

## **INTRODUCTION**

This document, in its initial part, tries to answer the question that how and why notion of violence are significant in a society and then importance and role of power in any act of violence is examined. In the last section, it explores that how violence is related to society's history and culture. The central idea in this document is to define violence as something which is culturally constructed and has a very structured form but still can have multiple meaning depending on the context from which it is being looked at. It is something which is always present. In this document it has been tried to assert that violence is a symbolic metaphor used to communicate across the boundaries between the 'self' and the 'other'. The general approach used in this document is to first define the context and then to build relevant arguments upon it. Most of the assertions made are supported by examples from ethnographical accounts from Sri Lanka, Andaman Is. and Nazi Germany.

### **I. SOCIETY AND VIOLENCE**

Let me begin with defining what a society is? According to me society is an ensemble of ideologies which can be contradictory, supportive or mutually exclusive of each other depending on the space and time in question. Society is dynamic i.e. the interaction between ideologies within a society keeps assuming different meanings with respect to time and space. At any given instance in this space-time continuum, interaction between these dynamic ideologies results in a collective way of thinking and understanding things called the episteme. It is this episteme that defines what is right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable and un-acceptable for the society.

Humans, who are arranged in the above mentioned mesh of ideologies in the society, are characterized with having a strong sense of possessing or owning some object and at the same time by a consciousness not owning the others. This basic instinct of humans is manifested into a wider distinction of the 'self' and the 'other' where 'self' represents something that is acceptable where as 'other' represents some thing unwanted or undesired. This cataloging is hardened in the society by

other cultural constructs like race<sup>1</sup>, religion, caste etc. This distinction between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ can be identified as a precondition for violence. This distinction can be seen in the case of *Jarwa* tribe of Andaman Is. (Pandya 2000: 4) who saw the settlers as the unwanted intruders who were not ‘them’; they were seen as the ‘other’ who should not be there. Similar were the notions prevailing in Nazi Germany where Jews were seen as the undesired ‘other’ in the land of Aryans. Same is asserted by the views of Sinhalese of south and Tamils of north Sri Lanka about each other during the conflict (Spencer 2001). Similar feeling persists in parts of modern<sup>2</sup> India where Muslim and Hindu see each other as the ‘other’<sup>3</sup>. I will relate this social property to violence after making the following point.

Communication is basic to a society. Communication is a tool with which the dynamicity of the constituent ideologies of the society is defined<sup>4</sup>. Communication can be one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many. Furthermore, ‘signs’ and ‘symbols’ can be identified as two most common means of communications. ‘Signs’ have a fixed meaning associated with them while ‘symbols’ dynamically change their meaning and relevance with respect to time and space<sup>5</sup> (Leach 19xx: 39). At this point I will like to assert that violence can be seen as a symbolic metaphor which used to communicate across the boundaries that separates the ‘self’ from the ‘other’ and reinforces these boundaries. It has been termed symbolic because its means different to different sides of the boundary. The inflictor of violence often sees it as an act of self defense as in case of settlers on Andaman Is. (Pandya 2000: 7) or an act committed for a morally sound reason and some thing which is glorifies the inflictor or the inflicted as in case of LTTE’s martyrdom for the dead (Spencer 2001: 133) and JVP’s moral grounds

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<sup>1</sup> Race is the cultural interpretation of a biological fact – color of human skin.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of modernity is in itself violent as it creates two sects as modern and those who are not.

<sup>3</sup> Such distinctions get intensified during certain periods like the resent riots in Gujarat.

<sup>4</sup> In a way this defines the episteme also which is nothing but the static chunks of ever changing and ever evolving ensemble of ideologies.

<sup>5</sup> The episteme also affects the meaning and importance being associated with the symbol, e.g. The symbol of sickle used to signify the glorious communist ideology at one time and great deal of importance and respect used to be associated with it but now with fall of all major communist regimes, it has lost some of it’s importance and probably will continue to do so with passage of time.

to inflict violence (2000: 130-131) while the 'other' sees it as an act of violation and repression like the *Jarwa* tribe on Andaman Is. felt the settlers were violating their territory and purity (Pandya 2000).

Though the biological time-flow of physical experience is continuous (Leach 19xx: 34), within a given ideological state of society, human's social life can be categorized in different states and the human moves from one social category to another in a series of discontinuous jumps<sup>6</sup> (19xx: 34) and the structure of most society demands this transition to be ritualized, e.g. in Indian society the transition from bachelor to married life in case of a male is ritualized by an elaborate procedure. In this regard, violence can be seen as a ritual in social and political life marking transformation of the impure into pure, living into dead, wounded from otherwise to mention a few. This proposition is reinforced by the fact that the tribal *Jarwa* community of Andaman Is., through the ritualized act of violence transformed the undesired settlers into the useless (dead or rock) and by this purified their lands of the impure 'other' (Pandya 2000).

