

Violence: A Dominant Term of Discourse

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The purpose of this paper is to bring out the elements of violence in those institutions of the modern society which the members, participants or observers of certain events either do not register as violent or else are mute and helpless witnesses. The contention of the author is that such discourse is heavily imbued with violence which we experience either casually or even with a quiver, but, helplessly as a 'part of the system'.

Violence is not considered here in its far-fetched accentuated sense like discourse as violence (Foucault), writing as violence (Derrida) or breast-feeding as cannibalism (Lacan). Here violence is taken in its mild form as an outrage, injury or act contrary to one's feelings or principles and in its strong sense as (law) unlawful exercise of physical force. There are varieties of violence operational at various levels, which is not the purpose of discussion here. Violence of the nature and natural processes of creation is also not the subject of argument here. What is projected here is the nature of contrived violence, both manifest and latent, which is 'purposely' inflicted or fed by certain specialised agencies. In this constricted spectrum of violence there is hardly any arena of social life that can claim to be free from it. This only affirms the endemic occurrence of violence in society. The 'big bang', it seems, is ticking incessantly in every mind.

I

One is given to believe scientifically by the unilinear theory of history that violence pertains to the uncivilised societies which are crudely natural and animalistic. These societies which Levi-Strauss calls 'cold', as opposed to the modern 'hot', do not subscribe to the linear view of history and practice their own ways of looking at social and natural reality. This type of world-view is labelled primitive, backward, uncivilised, barbaric hence violent by the 'civilised' people of the modern society. The evolutionists argue that the logic of civilisation implies movement of human society from barbaric to civilisation (Morgan) and from primitive to industrial society (Spencer). The nature of human knowledge, science and culture is cumulative. Such that, each development in science and technology takes society a step forward

towards progress and civilisation.

The holistic vision of early knowledge was an effort to maintain a relation of harmony between man and nature. This peace was ruptured, taking a violent turn with the advent of modern Western science beginning from Bacon and Descartes. It became anthropocentric, first only for the human beings against all other natural species, and subsequently for the elite, the upper classes as against the masses who are considered no better than animals. The control over nature became the only goal of modern science – living on nature, not along with it. To Bacon, nature was an enemy which needed to be defeated and tortured so that its secrets or powers could be extracted for the benefit of human race.¹

This orientation of modern science sought knowledge of reality through dissection, vivisection and inevitable violence on the lower species. According to the Smithsonian Institute, two species are becoming extinct every day as a result of the altered environment due to human intervention in their natural habitat. Now, it seems, is the turn of the human species itself.

In the words of Alvares: 'The dominant, domineering images of our world are of Science and Violence. The former is accepted as intrinsically Good; the latter as intrinsically Evil. Yet, paradoxically, more the science, the more the violence.'² He finds the principal connections between the two at the level of scientific method itself which 'vetoes or excludes compassion, its postulates require excision of values. In actual operation, both the method and its metaphysics require mutilation or vivisection as an integral part of science'.³ Sheridan suggests: 'It is Foucault's belief that motivation and techniques for scientific investigation have more than an etymological connection with those of judicial torture; not only was torture conducted with scientific rigour, but science itself has been, not so much a disinterested unveiling of the truth, as its extraction by a kind of torture'.⁴ Even for this anthropocentric science, man is only an object of treatment and experimentation, devoid of all human subjectivity, be it the doctor examining the patient or economic planner trying to rescue the poor from their drudgery. The World Bank Report on Poverty (1990) considers that the principal problem of the world today is of integrating the poor into the world market.⁵ The report classifies the 'poor as patient' who have to be cured by the 'first world as doctor'. All economic development in the name of people has only made them poorer and displaced them from their habitat and culture. According to an estimate 18.5 million persons have been displaced in India between 1951-91. Seventy five per cent of these have been tribals.

