

Amid rows of books in the Delhi office of political psychologist Ashis Nandy is a painting that's striking in its sordidness: the head of a dead politician enveloped in a floppy garland, surrounded by numerous tags displaying his numerous identities. Ever the political dissenter, Nandy is back in news after the Ahmedabad-based National Council for Civil Liberties filed a case against him for his article, *Blame the Middle Class*, published in The Times of India in January, analysing Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi's victory in the Assembly elections. The charge against Nandy is "promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth and language". Some 178 academics and intellectuals have signed a statement to protest the case against Nandy (<http://www.sacw.net/FreeExpAndFundos/defendNandy16June08.html>). In an interview with TUSHA MITTAL, Nandy explains how modernity is devastating India.

#### How has your understanding of India changed over the years?

Like every other Bengali from Calcutta, I had a political edge to everything I did, but little empathy for the world outside the cities. Theoretically, I might have been committed to the people of India, but in practice they were an abstract category. Things began to change dramatically when I came to the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. We studied politics empirically, and I realised its pervasive

### 'Modernisation leads to genocides, enormous degrees of violence and the demolition of civilisations'

presence in Indian social life, how much of a pace-setting agency it really is. A second major change came with the Emergency. Neither my political studies nor my understanding of Indian politics had prepared me for it. It was a shock. Then, I began to look for new ways of looking at Indian politics. My discovery of Gandhi happened at that time. I had always disliked Gandhi: his allegiances had looked primordial; his style a deviation from our idea of cosmopolitanism; his politics anti-modern. But I rediscovered Gandhi. I became more sceptical of the Indian state, which was modelled on the colonial state that had ruled us. I saw that the categories that dominated Indian politics

had no openness to the experiences of a majority of Indians. Often, as with terms like 'secular', they could not even be translated into vernacular languages.

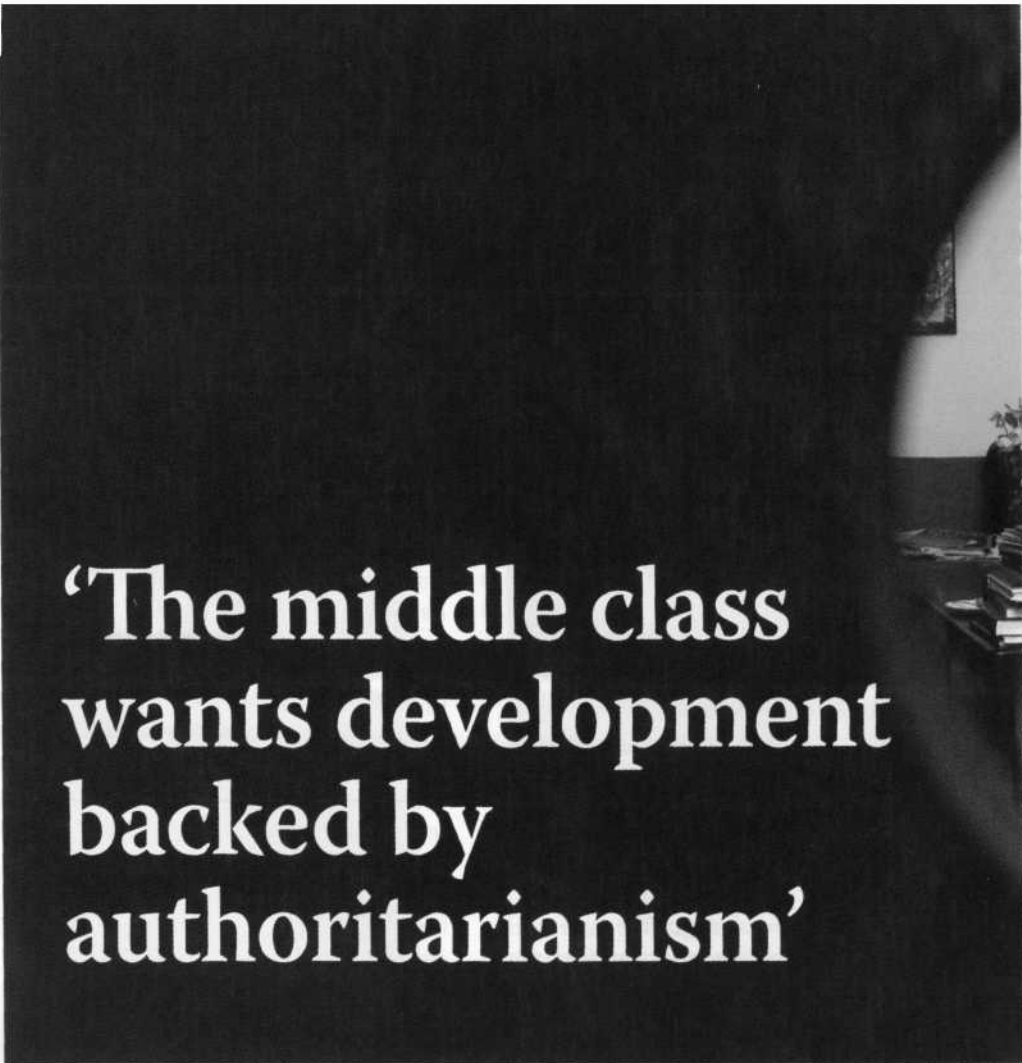
#### Would you say the secular project in India has failed, that we have failed to merge ground realities with our idea of liberal secularism?

