

Revisiting the Idea of 'Violence' as Means of Achieving Political Ends

The murder of senior journalist and activist, Gauri Lankesh in Bengaluru on September 05, 2017 created a great debate in the minds of many liberals and even among the so called neutrals. It's not an isolated incident, as we all know, and it is one, in a series of such bizarre incidents that have been occurring since long, but the phenomenon appears more pronouncedly almost since 2013. The vicious game got the public attention with the killing of Narendra Dabholkar on August 20, 2013 followed by the assassination of Govind Pansare on February 16, 2015 and M.M. Kalburgi on August 30, 2015. Communists, rationalists, liberals and many people left of the centre – are victims. There is uproar. There is a confluence of thought and action. The dominant theme is **“You may kill a person, but not an idea.”** In the meanwhile, the BJP and RSS also joined the debate on the killing of its cadre in Kerala. The recurrent theme in Indian political dialogue now is **‘violence’**. Both sides are conducting competitive protest rallies. They demand all the people to join the issue, and any neutrality might be a reason to be labelled as an enemy or an incompetent.

Dante said: **“The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintain their neutrality.”** Is neutrality such a dangerous position? Are we necessarily to join this nauseating duality? Did not the wise men all through the history take to silence, contemplation and time to relocate their responses as a reflexion in tranquillity when two opposing and dominant groups pose wrong questions as morally urgent ones, compelling others to take sides? Whether this **“within or without”** – a choice less dichotomy? Neutrality does not always mean running away from moral choices, and in fact there was always a case for **positive neutrality**.

The present times present before many of us some apparently moral questions, but by unveiling the mask it might be found that the case is somewhere beyond. All sides to the dispute dominating the debate have their hands stained in blood. Both are shouting down their opponents though. The choice of the present is not just a choice of ‘wrong’ and ‘right’. We are in a dilemmatic duality of extremes as documented by Dickens’s opening lines in **“A Tale of Two Cities”**. **“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness , it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we are all going direct the other way - in short, the**

period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only”.

The left is crying ‘foul’. The right is claiming ‘right’. It’s the time to reflect on the very idea of ‘violence’ as a means of achieving the political ends. Violence is a remnant of our archaic instinct, and readily finds its space either in our individual or group behaviour. In the colonial State, and as well in post-colonial nation-states it is expressed as an apparatus of State or authority. It is proactive and retroactive in its manifestations, and on most occasions as spontaneous response to a fact situation. It is not that we can immediately analyse and resolve all forms of violence. But the need of the hour is to reflect on political violence, and the stand of various political parties or their ideologies on the ‘**means and ends**’. The basic ethical question in any social dialogue has always been: Whether ends justify the means, or ends and means need to be negotiated on equal terms. Let’s examine these basic tenets of the ideology of each moral claimant to the present dispute.

In the Theses on Feuerbach, Marx comes out with the eleventh thesis that “***The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it***”. In fact, by the time Marx made this thesis, he thought that a lot of the physical or mental phenomenon of the world is revealed. But as the unfolding of historical events informs us the very understanding of the noumenon and phenomenon world was at its initial stages. Interpretation has not yet begun. Marxism can only be understood as one of such few attempts in interpreting the revealing world. It was a time when people across the globe started meeting, and even now, there is a lot left out to be understood in the world, leave about interpreting it. The idea of nation-state and nationalism, studies of religion and its influence on human beings, regional aspirations and their relations with global orders, the question of man-woman relations, the stress within family, the language movements, caste questions, human psychology – both individual or group etc., cannot be said to have received any reasonable understanding or interpretation by that time of this thesis. The effect of these factors on the international workers’ movements is now felt by all. Unfortunately, this thesis has advanced the idea of action and activism, right at the movement and right at the instance, and thus has also conquered the space of the contemplative activity. Most of the Marx’s disciples viewed the very process of thinking as “inaction” or ‘ineffective’. This idea has influenced sufficiently not only Marxists but a good number of other branches of intellectual activity.

Marx in an 1848 newspaper article is said to have written: *“There is only one way in which the murderous death agonies of the old society and the bloody birth throes of the new society can be shortened, simplified and concentrated, and that way is revolutionary terror!”* [per Stephen Hicks Ph.D., Philosopher at www.stephenhicks.org dated 18.02.2013]. The last paragraph of the Manifesto of the Communist Party says: *“The communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling class tremble at a communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.”* Adam Schaff [in a Journal Article “Marxist Theory on Revolutions and Violence” in journal of the History of Ideas Vol.34, No.2 9April – June, 1973 pp. 263 – 270, Published by University of Pennsylvania Press, presented at the Conference of the International Society for the History of Ideas held at the Temple University Sugar Loaf Conference House, June 16, 1972] quoting the above statement of Marx and Engels in the Manifesto contend that:

“This by now classic formulation includes two statements:

- a) that the existing social and political system is to be changed by a revolution;
- b) that the social revolution is to be identified with an overthrow of that existing social system by violence.”

