see the cricket matches on television during banking hours. In return, we didn’t have to stand in the queue. We gave our cheques to them and they sent the money to our house.

Anecdotes don’t take us very far. All that I am trying to say is that this kind of culture can survive in a democracy only as long as those coming in touch with the government institutions—banks, railways, insurance companies, utilities, public transport—are small in proportion. It cannot last when a large proportion of a country’s citizens have contact with such institutions. Their discontent begins to show and someone is bound to take political advantage of it sooner or later. People say that during the last thirty years, India has suffered from a series of scams. Actually, the entire state sector has become a scam. Corruption and nepotism has eaten into the innards of the Indian state and there has been a steep decline in trust in politicians and bureaucrats. That’s a dangerous development. The rise of
authoritarianism is often preceded by such cynicism. I may not be a great admirer of globalization, but I applaud the shrinkage of the state.

RJ: But the style of functioning of state institutions in India has not changed with globalization. Has it?

AN: Government institutions and state-owned corporations may not have changed that much, but the private sector has changed a bit because of competition. Even the public sector has improved in some cases. But that's not the point. My point is, what kind of stake do we expect vulnerable sections of society to have in the idea of a welfare state? I think very little. You can call them short-sighted; you can call them uninformed. The fact is that globalization has not been and will not easily become an electoral issue in India. People felt cheated and humiliated earlier; they feel cheated and humiliated now.

Often, opponents of globalization do not recognize the fact, that it's very difficult to make globalization a political issue, except where new policies directly impact the livelihood and life-support systems of the people. Like, for example, in agriculture. In some parts of the country, the peasants have been directly affected by the new political economy; and they have protested. When even protest is not possible, they have committed suicide. Some researchers believe that about 25,000 peasants have taken their own lives in the last fifteen years in some of India's most prosperous states. That can be considered their way of protesting against globalization. However, on the whole, even the victims of globalization don't think their problems began with globalization, just as they don't believe that their humiliation and harassment in nationalized banks, railways booking offices, public transport, insurance companies, and government offices began after globalization.

That is why opponents of globalization are finding it difficult to organize their opposition to the extent they would like. Even if you raise the question of language, while it may be true that 80 per cent of the content on the Internet is in English, we have to remember that less than 0.5 per cent of Indians have computers, probably around 2.5 per cent of Indians speak English, and a little more than 60 per cent are literate. Some discrimination and disparities do not touch the majority of the population, or touch them less. This is a problem of the middle class, not of ordinary Indians, who couldn't care less about whether 80 per cent of the content on the Internet is in English. Even if this percentage increases to 100 per cent, how would it affect them? In any case, the Indian elite have used English as a mark of status and a symbol of dominance for nearly 200 years. Those who have been subject to their status game and dominance do not find the new power of the English language strange or alien.

RJ: Would you say this is a common problem not just in India but also in Africa, the Middle East, the Arab countries, Iran, and Turkey?

AN: It is perhaps less of a problem in the Middle East because the vernacular has not been cornered and marginalized but given a lower status the way it has been in South Asia and in Africa, in particular, and in the colonized world in general.

RJ: Where everybody speaks English and French?

AN: Not everybody but the aristocracy, certainly the ruling classes, have always spoken English or French.

RJ: Well, it's interesting because Karl Polanyi actually confirms what you say. About half a century ago he said that the market, left to itself, would destroy society and ensure the demise of countless individuals who contribute nothing as consumers or producers. I fear that with the growth of the world population, the volume of so-called useless and superfluous people is growing every day. What you are saying is that these people are going to be annihilated. They are born in slums and will die in the slums, more quickly now because of the process of globalization.

AN: Yes. These ideas of obsolescence and redundancy have been underwritten by the concept of scientific rationality. This is one point I did not touch upon while talking with you yesterday. Those that are seen as obsolete and redundant also are seen as inferior in culture; they are seen as Stone Age savages who have somehow survived to this day due to the benevolence of the earlier systems of political
economy. It is interesting that we always talk of precolonial systems as oppressive, but the fact of the matter is that these people—those outside the monetized sector and the reach of modern media and education—survived those systems, but are finding it difficult to survive this one. This tells you something about where we stand and what the moral status of our civilization is. I think this enforced extinction, this attempt to consign people to a slow death, will brutalize society. In the long run, somewhere along the way, we will have to pay the price for it.

