

Mediating between Violence and Non-violence in the Discourse of Protest

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As long as the present generation of the powerful, whether the rulers in Washington or in New Delhi, persists with the practice of depending on its armed infrastructure to lord over the political space and establish hegemony over civil society, and fails to learn that such a policy invariably escalates a cycle of violence, the language of discourse in the relationship of the powerful and the powerless will be dominated by violence. In India today, how can there be a non-violent resolution of the major conflicts that are plaguing our society?

Let me first clarify my position on the definition of violence. While accepting the conventional concept of violence as *direct physical assault on living beings or property that inflicts bodily pain and damage*, I would like to extend its borders. I would include any action which may indirectly cause physical harm – such as the payment of starvation wages by sweatshop employers to workers who are gradually pushed to death; or the state's agricultural policies that drive farmers to commit suicide (as we have watched recently in Vidarbha and other parts of our country); or the setting up of an industrial plant in a habitat that not only physically uproots its original inhabitants, violently disrupting their lifestyle, but also creates environmental hazards that threaten the physical well-being of the neighbourhood. Where do we draw the line between acts of direct physical violence, and death or injury caused by other forms of coercion or power? A great deal of physical suffering is imposed on people without the use of direct physical force, but through actions or inactions that cause hunger and disease. Manmade poverty is violence. This led Martin Luther King to describe the deprivation of Afro-American children of food and schooling as violence. It is this physical suffering brought about by indirect physical force or coercion on masses of people that lies at the heart of most of the violent conflicts that tear apart our world today. When seeking a non-violent resolution of such conflicts, we should first try to analyse the causes that make these conflicts acquire violent forms.

In the history of human society, the first stone had usually been thrown by the powerful – who had been strong enough to lift and wield the heavy stone – against the weak and the powerless. It is this

assault by the strong predator on the life and property of the defenceless weak that had bred the violence with which a desperate, pushed-to-the-wall oppressed people retaliate. As one modern commentator describes the nature of this conflict –

...the essence of violence is that physical power is deliberately employed, with the ultimate sanction of physical pain, and little choice but surrender, or physical resistance (on the part of the victims of such physical power and pain)...¹

But who are the people who “*deliberately employ the physical power*”, and who are the people who opt for “*physical resistance*” against that power? The language of the conflict, and the terms on which it has to be fought out are already determined by the former in an unequal contest between the two – whether it is the ruling classes in India in their conflict with the rural poor, or the us in its war against its opponents in Iraq, or Israel against the Palestinian resistance.

If we follow the history of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, we shall find that the latter had *not* always resorted to *physical resistance*. In fact, they had thrown up apostles of non-violence from Buddha and Jesus to Gandhi and Martin Luther King. There is a long history of various non-violent means to resolve conflicts, starting with appeals and attempts at negotiations, and failing which, adoption of non-violent forms of resistance (e.g., boycott, no-tax campaigns, industrial strikes, satyagraha, non-cooperation, passive resistance, etc). But throughout history, the rulers have invariably retaliated against such non-violent demonstrations by the ruled, with violence. Non-violence as the only means of resistance had most often failed to achieve the goals of freedom and democracy in our part of the world. It surely cannot claim to be the sole decisive factor in persuading the colonisers to peacefully give up power in recent history – whether in India, Vietnam, or South Africa.

In this connection, let me recall a moving experience in my life as a reporter – my encounter with Yusuf Dadoo, the legendary leader of the anti-apartheid struggle of South Africa, whose name had been familiar with us since our youthful days in the Indian

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Communist movement in 1950-60, when we joined the campaign of solidarity with South Africa's struggle for liberation. He was Gandhi's direct disciple, but later joined the South African Communist Party. Sometime in the late 1960s, I had the opportunity to meet him in Delhi at an intimate gathering of political comrades, and I asked him the question that had always intrigued me – why did he, starting as a non-violent disciple of Gandhi, finally resort to armed resistance? I still remember that evening, and the sadness and despair in the eyes of this veteran freedom fighter, as he related his experience of years of frustration with the tactics of passive resistance that he learnt at his leader's feet, and the ultimate recourse to armed struggle that he had to accept to fight a violently recalcitrant racist regime.