Absolutely! Secularism is a tool to achieve certain goals of tolerance and amity. It has not been able to touch the heart of most Indians, who have found it flawed, an abstraction used for political purposes only. I think we would gain much more if we entered it through the various cultural and religious traditions of India to confront the forces fomenting communal conflict. They are actually anti-Hindu and anti-Islam. They will destroy these faiths in the arrogant belief that they can defend them. We don't defend faiths; faith defends us. In fact, the people often called religious fanatics usually did not care about religion.

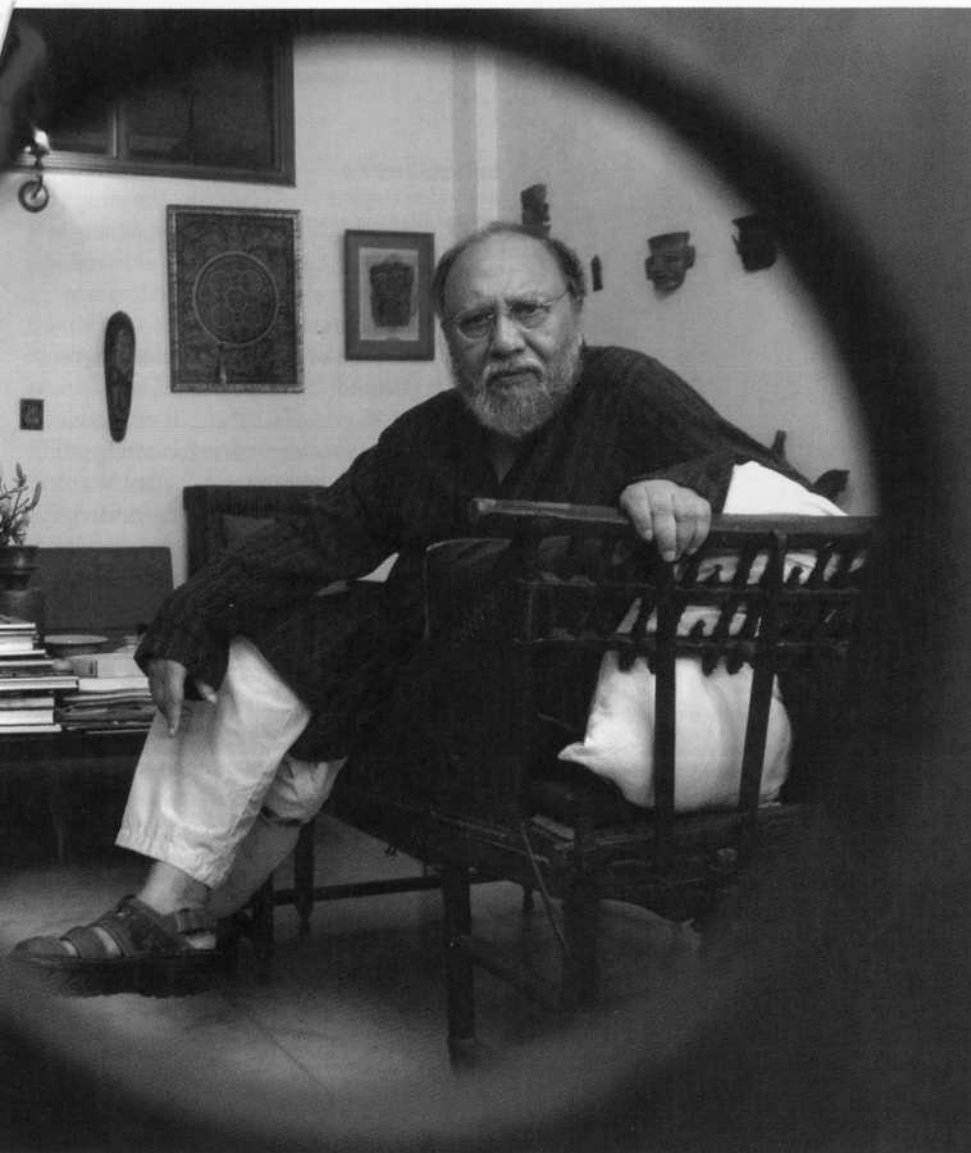
They were modernists who wanted a European-style nation state in India. They considered Gandhi primitive because he brought into politics ideas such as fasting and nonviolence. Gandhi was the counter-modernist who said that modernism was an intrusion in Indian culture and could only devastate India culturally, economically and socially, [that] it is intrinsically hostile to India's environment, local knowledge systems and diversity. Ethnic and religious conflict is a pathological expression of modernity, not of tradition. The way modernisation is conceptualised leads to genocides; an enormous degree of violence; the demolition of civilisations.