RJ: Is this the same subjection and death that, for example, somebody like Tzvetan Todorov describes in his book *The Conquest of America*, with the indigenous South Americans as the victims?

AN: In many ways. I have little doubt about that. Africa has also experienced the benevolence of modern civilization. Europe has paid a price for that cruelty, for what they did in the Americas and in Africa. The Nazis imported the model into Europe. It was not supposed to be imported; it was a model they had developed only for the non-European world. The Nazis, however, showed both Teutonic precision, consistency, and persistence and created a problem for European civilization. I think the model we are now creating for a section of our own people, and the ruthlessness we are demonstrating in pushing our political-economic agenda, will ultimately extract a heavy price from our societies and political culture. We shall have to pay for it.

The Price of Progress

RJ: So, if politics cannot transcend the market and become more democratic worldwide, then the twenty-first century may be worse than the twentieth.

AN: That’s possible, but I am still hopeful. Never in the past have we seen such widespread awareness of what is going on. Never have we seen the message of democracy become so pervasive the world over. Even the most oppressed sectors in the globe are dreaming of democratic freedoms, civil rights, and the right to shed aspects of their own cultures, while often aggressively re-affirming their cultures. Wherever there are attempts to throttle their voice, there has come, from somewhere, more affirmation of identity and a distorted expression of the aspirations of the excluded, in the form of fundamentalism and ethnic chauvinism. I have the feeling that gradually this awareness will spread further, and what regimes can get away with today, they may not be able to in another twenty years. The coming decades are going to be crucial.

RJ: I would say the same thing, confirming what you have just said. I think that globalization could itself bring to our door one final irony. This irony is that, suppose technology continues to shrink distances, and the world truly becomes a global village, and a sense of common belonging sulfuses all humankind, then people in developing societies would see rich nations from close and start using them as a reference point, and feel deflated by the comparison?

AN: This seems important. Could you reformulate your question?

RJ: I mean, the world’s poor may develop strong feelings of envy and resentment towards the world’s rich, just because of new technologies, because of the shrinkage of distances through new technologies, and because the world is becoming a global village. This may be the final irony of globalization, which may destroy the legitimacy of the global system.

AN: It’s not all in the future. Globalization has already created an enormous explosion of expectations, ambitions, and greed. Previously, the kind of high-pressure consumerism we see today was confined to a few. The expression ‘newly rich’ was a term of abuse, so was the expression *nouveau riche*. Often, the over-consuming scion of a royal family or aristocracy was seen as a decadent, deviant member of the family. This was because, if you were part of the elite, you not only had to learn how to consume elegantly, and discreetly, but also how and when not to consume. Even during colonial times,
concept of progress and where this idea of progress has brought us. We have, for over a century, been dragged by the prosperous West behind its chariot. We have been choked by the dust, deafened by the noise, and overwhelmed by the speed. We all agree that this chariot drive was progress, but I would like to say, like the character played by Burt Lancaster in Visconti’s film, *Conversation Pieces*, that sometimes ‘the price of progress is death’.

AN: There is little doubt about this. We have tried to climb an imaginary hill called progress, perpetually out of breath, panting, trying to do what others have done. These others think they have the divine right to be our perpetual advisors, because the elites in our societies have given them the mandate, and large sections of our literati choose to live permanently in the intellectual world created by the rich and the powerful. Often, when I discuss public issues with my colleagues, or when young scholars give me their papers to read and comment upon, I get the feeling that they do not want to talk to me or to others like me. They actually want to talk to their ego ideals and mentors in the West, and want my comments, to be able to communicate with them better.

Also, as I have said before, there is this widespread fear in the people, as the dark side of democracy and progressivism encourage our elite to treat our poor, our marginalized sectors, with as much harshness and cruelty as the Europeans did earlier, to beat the so-called illiterate, superstitious, tradition-bound people into shape, to make them fall in line.

The popular version of progress means nothing more than approximating the American standard and style of living. The American way of life, the senior George Bush once said, was not negotiable. He was responding to some demands of environmentalists. That non-negotiable standard of living constitutes a non-globalizable feature at the heart of globalization. For everyone knows that the world just does not have the resources to allow every society to reach that standard. But we have chosen to run after that mirage and run away from the realization that we are chasing a mirage. The running
has become more important than reaching the target. Because as long as we run, we have a shared, long-term, social goal to offer to our people. The moment we reach the target, modernity will offer us what it has already offered to the successful—meaninglessness, boredom, and loneliness.