II

There is something certainly wrong with this notion of development and the nature of modern science. Both have violence intrinsic to them. Had it been not so, the United States with the best of science, technology and development, a society par excellence of manifest prosperity, a heaven on

earth for people all over the globe, would not have borne scars of all-pervasive violence.⁶ Bob Herbert reporting from New York calls for 'A national rebellion against U.S. violence', appealing to fellow Americans to join hands against violence in their society. He quotes Senator Bill Bradley: 'In a society drenched with violence the legacy of brutality passes easily from generation to generation, and the myriad techniques of assault begin to be mastered at grotesquely early ages.'⁷

It is worth noting the predicament of abundance and development of the American sort as the whole world is out to follow its footsteps. Bradley continues,

...There is greater danger here. The catastrophe that has already descended on the urban young is bad enough, but there is worse ahead... We Americans have prepared a breeding ground for levels of violence that most people have never imagined. Immersed in a culture of extreme violence are millions of young people who are despised and who have little hope of ever finding meaningful work, and we have provided them with means to heavily arm themselves.... There are more gun dealers in the U.S. than there are gas stations or grocery stores.⁸

The only hope of an alternative socio-economic development has temporarily been marred with the collapse of the Soviet Union. All economies are opening up for integration into the world economy. Globalisation appears to be the only viable alternative for survival. But what is less realised is that it is primarily a capitalist integration ensuring free flow of commodities in the 'global village'. Such globalisation is nothing short of captivisation due to surveillance and under terms dictated by the powerful states. Human beings cannot behave normally in such conditions. Lorenz and other ethologists have shown that aggression manifests in captivity.

Such globalisation followed by universal acceptance of Western science and technology is hardly leaving any space free from the influence of cultural and economic imperialists. The local domestic spaces in societies farthest from the metropolitan centre have been invaded with violence and related phenomena characteristic of the modern society. All arenas of modern and modernising societies are witnessing dog-fights, sometimes open, sometimes hidden. 'What is most astonishing about the modern era, however, is the sophistication with which the performance of godless and violent acts of evil has become institutionalized and integrated into the normal routines of everyday living and working.'⁹

III

An attempt has been made below to identify elements of violence in those domestic and public spaces with which, normally, a heavy dose of violence is not associated. Or when perceived it is viewed casually and ignored. There is

no reason to discuss the obvious techniques, instruments and institutions which perpetrate violence in the modern society like the repressive apparatus of the modern state.

(i) A MARKET in an economically unequal society is a place for both manifest and latent violence. The former is witnessed in the form of communal riots or certain scarcity of goods, while the latter is seen in the form of a craving for goods inaccessible to the poorer classes. A market is an obvious indicator of the nature of production system in a society. The liberalization of economy has flooded every market with numerous types of consumer goods. Such a boom of imported items provides only a false hope of progress and development to the natives. It only adds to the craving and agony of the poorer people. This opening up of economies has sharpened the distinctions between classes – those filthy rich who squander lavishly on luxury items and the poor who live off their waste. In today's market it is difficult to practice a Socratic way of perceiving the consumer products which one does not need.

A market in an unequal society is one reason among others for the rise in urban crime, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, theft, robbery etc. With the rise of every great market, there emerge proportionately large and prominent slums. It is unfortunate that sociologists are busy studying violence in the slums but not 'slums as violence'. A relation between downtown and slum is simply a relation of violence.

The foil and wrapper culture of the modern market, attracts and captures the customer. It is also taken as is an index to the modernisation of the market. But it is simultaneously a great hazard to nature and natural resources. The indestructible garbage it generates does tremendous violence to natural resources and the environment.

(ii) FAMILY is an old universal institution which has been one of the important bases of a normative social order. An attempt was made in the erstwhile USSR during Stalin's regime to eliminate this bourgeois institution. Consequently, a steep rise in juvenile delinquency, crime, rapes etc., was registered. Once again, not only the family as a basic social institution but large families were encouraged. Awards were also instituted for proud mothers.

