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Democracy and Revolutionary Violence

Introduction

At first sight political violence appears to be an anomaly in democratic theory. Why should groups pick up the gun, or support those who do so, when they have the democratic right to question and renegotiate justice, in and through struggles in civil society. By contrast, the route that political violence takes is unpredictable and dangerous. It leads to harm, bears consequences that may well be unintended such as deaths of innocent bystanders, generates fear and resentment in civil society, loses out on the sympathy quotient, invites retaliation on a massive scale and sweeps up the perpetrator, the victim and innocent bystanders in a vicious spiral of merciless destruction and impairment. There is little that is noble about violence. ‘Each new morn’, says Macduff of war in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, ‘New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows Strike heaven in the face, that it resounds.’¹ And, yet, in democracies groups buffeted by all sorts of injustice opt for ‘new sorrows’ that strike heaven in the face.

In this chapter, I discuss precisely this problem: what the relationship between democracy and revolutionary violence is. In the second part of the chapter, I unpack different categories of violence and focus on state violence as well as revolutionary violence. The empirical referral for the discussion is revolutionary violence in Indian democracy.

Democracy and political violence: Unlikely companions

To many, the specific question whether in a democracy political violence as a form of politics that makes claims upon the body politic is justified might, of course, appear neither here nor there. Is not democracy, our interlocutors can indignantly ask, premised upon popular sovereignty? Is it not about free and fair elections, about accountability of representatives, about the consolidation of a solid political culture that permits debate and dissent and about institutions such as the judiciary that is bound to uphold the supremacy of constitutional rights? Why on earth should a group pick up arms and aim some very destructive weapons at agents of the state and members of society, when they have the right to articulate their politics through other means. Why should they transgress boundaries of what is politically permissible and legally sanctioned, and venture into dangerous territories, particularly when these transgressions are bound to create severe repercussions, and when they bode ill for the group in question?

To be fair, these hypothetical but irate responses to our question – why should we enquire whether political violence in a democracy is justified – are bang on track. In the field of logical reasoning, democracy and political violence are, or at least should be strangers to each other, ships that pass in the night with nary a nod to each other, the unknown and perhaps the unknowable. Democratic politics and violence, our interlocutors can insist inflexibly, simply do not inhabit the same conceptual and political universe.

They may be right. Democracy and violence can hardly be considered conceptual siblings, at least at first sight. The logic of each concept runs in different directions. Democracy enables citizens to come together across boundaries of class and ethnicity. The right to freedom of association, which is an essential precondition for the existence of a vibrant civil society brimming over with discussion, debate and contestation, is greatly conducive to the formation of

dense networks of social associations. These associations may be philanthropic, or passionately concerned about the state of civil liberties in the country. Some may focus on the quality of national governance, and others might prefer to concentrate on local matters such as the dismal performance of neighbourhood schools. Some associations form fan clubs that lapse into delirium the moment superstars in films, or in soccer, or in cricket are mentioned, and others set up reading societies that solemnly and laboriously work out what a particular author or her work signifies. It matters little what specific objective associational life promotes, the simple pleasure of sociability, monitoring the state or keeping watch on uncivil groups in civil society. It is enough that an energetic civil society connects people who would have been otherwise locked into their own little worlds of isolation, sometimes permanently so.

Acts of violence, on the other hand, systematically and irrevocably separate, divide and segregate individuals and groups. These groups might have, till then, lived in some civility if not perfect harmony and neighbourliness. Violence positions them as combatants in a great divide. With a rapid flick of its long forked tongue, the serpent of violence poisons the environment, seeds an atmosphere of suspicion and terror, relentlessly casts a miasma of hate and doubt over communities and societies and destroys every hope that people sealed into circles of apprehension and fear may even consider initiating a conversation with others.

This is exactly what took place in Muzzafarnagar in India in early September 2013 when neighbour turned viciously on neighbour. ‘They dismembered our people and raped our women’ said Shoib, the inhabitant of a refugee camp for those who had managed to escape violence. Among the rioters were faces known to Shoib – faces of individuals whose family festivals he had routinely taken part in.² Similar stories of how people who had lived together as neighbours and co-workers for decades were transformed into vicious marauding mobs thirsting for their neighbour’s blood have come to us from Bosnia, Kosovo, Sudan, from the struggle for the independence of Bangladesh

and from the partition of India. The lesson is clear: there can be no truck and transaction let alone dialogue, between a group that is intent on, say, ethnic cleansing and the target group. The momentum of violence, that of sundering relationships, runs counter to that of democracy, which brings otherwise solitary people together in shared networks of associational life.