It is obvious that somewhere, somehow, something will have to give way. Things will have to change. Newcomers in the game may take time to understand this, but the old, cynical experts in the development community know this. They have already, in their heart of hearts, written off Africa. They see it as a continent that will be denuded of most of its population in another five or six decades. They probably also think that those who cannot run to keep up with this chariot of progress do not deserve to survive. This is an attitude that also colours much of our attitude to poverty. All poverty has been dehumanized during the last fifty years. There were people previously who lived a reasonably healthy and creative life, despite being poor. People in the monasteries were always poor. Many writers and artists were poor. Teachers were expected to be poor, or, at least, austere. The Brahmins in India, the much maligned Brahmins, were expected to live austere and were sometimes poor. The tribal communities have mostly been poor. There was some vague awareness, amidst all the hypocrical glorification of poverty, that social status didn’t have much to do with money. There was some space for some degree of austerity, voluntary poverty. This gave some dignity to those who were left behind in the rat race of life. They could identify with those who were voluntarily poor and live with a modicum of self-respect.

Now, we have rubbish this concept of poverty and collapsed it with destitution. The earlier poverty allowed you to live an austere life in a minimally healthy fashion because the lifestyle of the poor and that of the rich were different. The rich were supposed to have many clothes; the poor only a few. As a result, in the tropics at least, you could remain poor but reasonably clean. Similarly, the rich ate one kind of food, the poor another. The rich lived in one kind of houses, the poor in another. But the poor at least had coarse grains to grow, roots and berries to collect and eat, and mud huts to live in. It was a hard life, but it was not undignified. Unlike the destitute, the poor did not have to starve to death on the pavements of prosperous cities.

Now, in urban slums you will see the poor live the down-market version of the same life the rich live. The poor also wear jeans, but the jeans are dirty and torn. The poor have dilapidated black-and-white TVs and unsteady chairs. They drink tea and coffee. They won’t sit on the floor and waste money on drinking lassi or buttermilk, which, at one time, many families gave away to the poor. Finally, we have made it a part of our culture to constantly revalue the concept of poverty. So many people who have lived a perfectly normal life now think they have been living in poverty. For example, in Europe before World War II, most people did not have separate rooms for each child, but they didn’t think they were poor because of that. But now in Europe, the concept of poverty has expanded. They think they have progressed; they all want to have a separate room for each child, like the Americans. Previously in Europe, even when there was central heating, it was not considered necessary to have rooms so highly heated that one had to wear summer clothes in winter. Now, like the Americans, Europeans also like to wear T-shirts at home when it is snowing outside, forgetting the amount of energy spent on the heating. And they think that they were poor when they could not do these things. To continue to live in this style, they have to be a part of the global structure of dominance.

Naturally, the former colonies have also dutifully followed suit. I suspect the concept of poverty is expanding in such a way that many millions living comfortable lives have begun to think themselves poor; we are constantly busy removing our own poverty before removing the poverty of others. In fact, poverty removal itself has become a billion-dollar enterprise, one of the twenty largest multinational corporations in the world. The poverty establishment makes sure that there is no time left to think of the more obscene instances of poverty. The decline of the welfare state is a part of a larger picture.
Human Culture and National Identities

RJ: There was a culture of the rich and a culture of the poor even in the Middle Ages, as you have said, in Europe and in many other places. But today, you have neither a culture of the rich nor a culture of the poor. You have a culture with no spirit, a culture with no education. The Europeans probably know this. For example, the Germans use three expressions when they talk about culture—Kultur, Geist, and Bildung. Bildung means education, as in Bildungsroman. It’s the process of education. So earlier, when speaking of culture, or of the culture of the poor and the culture of the rich, there was always the connection with this process of education, bringing up, formation. There was also always the idea of the spirit, Geist. But these concepts of culture have not survived.