#### Can you give an example?

I did a major study on sati, the first in contemporary times. I showed that sati epidemics primarily occurred when a community was under attack. For example, sati in late 18th and early 19th century was a direct product of the colonial political econ-



# 'The middle class wants development backed by authoritarianism'



SHALENDRA PANDHEY

omy, the kind of collapse of traditional norms then taking place in India, the monetisation of the economy and human relationships. Half the cases of Sati took place in Calcutta and its slums not in villages.

**In your article, 'Gujarat: Blame the Middle Class', you talked about how development has de-civilised society, leaving only a shrinking space for the life of the mind.**

This is a product of democratic processes. The people entering the middle class do not have middle-class values. They only have middle-class incomes. They have neither the traditional nor the modern concept of cosmopolitanism. They have just risen in the social hierarchy. They have only middle-class consumption.

**What are these middle class values?**

Some degree of tolerance and the ability to live with minority views which are different from yours; some acceptance that you do not protect divinities, that divinities can protect

themselves.

**You have used the term 'cultural desert' for Gujarat.**

Gujarat has produced an intellectual culture where some of the finest minds, thinkers, writers, artists don't feel comfortable at all. Perhaps it is not America but Singapore that is their utopia, at least in the short run. They want Singapore-style development. Even though they won't admit it, they are looking forward not only to Singapore-style malls but also to Singapore-style authoritarian prime ministers. Large numbers of the middle class are now perfectly willing to sacrifice large sections of the society for the sake of development. In most countries, spectacular development has been associated with spectacular authoritarianism. Not only Singapore, China is a very good example. The enormous diversity of India has always troubled modern Indians. They think some degree of homogenisation imposed from above

is the perfect remedy for India's ills. They think they are the strict school teachers who can teach the rest of India how to behave when the government takes away land for SEZs, when it builds mega dams. They want to shut their eyes to what development really means. They are its beneficiaries and feel it must be protected at all costs.

**What is your idea of a post-secular world?**

Everybody predicted the demise of religion in the 19th century. Yet, at the beginning of the 21st century, we find religion stronger than ever. It has re-emerged from its isolation and marginalisation in a big way, taking advantage of the democratic process. Unless we learn the language of religion and enter the people's mind through that path, we have no way of truly influencing their choices. That's why one of the most creative persons of our time,

**'The people entering the middle class do not have middle class values. They only have middle class incomes'**

Gandhi, said that people who say religion and politics have nothing to do with each other understand neither religion nor politics. Other creative persons who may or may not call themselves Gandhian follow that method. The Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King — they have all used religion very creatively. In India, people like Baba Amte and Sunder Lal Bahuguna never attacked religion; Swami Agnivesh has never put away his saffron robes. When you talk of saffronisation, it offends most Hindus. Saffron is not the colour of extremism. It is the colour of renunciation — sanyasis wear saffron. Extremists have hijacked it because we allowed them to; they have hijacked it even when they don't believe in it themselves. [VD] Savarkar was an atheist. He didn't believe in Hinduism but produced the bible of Hindutva. Hindutva is a political ideology while Hinduism is a form of faith. Ideologies enter when faiths become weak and do not have a meaning for people. Hindutva is a way of using Hindu sentiments politically to push towards the development of a Hindu nation state. The concept of a nation state is not Hindu. It is a 19th-century European concept, but Europe is moving away from it while we continue to cling to it. As Rabindranath Tagore once said, India try-

