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Introduction

Protest politics in the twenty-first century

Civil society

The first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed the intensification of two starkly dissimilar forms of protest across the global south. From Nepal to Libya, huge crowds, driven by a distinctly anti-authoritarian mood, assembled and agitated in public spaces to demand an end to monarchical rule, dictatorships and individualized tyrannies. The mobilization of civil societies against undemocratic governments once again, after 1989, demonstrated the competence of the political public to participate in an activity the ancient Greeks had termed politics.

Collective action bred dramatic results, at least in some countries. In 2006, in Nepal, a massive anti-monarchy movement was transmuted in the course of the struggle into a pro-democracy movement. The movement brought an end to a monarchy that had once claimed divine right to rule, motivated the Maoists to lay aside their weapons and take part in elections to a constituent assembly and catapulted the transition of the Nepali people from subject to citizen. Over two years, 2007 and 2008, a pro-democracy movement, led by lawyers, shook up the then military-ruled Pakistan. The movement forced the military government under General Pervez Musharraf to its knees, and heralded yet again the return of democratic politics to the country.

The most fervent assertion of civil society occurred in a region that had been written off by many scholars as destined for authoritarian rule, the Arab world. A series of anti-government protests, uprisings and rebellions in early 2011 inaugurated what came to be known as the 'Arab Spring' that spread from Tunisia to Egypt, to Syria. The term 'Arab

Spring' is hotly contested, but roughly it captures the phenomenon of a political awakening, and vocal articulation of discontent. Relatively peaceful crowds, passionately pursuing liberty, fundamental rights, constitutional and accountable government and above all dignity occupied and agitated in public spaces. Even as the initial uprising in Tunisia exerted a domino effect in the rest of the region, the development evoked reminiscences of 'Velvet Revolutions' in East Europe in 1989 that heralded the demise of Stalinist states and initiated electoral democracy and market economies. Since 1989, some very powerful states have collapsed like the proverbial house of cards before civil societies single-mindedly pursuing the agenda of democracy.

Certainly, there is more to civil society than just mobilization against tyrannical regimes. The concept abstracts from, describes and conceptualizes particular sorts of politics, such as civic activism and collective action. It is normative in so far as it specifies that associational life in a metaphorical space between the household, the market and the state is valuable. Associational life neutralizes the individualism, the atomism and the anomie that modernity brings in its wake. Social associations enable pursuit of multiple projects, and thereby engender solidarity. The projects themselves range from developing popular consciousness about climate change, to discussing and dissecting popular culture, to supporting needy children, to organizing neighbourhood activities, to monitoring the state. Above all, the concept recognizes that even democratic states are likely to be imperfect. Democracy is a project that has to be realized through sustained engagement with holders of power. Citizen activism, public vigilance, informed public opinion, a free media and a multiplicity of social associations are necessary preconditions for this task.¹

But it was the minimal avatar of civil society, that of mobilization against authoritarian regimes that denied, as dictatorships are wont to do, civil and political liberties to the people, which moved thousands of people across the globe to stand up and speak back to a history not of their making. The wheel had turned full circle. In 1971, Solidarity in Poland had reinvented the concept of civil society. This reinvented

concept spread to other parts of eastern and central Europe. It swept to Brazil where urban professional classes, youth and women's movements, trade unions and social associations took on the military regime, and to other parts of South America. And the concept enthused individuals and groups in South Asia and the Arab world to demand what is their rightful due.

A reinvented civil society that drew upon De Tocqueville more than Hegel or Gramsci gave to the world a new vocabulary: of participation, of civic and associational life, of the right of citizens to hold governments responsible and of human rights. The vocabulary contributed a great deal to the spread of the *idea* of democracy even if the institutionalization of democracy in large parts of the world remains an incomplete venture, a dream but partly realized. The language of civil society also gave to inhabitants of non-democracies and imperfect democracies hopes that the future would bring them rights and dignity, that democracy would be realized and that the capacity of ordinary human beings to realize themselves through collective action and social movements would be recognized and valued.