AN: Our first responsibility is to learn to distinguish between poverty and destitution. By destitution, I mean poverty where you starve to death. Now, many indigenous peoples or tribal communities, in India and elsewhere, were traditionally poor, in the sense that they had no income or a meagre one, but they did not starve to death, like now, except when nature failed, once in a rare while. Collective life in our societies may not have died out, but communities are being eroded. In a metropolitan city, if you have zero income, you can starve to death. Community life, which survives now mostly in rural areas, even if in a tattered form in many places, does not survive in cities, except in the form of some symbolic charitable enterprises. So, when Gandhi said, ‘Let us get rid of destitution and learn to live with poverty,’ he was articulating a profound truth that has no reflection in contemporary economic doctrines or public consciousness.

Globalization is a true child of old-fashioned development in that sense. It reduces poverty, not destitution. In fact, it creates destitution.

RJ: Yes, that’s very true. Another element we see today in the globalized world, which has great influence, is the unprecedented mobility of populations moving around the world. Indians going from India to the United States, Arabs going to West Europe, and so on.

Everybody is moving. This might create multicultural situations; it has already created multicultural situations. How do you think cultures can establish a national identity—we call it a national identity because we can’t call it a cultural identity—in this totalizing, pan-capitalist turbulent world?

AN: I didn’t get the question. You will have to formulate it again. Please.

RJ: I’m talking of the unprecedented mobility of populations today. It’s a new phenomenon created by a globalizing world, and the functioning of capitalism today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Now, this has created multicultural situations and I was wondering in what way you think cultures today—Indian culture, Iranian culture, Turkish culture, Arab culture—can establish their national and cultural identities in the world.

AN: National identities and cultures can be established very quickly. In fact, that’s the main by-product of this mobility. The greater the degree of uprooting, the more people cling to a national culture, because the uprooted, trying to retain their culture, opt for a kind of standardized—or nationalized—form of the culture. An uprooted, young Indian going to and settling in the Silicon Valley, to run his IT company, where he does not have access to his caste-specific, community-specific, language-specific, and region-specific Hinduism, will, of course, opt for the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita, and the canonical texts. He or she will opt for the high culture of Hinduism and think that his religious culture is intact. But our hypothetical Silicon Valley Hindu is not in touch with his family and village gods, family priests, family gurus, not even with his forefathers’ language of worship. He or she might find a guru of a different sort, most probably a globalized one.

Gradually, our young technologist will opt for, what he thinks, is a generic Hindu identity, although it could be one of the many varieties of modern cults vowing ‘high’ Hinduism. Apparently, he or she will retain Hinduism, but in reality, only by smothering the differences within Hinduism, by embracing a rarefied, abstract Hinduism that
has little to do with real-life Hinduism in India. I’ve seen similar changes in the case of Islam and Buddhism in many First World countries. Ultimately, they lose touch with grass-root vitality, and also the grass-root realism of religions. Naturally, they fall for every fundamentalist, chauvinist, or ultra-nationalist claptrap devised for them and begin to support, sponsor, or patronize fanatics and killers. The Irish Americans and American Jews have done this and now the South Asians are following suit. Yasser Arafat once said that he could handle Israeli Jews but American Jews were a different kettle of fish. Though the present regime in India is busy playing footsie with expatriate Indians in the First World, we shall reap the whirlwind later.

RJ: What I was referring to is my own experience in North America, seeing a second- or third-generation growing up there, who, not knowing much about their own culture, go to a Hindu temple if they are Hindus, or to a mosque if they are Muslims when they want to get married. But that is about all. For them, it’s a very instrumental way of looking at their own culture. It’s a culture with no spiritual values, no Geist. The Geist is not there anymore because of the instrumental approach. That creates other problems.

AN: Well, what might look like a reaffirmation of a culture at some point could actually be markers of the death of the culture at another. I was merely extending the argument to say that such abstract, rarefied, instrumental Buddhism, Islam, or Hinduism also finds resonance in many uprooted believers moving from villages to metropolitan cities and living totally isolated, atomized lives. What is happening in the First World is no different, I suppose, from what happens when somebody comes from the backwaters of Tamil Nadu to work in a multinational firm in Delhi, staying in one of the South Delhi colonies. He or she is no less of an exile than someone going and staying in New York city. So, it is not only globally that the diasporas are producing one-dimensional national cultures, such national cultures also have clear links with pockets of national culture that are crystallizing within the countries. These linkages are dangerous because they empower both and give them a greater voice than they deserve in the public life of their countries.