The later requirements of revolutionary politics prosecuted by the Marxists, Leninists, Maoists in various countries, including India, have blurred the subtle boundaries of these philosophical considerations devolving into elimination of individual class enemies. In India the concept further descended to the most problematic concepts of killing a person in the name of even an ‘informer’, where the prosecutor, judge and the jailor merges into one. The world has witnessed enough of its ugly shades in the statecraft of communist countries in USSR, East Europe, and China and in many more so called New Democracies. Sometimes inevitability, sometime historical or ideological necessity, sometimes the nature of dialectics, and even an urgent tactical line of action justifies violence, against both the enemy class and an individual.

Religions or religious philosophies also never rejected violence, and in fact, good number of wars, and executions of human beings were conducted without remorse in the name of God or religion or faith. Hands of all religions are blood-stained. Wars in the name of Jesus, in the name of Allah, in the name of Vishnu or Shiva! Buddhists are no exception as we have seen in the past or even in the recent past. In feudalism and in capitalism, violence is not

a matter of abhorrence; rather it is venerated as a **value**, of heroism of a great masculine ethic. Every religion claims that it is meant for peace and prosperity of the human beings in this physical world and the way of ultimate liberation from the ordeal of life on earth. But the experience of human beings over thousands of years has always been that many wars were conducted and millions of people died in the name of religion. In an Article titled “**Religion, Violence, Crime and Mass Suicide**” [© 2017 Vexen Crabtree, Current Edition:2009 Aug 31, Last Modified:2017 Jan 14, Originally Published 2008 Sep 28, http://www.humanreligions.info/vioolence_and_crime.html, Parent Page: Religion and Morals] the author quotes public opinion (in USA) where in the perception of US public the most violent religions were said to be Islam [64%], Christianity [9%] and Hinduism [4 %]. According to the author three factors lead believers into uncivil behaviour – (1) The irrationality of belief, (2) the legitimization given to actions by beliefs in higher authorities, without the teaching of any critical and sceptical way of judging between claims as to what those higher authorities would want, and for some people voices in their heads are all that are required as long as they believe in god(s) which have authority to speak for them, and (3) an otherworldly idealism and fixation with the corruptness, evilness or immorality of this world which often pushes groups into extreme isolation where they cease to consider outsiders to be worthwhile human beings.

In a paper titled “**Religion and Violence: Social Process in Comparative Perspective**”, prepared for the Handbook for the Sociology of Religion, Michele Dillon, Editor, John R. Hall [available online as 569_ jhallreligionviolence11_01.pdf] while considering the commonly prevalent public opinion that ‘religion is often held up as a vessel of peace, both inner and social’, in the post-September 11, 2001 scenario, however notes that ‘A moment’s reflection attests that religion and violence are often woven together in history’s tapestries’. He concludes saying: “Even when violence is ‘internal’ to religion, it is subject to the same forces that operate more widely – competition, social control, rebellion, and revolution. And religiously infused violence is often externally connected to broader social conflicts. Precisely because of religion’s capacity to mark socially sacred, social struggles that become sacralised continue to implicate religion in violence, and in ways that make the violence much more intractable. To sever this connection between religion and violence is an important yet utopian goal that will depend on promoting peace with justice. More modestly, sociological studies of religion should develop reflexive knowledge that can help alter the channels and trajectories of violence, and thus, mitigate its tragic effects. These are both tasks worth our intellectual energies and our social commitment.”

In India – violence or the elimination of the ‘other’ is not abhorrent to any ideological group, either to the left or to the right. There is not even a great debate over it before Gandhi’s forceful argument for non-violence. It appears that the concept of ‘non-violence’ was accepted by the Indian society in general and the political leadership in particular during the freedom movement out of certain political and practical consideration, temporarily during the aura of Mahatma, and all the parties slowly relapsed into their old practices of violence. As the charisma of Mahatma faded, the inclination towards invoking violence seems to take the path of ascendancy. Some Hindutva scholars have long started questioning the very understanding and interpretation of the sloka containing the great statement of inspiration to Gandhi “Ahimsa Paramo Dhama” as ‘half-truth’. The website article at <http://www.sankritimagazine.com> relies on the full text of the sloka from Santi Parva of Mahabharata: **Ahimsa Paramo Dharmah I Dharn himsa tadhaiva ca II** [Non-violence is the ultimate dharma, so too is violence in service of dharma], and argue that violence in service of dharma is an equally great prescription. Even presuming that the religious diktat allows or even mandates violence in certain situations, can we still rely upon only on these archaic prescriptions available in all religious texts in some form or the other, at this stage of human advancement and civilization to justify violence?