As mentioned before that violence almost invariably is characterized by creation of the 'self' and the 'other'. Though this distinction is made at different levels but the most fundamental is the one which involves the human body – the distinction that marks human body as the 'self' and things external to it as the 'other'. Due to this definition of the self, human body is found to play a central role in infliction of almost all forms of violence. This can be torturing, killing, mutilating (as in case of *Jarwas*) of body and it being used as a symbol to represent terror (generated by violence) or body's participation in some violent ritual marking a transition from A to Not A (example below). Further, human body forms the medium by which violence is inflicted on to the larger body – the society, which is composed of several such personal bodies. For instance, in Muslim community the male body goes through the ritual of *khatna* wherein the pain caused by the violence inflicted onto the

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<sup>6</sup> The existence of category 'A' and category 'Not A' and the ambiguous region marked by the ritualized transition can be understood in more detail from Edmund Leach's work. See his Bibliography for more details.

body is shared by the whole community and by this act the body becomes part of the community and describes the order of *musalmanni* (Mehta 2001: 50).

## II. POWER AND VIOLENCE

Power is a cultural and political construct defined as the ability to influence or control what the ‘other’ does or thinks. It is being called a social and political construct because the social structure is such that it entrusts the ability to manipulate others in hands of few, who are often part of the politics. Power is also a symbolic means of communication and depending on the time-space continuum it is associated with different meanings. In this section I will try to show that power is something that facilitates violence and supports it. Further I try to explore the various forms of power that are directly or indirectly responsible for infliction of violence.

In relation with violence, power is often associated with ability to affect the human body. Industrial society has always been concerned about body as measure of all practices<sup>7</sup>. Ability to inflicting wounds, mental torture and death can be seen as power’s application on human body. As mentioned before, violence is perpetuated by transforming the ‘other’ into the ‘useless’ (Pandya 2000), and this act of transformation is done forcefully by application of power on other. For instance, Nazi regime, the powerful one, transformed thousands of Jews into industrial products by application of power.

Another relation of power with violence universal is that of controlling information. Controlled information becomes the source of power with it one can manipulate the masses. This can be seen in the Sri Lankan context, “there was little credible news released by the government, but the country was swept with rumors ... in the world of rumor, violence was constructed ...” (Spencer 2001: 122) where the government exercised its power over control of information and thus created an

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<sup>7</sup> As noted from Prof. Pandya’s lectures in class.

ambiguous situation which often proves to be the birth place of violence<sup>8</sup>. Rumors or the popularly believed misinformation acts as a catalyst to intensify the nature of violence in times of crisis.

Visibility of power and its application also influences the nature of violence. Foucaultian notion that to discipline power needs to be exerted has remained but over time a little change has taken place around it. Earlier the notion was that the act of punishing<sup>9</sup> should be carried out in public so that every body sees it and understands the consequences of indiscipline, but with time, a touch of mystery has been added to it by hiding this act of punishing; every body still knows that the act is being carried out but it is invisible now. The most intense form of violence is the one where the inflictor is invisible. This again creates an ambiguous region (Leach 19xx) which creates possibility of violence. Violence can also be inflicted by visual means as evident from the Feldman's (2001) account of Ireland's civil war where the gaze of the powerful (British) inflicted violence on the watched. There the idea of private space as some thing personal was dissolved. The constant feeling of being watched made the victim feel utterly vulnerable. This act of visual violence can be seen as being ritualized by acts like putting a cross over photograph of the assassinated<sup>10</sup> (Feldman 2001: 48). Power to watch each and every thing creates possibilities for the watcher to violate people.

### **III. HISTORY, CULTURE AND VIOLENCE**

If time is seen as something continuous, then present is such a small instant that cannot be significant in it self and thus in a sense past is what is important. But still it is the window through which the flow of time is shaped. This shaped time then gets accumulated as the past. The nature of time is such that it is the past that again decides, up to a large extent, the way shaping of time has to take place in present. This assertion is supported by E. Valentine Daniel (2001: 352,355)

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<sup>8</sup> Ambiguity and violence has been related else where also in this document. Here I will like to make a point that ambiguous situations are periods of confusion and mystery. During such periods whatever goes wrong gets amplified and so do the emotions and reactions of masses. This deepens the misunderstanding and miscommunication between the 'self' and the 'other' and ultimately leads to a cycle of violence between the two sides of the boundary dividing 'self' and the 'other'.

<sup>9</sup> That is the act of disciplining.

<sup>10</sup> In Ireland a scopic regime was constructed by the state and its surveillance schemes. More details can be found from the account of Allen Fieldman listed in Bibliography.

... it is the present that plays the agitating role ... the past is closed, and “not the realm of possibility” (Corrington 1993: 182) . “The past consists of sum of *fait accomplis*, and this Accomplishment is the Existential mode of Time” (Pierce: 5.49) ... how can the absolute present even be a mode of time rather than a mere breach in time?

History is some thing and anything which is past but it very much defined by the present. Thus to understand the relation of violence with history, first its impact on the present must be understood. It is my contention to show violence is a tool of shaping the time in present.