There are other deep differences between democracy and violence. Democracy enables people to route their aspirations, their demands and their expectations of the state through peaceful methods such as public gatherings, demonstrations, petitions, lobbying, campaigns, social networks, political movements, political theatrics and the media. Violence erupts outside these prescribed and institutionalized channels in public spaces, in cobbled streets, in forests and in inhospitable terrains. Democracy is guaranteed to secure the legitimacy of the state and of the holders of political power; political violence disputes the democratic credentials of the state. It also challenges the right of those who rule to, well, rule.

In short, violence negates, subverts and defies the fundamental presuppositions of democracy. And resting as it does on precepts of popular sovereignty and fundamental rights of citizens, freedom of debate and assembly and limited governments, democracy should logically rule out political violence. How can then democracy and violence live together in the same political or conceptual space, ever?

The coexistence of democracy and violent politics

Let us pause for a while at this point. Even though democracy and violence are antithetical concepts, they manage to coexist with each other in country after country. Can our committed democrats ignore this? Can they overlook the fact that violence has become a routine way of doing politics in countries like India? But that violence has become a routine way of doing politics in India is not the subject of great speculation. For example, there is a large body of literature on the

successes of Indian democracy, and an equally large one on violence whether episodic or organized. Yet, studies, analysis, acclamation, condemnation and critical engagement with both concepts tend to wend their own literary, polemical, analytical, descriptive way with little prospect of intersection. It is almost as if it has been ordained that the twain shall not meet. Whether it has been ordained by the logic of democracy, or by the logic of violence, or both, is an open question.

Consider studies of democracy in India. Analysts and scholars celebrate, for undoubtedly very sound reasons, both the institutionalization of democracy in a highly unequal society and the dynamics that have been unleashed by this institutionalization. It is universally acknowledged that democracy has enabled the participation of groups that had been barred from the world of politics and political contestation among equals. The political agency of the so-called lower castes had been crippled by sometimes visible, sometimes invisible, but nevertheless highly effective systems of social prohibitions.

The codification of universal adult franchise as the linchpin of the Indian constitution has slackened these inhibiting social bonds. In the process, poor and predominantly poor, lower caste and rural voters have acquired political agency. They now exercise freedom of choice. In the sphere of electoral politics and in civil society, groups holding aloft their identity as members of this or that caste aggressively fight out issues of remedial justice. The fight for remedial justice forms part of a wider world of aspirations for equal status. The overturning of caste hierarchies in the electoral domain has marked a significant turning point in the way Indians think of themselves in relation to each other, and in relation to the state. In a society that has been for centuries deeply hierarchical, rigidly stratified and highly exclusionary, the institutionalization of the norm of universal adult franchise has proved nothing short of transformative.³

Despite the fact that India was at independence an unlikely candidate for democracy stamped as it was by poverty, illiteracy,

irate caste and religious face offs and a deeply inegalitarian social order, the attraction of the *idea* of democracy (as distinct from the institutionalization of democracy) has proved durable. Over the years, we see the constitution of a body politic shaped by democratic imaginings and aspirations, and inspired by notions of equality. India, in short, has proved an exception to the rule that theorists of western democracy had up till now carved in stone, that is that democracy demands 'these' particular and not 'those' specific preconditions.

Unpacking political violence

India's record in maintaining democracy is undeniably impressive. At the same time, the biography of Indian democracy has been deeply scarred by violence. Apart from quotidian incidents of violence in the country such as road rage or domestic abuse, we can hardly put onto the back burner the spectre of major destruction that follows brutal and completely amoral terror attacks, crowds running amuck setting fire to public property, demonstrations that go painfully wrong and riots between caste and religious communities.

We can, of course, believe that murderous riots between religious and caste communities in India constitute exceptions to normal ways of being, and as disconnected occurrences, they signify periods of chaos and breakdowns. During riots, codes of civility, which otherwise earmark or at least should earmark practices of everyday life, are suspended, and norms and boundaries that govern social transactions are transgressed. We would have had very good reasons for our beliefs for some very insightful work in historical interpretation has told us that the riot constitutes departures from the norm.

Elias Canetti focussing on destructive collective behaviour in his *Crowds and Power* suggests that such behaviour transgresses generally established and universally valid distances and boundaries, as well as destroys a hierarchy that is no longer recognized.⁴ The implication

seems to be that riots are little else than episodic and spasmodic events. But the breakdown of social codes is not permanent. These codes are put into abeyance for the time being and invariably restored when normalcy returns to the body politic. Riots have a short time span, and when the psychic high that is generated during the course of the riot is spent out, people return to ordinary ways of living with each other. Boundaries are restored to their rightful place. Yes, at one point of our history, we could have hoped that violent riots take place in a no-man's-land. In this space, neither the past nor the future is of the slightest consequence. Violence occurs in a time warp that mindlessly and meaninglessly constitutes a present: a present caught up in an admittedly vicious but nevertheless terminable spiral of violence. This is a reassuring thought; for then we could, with some ease, dismiss the riot as a contingent event marked by unreasonable crowd behaviour. In such situations, individual participants give into irrational impulses.