This is becoming a real problem in many parts of the world today. I think the dominant culture of the world today, that of the United States, as compared to the dominant cultures in the world fifty years ago, is a culture of the uprooted in many ways. Therefore, certain norms, concepts of religiosity, and ideas of culture enjoy enormous legitimacy in the American system and—because the American system is now the best-selling system in the world—in the global, middle-class culture. This particular version of what you call national culture not only has clout, it’s the only concept of culture that makes sense to millions, who have gone through the experience of uprooting. Exactly as in the United States, you may feel that you know Chinese culture, because you can distinguish Hunanese food from Szechwanese, and you have seen the Beijing opera and a couple of Hong Kong pot boilers on TV. Similarly, in the First World, because you go to an Indian restaurant three times a week, because you read novels on the Raj in India, can appreciate Satyajit Ray, and have visited India and seen the Taj Mahal, you feel you know India.

Now, every culture has one or more encapsulated versions. Very few people take them very seriously. The built-in logic in American culture, which is a culture of immigrants in the first genuine mass society in the world, finds such encapsulated versions very congenial. America reserves for its eggheads a complex understanding of cultures. Hence, the norms that go with uprootedness or are compatible with uprootedness, the kind of religiosity the uprooted can follow and make sense of, and the cultural products they can appreciate or produce, have natural legitimacy in the American popular culture, and, through that connection, globally. Such a national culture, therefore, acquires a certain momentum and gets endorsed by global common sense, if I may put it that way.

RJ: You know, I have a problem myself with American culture and the way it is looked upon today by Americans and non-Americans. Everybody is looking for the American dream, but without knowing
that they are doing so. They are only looking at the economic aspect of the American dream, without being aware that the dream itself was based on specific philosophies, political thought, and social visions. You see these philosophies and visions in authors like Henry Thoreau and Ralph Emerson; in Walt Whitman, in somebody like Martin Luther King, and in Abraham Lincoln. Democratic individualism is the basis and one of the philosophical foundations of this American dream. Nobody refers to that. An Indian who wants to go to the United States doesn’t care about Emerson and Thoreau, who are an integral part of the American culture. For Indians, it’s money and Disneyland, McDonald’s, and Coca Cola that are important.

AN: Exactly. One of the clearest indicators of this is that McDonald’s is supposed to be lowbrow in the United States; in India, it is highbrow for the upper-middle class. Entire families go to McDonald’s. Similarly, the Pizza Hut is lowbrow in the United States, but here it is seen as a part of élite culture. As I was telling you yesterday, we feel that because we have opted for the US as our standard, even if that standard has its problems, we would rather suffer from the problems from which the world’s richest and most powerful country suffers than from the old problems of the poor and the peripheral. We don’t want to die of starvation; we want to die of obesity and over-consumption.

RJ: Yes, that’s very true. I was wondering, if one of the ways in which this globalization or Western universalism has been rejected is through the idea of cultural relativism. I would like to know what you think about cultural relativism, because cultural relativism is like a sword with two blades. I see it this way. There have been examples, interesting examples of European writers in the nineteenth century, who have taken the theoretical position of cultural relativism against European colonialism or imperialism, but, nevertheless, when they did that, they tried to maintain the dialectical relationship between the self and the other by considering the other always as a savage, a good savage but nevertheless a savage. Let us take, for example—I was reading him before coming to India—E.B. Tyler, an Englishman who published a book in 1878 titled *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization*. Tyler says in this book that savage societies—and he takes a cultural relativist’s point of view—should not be judged according to European standards of thought, because savages are not as intelligent as Europeans and they do not have the intellectual capacity to draw the same moral conclusions from experience as Europeans. Now, the implication for Tyler is that people from lower societies are not culpable for their own moral mistakes. This is very interesting. In other words, while Tyler faults the modernized public institutions of lower societies, he holds that individual actions should not be judged with reference to the standards of a higher civilization. You also have these kinds of positions among cultural relativists.

AN: Yes, there are also the kind of theories that you are describing. Tyler’s position, by the way, is not unknown, even in India. There are deep ambivalences vis-à-vis tribal populations. The VHP wants to Hinduize them, both to counter the influence of Christian missionaries and as a step towards cleansing them of their paganism and incorporating them into a Vedantic Hindu nation. Others are as unhappy that in many tribal religions, Hindu gods and goddesses and the Puranas have a strong presence. The RSS does not like the fact that they call themselves indigenous peoples; the RSS calls them forest dwellers. Given half a chance, many people would love to take Tyler’s position.