Political violence

This is not, however, the end of the story of people's resistance to excessive and arbitrary power wielded by state elites. The task of civil society is to monitor and protest against elite capture of institutions and of resources, and against unwarranted state control over lives. That is why civil society is an essential precondition of democracy. But in country after country, civil society lost momentum in the face of inflexible states, or descended into proactive and/or reactive violence as in Egypt. At the very time that the phrase 'civil society' came onto the political tongues of newspaper readers, the social media, and television audiences, we also witnessed an explosion of politics in the mode of violence, in other words political violence.

Protest and resistance in the mode of violence is, of course, not new to human kind. The twentieth century can rightly be called the

'age of violence', given the immense destruction wrought by two world wars, numerous proxy wars, colonial despotism, anti-colonial guerrilla struggles and civil wars in the post-colony. Colonial rulers left countries they had plundered in states of devastation and were quickly replaced by a new, appropriative ruling class in the post-colony.

The persistence of injustice, exploitation, oppression and marginalization in the post-colony bred expected results in the form of violent resistance. Anti-colonial struggles subsided after fulfilling the objective of winning independence. The political space they vacated was occupied by new sorts of armed struggle within the post-colony, over the right of a particular ethnic group to rule, for control of resources, for takeover of state power or for a state of one's own. Formal colonialism came to an end, but colonialism was recast as economic imperialism that intensified deprivation and misery for the poor in the global south and generated multiple mutinies. An impoverished peasantry took to arms against institutionalized injustice within the post-colony; and private armies of aspirant elites sought to imprint the body politic with partisan and avaricious agendas.

The first two decades of the twenty-first century proved no exception to this trend of violent politics. Some non-state groups continue to use immense violence to assert claims to state power, others use violence to oppose the monopoly of power by political elites and yet other groups use violence to make a statement, to assert the power of the group and to create a generalized atmosphere of fear and trepidation. The last is best captured in the phrase 'global terrorism', which with a degree of impunity destroys lives and infrastructure at will.

Above all, post-colonies experienced unprecedented violence because some or the other group within the country staked a claim for a state of its own. The laws of secession or attempted secessions in the post-colonial world are frankly the laws of war – laws of the jungle. The reason why secessions are so messy in the post-colonial world, compared to, for example, the wished-for secessions in Scotland and Catalonia from parent countries, is fairly obvious. For countries that

wrested independence from colonial powers in the second half of the twentieth century, secession signifies a dramatic failure, a failure to consolidate the territory of the nation state.

The nation state is highly overrated, and in our part of the world, South Asia, it appears as one of the major mistakes of history. Even so, the global community continues to hold fast to the belief that the only state worth its name is a nation state and continues to believe that the 'nation' should form an essential prefix to the state, as in the axiom the 'nation-state'. In the global order, states that cannot hold their territory together are castigated as failed states, as crisis states and as fragile states, by western governments, donors, rating agencies and western academics for whom research on 'failed states' has become a profitable industry. The terminology produces anxiety, political knees quake and spines of ruling elite quiver. For any one of these dubious titles casts a particularly dark shadow on state capacity. The tale of terrible vengeance wreaked on insurgency by states could have been foretold.

States in the global south have responded by accelerating 'nation-building' through coercive means. There are a great many tragedies waiting to happen in, for example South Asia, simply because state making has not been preceded by 'nation making' as was the case in Italy and France. Post-colonial states simply cannot come to terms with loss of territory. They resort to every means available: torture, encounter deaths, firing on peaceful protests, imprisonment at will, draconian legislation, displacement and suspension of civil and political liberties, to repress secession.

The dramatic expansion in the number of groups demanding a state of one's own dates to the collapse of actually existing socialist societies at the turn of the 1990s. This inaugurated an era of violent ethno-nationalist movements, especially in the region of the Balkans and the Caucasus. The consequences of the upsurge were, somewhat, serious. Countries dissolved, federal systems melted away and a number of new states emerged out of the debris of old ones often through processes of

armed struggle, ethnic cleansing and genocide. Not surprisingly, a new lease of life was infused into hitherto dormant separatist movements. Among some examples of these movements are the Kashmiri's, the Naga's and the Bodo's in India; the Chechens in Russia; separatist movements in Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabach) and Moldova (Trans-Dniester); Baluchistan in Pakistan; West Papua in Indonesia; the Oromos and the Somalis in Ethiopia; the Kurds in Turkey; till May 2009 the Tamils in Sri Lanka; South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia; and parts of the Ukraine.

