

The Debate on Scientific Temper

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COMMUNICATION

The Debate on Scientific Temper

ON 19 July 1981, a document entitled "A Statement on Scientific Temper" was issued at the Nehru Centre in Bombay. The signatories to the statement constitute a veritable "who's who" of the established and administratively strategically placed intellectuals, academicians and scientists of the country. Gathered together "to share our common concern at the accelerating pace of retreat from reason", they issued the statement with the intention of generating "a nation-wide discussion" and "hopefully... a movement for the much needed second renaissance in our country" (P N Haksar's foreword to the statement). A complicity with the objectives, if not with the formulations, has prompted this critique of Bombay statement, on the one hand, and on the other, of the counter-statement, published recently in some leading dailies, by Ashis Nandy.

If the Bombay statement is a muddle-headed and logically contradictory attempt to understand the process of growth and development of science and society, the counter-statement issued by Ashis Nandy is both phoney and pernicious. The former, paying lip-service to the significant role of science in creating an egalitarian society, believes that the Indian ruling classes can deliver the goods provided only that the logic of planning and the logic of our socio-economic structure are "scientifically" harmonized. The latter is an unashamed defence of the status quo which couches its glorification of obscurantism in a presumptuous philosophy.¹

To take the Bombay statement first, a crucial, generalized question to be posed is why, despite the political thrust provided by a major leader of the national movement and certainly the dominant figure of post-independence India, Jawaharlal Nehru, the attempt to "inculcate scientific temper" not only failed but led to a situation where "we are witnessing a phenomenal growth of superstitious beliefs and obscurantist practices". The statement notes but makes no genuine attempt to provide an explanation for this fact. It identifies two apparent causes for this failure: i) the lack of appreciation of the relationship between objectives to be achieved and the methods and instrumentalities to be adopted, and ii) a "lack of systematic and sustained effort". The first is a lapse on the part of what the

signatories would have us believe is the whole of science; the latter is presumably attributed to the role of prevalent pro- and anti-scientific ideologies, for at one point the statement refers to "deep-rooted structures of an ancient society with super-imposed colonial structures". But this is no explanation at all, for it simply describes a situation in which scientific attitudes have not been socially imbibed.

The failure of the statement to come to grips with the question can be understood at two levels. The statement presents a totally ahistorical perspective within which the process of social development is sought to be understood. Social advance and transformation are claimed to be a product of "the spirit of enquiry" while periods of stagnation result from the deadening of this spirit. In what amounts to a reversal of the causal relationships in the historical process, "the spirit of enquiry" acquires an idealized and unrealistic independence from the social forces and interests of which it is in fact the expression. From this position it is but logical that the statement should view socio-historical movements primarily as the vehicles of the battle of ideas and intellectual attitudes, rather than seeing the intellectual ferment as the manifestation of the struggle of different and opposed social interests.

The theoretical weakness at this level certainly impairs the ability to decipher the significance of both social policy and the direction of social changes. This is evident in the statement's claim that the "deadening of curiosity and questioning" represented our "complete colonisation and subjugation to British imperialism" while it was "the spirit of questioning" that "ultimately overwhelmed an imperial system which seemed so powerful and even immutable". The distorted emphasis on ideas alone, the forcibly fitting in of facts into an impossible categorization results in such blatant absurdities. For while it is correct to assert that British imperialism, product of monopolistic domination at home and aligned with the vested interests in India, encouraged revivalism and obscurantism to suit its interests, it would be a travesty of truth to claim that the national movement was the outcome of "a critique of traditional society". Such over-simplification makes it impossible to grasp the fact that the national movement witnessed not only struggles against social obscurantism but also conscious compromises with it. Some of its outstanding leaders invoked obscurantist ideas and symbols to mobilize the people. To lose the duality inherent in the ideological tone of the leadership of the national movement, to neglect to identify the class interest which determines this apparent vacillation and "lack of sustained interest", is ultimately to lose the capacity to grasp the nature of the drift of policy in post-independence India.

Where no attempt is made to indentify the social groups or classes benefiting from the maintenance of the structures of ancient

society with its superimposed colonial structures, no attempt can obviously be made to pin down those social forces responsible for the visible variance between professed objectives and actual realities. A simple fact which has escaped the men of learning is however evident to a field worker like Anil Sadgopal who, in his Sarabhai Memorial lecture, unambiguously stated that the ship of scientific temper flounders on the rock of vested interests.²

The authors of the Bombay statement, in trying to skirt the basic issue that scientific temperament is a component of the ideology of the class which can revolutionize society (as it was with the bourgeoisie in its struggle against feudalism), avoids what is in fact the crucial point to be made by a serious statement of this sort. A correct political perspective is essential if scientific attitudes are to be inculcated in the great mass of the people. The present statement is so far from this that it lands itself in a vicious circle. "The inculcation of scientific temper in our society would result in our people becoming rational and objective, thereby generating a climate favouring an egalitarian, democratic, secular and universalist out-look. Consequently scientific temper cannot flourish in a grossly inequalitarian society... social justice, widespread education and unrestricted communication are, therefore, prerequisites for spread of scientific temper".