In fact both the right and the left even today concede that violence is heroism and non-violence is timidity and cowardliness. All hues of the left and the right, in principle, accept ‘violence’ as a necessary evil at the least, and from time to time, one or the other excelled in its execution. The international experience of communism, whether it is in USSR, or in East Europe or in China, testifies for violence as the weapon and also as statecraft. “Class-enemy”, “agent of a class enemy”, “informer”, and “State violence” etc., - a wide range of states and situations, justify the killing of the “other”. It is not just the ‘States’ in existence, and even the ‘State’ in the womb – all variations of extreme left and right groups etc., justify violence and base their course of action primarily on violence. What kind of democracy we can foresee in such future ‘State’ is an enigmatic question.

Until the emergence of Gandhi on the world scenario of political struggles, ‘killing’ the opponent for any reason is justified on the historical necessity, or as a reaction to an action, or as a moral value to defend the right of an ideological group. . It is this element which was seriously challenged by Gandhi. For him, ‘non-violence’ is not a strategy. ‘Non-violence’ and ‘truth’ are two inseparable expressions of the one and the only **Supreme Reality**. Without ‘non-violence’, ‘truth’ cannot exist, and without ‘truth’, ‘non-violence’ also cannot survive. Truth and non-violence are the secular version of the God to him. The genuineness of his ‘non-

violence' was subjected to critical analysis. But there is no disjuncture in his conceptualization of non-violence, as tried to be made out by some critics.

Whether the experiment of the Mahatma is just a onetime phenomenon, possible of realization only in the persistent hands of Mahatma or his likes, or is it a phenomenon establishing itself as a dominant discourse in many other struggles of the people in opposing the evil State is now put to severe test. Can we recreate an argument for absolute non-violence, now and immediately? Violence may happen on several situations – as natural element in the animal world, or a spontaneous reaction to a situation, but the issue is how we could rein in these forces of violence and how far we can journey in the direction of peaceful resolution of contradictions. As we travel from the caves and transcend tribal instincts, as we get civilized, we need to reduce the proportion of violence progressively. We may find that violence is available in nature, but it is an avoidable or reducible animal or tribal instinct. As we slowly advance in the process of civilization, we go on controlling or reducing many such remnants of animal instincts within us. We can consciously make a choice in favour of nonviolence with all its conceptual difficulties, and strive towards organizing the human societies on that basis.

Coming back to the present, the murder of four activists, leftists, or those who are somewhere around the left of the Centre, who earned the ire of the religious bigots for things they have done or not done has virtually shaken all the thinking persons. Violence in the Marxist ruled states, or in those places where the Maoist cadres claim to be conducting revolutionary practices also needs to be subjected to intellectual scrutiny seriously without any hypocrisy or duality. All of us are saddened, including those liberals, who have nothing to do with the Left or the Right. Gandhians, and all types of peace lovers are agitated. Until and unless, we commit ourselves to the civilization project of humanity, national and international brotherhood and peaceful co-existence, and to the goals of collective development based on peace and prosperity of all, this blame game goes on, and we are always forced to take sides in this moral crisis. Until and unless we unshackle ourselves from these adamant chains, and ask both these parties, the right and the left, to stop this *danse macabre*, and exercise our moral indignation against both to bring back to the centrality of the virtues of non-violence and truth, we cannot justify the unique freedom struggle of this nation and the messages of the Mahatma.

Engaging all the social partners in a meaningful and purposive dialogue is *sine qua non* of this civilization project. We cannot afford to allow this fragmentation of the society. It is the moral duty of the persons with wisdom to stop and contemplate a while on what is going on, and not to allow the things to drift away according the wishes of the dominant forces of time. The present stage of human evolution demands considered choices and primacy of the will, to understand and respond to the currents. All political parties and individuals may have to spell out their stand on the utility of, and the invoking violence, as a method of conducting politics. 'Violence' is not a virtue, nor represents any value of 'heroism'. It's the weapon you hold and its advanced technology, on many occasions that decide the result of the war, and not the logical strength of your argument or theory *per se*. 'Violence' is an archaic ethic which the modern societies can no more afford to accept or to tolerate. It's in fact cowardice. It's is misanthropic. "Non-violence" does not need any scriptural justification, it's justified on its own, and in terms of the larger goals of the civilization.

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