Political violence in the global south

In some cases, secessionist movements have proved victorious. But wresting a state of one's own out of unwilling hands has hardly managed to resolve problems of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities.² Consider Georgia and Ukraine that gained independence with the meltdown of the former superpower, the USSR. Both these countries have been wracked by separatist violence that has proved successful in some regions – notably Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Crimea became independent vide a referendum held in the shadow of an army massed at the border. Separatism has succeeded but will the formation of yet another state, or, as in the case of Crimea, integration into another state unscramble the basic problems that bedevilled earlier avatars of state formation? Recollect that in South Sudan, violence exploded between the two main ethnic communities almost immediately after it achieved independence in July 2011.

Afghanistan since 2013 has entered a new phase of civil war, marked by escalating violence between insurgents and the Afghan National Security Forces. The retreat of international security forces and the rapid decline in the capacity of the Afghan government to control the situation have led to generalized terrorism that affects neighbouring countries. Even as the insurgents assemble bigger formation for assaults,³ Afghanistan provides but one case of what Praveen Swami

calls 'epic wars unleashed by Mr Bush in the wake of 9/11'. Islamist armies more powerful than before 'have swept aside Iraq's military in Mosul, Tikrit, and Bayji; in Syria, too, they control large swathes of territory. Yemen has all but disintegrated. Pakistan is in apparently terminal meltdown. Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two largest regional powers, have been eyeing each other warily – each wondering when the ethnic-religious fires raging across the region will ignite a full-blown war between them'.⁴ Other horrifying cases of political violence continue to make for dismal newspaper reading every morning: Darfur, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eastern Burma, Eastern Chad, Iraq, Syria, Somalia and Sri Lanka. These regions stand as signifiers of brutality and terror, of man's inhumanity to man.

There seems to be no end to the spiral of civil wars and political violence in the foreseeable future (I am not speaking of global terrorism for this phenomenon demands a separate argument). Private armies augment arsenals, recruit civilians and often little children to fight their wars and assault the state. States fortify their walls against offensives that mercilessly batter their ramparts. And ordinary citizens are caught in the crossfire. The consequences are disastrous: loss of livelihood and lives, displacement and banishment to refugee camps, where relocated people are vulnerable to disease, malnutrition and general ill-being.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees reports that for the first time since the Second World War the number of people driven from their homes by conflict and crisis touched 51.2 million by the end of 2013. Syria is the hardest hit. 'We are seeing here the immense costs of not ending wars, of failing to resolve or prevent conflict', said the UNHCR chief Antonio Guterres. Without political solutions, he continued, 'alarming levels of conflict and the mass suffering that is reflected in these figures will continue'.⁵ The intensification of extreme violence in Iraq and Syria by the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) has worsened the plight of ordinary people.

Conceptualizing political violence

Given the pervasiveness of political violence, political theorists have had to take on board the generic concept of violence, the specificities of political violence and increasingly terrorism.⁶ Some of these formulations are discussed during the course of this argument. The urgency of the situation gives us enough reason to try to explore the concept of political violence and sort out categories of this genre of politics. First, political violence significantly impacts the classical concerns of the subject of political theory: the indispensability of an impartial and fair state, sanctity of human rights, civility, pluralism, toleration, secularism and above all injustice and justice. Second, political violence impacts the context in which we live and work. The subject cannot be relegated to a space outside the ambit of concern of political theorists.

But how do political theorists go about conceptualizing political violence? What conceptual tools do we have to theorize acts that cause immense harm and leave ineradicable scars on the body politic? There are conceivably two ways in which we can do so. First, we can believe that the origins of political violence, which aims to take over state power, control resources or pursue ethnic vengeance and/or the righting of historic wrongs, can be traced to that catch-all term ethnicity and ancient rivalries between groups. Or, we could say that insurgency is driven by greed for control over resources such as minerals and agro-products, and that rank acquisitiveness wins over politics of ethnic angst. According to the well-known thesis put forth by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, most civil wars are driven by greed and grievance with the former dominating the latter.⁷ It may well be that the ethnic fig leaf is used to camouflage rank avarice.