This very institution is now severely afflicted with violence between all its members. Once again an example from the U.S. would substantiate the relation between violence and civilisational development. In this cradle of progress and development, the incidence of child abuse and wife-battering is alarming. Quoting Bradley again: 'Violence in America is so pervasive that people take it for granted like a background noise. The most dangerous place of all is one's own house between 6 p.m. Saturday and 6 p.m. Sunday, "especially if you are a woman".' Further, '... Three children got into a fight. The mother turned to see what was the matter. And saw the two-year-old going for the throat of the four-year-old... Why wouldn't a two-year-old who sees daddy strangling mommy try to do the same to a sibling.'¹⁰ Wolfgang, a

practising psychiatrist, similarly concluded in his study on homicides that 'the bedroom is the most murderous room in the house'.¹¹ The situation two decades later is much worse.

What is happening to the family and the home which are supposed to be (traditionally) the safest and most secure institutions in human society? The structural constraints of capitalist development first broke up the joint family, and now the existence of the nuclear family too is threatened. These constraints are not only separations and divorces, but those willing to stay together cannot hold on at one place for reasons of career and economy. In a consumer society dependent children and old parents are both dispensable and hence the problems of juvenile delinquency and the caring of the old parents. Does this not amount to doing violence to children and parents? Girard argues: 'Not to love one's brother and to kill him are the same thing. Every negation of the the other leads to expulsion and murder'.¹² This sort of violence in the American family is fast reaching developing societies as a part of the import-package for the modernisation of economy, polity and society.

(iii) The TELEVISION constitutes the focus of the middle class family in contemporary society. Its multiple channels are perpetually bombarding innocent minds with abundant vulgar material and futile information. The films and serials thus screened are replete with violence. Slow motion and other techniques are in vogue to show the last contortions of singular muscles writhing in pain. Thundering sounds and blowing up of vehicles and buildings are made to look more than real for the pleasure of the spectators. Grimes says: 'Directors shoot explosions from multiple angles. To prolong the pleasure they cross-cut again and again with lavish use of slow motion. But an explosion that doesn't sound like World War III is a poor thing indeed.'¹³

What is its effect on the young and fresh minds? An earlier study (1975) in America has shown that an average American student puts in 11,000 hours of schooling before graduation, while he has seen television for 15,000 hours. And a recent study tells us that an average American child, before entering teens has already been exposed to 100,000 acts of violence on the screen. Why would they not practice such methods in real life? Recently, Auto Shankar's lawyer while pleading not guilty on his client's behalf argued that the provocation for his crimes involving a series of murders came from the violence of sex soaked Tamil films. Talking about the multilayered structure of television, Adorno suggests: 'As a matter of fact the hidden message may be more important than the overt, since the hidden message will escape the controls of consciousness, will not be "looked through", will not be warded off by sales resistance, but is likely to sink into the spectator's mind.'¹⁴

The chain of programmes on the television serves its audience a taste of wide range of violence - from the 'jammed' one at breakfast to 'sweet-n-sour' at lunch, shifting to the 'sipping hot' brewed violence in the afternoon and sometimes a 'chilled' cold-blooded one, followed by a 'spicy-crunching' one

at dinner. The display of the U.S. (Kuwait)-Iraq war on the small screen was a rare yet real spectacle in human history. Its spectators all over the globe were thrilled by the marvels of hi-technology. It is not sure if democracy was restored in Kuwait, or a lesson taught to Saddam Hussain. But, it is certain that this event led to a phenomenal rise in the sale of the U.S. war equipment thereby giving new life to the war industry.