As I listened to Dadoo, I remembered Gandhi's words uttered in a different context. Expressing his frustration with the lack of response to his message of non-violence, and why finally he gave the call for the Quit India movement in August 1942, he said:

I waited and waited until the country should develop the non-violent strength necessary to throw off the foreign yoke. But my attitude has now undergone a change. I feel that I cannot afford to wait... That is why I have decided that even at certain risks that are obviously involved I must ask the people to resist the slavery...

Referring to the violent repression inflicted on the people by the colonial power in the name of law and order, and fully aware of the consequences of a call for massive civil disobedience against such repression, Gandhi added:

There is an ordered anarchy round and about us. I am sure that the anarchy that may result because of the British...refusal to listen to us and our decision to defy their authority will in no way be worse than the present anarchy, and I have faith that out of that anarchy may rise pure non-violence. But to be passive witness of the terrible violence going on...is a thing I cannot stand. It is a thing that would make me ashamed of my ahimsa.²

Conflicts in India Today

Let me now come to the present – the conflicts between the powerful and the powerless, between the strong and the weak, in the Indian context. In India

today, the roots of the violence that is tearing apart its people are embedded in different levels of our society – conflicting states of mind and situations in a multilayered socio-economic environment and a fractured labyrinthine religious ethos. The conflicts explode into violent fights between religious communities (Hindu-Muslim-Christian); armed warfare between regional aspiration for secession and the Indian state's militarist response (e.g. in Kashmir and the north-east); inter-caste clashes (in states in north and central India); ethnic cleansing (as attempted in Assam and some other parts of the north-east); class-based armed confrontation between the landlords and the rural poor (under Maoist auspices in the villages of Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, and Andhra Pradesh).

These contradictions in Indian society – religious, regional, ethnic, linguistic, caste- or class-based – are historical and were inherited by the independent Indian state from the pre-1947 era, but which the post-independence state failed to resolve. In fact, the increasing explosion of these contradictions into violent conflicts during the last five decades can be traced in a large measure to the lopsided policies followed by the Indian state in relation to these problems. Instead of eliminating semi-feudal agricultural practices and the consequent social disharmony in large parts of the country, it opted for modernisation in selected sectors and regions with a marked bias in favour of newly emerging capitalist farmers. As a result, while inequitable distribution of income has sharpened class contradiction and fragmentation, uneven development has led to imbalances in regional growth.³ The perceived sense of injustice among the people is being fissured along the lines of caste, ethnic, regional, linguistic loyalties, and religious beliefs – their respective followers blaming each other for their misery. Besides, new policies of development followed by the state (e.g. building of big dams, industrial projects) that uproot local population without providing them with proper rehabilitation, and endanger the environment, are creating fresh sources of conflict.

How has the state in India responded to these types of conflicts and demonstrations of protest by their victims? It will be seen

the state and its institutions (the bureaucracy, the police and even the judiciary) are inclined to take decisions heavily loaded in favour of the powerful forces, when attempting at resolving conflicts like those between the upper castes and the dalits, the landlords and the rural poor, the religious majority and the minorities, the industrial employers and the workers. When such conflicts take militant forms, like public protests by dalits or tribals against upper caste exploitation, or strikes by workers, or attempts by the rural poor to end social and economic oppression, the state intervenes by acts of both commission and omission. In both these acts, the state plays the role of a patron of violence.

For instance, in cases of upper caste-dalit/tribal, or landlord-poor peasant conflicts in rural areas, the police invariably come to the help of the upper caste/landlords to penalise the protesting poor. Such acts of commission are matched by the acts of omission by the judiciary, which usually release the rich and the socially privileged upper caste/upper class people, even when they are accused of heinous crimes like rape and murder of the dalit/tribal poor. The most infamous example of judicial bias against dalits was the acquittal by the Madras High Court of upper caste landlords who were accused of burning to death 42 scheduled caste landless labourers, including 20 children on 25 December 1968 in Kilvenmani, Tamil Nadu. Acquitting them, the honourable judges said: "Most of them are rich men owning vast extents of land... It is difficult to believe that they themselves walked bodily to the scene and set fire to the houses..."⁴

