

The Discreet Charms of Indian Terrorism

An Abstract of the Gandhi Memorial Lecture, Given by Ashis Nandy under the Auspices of the Raman Research Institute Trust, on October 2, 1987, At Bangalore.

Taking as its point of departure Gandhi's belief that morality in our age takes the form of politics, the lecture reaffirms the role of creative politics as a substitute for violence and as pathway to the maintenance of a moral order.

The lecture analyses the two hijackings of Indian Airlines planes which took place in 1984. It takes one through the sequences of events which constituted the hijackings to reveal their political, cultural and moral meanings. It argues that the Sikh terrorists who took over the planes operated within well-defined, commonly shared, moral and cultural norms, and that even the passengers and the crew understood and abided by these norms. So the hijackings took the form of a family quarrel or village feud. The communications among the three groups never broke down and the costs of the hijacking, in human terms, was close to zero.

The lecture also tries to show that, though at first the sequences of events were clear enough and though the released passengers spoke of the human concerns of all parties involved, gradually conventional middle-class thinking and Stereotypes and the demands of mass media, politics and statecraft took over. Tendentious re-constructions of the memories of the hijackings began to emerge and many began to look at the hijackings not as problems created by political failures (even if mediated by the immature,

teen-aged hijackers) but as problems created by the failures of the law-and-order and security machineries and by the actions of treacherous and hard-boiled terrorists and foreign conspirators. So the voice and the discontent of the marginalised Sikh youth, which had pushed the hijackers outside the bounds of conventional politics in the first place (even if not outside the mainstream political culture) continued to be ignored.

The last part of the lecture suggests that studies of contemporary terrorism, often despite the best efforts of their authors, seem to show that terrorism and secessionism are best handled through political means. It gives examples from India's own experiences in Tamilnadu, West bengal, the North East and Punjab that democratic politics has been the best means of containing terrorism in this society and whenever the society has depended on the coercive might of the state, terrorism has been given a longer lease of life. It shows that democracies which have depended on security expertise and state-violence to eliminate terrorism have never succeeded in doing so. They have sometimes, because of that dependence, moved closer to becoming police states.