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The Ambivalence of Violence

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Abstract: The second millennium in general, and its last century in particular, can claim the doubtful honour of being the bloodiest and cruelest in human history. Man (the masculine form is intentional) invented and developed refinements of cruelty and mass destruction (culminating in the "clean bomb" of the last decade, so-called because it would "merely" destroy troublesome humans, leaving the rich heritage of lands, buildings and - especially! - plant and industry intact). Few, if any, would dispute that assertion. Small wonder, then, that some of our contemporaries were quite convinced that, tucked away in the depths of each of us, there lurked a latent "criminal chromosome" or "aggressivity gene", just waiting to be roused from its fitful slumber by some quirk of history or psychology so that it could go on a rampage.

Keywords: Aggressivity gene, Ambivalence, Violence, Quirk of history

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The Ambivalence of Violence

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"Nature, red in tooth and claw. . ." Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, lvi

The second millennium in general, and its last century in particular, can claim the doubtful honour of being the bloodiest and cruelest in human history. Man (the masculine form is intentional) invented and developed refinements of cruelty and mass destruction (culminating in the "clean bomb" of the last decade, so-called because it would "merely" destroy troublesome humans, leaving the rich heritage of lands, buildings and-especially! – plant and industry intact). Few, if any, would dispute that assertion.

Small wonder, then, that some of our contemporaries were quite convinced that, tucked away in the depths of each of us, there lurked a latent "criminal chromosome" or "aggressivity gene", just waiting to be roused from its fitful slumber by some quirk of history or psychology so that it could go on a rampage. The fact that the German nation, which many had good reason to assume represented the zenith of European and Christian civilisation, could produce monsters like Hitler and Mengele with all their attendant Gestapos and Buchenwalds seemed to be a proof of this and also a terrible cautionary tale: what guarantee have I that something mysterious would not trigger off some frightful chemical reaction within me and unleash the Frankenstein hidden behind my polite façade? And suddenly Stalins and Pol Pots were mushrooming about us. Gulags, brain-washing and ethnic cleansing became part and parcel of the common man's vocabulary.

Konrad Lorenz and his research come spontaneously to mind at this juncture. His theory of human biological aggressivity appears to be borne out by the prolonged and well-documented experiments on rats conducted by Dan Olweus in Norway and Sweden (Karli 1982: 419). Nearer to home, Mahatma Gandhi was apparently quite convinced that some kind of inbuilt violence was constitutive of the carnal nature of the human person. "Destruction does not need to be taught," he averred. "Man, as animal, is violent, but, as spirit, is non-violent" (Gandhi 1958: 87). He was equally certain, however, that "Man has been steadily progressing towards *ahimsa* (non-violence)." He elaborates,

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> Our remote ancestors were cannibals. Then came a time when they were fed up with cannibalism and they began to live on chase. Next, came a stage when man was ashamed of leading the life of a wandering hunter. He, therefore, took to agriculture and depended principally on mother earth for food. Thus, from being a nomad, he settled down to civilised, stable life, founded villages and towns and, from member of a family became member of a community and a nation. All these are signs of progressive *ahimsa* and diminishing *himsa*. Had it been otherwise, the human species would have been extinct by now, even as many of the lower species have disappeared (Gandhi 1961: 27).

Gandhiji offers us an extremely selective and reductionist summary of evolutionary history. Changes in human lifestyle were motivated by more complex causes than being "fed up" or becoming "ashamed" not to mention a plethora of intricacies that we need not go into here. One thing is certain, *homo necans* (man, the killer) was an important stage in the evolutionary ladder, as crucial as his becoming *homo faber* – or, more accurately, the latter learnt to make tools so that he could do his role of killing and eating his bigger, stronger and swifter animal contemporaries more efficiently. When our puny ancestors learnt to stand up on two legs and make weapons they were able to swing the grim laws of evolution – "Might is Right" and "Survival of the Fittest" – in their favour. Humans learnt to think and plan strategies together and, as non-vegetarians, were able to gain the upper hand. Little of this points towards a "growth in *ahimsa*" in the sense that Gandhiji had in mind.