Roots of Terrorism

The discrimination against the powerless and disadvantaged sections comes out clearly in the state's handling of conflicts involving majority and minority communities. Three instances, in particular, stand out as examples of the Indian state's most despicable role in contributing to the escalation of violence and growth of terrorism. The first is the 1984 massacre of Sikhs (carried out primarily by Hindu gangsters led by the then ruling Congress Party) in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination (by her Sikh bodyguard). The second is the

carnage of Muslims (again by gangs of Hindu hooligans organised this time by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to celebrate their demolition of the Babri Mosque) in 1992. The third is the BJP state government-sponsored pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. In all these cases, the state (whether run by the Congress or the BJP) not only abdicated its responsibility to prevent the killings, but its machinery (the police and the administration) often actively connived in the violence perpetrated by the majority against the minority.⁵

In all the three cases, until today, the Indian judiciary has failed to mete out punishment to the guilty – although they have been repeatedly identified and indicted by the victims as well as numerous Indian human rights groups that visited the scenes of the killings and interviewed both the accusers and the accused. While in the 1984 case, the accused are prominent Congress leaders, in the 1992 and 2002 cases, the guilty are BJP leaders. While the state (the government of Maharashtra) drags its feet in punishing the BJP-Shiv Sena leaders and activists who had been indicted for the 1992 killings by the Srikrishna Commission, the judicial commission set up to investigate into the Babri Masjid demolition case and the riots that followed, procrastinated, requesting extension after extension of its term, and then, after 17 years, submitted a report that, besides stating the self-evident, chose to remain silent about the role of the Congress Party. Sad to say, whether as adjudicators in courts, or as retired justices heading judicial commissions, the present breed of Indian judges, barring a few exceptions, have demonstrated a pathetic lack of sensitivity to the grievances and demands of the disadvantaged sections of our society in general, and the victims of religious majoritarian violence in particular.

Recourse to the judiciary is the ultimate form of constitutional and non-violent demand for justice by the victims of oppression. When the judiciary fails to deliver them the justice that they deserve, where do they go? It was the failure of the judiciary to punish those responsible for the killings of Sikhs in 1984 that led many among the younger generation of Sikhs to swell the ranks of the Khalistani terrorists, who perceived violence as the only means

of retaliating against a recalcitrant Indian state. It led to the intensification of the cycle of violence, with the Indian state unleashing a ruthless anti-terrorist campaign with no holds barred (including the killing of hundreds of innocent people in false encounters in Punjab in the 1980-90 period).⁶ The same sad experience of waiting for justice for years without getting it has led to the growing bitterness among sections of the Muslim community, who frustrated with the administrative and judicial refusal to punish those who killed their kith and kin and destroyed their homes, are often lured by terrorist groups.

Non-State Agencies of Power

In this cycle of violence and counter-violence today, parallel centres of power are being set up by the non-state actors in the conflict – many among whom are replicating the violence of the state in an equally reprehensible form. Whether it is the Islamic mujahideen (either home-grown or trained in Pakistan) or the Hindu Bajrang Dal, they are emerging as a decisive force in Indian politics – thanks to their ability to build up a similar armed infrastructure (with easy access to sophisticated weapons and explosives) through which they can intimidate the citizens.

Some among these non-state actors are often patronised by the state itself – the most notorious example being the Salwa Judum of Chhattisgarh. Advertised by the state administration as a “spontaneous” uprising against Maoist guerrillas who had been operating there, it has been exposed by several human rights groups as a murderous exercise (aided and abetted by the police, as well as legislators, in recruiting vigilantes to hound out the supporters of the Maoist movement among the tribal population there). The resultant violence leading to the displacement and loss of livelihood of thousands of villagers compelled the Supreme Court to take notice of the human tragedy and ask the state government to investigate into the violence of Salwa Judum.

Particularly alarming is the rise of the majoritarian Hindu terrorist groups and the training that they are receiving from retired officers of the Indian army. The recent arrests of Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur and her associates in connection

with the 29 September 2008 Malegaon bomb blasts have led to the discovery of a well-knit network of Hindu right wing terror modules. These groups are no longer confining their attacks to Muslims, but have expanded their offensive against the Christian minority community, who until now had enjoyed security. Two rounds of violence were unleashed against the community in Kandhamal in Orissa by the Hindu terrorists in 2007 and 2008, resulting in death of Christians, rape of nuns, destruction of houses and churches, forced conversion of Christians into Hinduism and threat to life of those who refused to accept the diktat of the terrorists. Both the state and these terrorists of various religious hues thus share an identical goal – power with a capital P that holds down the people in total subjugation.

