

## Violence or Non-Violence?

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The reason why the Maoists get so much play from the government and national media is precisely because of their regular use and explicit promotion of armed action as a means to further their cause. The same national political elite and media that calls on the Maoists to enter the mainstream, abjure violence and work within the framework of the Indian Constitution, would not pay any attention to their demands at all if the latter really give up the gun.

Just look around India right now and there are dozens, maybe even hundreds, of social activists and groups working peacefully and democratically on a range of important issues for many years. There are movements against forced displacement, struggles for land and forest rights, education and health facilities or the rights of oppressed castes and ethnic minorities – some of them successful, many of them not so. All are dismissed by those in power as not ‘threatening enough’ to be taken seriously. Ironically or deliberately, for all its official abhorrence of violent means, the Indian State and its faithful media are promoting the perverse idea that ‘if you want to be heard, you have to use the gun’.

One good example is that of the Manipuri poet and activist Sharmila Irom, who on 2 November 2009 entered her tenth straight year of fasting demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Manipur – a world record if there is one for hunger fasts anywhere. The AFSPA is one of the most draconian laws anywhere in the world and allows even foot soldiers of the Indian army to shoot ‘suspected’ militants, a privilege they abuse with frightening abandon. Sharmila’s marathon fast though is not the kind of stuff that makes the Indian government even think, leave alone blink. Instead the soft-bellied but hard-nosed politicians who run this country must be simply laughing their guts out at her non-violently starving herself for democratic rights.

This writer personally doesn’t have any absolute position on the issue of violence versus non-violence because both terms are impossible to define with precision and no meaningful debate is possible around them.

Do not the speculative flows of global capital that leave in their wake thousands upon thousands destitute, driving many to commit suicide, constitute a clear form of violence? Nobody puts a gun to the heads of the 2.5 million Indian children who die every year due to malnutrition—so are these supposed to be ‘non-violent’ deaths?

Further the ethical and moral dimension of any action depends on the specific context and cannot be pre-judged or prescribed in a cast-in-iron manner. The Muslims who died in Gujarat’s 2002 pogrom for example surely had the right – if they had got the chance at all – to shoot the fascist mobs that managed to lynch them because they found them unarmed.

In many ways the concept of ‘non-violence’ also depends crucially on how ‘violence’ is defined and by looking at the kind of ‘violence’ that is perpetrated. In other words, the notion of proportionality is very crucial to understanding what is ‘non-violence’ and what is not. For instance, if someone is threatened by a regime

that merely sends him to jail for dissent then the corresponding 'non-violent' strategy will be different than if the oppressor tries to bomb him and his entire neighbourhood out of existence, *a la* Iraq or Afghanistan.

On a purely theoretical plane answer to the question 'Gandhi or Guevara?' is 'fifty-fifty'. Both had their spectacular successes and abject failures in different contexts.

Gandhi for example after leading a non-violent struggle for India's freedom could do little to prevent the Partition of the sub-continent that led to the deaths of over 2 million people and displacement of 14 million more within the space of just a few months. This was violence on a scale shocking even for a planet just emerging from two successive World Wars and showed the limitations of Gandhi's politics of non-violence, that could not take into account the machinations of various other forces operating around him.

Che on the other hand, after participating in the violent overthrow of Cuba's Batista dictatorship, got murdered in Bolivia, after failing to get local peasants and workers to join his attempts to spark off an armed rebellion. Four decades later, in the same Bolivia, a revolutionary new government has been elected to power under the leadership of Evo Morales, who successfully mobilised the country's much oppressed indigenous population through militant but non-violent movements.

In the Indian context, unfortunately, the language of physical force and bloodshed has been preferred by the Indian ruling elites over that of peace and persuasion, not just in modern times but for millennia. One has simply to delve into Indian mythology to easily recognise the horrific militarism that permeates every ancient epic and the routine valorisation of intrigue, bloodshed and the murderous mindset it represents.

So in the famous sermon on the battlefield, the Bhagvat Gita, the Hindu deity Krishna exhorts Arjuna to drop his qualms about killing his close relatives, his guru and all those he loves and respects in the 'enemy' camp as his 'karma' or 'duty' to kill is more important than human values. Almost every Hindu god is further depicted carrying war weapons meant to exterminate 'asuras' and 'rakshasas'- obvious euphemisms for some tribal character or the other whose resources were being taken over by the ever expanding Aryan 'deva' population. Even the gods are insecure in this country of epic wars.

Since Independence the Indian ruling class has simply reverted to such age old traditions of using naked force to deal with social sections considered 'inferior'- like ethnic or religious minorities, Dalits, Adivasis, workers or peasants. Forget about actual civil conflict of which this country has seen plenty since 1947 in Nagaland, Mizoram, Kashmir, Punjab and so on – just look at the figures of deaths in police custody around the country, the highest in the world, and one can understand how violence is an integral part of the Indian State's day to day functioning.