But, if we think of violence in this fashion, if we type this form of collective behaviour as an abnormality, we assume that the outbreak of violence has nothing to do with history, with social and political representations that profile communities and position them against each other, with competition in the economic and in the political marketplace or indeed, with the tensions which arise out of living together: tensions that permeate neighbourhoods and workplaces, rituals and public spaces. It is precisely here that we need to pause, reflect and wonder: does violence really signify isolated instances in human history abstracted both from the past and from the present?

We just have to dwell on the diverse and intricate ways in which violence is produced and reproduced in the body politic, to realize that violence, as a specific form of politics, is neither an aberration nor outside the provenance of democracy. Violence is not an unwelcome visitor, or an uninvited stranger who has strayed into our harmonious world, but whose prolonged stay can be brought to an end only if we,

in a determined fashion, refuse to extend hospitality. On balance, we have to accept that violence is part of individual and collective lives. No matter how democratic a society may be, violence lurks on the sidelines, waiting for a cue to enter and wreck the carefully and painfully constructed democratic world where people see themselves as equal members of a political community.

In sum, the unhappy coexistence of democracy and violence cannot be wished away by neglecting either the context of violence that is democracy or ignoring the pervasiveness of violence in democracy. We can no longer see violence as an aberration, or see democracy as a gigantic fraud that is perpetuated upon political innocents. Most democracies are deeply flawed but they have nonetheless several achievements to their credit. Unless we wish to engage in the time-consuming and ultimately thankless task of constructing binary opposites: violent democracy versus democracy where violence is, but, an aberration, we have to look for a relationship from within democracy itself.

The prevalence of violence in democratic politics might well compel us acknowledge that democracy and violence inhabit the same political space. I am by no means arguing that democracy is embedded in violence. I suggest that we begin to think through the phenomenon of political violence and also reflect on how it relates to the fundamental presuppositions of democracy notably democratic justice. I explore this issue in Chapter 4, here let me merely suggest that the relationship cannot be one of exteriority; the links that bind democracy and violence have to be internal; they have to do with injustice. Nothing else explains the wide prevalence of violence in democratic life.

Violence is not a matter only for conflict theorists or for strategic and security studies; it is a matter for those who study and value democracy and justice. Something must have gone wrong, somewhere. We have to come to terms with the flaws in democracy, the lapses in democratic life and the imperfectability of democratic justice. We have to come to terms with violence within democracy.

Categories of violence

Violence seems to have become the defining feature of Indian society as in other countries. Headlines of morning newspapers regularly disburse news about the latest incident, of often incredible brutality, etched onto the bodies of women, of children, of the so-called lower castes and minority groups and of others with deadly knife slashes. At any given day and time, everyday violence ranges from child abuse, to female foeticide, gang rapes, acid attacks on women, road rage, criminal acts for personal benefits, to the sort of violence that vulnerable sections of society, such as domestic and bonded labour, are subjected to. Though all categories of violence are political because violence is an act of power, assertion of domination and the extraction of subordination, let us talk about specifically political violence.

In a preliminary way, let us note the main characteristics of political violence. First, the concept of political violence enables us to distinguish organized forms of violence from sporadic and uncoordinated protests, and other manifestations of public anger that lead to arson, destruction of property and loss of lives. Second, political violence is unleashed in the public domain. Third, the agents of political violence are ideologically charged groups. Individuals commit acts of violence, for example suicide bombers. However, these individuals, either implicitly or explicitly, are bearers of an ideology. Andres Behring Breivik shot seventy-seven people on the island of Utoeya as an act of protest against the Norwegian government's immigration policy. The violence was individually executed, notably however, the perpetrator was embedded in an ideology of race discrimination.

In India, similar ideologies of exclusion and discrimination have motivated groups to inflict savage violence on the heads of minority or vulnerable ethnic groups. Ahmedabad (1969), Belchi (1978), anti-Sikh riots in Delhi (1984), Bombay riots (1993), Bathnan Tola (1996), Laxman Bathe (1997), Gujarat (2002), Kherlainji (2006), Dharmapuri

(2012) and Muzzafarnagar (2013). These are not only names given to places on the map of India. They signify milestones in the sordid biography of communal and caste, or simply ethnic violence in India. History will tell a blood-soaked story of shameful incidents in the country, of inhuman acts performed by one human being on another for reasons outside the latter's control-birth into a particular ethnic community.

Of course, other ignoble motives underpin ethnic riots, such as attempts to grab remunerative land or the settling of personal scores. Running like a strong skein through these incidents is another story: that of struggle for power. These incidents of violence are not random or abstracted from deeper struggles over power in society. They are, indeed, signifiers of these struggles. For ethnic violence throws onto the political horizon the one question that is crucial to democracy – the relative standing of persons in society. The aim of ethnic riots is to redraw the normative map drafted by democracies and constitutions: that of equality of political status irrespective of religion, caste, ethnicity, gender and class. It appears that those who wield violent weapons are in the business of warning others, those others who would dare to subvert social hierarchies that in some societies are considered ordained by the law of nature. Ethnic violence seeks to restore an older social order based on hierarchy and exclusion, domination and subordination, and dispense with the new democratic order that upholds as an organizing principle of the political community the principles of non-discrimination and equality.