At any rate, as the Mahatma was himself constrained to admit, *ahimsa* is actually an unrealisable ideal.

> Perfect non-violence is impossible so long as we exist physically, for we would want some space to occupy. Perfect non-violence, while you are inhabiting the body, is only a theory like Euclid's point or straight line, but we have to endeavour to attain it every moment of our lives (1961: 28).

The fact that some kind of violence appears inevitable in human embodied existence might also cause us to wonder whether we should go ahead with the tendency to absolutise the evil of violence and the good of non-violence. To live we must eat and to eat we must take life, be it the life of animals or plants. The jury is out as to whether biologically and psychologically it can be proved that humans were meant to be vegetarians or not. Whether it is possible to obtain enough proteins and other vitamins for healthy all-round growth from a pure vegetarian diet is still being fiercely debated back and forth. Cover their mouths with cloths and sweep the floor before them as Jain monks and nuns might, they have to admit that at every step, nay, at every moment, we are slaughtering millions of microscopic life forms. Birth emerges out of violence: the foetus is forced to change its fishlike existence in the womb and learn to breathe amid the blood and pain of its mother, as it takes shuddering wails. No real human growth occurs without suffering, tears and agonising self-doubt. All this indicates that it would probably be much more realistic to admit that violence – like most things that humans do or un-

dergo in life - is neither good nor bad in itself, but must be judged against its context and the motives that inspire it.

Dom Helder Camara, the late saintly and courageous prelate of Recife, in Brazil, one of the world's poorest dioceses, has some very pertinent remarks on violence, in this regard, in his insightful and provocative little monograph, *Spiral of Violence*.

He distinguishes between three types of violence that have been current in human history since time began. There is, first of all, **structural violence**, the violence of unjust social structures that have legal backing and prevent large groups of people from developing and living in authentic freedom. Examples of these would be the institution of slavery (officially outlawed only within the last two centuries of the last millenium), *apartheid* in South Africa (put an end to barely a decade ago), racism in the US and the pernicious caste system in India (both banned by their national Constitutions but still prevalent in outlying areas in both countries). Gender discrimination and other forms of ethnic discrimination may also be mentioned. Eventually the oppressed masses can "take it no more". The amount of insults and beatings they have borne meekly and quietly reaches boiling point and explodes into moments of sporadic and unplanned **insurrectional violence**: they begin to riot and attack representatives of the oppressive régime – the police and the upper class. Vehicles are stoned and overturned, public transport is set afire, shop-windows are smashed and an orgy of terror and mayhem breaks loose. Mobs charge through the town looting and destroying, mixing a goodly bit of vengeance with their justifiable cry for a bigger share of the cake. Finally, this provokes **repressive violence**: the State unleashes the full might of its paramilitary and other forces to put down speedily and ruthlesly all unrest. The people are cowed down with a new system of even harsher and more cruel laws – Prevention of Terrorism Acts and Emergency Measures – and the last situation becomes a good deal worse than the first. The spiral of violence once more reaches a climax and the people, in desperation, take to the streets with their puny weapons once again. The army is called back and the whole cycle is repeated. It keeps on getting worse and worse.

The significant thing, Dom Helder reminds us, is that the Establishment reserves the name of "violence" only for the second type, the form of hopeless and hapless protest initiated by the people in the face of the crippling injustices meted out to them. Structural violence, which set the whole ball rolling, is dubbed "the established order". Its violent nature is disguised by the legitimisation of its injustices and the fact that traffic is seen moving in an orderly manner on the streets while shops and offices and factories are offering "business as usual". As for repressive violence, that was mere "restoring the established order". If ever the State was forced to admit that excesses were committed by the enforcers of "law and order", these were covered over with rueful comments that these were the price that had to be paid to make the intractable and ungrateful masses behave.