Ashis Nandy's counter-statement arguing for a "more" humanistic temper (the problem of quantification presents no difficulty, for Nandy's is a purely "ideological" argument) is based on a single categorical statement: "*Oppression never ends. When one form of oppression ends, new forms emerge*". His "humanism" thus consists in palliatives and not solutions. It is difficult to argue with a position based on this assumption. One can only state that the entire exercise is spurious. For Nandy cannot distinguish between electrons and witches; both are myths neither of which is better or worse than the other. On such myths, traditional, religious or otherwise, Nandy grounds "human dignity", making a mockery of the struggle of the human race to better its conditions and advance the parameters of its understanding and control. The "status quo-ist" basis of his article forces this posture, for "astrology is the myth of the weak; modern science that of the strong. If you have the latter you have to have the former". Since Nandy has neither the courage nor the inclination to question this division, far less to join forces with those struggling against it, what could be better than to provide a "justification" for it?

A series of obviously fallacious reasonings are offered to substantiate a vacuous posture. The real control which scientific knowledge offers human society over its environment and therefore its destiny is discounted, while politico-administrative policies which have exploited this to the detriment of humanity are placed at the

door-step of science. Where a broad spectrum of social welfare policies, medicinal, educational and so on, made possible by scientific advance cannot be wished away, Nandy is quick to appropriate the credit for these for institutions of every hue but not for science. If science demands that other "systems of thought" be criticized from the point of view of its exacting standards, Nandy demands that science must equally be open to criticism by the standards of faith. But this is ridiculous, for scientific ideas must be open to scientific criticism and so indeed they are. It is the worst kind of opportunism to deny this in the name of "equality of cross-criticism". It leads Nandy to the absurd conclusion that incantations are perhaps better than vaccines and antiseptics, for the latter enrich the monopolists, while the former, if they do nothing to protect the health of the poor, at least, or so Nandy supposes, provide some psychological satisfaction.

Of course this pseudo-philosophic posture is not without important political or intellectual support. President Reagan of the United States of America, during his election campaign, argued in favour of treating both the "evolutionism" of Darwin and the "creationism" of the Bible as "scientific". At a far more sophisticated level, Feyerabend, the self-proclaimed anarchist and flippant *Dadaist*, whom Nandy holds in such esteem that he feels every "literate" should be familiar with his arguments, has provided intellectual currency for this trend,

Not satisfied with this, Nandy had resorted to dropping names of Western philosophers of science, in the hope that his distortions both of the history of science and of their positions would go unchallenged. It is on the authority of a person like de Santillana that he claims that in the case of Galileo "it was the church which proved itself more open and sought to have plural images of the cosmos. Galileo, like the signatories to the statement, thought he knew the truth and wanted to oust all other concepts of truth". It is worth noting that Santillana himself contrasts the relative "openness" of the Church not with Galileo's attitude but with the posture of the Committee on Un-American Activities which subjected Oppenheimer to investigation in the 1950s. That Nandy is being dishonest and not merely incompetent in overlooking this fact is evident from Santillana's views regarding Galileo: "Galileo had no advocates in court, nor was there any discussion of the Copernican theories as such. Galileo was not allowed to defend his scientific work; the only question was: Had he disobeyed the Church or not?" Further, he observes that "all efforts were bent towards keeping social forces under the firm control of a consistent philosophical motivation".³

Finally, Nandy has appealed to the most uncritical chauvinistic sentiments, by asserting that "the attempt to set up science and religion as antagonistic forces in India is entirely derived from Western

experience and is further proof that the Statement is a posthumous child of Colonialism". His feigned nationalist concern expresses itself in the demand that "we can hope to build an indigenous science only when such lost sciences and implicit philosophies (traditional science and philosophies of science of the 'common man') are respectfully articulated by contemporary Indian scholars. No theory of progress negates this principle of basic respect for nonmodern idea systems". Even if we ignore the fact that Nandy's own arguments are drawn largely, if not very faithfully, precisely from men steeped in the "Western experience", one cannot neglect the implications of the stand he is adopting. Modern science is the preserve of the West, which progressed to this position by, respectfully or otherwise, overturning the "non-modern" idea systems that hindered development. This however is not possible for India which must accommodate "non-modern" ideas, of which the eternal nature of social oppression, so confidently upheld by Nandy, is certainly the foremost.

Placed in the context of Indian conditions, and the specific conflict of class interests, the two statements, which appear to be irreconcilable at the level of ideas alone, display a surprising compatibility in that both fit into the ideological framework of the ruling classes. For, on the one hand, these classes are interested in utilizing science both for production and the management of society to the extent that this furthers their interests. But, on the other, their capacity to modernize Indian society while retaining their political and social dominance is severely limited, which leads to the duality in their position. Increasingly, the need to resort to alliance with obscurantism and reactionary socio-political trends offers itself as the best solution to the problem. Within this perspective the Bombay statement can be seen as an idealized, and given the reality of Indian development in the last few decades, nostalgic expression of ruling class interests; Ashis Nandy's counter-statement is an unabashed attempt to legitimize the war against the scientific advance of social life and values unleashed by the bourgeoisie in both the developed and the developing capitalist countries.

Abolition of oppression and inequality, and the urge for modernizing society are feasible social goals only when science is allied to the social forces capable of revolutionizing society at the present historical juncture. Hence the question of the spread of the scientific temperament is fundamentally a political question to which there can be no voluntaristic solutions.

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- 1 The statements along with articles by E M S Namboodiripad and B Chattopadhyay and explanatory notes by a few of the signatories have been published in *Secular Democracy*, November 1981.
- 2 Anil Sadgopal, "Between Question and Clarity", *Science Today*, October 1981.
- 4 George de Santillana, *Reflections on Men and Ideas*, MIT Press, pp 120 and 133.

* Works on the editorial staff of the *People's Democracy*.