The institutionalization of political equality in countries of the global south, vide social movements and constitutions, has actually succeeded in a strange way. It has bred uncertainty and fear among social groups who believe that they and they alone have the right to dominate others by reasons of birth into a particular religion, class, caste or for that matter gender. Struggles in the arena of ethnic, class and gender politics are struggles over which group occupies what status in society. Equality of status is a relational concept; therefore, dominant elites contest hotly ideas that other ethnic groups are as

equal as they are. Violence in this case erupts over claims to universal rights of equality, freedom and justice. Ethnic violence inscribes in fine and painful detail the way groups resist the institutionalization of a new and equitable political order, and the way the targeted groups fight for this order. For this reason, this avatar of inter-group violence falls within the category of political violence.

A second category of political violence is employed to make demands upon the state and force changes in policy. Some groups use violence strategically in order to wrest collective benefits from the state ranging from, say, the extension of affirmative action policies to 'this' or 'that' group, to the demand for a separate state within the federal system. Collective benefits are wrested from the state through the use of violence.

Third, a group might resort to violence because it wants to simply opt out and establish a state of its own. This sort of political violence falls into a distinct category. Groups that want benefits from the state neither challenge state legitimacy nor renounce political obligation. They can hardly do that because they expect the state to provide the goods on demand. They do not renege on political obligation. Notably, they renege on moral obligation to their fellow citizens, because violence is used to prise open the economic and the political coffers of the state for the benefit of one section of citizens alone.

Secessionists, on the other hand, renege on both political and moral obligation. They renounce the sovereignty of the state and wish to establish a new one forged out of the territory and the people of the existing state. They also renege on moral obligation to the citizens of the state they wish to secede from in so far as they make it quite clear that they do not owe anything to them. Keep your society unequal, corrupt, exploitative and rotten, they seem to say, just give us a state of our own. Secession raises a profound dilemma for most of us. Is it politically prudent to support a leadership that skilfully deploys violence to acquire advantages for only the members of its own constituency, a constituency that has been forged through deliberate political fashioning and one that is based on notions of

who belongs and who does not belong. On balance, these notions are grounded in ethnic affiliations. It follows that people who have not been born into that particular community are excluded by definitional fiat. It is precisely the abdication of moral obligation to people who do not belong to the right, ethnic group even if they are in want; that makes it difficult to unconditionally defend the use of secessionist violence.⁵

The complexities of revolutionary violence

The issue is much more complex in the fourth case: revolutionary violence, which forms the subject matter for this work. Revolutionaries seek to transform the institutional context in which people live out their lives and make it less unequal and more just, through armed struggle which has as its long-term objective the takeover of the state. This avatar of violence can be distinguished from other forms in distinctive ways. It does not seek to wrest collective benefits from the state. That is, the proponents of this form of politics do not see violence as a way of making demands upon the state. This course of action implies that the state is legitimate, and that it can deliver benefits to citizens if pushed hard enough.

The proponents of revolutionary violence believe, on the other hand, that the state is not only unwilling, but incapable of institutionalizing the basic preconditions of justice for the most vulnerable: through, say, redistribution of resources, guarantees of a life of dignity and assurances that the political voice of people who are trapped in the clutches of injustices will be heard. The chains that tie different forms of injustice are durable and inflexible. Injustice carries no expiry date. The tangle of injustice can be untangled only through violence, and ultimately the replacement of the state by one that belongs to the people.

Unlike secessionist politics, revolutionary violence does not seek to break away a piece of a territory of the existing state and establish a new state in the name of a particular ethnic or religious group. The

group wielding revolutionary violence reneges on political obligation to the state, but not on moral obligation to fellow citizens, particularly the most deprived, the most discriminated against, the most oppressed, and the most exploited and in general those who are victims of a history not of their making.

Revolutionary groups do not say 'keep your state and society, rotten, corrupt, unequal, exploitative and unjust as it is' all we want is a state of our own. They seek to replace a state that has displayed remarkable and a somewhat stunning incapacity and unwillingness to provide justice to its citizens with a state that will be responsive to precisely those people that have been consigned to the footpaths and the ditches of the road during the long march of history. This is the objective of violence in the revolutionary mode.