There is, however, another group of non-state actors in India who resort to violence – but from a different ideological motive. There is a need to make a distinction between them and others. It is necessary to differentiate sectarian violence from what is known as revolutionary violence in modern political literature. Sectarian violence is manifested in acts of terrorism by groups wedded to their respective religious or ethnic doctrines that seek to implement their own exclusivist models of development in India (e.g., according to the Islamic Shariat, or concepts like Hindu Ram Rajya, or Ahom nationalism), which are usually marked by indiscriminate killings of innocent people in bomb blasts or suicidal bombings by their cadres. Revolutionary violence on the other hand is advocated as a tool for overthrowing the given state by an economically oppressed class or community, which is organised by a political party that aims at replacing the state with an egalitarian order wedded to universalistic and “inclusivist” political values. Its representatives in India today are the various armed naxalite groups, leading among which is the Communist Party of India (Maoist) operating in large swathes of territory from Bihar and Jharkhand in the north, through Chhattisgarh and parts of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh in the centre, down to Andhra Pradesh in the south. They are a part of the long historical tradition that claims inheritance from the ideals of the

French Revolution, the American Civil War, the Paris Commune, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, the Cuban, Vietnamese and South African wars of national liberation.

Clearly, there is a qualitative difference between the ideological motivations lying behind the violence of these Maoist organisations and those of the terrorist acts of the religious/ethnic-based groups of indoctrinated militants. Besides, unlike the Maoists who depend solely on indigenous support, both the Islamic fundamentalists and their Hindu counterparts are funded by extraneous sources (e.g., the former from Saudi Arabia and the latter from non-resident Indians (NRIs) based in the west). Curiously enough, the common source of military training and aid for both Islamic terrorist groups like the Lashkar-e-Toiba and Hindu groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), has been traced to Pakistani intelligence services – indicating again how a state can use violence in an insidious way to serve its aggressive interests, and exploit equally two militant groups which profess ideologies and adhere to religious doctrines that follow mutually opposing trajectories. The state's power to use violence through both

its own agencies and non-state actors is, thus, far more widespread and nefarious than that of its opponents who may be resorting to violence to resist socio-economic oppression.

By tarring both these forms of violence with the same brush of "terrorism", the Indian state has displayed a lack of political understanding of the qualitative difference between the two, and failed to formulate a sophisticated policy of nuanced response. In this connection, I would like to refer to the findings and conclusions of the Expert Group which was set up by India's Planning Commission in May 2006 to examine "Causes of Discontent, Unrest and Extremism" (the term "extremism" being the official euphemism for Maoist activities). In its report, it devotes a lot of space to the operations of the parallel centres of power that have been established by the Maoists in their areas of influence. Although forthright in condemning the violence of the Maoists, the Expert Group acknowledges that they had met, to a large extent, the popular expectations by implementing the much needed agrarian reforms like land redistribution, and protecting the dalit and tribal poor from social and

economic oppression by feudal interests – tasks that the state administration should have carried out.⁷

It is intriguing that while the Indian government is willing to talk to other groups committed to violence – the two factions of the secessionist National Socialist Council of Nagaland, or even the terrorist ULFA and Bodo armed outfits in the north-east, or Hurriyat in Kashmir – it betrays a peculiar reluctance to open a dialogue with the Maoists. Yet, unlike the other groups mentioned above, the Maoists are not secessionists. Further, the Maoist objective of setting up a secular and socialist society in India (as outlined in the party programme issued by the CPI-Maoist on 9 September 2004) is more in consistency with the spirit of the Indian Constitution's commitment to that goal than the programmes of the various terrorist outfits which follow the design of dividing the Indian people along religious, regional and linguistic lines. A dialogue between representatives of the Indian state and the Maoists therefore seems to be more in the fitness of things – given their professed faith in the twin objectives of socialism and secularism (whatever differences they might have over their

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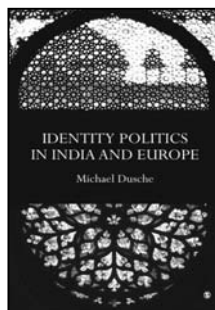
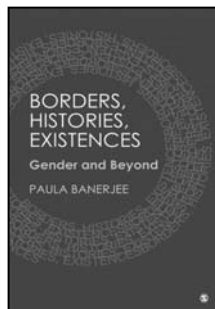
Gender and Beyond

Paula Banerjee

This is an insightful historical work on borders and bordered existences, with special emphasis on the gender dimensions of these existences. The author argues that the experiences of women living on borders and in borderlands are definitive of those of the vulnerable communities who bear the brunt of the complex border and security issues.

Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond contends that borders are, by definition, lines of inclusion and exclusion established by the state. It analyses how states construct borders and try to make them static and rigid and how bordered existences, such as women, migrant workers and victims of human trafficking, destabilise the rigid constructs. It explores the political conditions that have made borders problematic in post-colonial South Asia and how these borders have become regions of extreme control or violence.

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Identity Politics in India and Europe

Michael Dusché

Identity Politics in India and Europe combines qualitative methods (20 interviews) with historical and philosophical analysis. The first part of the book discusses the history of perceptions between the Europe of Latin Christianity and the so-called Muslim world, starting from the 7th century onwards. The second part is devoted to a discussion on the emergence of modernity and how it changed the identity politics of earlier times. The third part explores the role that intellectual elites have to play. It comprises interviews of eminent scholars and thinkers in India such as Imtiaz Ahmad and Ashis Nandy. These make for an insightful read, especially as subtle ideological differences surface in their responses to a set of common questions.

The interviews are set in the historical context of the relations between Europe and the Muslim world and analysed from a theoretical angle, drawing from theories of modernity, conceptions of justice and notions of identity politics.

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interpretation and practice). But the Indian state's unwillingness to negotiate with the Maoists to address the basic socio-economic issues that they raise makes us doubt the ideological bona fides of those who are running the government today.

Violation of Constitution

This leads us to the next question. How serious are these people in power in their loyalty to the Preamble of our Constitution? The Preamble states in unequivocal terms that it is "resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign, Socialist Secular Democratic Republic". The Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution further elaborates on the specific duties of the state to reach the goal of the Preamble.

Instead of carrying out those duties, the state machinery had been subverting efforts to implement the Directive Principles. It had chosen violence as the main tool to suppress movements that try to uphold the Directive Principles. It is significant that the Indian state resorts to violence not only when dealing with militant groups like Naxalites, Kashmiri secessionists or north-eastern insurgents, but also with non-violent movements of a Gandhian nature, like the Narmada Bachao Andolan being waged by professed Gandhians to protest against the uprooting of thousands of people by a dam, or a peaceful demonstration of citizens against some bureaucratic misdemeanour. The administration's immediate response is to treat such movements and demonstrations as a law and order problem (instead of inquiring into their causes and seeking a solution through negotiations), and dispatch the police to suppress them. Such acts of aggressive commissions stand out in sharp contrast with the state's acts of criminal omissions (or even abetment in communal holocausts, as in Gujarat). Worse still, even a state run by the Congress Party (which swears by secularism) drags its feet in using its coercive apparatus against regional Hindu communal forces (like the Shiv Sena and its spawns in Maharashtra) which are allowed to go on the rampage for days together, vandalising libraries and art exhibitions, forcing an eminent artist like M F Husain into exile, hounding out non-Maharashtrian migrant labourers. To describe the present sad state of affairs, I

can only recall the words that were used by Gandhi for the situation prevailing in India on the eve of his Quit India call: "there is an ordered anarchy round and about us".

Conclusions

To go back to the basic issue raised at the beginning – the unequal contest between the powerful and the powerless. Like the Bourbons of the past, the present generation of the powerful, whether the rulers in Washington or in New Delhi, never forget and never learn! As long as they persist in their past practice of depending on their armed infrastructure to lord over the political space and establish hegemony over civil society, and fail to learn from that past experience that such a policy invariably escalates a cycle of violence, the language of discourse in the relationship of the powerful and the powerless will be dominated by violence.