To return to Gandhiji. He reserved words of strong condemnation for all kinds of violence. "Every murder or other injury, *no matter for what cause*, committed on another, is a crime against humanity," he equivocally asserted (1958a; emphasis mine). And, though he would also clarify his position to the effect that, "Between violence and cowardly flight, I can only prefer violence to cowardice," he went on to add, "As a coward, which I was for many years, I harboured violence. I began to prize non-violence only when I began to shed violence" (1958: 102). In other words, he tended to identity all violence with cowardice, whether it be the violence of five men who beat up a Dalit and then proceed to gang-rape his wife or the efforts of her valiant husband who endeavours to fight them off and falls, battered and bleeding, after having incapacitated a would-be molester or two in the process.

Paolo Freire would not agree. As he tellingly remarks,

> Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who fail to recoginse others as people – not by those who are oppressed, exploited and unrecognised. It is not the unloved who cause disaffection, but those who cannot love because they love only themselves. It is not the helpless, subject to terror, who initiate terror, but the violent who, with their power, create the situation which begets 'rejects of life'. It is not the people who are the sources of despotism, but the tyrants: not the despised who initiate hatred, but those who despise them. It is not those whose humanity is denied who negate man, but those who denied that humanity (thus negating their own as well). Force is not used by those who have become weak under the preponderance of the strong, but by the strong who have emasculated them (1972: 32).

Freire, thus, is totally at variance with the Mahatma when the latter puts all violence on an equal footing. The Brazlian activist sees the cruel acts of the oppressor and the revolutionary action for justice of the oppressed as two **qualitatively** different acts! Paradoxically, the violence of the oppressed who resists the injustice perpetrated by the oppressor, violent though it may be, is "a gesture of love"! Even though it be "as violent as the initial violence of the oppressors" it can "initiate love". This is because the oppressors' violence "prevents the oppressed from being fully human" and, thereby, as we have said, dehumanises also himself. On the contrary, the response of the oppressed, violent though it may be in itself, is "grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human" whereas the violence of the oppressor denies one the same right. The oppressed, on the other hand, "fighting to be human, take away the oppressors' power to dominate". In doing so, they restore, not only their own humanity, but also rehumanise their oppressors. That is why Freire likes to say that "only the oppressed . . . by freeing themselves can free their oppressors" (1972: 31-32).

Nor can we simplistically label as "oppression" the restrictions that the formerly oppressed impose on their ex-oppressors so as to prevent them from regaining their old oppressive positions and powers. For, as Freire so rightly comments, "an act is oppressive only

when it prevents men from being more fully human"; these "necessary restraints do not **in themselves** signify that yesterday's oppressed have become today's oppressors (1972: 33).

But that always remains a real and dangerous possibility. It is all to easy for the formerly oppressed people, on seizing the reins of power, to degenerate into a new oppressor class, to wreak fearful and terrible vengeance on the old oppressors and introduce cruel and unjust laws to ensure their remaining in a position of incontestable authority. Again, in the course of the revolutionary struggle, it is not easy to moderate and control violence so that it remains but a means to usher in a just society and doesn't become a cover up for all manner of paying off personal grudges, seizing long coveted wealth (or women!). . . Gandhiji held that non-violence had to be taught: people must learn how to control their spontaneous urge to hit back, to seek revenge, to exact three teeth for one, let alone an eye for any eye. In the same way, would it be unrealistic to call for a training of would-be revolutionaries in moderation and self-control, so that violent action be used solely as a means for establishing the balance of order that had been disturbed and not as an outlet for revenge or pandering to one's concupiscence? Such a call was made, and implemented, by a man who was no idealistic dreamer of "armchair revolutionary" but a person who committed himself to active struggle for justice in many battles for freedom and emerged as the "revolutionaries' revolutionary", none other than Che Guevara, himself. In his *Guerilla Warfare*, written out of the experience of the experience of the Cuban revolution, he envisaged just that. He laid down that the revolutionary be strained above all to be an "agrarian reformer" who should exercise the utmost gentleness and humanness in dealing with wounded and captured enemy soldiers. Civilians and peasants were to be treated with courtesy, even if they had been known to have supplied the National Guards with food and shelter, for often they had no choice. Non-combatants should be respected and there was to be not a breath of rape or looting among his guerillas. The fact that these directives were, for the most part, scrupulously adhered to was one of the reasons why Che's little band soon won the affection of the people as against the brutalities inflicted on all and sundry by the Batista régime. Che had nothing to do with the excesses introduced by Castro and soon left to throw in his lot with revolutionaries elsewhere.