More importantly, revolutionary violence is based less upon the use of instruments of force and destruction and more on political mobilization of the group of peasants on whose behalf the guerrillas have picked up arms, and in influencing public opinion. The war against recalcitrant elites is political rather than military in so far as the objective is to build up a political movement that recognizes that society is embedded in injustice, that the state is the codified power of the social formation and that all manifestations of injustice have to be battled, transformed and made receptive to the voice of those people who have been banished to the fringes. The task is not easy given the intractability and inflexibility of power relations. If political strategies short of violence have not succeeded in unshackling the lives of people from necessity, violence has to be used to break these bonds. Violence, as the time honoured adage holds, has to be the midwife of history. There is no other option in revolutionary politics.

Revolutionary politics in a different vein

Of course, revolutions have not always been made by or even on behalf of poor peasants. Barrington Moore in his classic work on

the social origins of dictatorship and democracy explored the varied political roles played by landed upper classes and the peasantry in the transformation from agrarian societies to modern industrial ones.⁶ Different societies, he suggested, took different routes towards the making of a modern industrial society, and discrete complexes of historical factors enabled specific classes to play a significant role in the transition. The complex of these factors produced different outcomes. For instance, the Puritan revolution in England, the French Revolution and the American Civil War created the political context for bourgeois revolutions. These revolutions gave political expression to deep-rooted economic changes that had already taken place, such as the rise of the bourgeois class, decline of the power of the landlords and the seminal shift in the social basis of the state. Bourgeois revolutions heralded not only a new economic dispensation, but also a new political order marked by constitutionalism, limited government and the grant of basic fundamental rights to citizens. The outcome institutionalized both capitalism and parliamentary democracy.

In Germany and Japan in the late nineteenth century, modernizing revolutions were crafted by a landlord class, more than conscious of the need for transforming the economy into a modern industrial one. The role of this class was central to 'revolutions from above', simply because the bourgeois impulse was weak, and the peasantry was equally weak. Though the revolutionary path to a modern society also led to capitalism, given the absence of a strong revolutionary surge, it passed through reactionary political forms and culminated in fascism. That is, though 'revolutions from above' transformed the economics of these two countries, economic modernization did not lead to a liberal democratic political order of the kind witnessed in countries that had undergone bourgeois revolutions.

Moore contrasted 'revolutions from above' with what he called 'revolutions from below' that took place in China and in Russia. In both countries, the bourgeois impulse was weak. However, agrarian class relations were marked by conflict, and this factor enabled the politicization of the peasantry. Semi-imperialism had greatly weakened

the state in China and made it dependent on the landlord class, both to maintain control over the peasantry and to ensure production. The intensification of repression on the peasantry deepened political consciousness among the class. Political mobilization by the Chinese Communist Party, which tapped memories of large-scale peasant rebellions, radicalized an already politically aware peasantry and forged a revolutionary moment. The revolution targeted both imperialism and feudalism. In Russia and in China, revolutions had their exclusive origins in the peasantry, and this factor alone made communism possible.⁷

The one country, which Moore thought should have had a revolution, but which failed on this front, is India. Despite wide-scale poverty and misery, India had not experienced a bourgeois revolution. Nor had it experienced a conservative revolution from above, or indeed a communist one. The impact of colonialism on the country had resulted in a weak bourgeois impulse and a large but conservative peasantry. Both these factors contributed to a non-revolutionary situation.

Moore published his magisterial work in 1966, and barely a year later, the Naxal revolution broke out in West Bengal. The revolutionary movement persists till today, in some form or the other, fragmented at one time, and united in another, as we shall see in Chapter 3. Moore was correct in one respect though. The revolutionary *movement* continues to throw light on the infirmities of Indian democracy, on inequality and on poverty, but the time for a revolutionary *moment* has still not come around. The reasons for this lag between a revolutionary *movement* and a revolutionary *moment* are discussed in Chapter 5. Perhaps the lag has to do with the political context of revolutionary violence – democracy howsoever imperfectly institutionalized democratic justice maybe. The paradox is that revolutionary violence has flared up in imperfectly just democracies like India, but the democratic context inhibits the realization of the objectives of this brand of politics, but more on this anon. Let me now thread the argument above and try to arrive at a comprehensive definition of political violence.

The two faces of violence

Political violence is practised by organized and ideologically charged groups that seek to impact the political order in some way, to stake a claim on the political order, to change it or indeed to defend it. The last part of the definition enables us to conceive of states and/or vigilante groups that act on behalf of the state as agents of political violence. Non-state groups use political violence to make demands on the body politic. The state is also guilty of using political violence to resist these demands, and of hammering the polity and society in a particular shape and form through law and the use of coercion. Let me illustrate this with reference to an incident in India's recent history.

On 26 May 2013, India's revolutionary guerrillas, the Maoists, ambushed a string of cars ferrying leaders of the Congress party in the Bastar forests of Chattisgarh and attacked passengers. Twenty-eight persons were killed. The Indian security establishment promptly went off into paroxysms of acute hysteria. So did self-appointed spokespersons of 'Indian' public opinion. Strident demands to exterminate 'terrorists' and 'terrorism' assaulted our collective eardrums once again. On a less hysterical note, a number of security experts reiterated that the latest Maoist attempt on the life of political figures was deplorable, and that it was time the Indian state did something about this most serious threat to the security of the country. It should use all the means of destruction at its command to exterminate the Maoists.