On the other hand, and this is the second route to conceptualizing political violence, we recognize that such neat explanations serve to push issues of justice and injustice, of exploitation and resistance, of justifiability and of contradictions in the practice of armed non-state

actors, under the metaphorical carpet. This does not help anyone to take a principled stand on the issue of political violence, unless we happen to be either uncritical ideologues or fervent opponents of this form of politics. As uncritical ideologues, we could affirm with some ease that political violence is needed because the world is violent. And as fervent opponents, we would say that violence by non-state actors is a pox on our earth and should be exterminated by the use of every means possible.

But certain sorts of political violence I suggest in this work, particularly revolutionary violence, do not and cannot permit of single-point explanatory agendas or solutions, impassioned affirmation or fanatical disapproval. All political concepts are complex and contradictory, but political violence is more complex, more contradictory and definitely untidier than most concepts. As we shall see in the course of this argument, it is possible to support as well as reject this form of politics at the same time. We can understand why groups have reached for the nearest gun, and yet believe that political violence is a bad or rather an unwise way of doing politics in a democracy.

If we recognize the ambivalences of political violence, and if we understand that the specificities of political violence can only be comprehended and justified contextually, as the argument in this work holds, our agenda shifts. Abjuring outright affirmations or dismissals, we begin to ask a different set of questions. For instance, are armed insurgents justified in using violence to press their demands regardless of whether or not they will win the struggle? What are the circumstances in which they have resorted to violence? What are the contradictions in this particular avatar of politics? What precisely does this sort of politics do for ordinary people: does it enable them to recover 'voice', realize the enormity of injustice heaped upon them and fight for justice? Or, does political violence reduce people to an audience of a political theatre of the absurd, where every protagonist, as in Greek tragedies, either commits suicide or is killed? What is the concept of violence about, in any case?

The issue that lies at the heart of violence should be clear by now. For critical political theorists, discussions about political violence are ultimately about the kind of state that does or does not provide justice to its people *even* if it is democratic. This we have to take into account. We have to recognize that justice and democracy may not be conceptual siblings and that sometimes violence has to be used to seize justice from states. If this is not of interest for political theory, what is? Political theorists have to ask why people rebel in a democracy that recognizes the value of dissent. Finally, discussions about violence in political theory are eventually about what violent politics contribute to the lives of those very people this avatar of the political speaks for. There is, in other words, paramount need to think through the concept of political violence, its nuances, its inconsistencies and its complexities.

For this reason, I approach the theme of political or more specifically revolutionary violence from the vantage point of critical political theory. (I use in the rest of the work the terms ‘revolutionary and political violence’, and ‘revolutionary violence’ and ‘revolutionary politics’ interchangeably because revolutionary violence, arguably, represents an extreme form of the political.)

The significance of empirical referrals

But, then, political theory has to address empirical contexts and concrete problems. ‘The task of political theory’, John Dunn reminds us, ‘is to diagnose practical predicaments and to show us how best to confront them.’⁸ Arguably, political theory as critical activity is geared to addressing and reflecting on intractable political problems and dilemmas of the human condition. Therefore, practitioners of the craft cannot afford to live and work in rarified spaces shorn of the complications of actually existing social, economic and political worlds. If the task of political theorists is to figure out what this form of politics we call political violence is about, and why it has erupted onto

the political landscape, then our theories cannot ignore empirical facts that constitute a referral for theories in the first place.

In any case, in a world that is inscribed with inflexible political predicaments can theorists resort only to formal propositions and hypothetical examples to illustrate the finer points of their formulations? Does he or she have any other option except to philosophically reflect on and try and sort out the ambivalences, the uncertainties and the contingent nature of the political world?