Though violence seems to be a disruption from the normal course of life, it is in fact, in some sense, the normal course of life. Violence has always been a part of everyday life in its various forms. Some of these forms are so structured in the society that people do not even take notice of their presence. For instance, stress, that people often finds in their daily lives and their attempt to cope with it, is a form of violence. Most of the time those who are directly affected are the only ones bothered. But everyday violence occurs in collective experience and in the subjectivity of personal experience (Klienman 2001: 238) and experiences are what that mark the present.

These experiences keep on accumulating and together form the collective memory or the history. But some of these experiences are suppressed in the tide of time while others remain fresh in memory. Violent experiences largely constitute the later kind. According to me, history gets layered with every new experience, and this leads to two possible ways of looking at history, first the objective way which involves monotonously looking at the top layer where only recent act of violence are prominent and other is the transcendental way in which the cross-section of this layered matter, or the whole, is looked at and this what that could also be called the cultural<sup>11</sup> history<sup>12</sup>.

I mentioned earlier that even history affects the way present shapes time. This is done by the act of forgetting which is remembering what is to be forgotten, but because it is remembered so many times, it cannot be forgotten and this ways it becomes a part of the present. Even if we look at violence as a ritual, rituals are not to be forgotten and they are supposed to persist in time. If we look

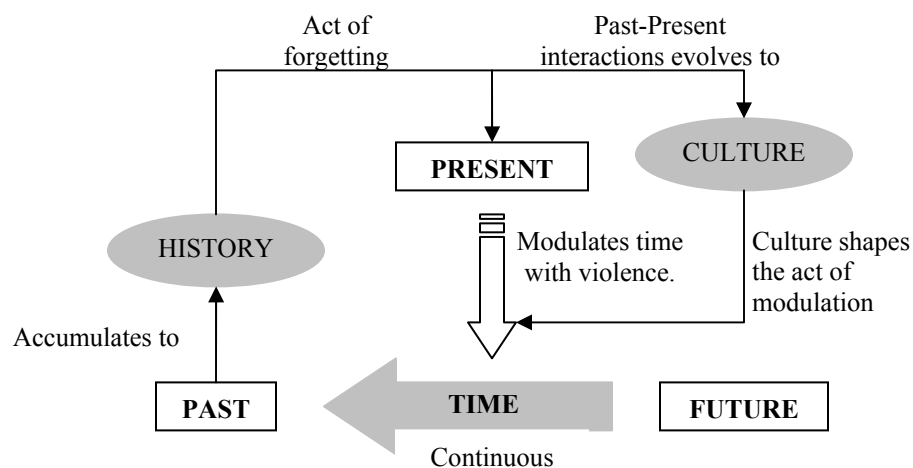
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<sup>11</sup> Notion of culture will be delved into some more detail later.

<sup>12</sup> This is noted from lectures of Prof. Pandya in class.

at violence as something that modulates the ideologies, then the older episteme become part of the heritage. Examples for this assertion can be seen in context of Sri Lankan civil war where Tamils saw violence as a part of their history and at large their heritage. Those of them who chose not to participate, like *Piyasena* (Spencer 2001), tried to ignore it when it was all round but could not because he was himself a constituent part of it. Similarly, the Tamils could never forget that there is a war associated with their act of existence because every time they tried to forget they remembered it (Spencer 2001 and Daniel 2001).

Culture as mentioned before, is a transcendental view of history i.e. the whole of history collectively. Culture defines the parameters for one's act in present society. One of these parameters requires violence to be a sustained mode of thinking. A new born does not subscribes to any ideology in the society, but as he or she grows his or her mindset is molded into the prevailing ideology and this way even he or she contributes to the episteme in a similar manner as others do. So when a particular society sees violence for a long enough period, it becomes a prominent part of their history and then implicatively of their culture, like for the Jews who suffered the Holocaust, the suffering became a part of their culture and heritage and relate to as some pre-determined part of their religious history. Graphically essence on this section can be put as following.



As mentioned before, in this section I tried to show violence as a tool for modulating present time

and recognize history's feedback action. I tried to assert culture as something which provides an environment for these interactions between the past and the present and in the process evolves.

As an endnote to this section I would like to mention the presence of violence in Indian culture especially Hindu culture. Two of the most important epics which are considered as oceans of knowledge, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have the ultimate form of violence – war as their central theme. Many of the Hindu Gods, Goddess and mythical creatures are personification of violence like Goddess *Kali*.

### CONCLUSION

In this essay of mine, I tried to show that how notion of violence is integrated in society and how history and culture are shaped by it. I also tried to present violence as a cultural construct which is product of interaction of various ideologies, notions and forces prevailing in the society. I also tried to show how power in its some forms becomes facilitator, cause and perpetrator of violence. In short, I tried to explore 'Structure of violence & violence of structure' (*inspired by Panday 2000: 15*).

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<sup>13</sup> Others are Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele and Pamela Reynolds.