The television and media not only make celebrities but also martyrs, by projecting them as probable targets. In the U.S. Presidential election of McKinley in 1876, Pulitzer and Hearst papers published one million copies bearing his photographs as a part of the campaign. One who killed McKinley in 1901 uttered: '... a man should not claim so much attention while others receive none'.¹⁵

(iv) The war on television was seen like a SPORT. As a matter of fact there is hardly any difference between the two. The war on television 'good' Bush (ing) out the 'evil' Saddam. Huizinga argues:

Indeed, all fighting that is bound by rules bears the formal characteristics of play by that very limitation. We can call it the most intense, the most energetic form of play and at the same time the most palpable and primitive. Young dogs and small boys fight 'for fun' with rules limiting the degree of violence; nevertheless the limits of licit violence do not necessarily stop at the spilling of blood or even at killing... As a striking element of the play-element in fighting taken from a not too remote period of history, we would refer to the famous 'Combat des Trente' fought in Brittany in 1351.¹⁶

Further

fighting as a cultural function, always presupposes limiting rules, and it requires, to a certain extent anyway, the recognition of its play quality. We can only speak of war as a cultural function so long as it is waged within a sphere whose members regard each other as equals or antagonists with equal rights; in other words its cultural function depends on its play quality. This condition changes as soon as war is waged outside the sphere of equals, against groups not recognised as, human beings, and thus deprived of human rights – barbarians, heathens, heretics and 'lesser breeds without the law'.¹⁷

The original form of sports was merely a means of conditioning and training for combat and warfare, and for hunting rather than for recreation. World War I gave boxing a tremendous impetus when it proved its value in training soldiers. Prior to that it was banned in all but a few states of the U.S.¹⁸ Between sports and war, an intrinsic connection may also be seen in their common terminology like attack, defence, offence, throw, shot, shoot-out, hit, kick, dash, clash, heats, elimination, crushed to defeat, victory and

various types of formations for defence and offence. Reporting the 1994 World Cup Soccer events a newspaper carried the headlines, 'Brazil scared of ariel bombardment by Sweden'... later: 'More so by the penalty shoot-outs.'¹⁹ The names of the sports too smack of war, for instance, tug-of-war, bullfight, cockfight, shooting, archery, fencing, tent-pegging etc. The players too dress up like the knights in tough armour, whether they are the goalkeepers or wicketkeepers, rugby players or cricket batsmen or the motor rallyists. Huizinga says that two teams matching closely are labelled as having a 'pitched battle' – 'meaning one that is conducted according to military rules'.²⁰

It is pertinent to speak of football – the game, its nature (violence therein) and issues relating to its economy and polity. The game of football is believed to have originated after the British won a war with Denmark. In sheer joy and excitement the soldiers started kicking around the beheaded skulls. Dunning spells out four phases in the development of football in England. The first one from the 14th to the 18th century witnessed a wild and unruly folk game. The second phase lasted from 1750 to 1840 when the rough game was taken up by the public schools. It was formalised in the third phase (1840-1860) and in the final phase diffused into the society and developed mass spectatorship.²¹

In the second phase, playing football was a means used by the senior boys to dominate the juniors. It was called 'prefect fagging'. The name given to football at Shrewberry was 'douling' – derived from the Greek word for slave.²² The Headmaster of this famous school recorded that this game was 'fit only for butcher boys,' 'more fit for farm boys and labourers than young gentlemen'.²³

The football ground not only witnesses sport but also combats amongst hooligans. During the last few decades in Europe it has been referred to as 'English disease'. That is why it has been subjected to serious research by the scholars in Britain. Jacobson noted that the lyrics of inter-fan-group chants are punctuated with words like 'hate', 'fight', 'surrender', 'lick' and 'die', all of which convey images of battle and conquest. Apart from violence, symbolic demasculinisation of the rival fans is another recurrent terrace theme.²⁴ These authors conclude their essay: 'The game itself can generate high levels of excitement, the focus of which is a contest – a "mock battle" with a ball – between the male representatives of the two communities. Though formally controlled and in a sense more abstract, and usually less openly violent, the game is in many ways analogous to the sorts of confrontations in which the hooligan fans engage – it is also a form of ritualised masculinity struggle.'²⁵