Public indignation mounted at reports of how the Maoists sprayed bullets on the occupants of cars, how they targeted Mahendra Karma popularly known as the Bastar tiger and how they subjected him to unspeakable acts of violence. Eyewitnesses told the media that Karma's hands were tied behind his back, that he was taken into a thicket and that a female cadre of the Maoists shot him at close range. Other women cadres stabbed him seventy-eight times with their bayonets. Reportedly, they executed a macabre dance of death on his body, kicked it around like a beach ball and abandoned it.

Senseless acts of violence performed on a dead man by cadres of a political formation, even one that declares itself wedded to violence as creed and as political strategy, repelled and repelled thoroughly. The widespread and insistent demand that the Maoists should be simply wiped out appears warranted, indeed the paramount need of the hour.

Let us, however, tarry for a moment and glance briefly at the context in which these senseless and brutal killings had occurred. The way Mahendra Karma was tortured and killed, and his body desecrated, gives us enough reason to erupt in vociferous indignation. At the same time, one could not help but remember that this man, who represented Bastar in the popular house of the Indian Parliament, and Dantewada in the state assembly, was responsible for the founding of two rabidly anti-Maoist forces in the state of Chattisgarh: Jan Jagran Abhiyan in the 1990s and the infamous Salwa Judum in 2005.

Salwa Judum, a notorious vigilante group supported by the state government and funded by the central government, forcibly moved thousands of tribals from their homes and relocated them in camps, ostensibly for the purposes of protecting them against the Maoists. This was borne out by the 2009 Report of Sub-Group IV of the central government appointed 'Committee on State Agrarian Relations and Unfinished Task of Land Reform'. The report confirmed that the vigilante group was created and encouraged by the state government, was supported by the armouries of the central government and was trained in organisational skills by the security forces of the state.

This state-funded privately armed group, writes Jason Miklian, represented itself as a popular movement against Maoism. A deeper and ignoble conspiracy was, however, afoot. The leaders of Salwa Judum, or rather war-lords, proceeded to divide the territory and the forest resources of Dantewada amongst themselves. They controlled camps sheltering displaced persons, displaced in the first instance by these very leaders. In exchange for protection services, they received funding, food and arms from the Chattisgarh state. Convoys of trucks

carried war lords, who were protected by automatic weapon-wielding plainclothes and security personnel, across the length and breadth of the region of Dantewada. The idea was to recruit young men as special police officers or supplementary forces. These war lords unleashed a reign of terror on the region in order to accomplish their aims.⁸

In addition to garnering profits for its members, the organization had been contracted by corporates intent on appropriating mineral-rich land, in order to provide protection and ground-clearing services for excavation and mining.⁹ Not surprisingly, these activities bore a bitter harvest. Villagers were displaced, villages were stripped bare, vast stretches of cultivable land lay fallow, collection of forest produce was disrupted, people had no access to weekly markets, schools were turned into police camps and basic rights were trampled upon.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, the criminal acts of the S.J. drove many a young tribal into the arms of the Maoists.

A petition was filed in the Supreme Court by scholars and activists requesting that the court ensures that the state government discontinue its support of the vigilante group consisting of more than 5,000 tribal youths. On 5 July 2011, the Supreme Court ordered that both the Chattisgarh government and the central government should desist from arming callow youth, and allotting to them the status of Special Police Officers expected to perform police functions. Raw recruits had neither been given basic training in the use of arms, nor rudimentary knowledge of human rights law. And, these hurriedly conscripted young men had been let loose on villagers in the name of fighting Maoism by any means possible.¹¹

We might also do well to remember that in the months preceding the attack on the convoy of Congress leaders, the state government had majorly hyped up military operations against the Maoists. The paramilitary organization of the government, the Central Reserve Police Force, set up bases in areas of Bastar considered to be Maoist strongholds and took over health centres and schools. From here the force not only launched sorties to flush out Maoists from the forests, but also terrorized local populations.

It is possible to recount story after story of the competitive violence unleashed by the government, the Maoists and vigilante groups on the inhabitants in the region named the 'Red Corridor' in central and eastern India. We can tell another story of how both perpetrators and victims have been scooped up in the maelstrom of violence to such an extent that their identities have fused. The victim has become the perpetrator, and those who inflict violence have been reduced to objects of target practice. But that is another story.