Of course, we may not be able to come up with neat theories if we try and negotiate situations and circumstances that are far from neat. Coppeters has made an important point in the context of secession. For him, any approach that

avoids tackling the innumerable difficulties inherent in the precise description and analysis of a concrete case of secession, does have clear advantages. It makes it possible to clarify the moral debate on secession when discussing the hierarchical order of various legal and philosophical principles and arguments within a systematic framework... [Yet] philosophical reflection on the guiding principles applicable in a normative analysis of the legitimacy of secession cannot be made in a way that is entirely abstracted from practical experience.⁹

The danger is of course that theories that address empirical situations and facts become much more hesitant and shorn of certainties, convictions and neatness. But this might be an advantage, because seldom do political dilemmas and uncertainties lend themselves to absolutely clear and unreservedly decisive analysis, conclusions and resolutions. It is just as well that we recognize this particular aspect of politics that we seek to understand, theorize and prescribe for.

The significance of political theory

The task of political theory is to critically engage with political practices and quandaries; therefore, theorists need an empirical referent point.

At the same time, we should be careful not to lapse into empiricism. 'Whereas', suggests Daniel McDermott, 'social scientists determine the empirical facts of human behaviour and institutions, political philosophers aim to determine what ought to be done in light of that information. How should states be organized? What kinds of projects should they pursue? Are there some actions that are impermissible?' No set of empirical facts can answer these questions. Empirical facts are important, but without 'the normative element that is the political philosopher's concern, nothing would follow about which form of government ought to be implemented'.¹⁰

Accordingly, this study attempts to explore the concept of violence from the vantage point of critical political theory, which in turn addresses the armed struggle waged by Maoists in India. India provides an interesting referral for the theme. Political theorists generally agree that political violence has no room in a democracy, which gives voice to its citizens. India is unquestionably a democracy. Yet all sorts of violence bedevil political life in democratic India as in other countries, from secession, to communal and caste riots, to revolutionary violence. We have to make sense of this paradox.

Arguably, two key questions constitute the core of a political theory of revolutionary violence. First, can we justify revolutionary violence in democratic contexts? In what circumstances can we justify political/revolutionary violence? The problem is elaborated in Chapter 1 and negotiated in Chapter 4. Political violence can be justified, I argue in Chapter 4, in a very specific set of circumstances – that of overlapping forms of injustice that betray the basic presuppositions of democracy. The underlying theme of this work is the relationship between democracy and revolutionary violence.

Second, even if we can justify revolutionary violence with reference to some criterion, is this a prudent way of doing politics in a democracy? Revolutionary violence claims to speak in the name of and for the most marginalized in society, but what exactly does this form of politics do for its constituency? Does it enable voice? Before we negotiate these questions, there is need, I argue in Chapter 2, to sort out

the many meanings ascribed to violence. In Chapter 3, I outline a brief biography of revolutionary violence in India. And in the conclusion, I revisit a period of Indian history to discover what Gandhi had to say about revolutionary violence in the country. Though Gandhi is known more for his strong belief in non-violence, he actually had carefully thought through extremist violence that wracked India at the turn of the twentieth century. Many of his insights enable us to comprehend the nature of revolutionary violence.

Objectives of the argument

Objective I: A perspective from the global south

Whereas the Maoist problem constitutes the empirical linchpin of the argument, this is not another book on Maoism. This study is distinctive, I hope, not because it gathers, documents and analyses knowledge about the Maoist armed struggle, not because it tries to explain the whys or the whereof of the political crisis and not because it rehearses explanatory theories already on board, but because it tries to do something else with the knowledge already gleaned, and with theories already constructed. This 'something else' consists of reflecting on the nature of, justifications for and the contradictions in revolutionary violence.

The argument might be able to contribute to the conceptual and the political debate on violence from the perspective of the global south. Where else would a voice on revolutionary violence come from? The global south is more than familiar with this avatar of politics. In the past, Maoist violence had flared up in predominantly agrarian countries in the form of an anti-colonial liberation war. Armed anti-imperialist struggles had swept China, Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Algeria. In the post-colonial period, revolutionary violence shattered the complacencies of Indian democracy and challenged the legitimacy of the state in the name of the most deprived, the most discriminated against and the voiceless.

I attempt to contribute to the debate on violence from this particular spatial and experiential vantage point.