But there is also the distressing phenomenon of how oppressed people often turn on each other in acts of unbridled and horrifying violence, which leads their oppressors to be confirmed in their opinion that "the great unwashed masses", the "niggers" or "wogs" – whatever be the term of opprobrium then in vogue – are incorrigible and uncouth barbarians, totally incapable of looking after themselves and who can only be made to respect order and discipline by means of the gun and the whip. 'After all, if that is the way they treat each other, what can we, their bet-

ters, expect at their hands, if they were given freedom?' Franz Fannon, in his classic, *The Wretched of the Earth*, explains the origin of this awful violence:

> The colonised man will first manifest this aggressiveness, which has been deposited in his bones, against his own people. This is the period when the niggers beat each other up, and the police and the magistrates don't know which way to turn when faced with the astonishing waves of crime in North Africa. . . . While the settler or the policeman has the right the live-long day to strike the native, to insult him and to make him crawl to them, you will see the native reaching for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him by another native; for the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-a-vis his brother (1961: 38).

Freire, who quotes the above passage, then goes on to explain, in effect, why it is that when Dalits and Adivasis are allotted positions of power, say in the Police Force or Customs, as per the "reservation quota", often act so rudely and arrogantly. Indeed, this has become one of the main reasons why many have begun to suggest that it is not good policy to grant "STs and BCs" such posts: 'they just don't know how to treat people!'

Oppressed people, Freire observes, tend to "internalise" the image of their oppressor. Why do they do this? For the simple reason that, after having undergone long periods (centuries?) of oppression, they have come to believe that the oppressor alone is human. They have succumbed to the brain-washing that forced them to see themselves as sub-human and thereby meriting the kind of treatment they were receiving from their "betters". The oppressor, then, emerges as their sole role model for humanisation: the way he acts is the way they must act if, like him, they are to become humanised! For the oppressed, "to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor" (Freire 1972: 25). So, when Dalits and Adivasis find themselves in authority, they "lord it over others", not so much out of revenge (as we tend to think) but because this is the way they have seen their role models behave in such positions. They know of no other way to establish their pre-eminence and, in order to demonstrate that they can do the job efficiently, they follow the lifestyle of their former oppressors. Rather than retaliate by putting a moratorium on such appointments, the better course would be to wait a little patiently. It won't be long before clearer thinking prevails among these formerly oppressed people. At any rate the rest of us won't have to suffer at their hands anything like the atrocities they had to undergo from our predecessors, nor for any comparable length of time.

Thus we come to the conclusion that violence is ambivalent. One cannot absolutise all violence as bad and all non-violence as good. It should be clear enough that one cannot make a commitment to violence as a strategy to be used whenever any injustice confronts us. But neither can one assert that never, under any circumstances, can one use violence to protect the weak or restore the balance of justice from the proud and the arrogant. Martin Buber, I think, gives us a clear and succinct summary of this position in a letter which he wrote

to Gandhiji, for whom he had the utmost respect.

> . . . I cannot help withstanding evil in the world, just as the evil within myself. I can only strive not to have to do so by force. I do not want force. But if there is no other way of preventing the evil destroying the good, I trust I shall use force and give myself up into God's hands. . . . If I am to confess what is truth to me, I must say: There is nothing better for a man than to deal justly – unless it be to love; we should be able even to fight for justice – but to fight lovingly (Buber 1963: 146).

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