In India today, how can we change this violent language of discourse – into civilised and humanitarian terms? In other words, how can there be a non-violent resolution of the major conflicts that are plaguing our society? It primarily depends on the willingness of the Indian state and ruling classes to evolve an alternative framework of policy and administration. A national debate on the conflicts and dialogues with the opponents at various levels can possibly lead to the formulation of a new model of development based on democratic participation of the affected people. Decentralisation of power and equitable reallocation of resources could be the guiding principles for evolving such a framework. It would require changes in the present constitutional structure as well as in the state's socio-economic policies. Recommendations had been made in the past for more autonomy for the states in a federal structure (e g, the Anandpur Sahib resolution of 1973 limiting the central government's role to only defence, currency, foreign relations and communications, while the states should be allowed to look after the other subjects; or the recent suggestions by the National Conference and the People's Democratic Party of Kashmir regarding autonomy). There is no harm in calling for a national debate among all sections of the Indian people.

Dialogues can be initiated with those outside the mainstream of constitutional politics – the secessionist groups in Kashmir and the north-east, as well as the various armed naxalite groups that are fighting a class war – on the possibilities of making changes in the system.

But if such debates and dialogues drag on through a time-consuming process (given the meandering procrastination that has been turned into an art jointly by the Indian politicians, bureaucracy and judiciary to widen the distance between their rhetoric and practice), it will surely tax the patience of a people on edge. Such negotiations therefore will have to be accompanied by simultaneous actions that are perceived by the restless masses as positive changes towards a better future.

The first such action that the Indian state has to undertake immediately is to curb the authoritarian and arbitrary powers of its law-enforcing agencies which are perceived by the common people all over India as the main source of violence – its police, the huge and ever-expanding network of paramilitary and security forces (e g, the Central Reserve Police Force, the Border Security Force, Assam Rifles, Black Cats, etc). They have earned international notoriety for violation of human rights not only in secessionist-bound states like Kashmir or Nagaland, but also in places like Andhra Pradesh and Bihar where they have resorted to the elimination of naxalites as well as human rights activists. These are denounced as "extra-judicial killings" by international human rights groups. In Chhattisgarh, they had put behind bars the eminent physician and social activist Binayak Sen under a draconian law – in a bid to suppress his consistent and peaceful fight to defend civil liberties and democratic rights of the tribal people there. There has to be an end to the state's disreputable practice of using the law-enforcing agencies to suffocate voices of peaceful dissent.

The second action requires collaboration between the state, political parties and social action groups of civil society in restoring and reinforcing the democratic structures – as well as building up of new ones. This has to be accompanied by determined efforts to eliminate the sources of "criminalisation of politics". The state's

coercive apparatus, the law-enforcing agencies, instead of being targeted against the common people and social activists (like Medha Patkar and Binayak Sen), must be turned against the powerful nexus consisting of corrupt politicians, unscrupulous business houses and the criminal underworld. The underworld is the violent fist that is hidden underneath the non-violent glove of the former two – and is unsheathed by them whenever they feel the need. It is necessary to break this nexus first, if we want to replace the language of violence with that of democratic debate. In this task, civil society and the various social movements can play a major role by putting pressure upon the political parties to cleanse their organisations of corrupt and criminal elements, as well as upon the state to apply its coercive apparatus against communal leaders of all hues who instigate violence against religious and other minorities.

This leads us to the third action plan – which can be envisaged as a mass movement to facilitate the two actions suggested above. Like Gandhi's three main mass agitations against the colonial regime (Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements), there is an urgent need for another nationwide movement – this time to compel the post-colonial Indian state and political parties to keep the promises they are obliged to fulfil under the Constitution.⁸ It can be termed as a Whiplash movement – to galvanise the urges of the masses from the underbelly of their grievances to lash the Indian state and whip it to change its policies. A similar attempt was made, within the non-violent Gandhian framework, by Jayaprakash Narayan who launched an agitation in the 1970s. Ironically enough, although his campaign began with a drive against corruption by Congress rulers, his political disciples (arraigned under a variety of nomenclature) who captured power in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the 1980s were soon to replicate the same pattern of corruption and criminalisation that their Congress predecessors followed. Besides, his open door policy allowed the Hindu communal elements like the BJP to ride piggyback on his movement in the 1970s, and acquire legitimacy in the public mind – leading to their gradual

ascendance in Indian politics, and ability to carry out the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the pogrom in Gujarat. Any future national mass campaign for a change must therefore take care to prevent the infiltration of these twin dangers of political corruption and communal hatred into their movement.