This story is about the acute political dilemma that confronts those who try to think beyond the obvious and the banal. The Maoists have let loose a fury of violence on innocent citizens who travel in trains that blow up, who inadvertently walk or drive over landmines placed by guerrilla bands of the party, and are thereby consigned to oblivion, who are caught fatally in the crossfire between the armed guerrillas and the security forces of the state, and who inhabiting the region the Maoists have made their base, live in constant fear that they will be targeted as informers or police agents, and executed by kangaroo courts. Coercion, intimidation and strong-arm tactics are outrageous and condemnable. These acts violate our basic moral sensibilities and violate deeply held convictions that the least that is due to human beings is respect for the right to life, howsoever stark that life may be.

Do we find the overreach of state violence, and state sponsored violence, quite so outrageous and condemnable? On the 26 of January every year, India celebrates the anniversary of that momentous day in 1950 when the country was constituted politically as a Republic. The Indian state showcases the country's plural and diverse culture through dance, music and visual representations. Exotically designed floats representing the traditions and history of regions are, undeniably, the high point of the Republic Day parade. Also trotted out with some conceit is the country's formidable arsenal of violence, garnished in the colours of the great Indian Republic that has promised to its people justice, social, economic and political, in the preamble of the constitution.

How many of us wonder whether some of these weapons are fated to be turned on our own people: dissenters in the valley of Kashmir, insurgents in substantial parts of the North-East and people living in regions considered Maoist strongholds? India is considered the world's largest democracy, and this is certainly a matter for gratification. But for some decades now, we have seen with regret the increasing and arbitrary use of force against citizens in the form of encounter deaths, police torture, firing on peaceful demonstrations, charges and the ferocious use of water cannons against young people who dare to protest against sexual violence unleashed on women in the streets of Delhi, unwarranted arrests and detention and suspension of basic civil liberties in major parts of the country.

State violence

In the Kashmir Valley, and in parts of the North East, the Indian state has come to be known as the harbinger of death and destruction. Firing on peaceful protests, killing of suspects, rapes and torture have become the hallmark of the power that security forces command, even as they occupy the valley. The ruthlessness with which inhabitants of regions typed the Maoist 'Red Corridor' are treated is scandalous and shameful. And the democratic state makes absolutely no attempt to remedy its own record as a violator of basic human rights. The number of stories that compose the long and sordid narrative of state violence in India is beyond belief.

Despite a plethora of human rights legislation, India has one of the worst records in human rights. According to the 'Status Report 2012-Human Rights in India' released by the Working Group on Human Rights (convenor Miloon Kothari) of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the Government of India has rejected the recommendation that it should ratify the Convention Against Torture. The GOI also rejected the recommendation that draconian laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act that provides immunity

to the army in cases of human rights violations should be reviewed and repealed, so that it is aligned with the obligations of the government under the International Covenant on Civil Rights.

Despite claims that the Indian government ritually trots out that it faces neither international nor non-state conflict in what is called insurgent zones, security forces have been held responsible by civil rights organizations, by independent tribunals and by the Supreme Court, for disappearances, arbitrary arrests, torture, extra-judicial killings, sexual violence and use of lethal force to disperse crowds agitating against state-sponsored violence. India still has to accept the recommendation of the UNHRC that capital punishment should be outlawed. Human rights are persistently violated by the state, concluded the report. The number of Indian citizens killed in the name of national security, territorial integrity, the war against terror and other acts construed as national crimes is beyond calculation. We do not even know the extent of harm committed in the name of some or the other unspecified national interest.

Extra-judicial killings of people whose guilt has yet to be established in a court of law, and whose complicity in some or the other crime is highly debatable, are accepted by citizens, by the media and by representatives with a degree of unthinking ease. Policemen popularly known as 'encounter specialists' are celebrated, rewarded and immortalized by the Bombay film industry. Take the case of Dayanand Nayak, a police sub-inspector of the Bombay police, who reportedly killed more than fifty gangsters during his career. The 'fame' that he had carved out for himself through extra-judicial killings was chronicled and acclaimed in the 2004 movie 'Ab Tak Chappan' produced by Ram Gopal Varma and directed by Shimit Amin. Increasingly, movies have begun to commemorate vigilantes who kill in the name of national security, an interesting departure from the one-man army of Amitabh Bachan intent on extracting revenge from some individual that had wronged him and his family in the past. Vigilantes do not only kill to sort out personal traumas, but they kill to rid the country of, as the gifted actor Naseeruddin

Shah put it in the Neeraj Pandey 2008 directed thriller *A Wednesday*, 'cockroaches' who infiltrate society bringing with them disease and pestilence.

India is not alone in accepting state violence as a given. Few eyebrows are raised at the indiscriminate and lawless excesses committed by the police, paramilitary forces, the army and by vigilante groups the world over. Ideologies of security, territorial integrity and the war against terror have bludgeoned societies into complacency and acceptance of state violence. Humankind has become insensitive to violence and to the harm that attends politics in this mode. If in a democracy people are arbitrarily imprisoned, tortured and killed, this should be a matter of public outrage, of concern and of demands for the resignation of the government that has violated the fundamental maxim of a constitutional contract between the state and the political public. The political tragedy is that state violence, for the most part, goes unremarked. All this, and nary an explanation, or any sort of justification for the indiscriminate violence that citizens are subjected to, except in the tired and overused language of state security.