There are other variations on that position, which are almost as deprecatory. One is, ‘Let them stew in their own juice’. This is arrogance of another kind. It hides the belief that without our intervention, without our version of development, medical care, and education, they would be miserable in the long run and throw up their hands and surrender. I do not want to reject cultural relativism, lock, stock, and barrel. It has played a creative role in many situations. At least in some cases it has given breathing space to cultures to devise their own modes or strategies of survival. But beyond that, I don’t think it is very relevant in the coming century. A more interesting
way of looking at cultures is to see them as representing competing forms of universalism, not relativism. You are not saying that there is one culture that is at the pinnacle of human civilization and its artefacts and knowledge systems are universal, and all other cultures are legitimately different but must be understood in the language of the universal culture.

This may seem very unfair to cultural relativists, who technically include all cultures within the frame of cultural relativism. We are talking here of the shape the ideology has taken in popular culture. In that popular version, all cultures are equal under the banner of cultural relativism, but one of them has presumably accidentally produced the only universal ideas of development, nation-state, progress, and modern science. Almost naturally, the argument proceeds, that culture enjoys a clear priority in everything global, universal, cosmopolitan, or international. Modern scientific rationality is universal, so are human rights, concepts of good governance as practised in modern nation-states, secularism, history, and development. There is a whole range of concepts that have been declared universal and protected from external criticism and cultural contamination. You can criticize them from inside. You can talk of alternative or sustainable development, never of alternatives to development. You can talk of alternative history, never of alternatives to history. And these universals are seen as the specialization of one culture.

Then there are cultures that become acceptable because they include good elements and good values, and the expectation is that they will shed their bad elements. This means that parts of the culture make sense to the modern mind, and it would do well to reorganize itself around these parts. So, if there are elements in Tibetan Buddhism that allow human rights to be upheld, it goes in favour of Tibetan Buddhism; if a Jain–Bania lifestyle fits in with industrial capitalism, then it gets the benefits of cultural relativism; it has the right to survive.

Simultaneously, cultural relativism seems to affirm that regional, local, or vernacular cultures have the right to think about themselves, but, because they are not universal, they cannot, and they do not, have the right to participate in defining the universal. Whereas a universal culture has not only the right to talk of itself, including defining its culturally relativistic parts, it also has a responsibility towards the rest of the world. It has to think of global issues and solutions. Similarly, those given to modern scientific rationality have a responsibility not only to think about modern science, but also the right to think of and assess other traditions of science—their validity, reliability, and internal consistency. The moderns also have the unique responsibility, if they find worthwhile elements in these sciences, to incorporate them in the modern sciences and declare them universal. For non-modern sciences do not have the ability to understand what is good and what is bad in them, what should be preserved and what should be discarded. So, if modern agronomy comes to know of an anti-fungal agent in Chinese traditional agronomy, that agent is incorporated in modern agronomy, but Chinese agronomy and its principles still remains superfluous, apart from being inferior and misleading. In the dominant, global popular culture of knowledge, Indian and Chinese agronomists are supposed to think about India and China; only the modern Western agronomists have to think not only of the modern West but also of the whole world.

This is cultural relativism at its best. Whereas, if you presume that each culture has its own version of universalism within a world of competing universalisms, it is a challenge to establish a dialogue among systems that may or may not be unequal, translating one set of universalism into another at each stage, and establishing a new dialogue of cultures on that basis. This could be an interesting way of restoring the dignity of the knowledge systems used by defeated cultures, but I don’t think this will have wide acceptance in the near future. It will be seen as an attempt to undermine superstitions and irrationalities, and give a clean chit to older systems of oppression and violence.

RJ: I think there should always be limits to the universality of different cultures. We can take the example of Islamic cultures in
which Islam declares that it has universal values. In the name of the Sharia you can, in Saudi Arabia for example, cut off the hands or fingers of a robber. These values are in contradiction with another set of values: the universal declaration of human rights. I think there should be limits, exactly as there should be limits—I know we don’t discuss that often—on the universal values of the West.