And why blame the formal Indian State alone, why not take a closer look at the sheer amount of violence that exists in every nook and corner of Indian society itself – where even disputes over parking of cars in the capital city often result in murder. Between dowry deaths, honour killings, female foeticide, infanticide, caste related massacres and jealousies aroused by simple boy-girl romances India

is more a Super-Slaughterhouse than the Superpower it wants to be or the Land of Ahimsa it claims to have been in the past.

As for Indian political organisations today, it is not just radical sections like the Maoists but all mainstream national level parties, like the Congress, BJP and CPI(M), that use violent means routinely to establish their hegemony as evident from their respective roles in the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, the Gujarat genocide and the Nandigram massacre. While operating within the democratic spaces offered by the Indian polity, contesting parliamentary elections and claiming allegiance to the Indian Constitution, they show little respect in actual practice for democratic rights, norms or processes. As far as they are concerned such spaces are to be merely exploited till such a time they are in complete command and the pretence of democracy itself can be cast off like a dispensable cover over their quest for raw power.

There is yet another source of great violence in the world people live in that comes from the notions of modernity that have been in vogue since the nineteenth century. It is violence born out of blind belief in the concepts of the fortified nation state, industrialisation, urbanisation and ever-increasing production and consumption as being synonymous with progress and development.

During the last fifty-two years, some 3300 big dams have been constructed in India and another 1000 are under construction leading to the displacement of anywhere between 21 to 33 million people. Over 55 percent of those displaced are from tribal communities who constitute only 8 percent of India's population but pay a disproportionately heavy price for national 'growth'.

Further the skewed policies in favour of urbanisation and industrialisation has pauperised India's rural folk, whose survival depends on the callously neglected agricultural sector. Over 180,000 farmers have committed suicide between 1997 and 2007 while millions of villagers are forced to migrate to the cities as economic refugees to live in miserable slums that do not offer even the most basic of amenities, leave alone a life of dignity. The urban centres of India are sucking the resources of the countryside dry and with it the very basis of existence of 70 percent of the country's population.

If one adds to all this the annual toll of human lives extracted by the indiscriminate use of pesticides, industrial accidents, pollution of water by toxic wastes, loss of soil fertility due to Green Revolution agriculture and so on, the costs of modern progress are exceedingly high indeed.

So given all these multiple sources of violence, what are the brave but increasingly lonely activists advocating 'non-violence' as a means of social action and political change supposed to do?

It is precisely because of all the violence around the society that there is an even greater need for non-violent approaches to solving social problems. There is in fact an urgent need to lower the levels of violence not just in India but all over the Southasian sub-continent that is home to two nuclear powers and has already seen several wars and the horrific massacres of Partition.

Violent actions do produce results sometimes and are highly attractive therefore to impatient youth or groups for whom it is part of ideological faith. However, hard experience tells the victories are very often ephemeral and only

lay the foundation for yet another bout of bloodshed and the cycle keeps spinning out of control well beyond the original objectives with which the violence started. The examples of such violence begetting violence without end are strewn all over the planet from the killing fields of Cambodia to the tropical forests of Colombia.

Violent actions are also elitist in nature and do not allow mass participation, thereby depriving an opportunity to politicise the greatest number and build the basis for a genuinely democratic movement or a democratic future. A handful of Robin Hoods do not a Revolution make and it is ultimately the political experience of millions of ordinary citizens that can ensure one dictatorship is not merely replaced by another.

Talking about revolution, political parties that describe themselves as revolutionary and which have the integrity and even perhaps the right social vision should also stop looking down on non-violent movements as 'reformist' or conflating all 'revolutionary' work with armed action alone. 'Reform or Revolution?' is in fact a trick question—like 'food or freedom', 'love or money', 'democracy or development'? As if any of these two terms are mutually exclusive and as if anybody really knows where one ends and the other begins. Is it not simply absurd for some of the most sincere and committed political activists to be willing to give up their lives for a cause because this is 'revolutionary' but not give a glass of water to someone dying of thirst because this is seen as 'reformist'?

Finally, the reason why violent actions should be avoided as much as possible in the current Indian context is simply because a hell of a lot of problems in the country like the caste system, religious bigotry, honour killings, female foeticide, patriarchy or environmental destruction are extremely complex and cannot be solved by merely shooting bullets or setting off bombs or planting landmines. They require intelligent long-term interventions with a lot of care and perseverance and the involvement of millions in a country as large as India.

In that sense they are more like the challenges faced by the farmer trying to grow his crop on hostile soil and battling the vagaries of the weather than that of an engineer trying to get a mountain out of his way for a project. The latter can use dynamite but for the former this would be suicidal. Ironically, many advocates of agrarian revolution in the subcontinent seem to be in a tearing hurry to capture the land without doing the hard work of cultivating the soil, waiting for the first rains or planting the seeds of a future society all around. It may be time to learn from the humble Indian peasant and show a little more patience and wisdom instead of ending up harvesting an imaginary crop and cooking a non-existent meal.

*[Courtesy: Himal Magazine, Kathmandu]*