Describing the nature of football De Souza says:

If it is sometimes played in a rough and tumble way (or leads to violence) so that, in actual fact, it closely resembles a war, the seeds of this were sown in Europe... Two major wars, and numerous forays and attritions to

colonise and subjugate other peoples of the world, ensured that the basic strategies and playing of the game were militaristic in nature. Until 1958, football tended to be a game of commanders and tanks. Playing took the form of an admixture of tanks, crack infantry, a senior commander (either in the back or half-line), and high-powered long-range cannon employed in front of the goal-keeper. The players used heavy, hard-toed, studded, ankle-length boots and were obviously, if somewhat crudely, influenced by the boots issued to soldiers.²⁶

He elaborates further:

To England and Germany must go the dubious distinction of introducing football to the world in its mode of war. The credit goes to the Brazilians to de-militarise the football introducing a new technique of short-passes, keeping the ball close to the body and virtually dancing with the ball. Contrary to their European counterparts they supported tighter and shorter shorts well above the usual knee-length, light shoes with soft toes and cut below the ankles. This gave them flexibility to sway, bend and pivot while moving with the ball.²⁷

The currently flourishing industry of war toys is indicative of the definite connection between war and sports, between the instruments of violence and the toys. It may be a part of the American politics of socialisation to prepare their youth to fight against communism to keep aglow the flame of liberty. But, more often these guns are turned towards their own people. Scandinavian countries are an exception in imposing a ban on such toys.

The war toys, supplemented by video war games and an easy access to real weapons ensure that the U.S. milieu is imbued with violence. School children carry pistols in their lunch boxes and take these out at the slightest provocation. The whole atmosphere is so charged and full of insecurity that children play 'funeral games.' A report says: 'Shootings, stabbings and drug related violence in their everyday lives have prompted them to wonder in which colour they would like to be shrouded if they die, whom they want to invite to their funerals and what music they would have at the procession.'²⁸

The developments in science and technology have well combined with big capital to make sports a super-specialisation and as thrilling as fictional films. The WWF's (World Wrestling Federation) giant heroes with matchingly horrifying titles and fictitious names displaying cold violence are the latest craze with children all over the globe. It may be a charade, mitigating spectator's aggression (as some argue) but their fight certainly makes one convulse in the chair. It is not surprising to note that the WWF seems a modern version of 'pancratation' which was a form of ground-wrestling in the ancient Olympic Games. Elias notes that it was one of the most popular events then. The competitors fought with every part of their body and were allowed to gouge one another's eyes out. The contest continued till one of

them gave up or died there. The crown was conferred on the dead.²⁹

The sports today reflect the competitiveness of post-capitalist society. The sports meets are mega-events involving multinational corporations making huge investments. The professional players are increasingly becoming pawns in the hands of capital and mafia who lay bets on players and teams. It is unfortunate that the assassination of Andres Escobar, the gifted Columbian defender in the World Cup Soccer 1994 was due to the 'auto-goal' which caused financial loss to the betters. Nandy suggests: 'It is not the quality of football or national self-respect that determines the fate of foot-ballers; it is their location in the alternative world of high finance.'³⁰

It is not only capital, but politics that is equally involved. The victory or defeat determines the political status of a nation-state. Riots too break out between religious communities following a match between rival teams, say India and Pakistan. Soccer riots and hooliganism were a menace for decades in Europe. Dunning *et al.* suggest affiliation of the soccer hooligan groups with extreme Right-Wing, fascist organisations like the British National Party and the National Front.³¹

Racism too got inflicted on the sports. *Encyclopaedia Americana* notes that Hitler was extremely displeased during the Berlin Olympics of 1936 when six events were won by American Negroes in a single day.