Objective II: Towards a dialogue on political violence

I do not seek to glean policy prescriptions for the Indian state, or indeed for the revolutionaries from this study, because I believe that the task of scholarship is to keep a dialogue going not only in the havens of political theory, such as journals and seminars, but also in public spaces. In any case, no theorist, or expert, or activist can ever declare that he or she has said the final word on an issue, that nothing more needs to be said and that 'this' or 'that' requires to be done. For knowledge is necessarily imperfect, and inescapably partial. Two political philosophers living in different centuries and in different spaces were to tell us precisely this. The first of these was the Athenian philosopher Socrates (469BC–399BC).

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates defends his case before an Athenian jury thus. The late Chaerephon who was a friend of mine, he said, went to Delphi and asked the oracle to tell him who the wisest man of Athens was. The Pythian prophetess answered that there was no man wiser than Socrates. Confessing that he was bewildered by this answer, because 'I know that I have no wisdom, small or great', Socrates set out on a voyage of discovery. He intended to find out who in Athens was wiser than him. It is only then that he could go to the God and refute the statement. I, said Socrates, spoke to politicians, poets and artisans, all of whom had a reputation for wisdom. And I came away time after time with the conviction that 'I am better off than he is – for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know'.

The truth is 'O men of Athens', stated the philosopher, 'that God only is wise; and by his answer he intends to show that the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name by way of illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing'.¹¹

In this passage, Socrates addressed one of the staple problems in philosophy: how do we know that we know. The answer is that we can never know whether we know. All that we can be certain of is that there are limits to our knowledge.

In the twentieth century, another philosopher M.K. Gandhi made roughly the same argument. For Gandhi, truth is absolute and transcendental, but human beings cannot possibly know what the absolute truth is. Gandhi cites a story in the Gospel to establish this point. A judge wants to know what the truth is, but gets no answer. The question posed by that judge, suggests Gandhi, has still not been answered. This is because truth means different things to different people. The truth espoused by King Harishchandra, who renounced everything he possessed for the sake of the truth, is not the same as the truth of Hussain, who sacrificed his life for the truth. These two truths are equally true, albeit partially so, but they may or may not be *our* truth. Gandhi, in effect, tells us that the one ultimate truth is manifested in the shape of many truths, but each of these truths is but an incomplete version of the ultimate truth. Using the metaphor of the seven blind men and the elephant, Gandhi suggests that we are as blind as the seven in the story.¹² We miss out on the wood for the trees.

The proposition that human beings can, but, partially grasp the nature of the ultimate truth holds interesting implications. First, the nature of Gandhi's truth enjoins human beings to discover the truth along with others in and through dialogical interaction, and through a shared search for the Holy Grail. We will never reach the site of the Holy Grail, but that is not important, what is important is the journey transforms our understanding. Second, if persons have the capacity to know the truth, but not the entire truth, then no one person or group can claim superiority over another on the ground that their truth alone is the ultimate truth, and that other truths are false or travesties of the real thing. Such beliefs – that only we know the truth – are the basic cause of violence. Not only is Gandhi's notion of toleration anchored in his theory of imperfect knowledge, this theory gives us ground to believe that the search for truth has to be a collective effort.

Gandhi would deny that inability to know the entire truth leads to moral relativism. All that he expects is that people arrive at judgements about the world they encounter in full awareness that these judgements are partial. No one can know all there is to know about any subject. Nor can they be certain that what they know is the truth and nothing but the truth. They might have to change their minds during the course of their lives as they encounter other people, other beliefs, other truths and when they become aware of other possibilities. Our truth is always subject to renegotiation. The proposal that truth is always subject to renegotiation sounds absurd but is nevertheless reflective of the state of human knowledge. All that we can do is to keep our minds open to other perspectives and other takes on an issue that we have judged, but, provisionally.

We, as a matter of course, cannot appreciate other perspectives unless we are willing to listen to other people, until we are ready to respect their views. We might find that we were wrong, misguided, confused, or all three. Such abashed recognition is as true of personal transactions as of political ones.