AN: We should discuss not only the provincial values of the West, masquerading as universal values, but also why this reading of the Sharia dominates in Saudi Arabia, why the provincial interpretation of Islam masquerades as universal Islam, why this interpretation is not followed even in some countries which follow Sharia laws. Pakistan toyed with similar ideas for a while, perhaps because the Pakistani ulema suffers from a feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis the Saudi Arabsians, but they didn’t go the whole hog. There were built-in restraints, even among believers in Pakistan. In many other Islamic cultures, such punishments are seen as abhorrent and anti-Islamic.

We have not played the game of internal diversity and internal debates well. That’s why when we talk of the universalism of Islam, we do not bear in mind that Islam, like any other faith, has a plural culture. Human understanding is necessarily incomplete and, therefore, there are many legitimate readings of Islam and a few illegitimate ones too. We have not established alliances with those interpretations of Islam that are normatively more acceptable to us. We have, in fact, tried to identify Islam with its more obscene versions. Saudi Arabia is a small state run by feudal potentates who are written by the global hegemon, the United States, and we look at them as the custodians of Islam! It’s sad that we don’t look at Indonesia, the largest Islamic country in the world, or India, where Muslims have not suggested that chopping of hands or fingers be introduced as punishment under Muslim personal law. That also is a part of the same story. We have created a situation where, whenever we talk of Asian values, we think of Osama Bin Laden or Mahathir Mohamad, not of the Dalai Lama or Aung San Suu Kyi.

RJ: Very true. Actually, in your own work, you are looking for possible dialogues between visions. You are always looking for this plurality and diversity—inside a culture and outside it—or for a dialogue between cultures.

AN: It is our responsibility to establish alliances with other cultures, particularly with those parts of other cultures that can be held up as a mirror to or as criticisms of our culture. We have done this only half-heartedly; we have not explored its full possibilities. Even in the case of the United States, we think of it as a monolith. You have, yourself mentioned Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau. It’s a pity that people connect colonialism and fascism with European civilization, but don’t remember that Blake, Tolstoy, and Thomas Mann were also voices of the same civilization. Europe can decide who it thinks has a better right to speak for European civilization—Blake, Tolstoy, Goebbels, or Winston Churchill. But let us at least make public our decision and our disagreement with their intellectual hierarchies and ethical priorities.

RJ: These interactions of the concepts of us and them, or self and others, are dominant in your own work, like in The Blinded Eye, The Intimate Enemy, and Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias. You are saying that what we have to actually struggle for is to engage the others within us and also to draw these others into a dialogue with us within ourselves.

AN: Such a dialogue is a clue not only to the survival of the others—those concerned with mass violence, particularly ethnic and religious violence and culture clashes, have been saying this for decades—but also to the flowering of our own creativity, psychological health, and moral survival. Even when it is not necessary for the survival of others or of ourselves, it is necessary for the unfolding of the creative potentialities of our cultures. In a normal civilization, we will have to learn to play this game with others, to negotiate within ourselves, with our diverse selves, in an emancipatory fashion, and also to negotiate—or grapple with—the dark underside of ourselves. Often
have we reminded ourselves that the fear of cultural plurality is the fear of the other—seen as strange, unknown, and fearsome. Only rarely have we been aware that our fear of plurality is the fear of the strange, the unknown, and the fearsome within us.

RJ: You are saying that the only way to appreciate the values of others is to appreciate the plurality within ourselves.

AN: That’s not an easy thing to do, because recognizing the plurality within ourselves is the beginning of a long psychological battle, a battle for self-awareness, and that is always painful. We have, in the last century, learnt to foist the responsibility for all successful self-awareness on psychoanalysts and psychotherapy. We consider it to be a professional job: someone somewhere should make us more aware of ourselves. We have even delegated this responsibility to the state and public institutions during the twentieth century and demanded from them psychotherapeutic interventions. I believe that, as a general rule, a healthy personality has a built-in process for that kind of self-reflection. It goes on all the time, even in cultures that have never heard of psychotherapists.

RJ: I suppose that in this kind of dialogue of cultures there has to be not only a capacity, but also a willingness, in the winners and the losers to distance themselves from their positions in the global hierarchy and come closer to one another.