(v) SEMINARS are a congregation of the learned scholars. But there too violence is manifest, though more often as verbal intercourse. It is supposedly a battleground for academic debates to enhance knowledge, which is for very obvious reasons directly linked to power. Foucault's views are interesting to note: 'The historical analysis of this rancorous will to knowledge reveals that all knowledge rests upon injustices (that there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation for truth) and that the instinct for knowledge is malicious (something murderous, opposed to the happiness of mankind).'³²

How could knowledge advance without the sacrifice of scholars like Socrates, persecution of scientists like Galileo, Harvey and Darwin and the exile of philosophers like Marx? The crucial question is that if scholarship, as a harbinger of civilisation is not free from violence, then why is violence associated with the savages, the primitives and the uncivilised? The knowledge - power nexus is not a modern phenomenon but as old as knowledge itself. The ancient Indian sages, so the stories tell, would turn anybody into a rock whoever dared invite their slightest displeasure. In early Indian tradition the *shastrartha* was nothing less than a wrestling arena. The audience enjoyed the academic bout. The prolonged *shastrartha* would continue for months together. The loser would literally go into hiding or leave the town/community altogether, similar to a wrestler who has lost the contest.

A modern seminar is, in certain ways, no less than a wrestling arena with a referee checking and counting the fouls and keeping the time as well. A professional seminarian takes out his watch and pulls up the sleeves in the

manner of young children going to fight each other, before tuning himself to deliver the discourse. The volley of questions and comments are strictly regulated within a stipulated period. The seminarian, a lonely fighter, must defend himself against all possible attacks. All throws reversed would make him a champion, followed by pats on the back and warm hand-shakes accompanied by remarks 'well done, remarkable, excellent'. A loser is only accosted by a close sympathiser. A question-answer session usually lends authenticity to the seminar in the manner of a hard-hitting batsman in cricket or a boxer's fast volleys knocking down his opponent.

Taken as a religious affair, a seminar could be comparable to the ritual of sacrifice, meant to maintain or restore an academic 'order'. An erudite scholar who has sermonised his thesis successfully is held in high esteem like a 'baba'. But, a poor seminarian is assailed with queries as a heretic is pelted with stones or as a criminal who could only be sacrificed from a distance, lest the act of sacrificing pollute the sacrificers themselves.

Alternatively a seminar might be likened to a penal chamber where the chief executioner executes the victim using impersonal objective terminology in the bureaucratic frame of an organisation. The microphone is truly symbolic of the noose that can well choke the voice.

What is common in all these types is the underlying current of violence which is too obvious in the case of a 'seminar as a sport'. In the latter two types, sacrificial and bureaucratic violence can be distinguished from each other. The former has the victim's consent which is absent in the latter case.

Foucault also relates to this issue in his own way:

Knowledge does not slowly detach itself from its empirical roots, the initial needs from which it arose, to become pure speculation subject only to the demands of reason, its development is not tied to the constitution and affirmation of a free subject; rather, it creates a progressive enslavement to its instinctive violence. Where religion once demanded the sacrifice of bodies, knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves, calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge. The desire for knowledge has been transformed among us into a passion which fears no sacrifice, which fears nothing but its own extinction. It may be that mankind may eventually perish from its passion for knowledge. . . .³³

IV

If knowledge, too, is infected with violence, where is the hope for fighting the menace itself which seems to be growing like a scourge. Girard has argued that the human culture is simply an endeavour to conceal the primeval murder. Let me conclude this essay with Girard who has summed up the whole scenario precisely and effectively. He says:

Today the reign of violence is made manifest. It assumes the awesome and

horrific form of technological weaponry. Those weapons, as the 'experts' blandly inform us, are what is keeping the whole world more or less in line. The idea of 'limitless' violence, long scorned by sophisticated Westerners, suddenly looms up before us. Absolute vengeance, formerly the prerogative of the gods, now returns, precisely weighed and calibrated, on the wings of science. And it is this force, we are told, that prevents the planetary society, the society that already encompasses or will soon encompass the whole of humanity, from destroying itself.³⁴

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