In the ultimate analysis, however, it is the Indian state that will have to take positive steps to put an end to poverty and social injustice. It is shameful that even after 60 years of independence, the majority of our people live without adequate food, safe drinking water, proper housing and health facilities, and their children lack schooling. It is a disgrace that almost every day dalits are humiliated or lynched by their upper caste neighbours, that women are killed by their in-laws for dowry – despite laws providing for the protection of their rights. Even altruistic measures like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Targeted Public Distribution System fail to reach the poor as corrupt officials siphon off funds and food rations.

Given this stark reality, is it any wonder that our people often break out into violent acts of protest to express their frustration? Is it fair on our part – being safely tucked away from the site where the poor have to daily contend with violent oppression – to advise them on the virtues of non-violence? Do we have the right to ask them to forgive their oppressors and agree to reconciliation? These are uncomfortable questions. But they are not unique to our times. Some 70 years ago, here in India, during a similar period of violent upsurges, the same questions were raised by a nobler soul, a poet who was an apostle of non-violence. In a poem, composed in 1931, and entitled "The Question", he bemoaned:

"Oh Lord!
At every age, you had sent your messengers
To this heartless world of ours –
They had always counselled us:
'Forgive everyone!' 'Love everyone!'
'Destroy the poison of hatred from within yourself.'
They are welcome.
They will be remembered with reverence.
But today in these sad times,
I have to bid them goodbye from my doorsteps,
Bowing my head in a futile gesture of politeness.
I have seen how violence from its hidden shelter,

In the darkness of false night,
Kills the helpless.
I have seen how the message of justice
Weeps alone in the face of the crimes of the powerful.
I have seen how a young boy, mad with impotent rage,
Dies in anguish banging his head against a stone wall.
My voice is muffled today, my flute is without any music.
I am living in the prison of a dark night.
My world is lost – drowned in a nightmare.
And that is why I am beseeching you in tears –
'Those who have poisoned your air, put out your light –
Have you forgiven them? Do you love them?'"⁹

The poet was Rabindranath Tagore.

NOTES

- 1 Gerald Priestland in *The Future of Violence*, (Hamish Hamilton 1974), p 11.
- 2 *Harijan*, Vol IX, 184, quoted in Nirmal Kumar Bose's *Studies in Gandhism*, Calcutta, 1962.
- 3 Cf Pradhan P Prasad, *Lopsided Growth: Political Economy of Indian Development* (Bombay: Sameeksha Trust and Oxford University Press 1989).
- 4 Exhaustively documented reports of similar cases of atrocities and denial of justice have been brought out by Indian human rights groups like the People's Union for Democratic Rights, the People's Union for Civil Liberties, the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights, the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, the Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights, among many others.
- 5 The abetment of the state in the massacre of Sikhs in 1984 is well documented in *Who Are the Guilty* (brought out soon after the event, jointly by two human rights organisations, PUHR and PUCL). Its complicity in the massacre of Muslims in the aftermath of the Babri Mosque demolition is exposed in the findings and judgment of a tribunal on Ayodhya headed by eminent retired judges that held public inquiries immediately after the widespread killings, and came out later with a report entitled *Citizens' Tribunal on Ayodhya* in May 1994. The Gujarat state administration's active collusion in the massacre of Muslims in 2002 has been exposed in a report by the National Human Rights Commission, a body set up by the central government itself.
- 6 *Punjab in Crisis: Human Rights in India* (USA: Asia Watch 1991).
- 7 Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas, Report of an Expert Group to Planning Commission, Government of India, March 2008. This report should be compared with an investigative document prepared by the National Human Rights Commission on the Salwa Judum activities in Chhattisgarh, which vehemently accuses the Maoists of using violence against villagers to submit to their dictates. For a review of the document, see K Balagopal, "The NHRC on Salwa Judum: A Most Friendly Inquiry", *EPW*, 20 December 2008.
- 8 Efforts by civil society groups towards such a nationwide agitation are already evident in campaigns like the *Wada Na Todo Abhiyan* – a recent attempt to mobilise citizens to put pressure on candidates of all political parties for the 2009 parliamentary election to commit themselves to the fulfilment of basic popular demands like land and housing, good governance, protection of environment, equitable growth and social justice among other things.
- 9 Translated from the original Bengali by the present writer.