That democratic states unleash realms of violence on their own citizens is indisputably condemnable. But I do not elaborate more on this phenomenon. I take it as a given that even democratic states are condensates of power, that these states do not hesitate from inflicting harm on their own citizens and that they have the resources to garner support among the political public for such actions. More interesting are questions of how people speak back to the state, more interesting is the issue of agency and more interesting is the issue of why revolutionary politics cannot promote agency.

Shall we speak of violence?

Given the widespread resort to violence as a form of political claim-making and political rejection, there is some need to speak

of political violence, to open up the phenomenon to scrutiny, to distinguish between various forms of political violence and to approach everyday vocabularies and newspaper headlines with the proverbial pinch of salt.

Who would not accept that a world without violence is infinitely preferable to a world of violence? But we inhabit imperfect and flawed societies. The promises of democracy remain unrealized. And the norms of justice are destined to be unfulfilled. We do not have to be votaries of violence to comprehend why people who suffer from historical injustices such as extreme economic deprivation, social stigma that refuses erasure, state-sponsored coercion and lack of voice in the public domain of civil society resort to violence. In such contexts, violence can conceivably become its own justification, sometimes, somewhat, perhaps a weapon of the last resort, but also indispensable in situations of extreme disadvantage.

No less a person than Gandhi, the paramount apostle of non-violence, accepted that violence in certain conditions is unavoidable. Violence, he once remarked at a public meeting, was certainly preferable to cowardice. 'I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour.'¹² For Gandhi not only is violence preferable compared to lesser or inferior sentiments such as cowardice, it can be defended if it prevents greater harm. In some circumstances, 'taking life may be a duty... We do destroy as much life as we think necessary for sustaining the body... Even manslaughter may be necessary in certain cases. Suppose a man runs amuck and goes furiously sword in hand, killing anyone that comes in his way, and no one dares to capture him alive. Anyone who despatches this lunatic will earn the gratitude of the community and be regarded as a benevolent man.'¹³ Finally, Gandhi suggested that it is violence to cause suffering to others out of our selfishness, or just for the sake of doing so. But if it is necessary to cause suffering to make someone happy, dispassionately and unselfishly, this is non-violence. There is

a distinction between the act of injuring a thief to save oneself and injuries produced by a doctor to bring relief.¹⁴

Gandhi's endorsement of violence is conditional and contextual; that is the context and/or intent justifies or does not justify the use of violence. In a similar fashion, let us, at least, begin to ask the following question. When groups neither hope nor expect justice for harm done, is violence by non-state actors *prima facie* justified? Dare we harbour the thought that non-state actors are, on the face of it, justified in using violence because they have reached the nadir of desperation, or because violence for them represents the ultimate and perhaps the final act of protest, or because violence enables to recover political agency that the state and dominant classes have sought to obliterate or because violence is the midwife to a new society?

Can we move beyond hegemonic beliefs and speculate who these people are. What are the personal biographies of people who are fated to be massacred by the security forces of the state or blown up in landmine explosions detonated by Maoists? Equally, why did some groups pick up the nearest weapon and aim it against the state and minions? Did they lose hope and trust in India's democracy completely, or did they never have cause to hope and to trust in the first place? Do we, who occupy privileged places in society, ever wonder what it is like to be relentlessly hunted down, tortured and killed? Can we empathize with the fact that the hunted will at some point of time turn on the hunter in order to reverse the order of domination? This can happen even in democracy, because we have found that justice does not always follow the route of democracy. On the contrary, democracy provides us with the space to struggle for the realization of justice. Some of these struggles have to use violence in order to do so.

Therefore, let us begin to think about the issue of violence in public life contextually. Little attention has been paid to these questions because the very idea that non-state actors, in certain and specified circumstances, are entitled to use violence is ruled out by definitional fiat. Political discourses whether of the state or of civil society tend

to dismiss armed struggle against injustice as terrorism or as a law and order problem. In the process, we often take the side of coercive states.

Conclusion

All this makes the task of exploring various dimensions of revolutionary violence daunting. Nevertheless, we have to take it on because increasingly groups in India and other countries tend to see violence as a form of doing politics. We need to sort out different forms of violence and see which is worthy of a limited and provisional defence, and which is not. Before taking on this task of sorting out the untidiness of political violence, the concept of violence, which has arguably been overextended by a number of different authors and experts, needs to be clarified, somewhat. Though we are fairly certain that we recognize violence when we see or experience it, it is undoubtedly one of the most knotty of concepts that political theorists have to deal with. It is to this discussion that I turn.