Take, for instance, Jane Austen's deservedly famous and popular novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The introduction tells us that this novel tells us how a man changes his manners, and a young lady changes her mind. The protagonist of the novel, Elizabeth, sets herself against the highly attractive Mr Darcy for a number of reasons. One of these reasons is that he had treated a friend of hers, Wickham, shabbily. Or so she believes. Elizabeth blushes at her own lack of judgement the moment she comes to know the other side of the story from Darcy himself. 'She grew absolutely ashamed of herself.-Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd'.¹³ The message of this most charmingly written novel is as follows. Rather than rushing to acclaim or condemn anything, we need to think through various aspects of the issue and take care to consider other opinions and other dimensions.

The simple act of 'listening' to opposing points of view will allow us to re-examine our own beliefs. An unexamined life as Socrates

had reminded us is really not worth living. Above all, there is nothing, but nothing, like dialogue to depress pretensions that we know everything there is to know. Dialogue instils modesty in our own capacities to understand, analyse, predict and resolve. We would do well to remember that in Greek mythology hubris or overweening pride and arrogance that human beings can even dare chart out paths that we and others will traverse in the future was likely to be dramatically overturned by a certain avenging goddess called Nemesis. This particular affectation falls within the provenance of the Gods; it is not for human beings to believe that they know all there is to know about the world.

Above all, engagement in dialogue is indispensable because the give and take of ideas unearths the complexities of an issue and shows us how best to approach these complexities. Politics is plural, contested and often messy, and a given political problem, say political violence, has probably more than two sides to it. To cut down on these complexities makes for bad political understanding. We cannot be sure that we know all that there is to know about a particular issue or a problem. All that we can do is to engage with others in a conversation that might tell us about other stories of a mega story. It is in this spirit that I try to unpack the narrative of revolutionary/political violence as a contribution to the general discussion on violence.

Objective III: Mapping complexities

In keeping with the reductive mood of the times, the debate on revolutionary violence in India has been deeply polarized with a majority of participants castigating Maoists. Critics argue strenuously that violence by non-state groups is immoral, destructive of society, irresponsible and unwarranted, and that groups that deal in violence are criminals or terrorists. A few observers and analysts defend Maoists as fighters for a worthwhile cause and thus defend violence as justified. Not only is the debate polarized between the 'Yays and the 'Nays', political violence is dismissed as a law and order problem, submerged

in the generic concept of violence or casually labelled as structural violence. The specificities of revolutionary violence simply go missing in the process. It is the specificity of revolutionary violence that I wish to deal with in this essay.

To rephrase the first of the two questions that have already been tabled, and that form the anchor of this work: is it possible that violence by non-state actors can be *prima facie* justified? The addition of the term '*prima-facie*' as a prefix to '*justified*' holds significant implications. Arguably, violence does not lend itself to absolute and unconditional defence, the way we defend the legitimate right to protest or the right to civil disobedience in a democracy. Violence or more precisely political violence is capable of *prima facie* justification in very specific circumstances. What are these conditions? The exploration of this question is one objective of this work.

Inbuilt into the notion of *prima facie* justification is that the argument at hand can be mediated or overruled by other considerations. Let me clarify. Through reflective and critical engagement with the issue at hand, it is possible to conclude that violence by non-state actors can be justified in certain and in very specific circumstances. But, then, other problems with political violence rear their head and propel a rethink. As the second question that has been put on the high table of reflection and judgement asks: is revolutionary violence a prudent way of doing politics? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. We can know this only when we open up the concept of revolutionary/political violence, examine and learn from the history of this sort of violence and critically engage with the question of whether revolutionary violence fulfils its own presuppositions.

Paradoxes and ambivalences

Note that I am not speaking of the morality or the immorality of violence, nor do I say that violence is an absolute wrong. Of course violence is a wrong, but the deplorable conditions in which people,

who revolutionaries pick up the gun for, live are also a wrong. The banishment of entire groups to regions lying outside the pale of state and public concern is equally immoral. Eschewing immorality and notions of wrong, I speak of the ambiguities that track the path of revolutionary violence. I ask whether revolutionary violence fulfils its own presuppositions.

For this reason, we cannot reduce the question whether violence is justified to either—or answers. In a world shot through with contradictions and ambiguities, we have to recognize that violence may be necessary in some cases, even if we opt for non-violence. We recognize the inevitability of violence in specified instances, even as we recognize that this mode of politics can be politically unwise and even counterproductive.