AN: Surely, but it’s an extremely painful task. Self-reflection cannot but lead to a painful process of self-negotiation. Nobody likes it. A healthy person does not necessarily look within that much. Many forms of creativity are possible without self-reflection, though some forms of creativity are not. But I think that for the full range of human creativity to unfold itself, some degree of self-reflexivity is a must. If you don’t have the ability to self-reflect, it narrows the range of your cognitive and emotional capabilities.

RJ: But Ashis, may be there has to be in this dialogue also a search, a common search for truth. I refer here to an example of this type—the dialogue between Gandhi and C.F. Andrews, where you have a dialogue between a Hindu and a Christian, and between an Indian and an Englishman. This dialogue between the two took place because there was a common search for truth. Don’t you think so?

AN: Could you repeat that please? I didn’t quite understand the thrust of your question.

RJ: For a dialogue to be fruitful—take the example of the Gandhi–Andrews dialogues—one which is positive and gives results, it should bring out something common in both the people. Gandhi and Andrews were both looking for a common truth and had a common aim, which was non-violence.

AN: Partly. Only partly so. Like Thoreau, Gandhi talked the language of truth, but in practice he was more concerned with plural constructions of truth. His exchanges with Kalicharan Bannerji, the well-known Christian pastor at Calcutta, are a good example.

Most people think that science cuts across cultures whereas values divide cultures. I sometimes suspect that basic human values cross cultural barriers more easily than do impersonal, cognitive orders such as modern science. Values like nonviolence, or, better still, sanctity of life; the importance of a family or a community, any community; the protection of children, particularly infants, and a recognition of their vulnerability; the search for a sense of belongingness—these are always present in some incarnation in all societies. The dialogue between Gandhi and Andrews was not so much a common search for truth but a recognition that basic human values are shared and their various versions can be brought together or made to converse. The political trigger might have been Gandhi’s insight, that Andrews had been marginalized in the British-Indian system, and that a culture that marginalizes someone like Andrews could not have been in the best of health. Gandhi was probably pushed to establish an alliance with that part of English culture which Andrews represented, guessing that Andrews was fighting the same battle within his culture that he as an Indian was fighting within his.

Don’t forget that Gandhi’s voice too was for a long time the voice of a minority. The kind of militant non-violence he was talking
about, the satyagraha he forged as a technique, the critique of modernity he offered didn’t enjoy absolute legitimacy in Indian culture—certainly not in the high culture of modern India. We don’t have to believe the conventional wisdom of many people who come to India in search of gurus and spiritual bliss that this is a non-violent culture. There are a lot of restraints on violence in this culture—many injunctions, starting from the Jaina and Buddhist scriptures to the Vaishnava celebration of amity, but these injunctions do not make this a peaceful society. So, Gandhi was fighting a battle within Indian culture, and, for that battle, although he was in the minority in modern India and among the Indian elite, he could politically mobilize the masses for his cause. But that’s a different story. Gandhi could see, he could appreciate the nature of the dissent that C.F. Andrews represented within Britain’s ruling culture, and that was the strength of their dialogue. It was self-actualizing because it brought two recessive elements in two civilizations together. These elements were not powerful enough by themselves, but in coalition they became formidable.

RJ: That’s very true. Actually when you say that Gandhi was in the minority, he got out of that situation also through dialogue. When you read the writings of Gandhi during the period of Hind Swaraj, when he was in South Africa, you find that he moved towards Tolstoy and corresponded with him because of the discussions he had, while living in India House in London, with Marxists and people like Savarkar and other nationalists, who felt that they had to kill the British, to drive them out. Gandhi was trying to discover a way out of his minority status and his isolation. So he went towards Tolstoy and when he entered into a dialogue with him, he got from Tolstoy, his culture. This experience of another culture he brought into his own, which he also had to rediscover. I think this is exactly what I’m doing with you today.

AN: That’s a compliment. Yes, we are probably doing the same thing. It has been a very rewarding day.

RJ: Because I feel I am at the margins of my own society, Iranian society, and the fact that I’ve started working on India with intellectuals like you, and started to take an interest in India, the India of today, encourages me to have this dialogue of cultures with living people to and to try to discover and share our common values.

AN: Maybe, as a part of this enterprise, you will also help me get an entry into Iranian civilization, to re-enter Indian civilization.

RJ: Absolutely. Why not? I think this is a good ending for our book.