This does not make for neat theory or single-point explanations. But, then, it is impossible to make definitive judgements about ideologies and acts that use force and coercion to achieve objectives that every egalitarian democrat dreams of. Revolutionary violence, to put the point across mildly, is an ambiguous concept. Ambiguity is, nevertheless, not a bad thing, because it allows us to investigate different aspects of a question without subordinating these to a mega story. Recognition of ambiguity is not a bad thing, because it allows departure from the rigorous rules of consistency in social science arguments; rules of consistency that are unfair to inconsistent political phenomenon. And ambiguity is not a bad thing because the world of politics that we inhabit is shot through with discrepancies and irreconcilable paradoxes. An attempt to bring neatness in explanation or prescription into understandings of these practices can prove flawed, for politics of this sort does not lend itself to single-point agendas and simplistic solutions. To impose coherence upon processes that are necessarily untidy and incoherent is to prevent understanding of, well, how untidy and incoherent politics can be.

A conceptual analysis of the politics of revolutionary violence, an analysis of the context in which it has arisen, a study of the constituency which it caters to, a focus on what it stands for and

what it does not stand for might well lead us to conclude along with Hamlet that there 'are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy'. Recollect that these immortal lines penned by Shakespeare were uttered by Hamlet to Horatio who was in a state of utter bewilderment, even paralysis, at the spectacle of Hamlet conversing with the ghost of his own father, the late king of Denmark. Like Hamlet, Horatio was a student at the University of Wittenberg where he studied classical philosophy. And classical philosophy grounded in ethics, logic and the natural sciences is hardly likely to admit that ghosts exist. But perhaps in other systems of perception and beliefs, and for those who possess the famed 'sixth sense', ghosts do exist.¹⁴

Likewise, political violence, which is a form of politics even if it is non-standard, admits of more than rational philosophy gives us reason to assume; that the only conclusion worth arriving at should be consistent and non-contradictory. In the final instance, we have to take sides according to judgements that are necessarily married to uncertainty, caution and prudence. Traditionally, the concept of prudence is seen as synonymous with practical wisdom, a virtue that is the hallmark of Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*. As a property of the practical intellect, prudence tells us that it is better we err on the side of caution, temperance and fortitude, instead of rashly acclaiming, condemning or dismissing violence outright.

In any case, I do not aspire to make a definitive statement on revolutionary violence, but, then, no one can pronounce a definitive judgement on anything. All arguments, even those made by intellectual giants, can be, but, contributions to an ongoing conversation. What I wish to do is to lay out some of the nuances and contradictions in the political practice of revolutionary violence. Towards that end in this work, I make a case *for* political violence, and one *against* political violence. This is, perhaps, in the best tradition of argument. After we make an argument, we turn it on its head, and look at the other side of the issue. That is, we seriously investigate

both sides of an issue, and employ judgement marked by prudence to see which side is more persuasive.

Conclusion

On balance, most people seldom go beyond familiar political languages and beliefs and ask questions that run against the grain of received wisdom. The sheer ubiquity of received wisdom on a number of issues forecloses the asking of uncomfortable questions about, say, revolutionary violence. But these must be asked because they matter for democracy and for us. We are, after all, bound to other citizens by virtue of common membership of a political community. We have obligations towards them; the obligation to ensure that they are not deprived of justice that is the rightful due of every citizen. We have the duty to investigate whether they are justified in issuing a call to arms. At the same time we are also bound to interrogate political practices, especially if these political practices are cast in the garb of violence. Violence is a form of politics, and whether it is employed by the state or by non-state actors, it shapes the larger political context in which we live and work. In the next chapter, I explore the relationship between democracy and violence, focus on state violence and categorize political violence.

Democratic theorists have to take on the issue of political violence in democracies. The hope that democracies have no room for violence has been belied. Our belief that democratic deliberation is the only way to resolve problems has been shattered. In any case, a defence of non-violent politics demands that we think through violence. This is after all what Gandhi did, as we will see in the concluding chapter of this work.¹⁵