

## ON VIOLENCE

In recent years, political theorists and social scientists have said a great deal about violence—especially in the context of socio-political transformations. Some of them accord a socially meaningful role to certain modes of violence in maintaining the stability of the social fabric, some others recognise it as an agent of socio-economic change, while many others decry violence and believe that meaningful change is possible, or at least desirable, only through non-violent methods. Philosophers and laymen, by and large, simply express abhorrence for violence ostensibly because of the security-fear complex supported by their religious and, moralistic predilections. All this, of course, assumes that we have a well defined concept of violence and that there is a straight-forward demarcation between violence and non-violence. Here, I am not interested in either defending or denouncing violence as a means of change; nor am I concerned with an empirical enquiry into the causes or consequences of violence. There are significant conceptual and definitional questions attendant upon the notion of violence which deserve serious consideration. For example, what constitutes violence? What are the factors, if any, implied when we describe some action as violent? What distinguishes a violent act from a non-violent one? Apart from their academic worth such questions assume added relevance and an element of urgency about them when viewed in the context of the present socio-political reality of which inescapably we ourselves are a part. For example, the political drama being enacted in Bihar where competing forces with conflicting group interests have confederated essentially to fight for their own survival and maintain social status quo while exhorting the people at large for a *Total Revolution* through non-violent means such as strikes, 'bandhs', militant demonstrations, and 'dharanas' etc. only brings into focus the need for greater conceptual clarity with regard to the notions of violence and non-violence. It is not to suggest as though we have no idea whatsoever of what "violence" means. Indeed we know that if we were to see a Brutus slaying a Casesar, we would call it a case of violence; and indict Brutus for having done something violent. But this is

not the point. What is of interesting philosophical consequence is to see if it has some unique feature(s) which can be generalized so as to serve as the basis for defining violence and distinguishing it from non-violence.

That the notion of violence is complex is evidenced from the variety of contexts in which we employ the word "violence" and its adjectival form, "violent". We speak of individuals as violent, e.g. So-and-so is a violent man, and we also ascribe violence to their actions or behaviour. What is curious here is that we ascribe violence not only to a particular type of actions sharing similar behavioural structure but to a variety of actions apparently having no structural similarity. For example, we speak of violence in the context of acts such as murder or burning of property or other acts of physical aggression leading to actual or possible harm or damage. And also, we speak of doing violence to one's senses, dignity or sentiments, or doing violence to scriptures, and so on. Obviously doing violence to scriptures, or to one's dignity or sentiments does not necessarily involve physical assault. One may do violence to scriptures either by doing something contrary to what is commanded or simply by not following the scriptural command. Likewise, one may do violence to some one's dignity in several ways, such as by physically molesting the person or by abusing or insulting him. One also speaks of violence in the context of natural and non-natural events or phenomena. E.g. 'a violent storm or river', 'violent pain or death', 'violent flow or motion', etc. Coupled with the fact of there being a wide range of things to which violence is ascribed, there is another extremely significant factor of strong emotive overtones that the words "violence" and "violent" carry. Our emotive responses to violence are non-uniform and often conflicting. We abhor violence, but in certain contexts are thrilled by it. We dread violence but sometimes we welcome it. Consider for example, sports like bull-fighting or boxing. For some, it is a matter of tremendous excitement to watch these games, whereas for many others, they may be revolting and disgusting. The emotive overtones import to them considerable persuasive force. In politics, particularly, "violence" acquires almost a new dimension where it is exploited as a symbol to evoke desired responses.

The elusive character of 'violence' is eminently clear from the above. However, the elusiveness is not only because of the multiplicity of contexts of its use, it is manifested more importantly in the fact that on the one hand it subsumes so much, and on the other, leaves out so much more from its fold without any analytic reasons that it becomes increasingly difficult to spell out the descriptive conditions for the appropriateness of its use. Recently, there was quite a furore over JP's alleged permission to students to slap the legislators to force them to resign from the legislative assembly. The reason was that JP was bringing in 'violence' into his apparently "non-violent revolution". But, preventing a minister from leaving his house and obstructing him from performing his normal functions is, by most, not seen as an act of violence. Similarly, taking of hostages is considered as committing violence, while sitting on 'dharna' is not.

A little digression here would be useful in guiding our subsequent discussion. We use the adjective "violent" to characterize men as well as their actions. We say, "So-and-so is violent", and also, "Such and such is violent". There is one important difference, though. In saying, for example, that Hitler was a violent man, one is not referring to any particular instance of Hitler's actions. One is attributing to him a certain tendency or disposition to behave in a certain manner in certain kinds of situations. One's 'being violent' is in this respect different from one's 'becoming violent'. One may be provoked into violence without his really being a violent person. However, whether or not one is a violent person depends upon how he conducts himself in certain sorts of situations. One who behaves or is prone to behave violently is said to be violent. A quarrelsome or kind or intelligent man must quarrel or do acts of kindness or perform intelligently if not always, at least often enough to warrant appropriate characterisation. A disposition, in other words, must find appropriate expression in the behaviour of a person if it is attributed to him and the attribution is to be proper. Now, if it is so, it would mean then that predication of "violent" to actions is basic to its attribution to men. For knowledge of what constitutes violent behaviour is a precondition for being able to say that So-and-so is a violent man. This point perhaps is not very significant in itself; but it suggests

a direction to what we are looking for. An analysis of the notion of violence would be gainful only in the context of actions.

An immediate important conclusion follows from the above. The term "violence" or "violent" does not designate any property—for actions do not, strictly speaking, possess any property. They have a structure which lends them to interpretation. Acts of courage, cowardice, humility are so characterized not because they have some property like courageousness, cowardliness or humbleness inhering in them, instead they are so characterized because they are so interpreted. And, what interpretation we give to an action, to a large extent, depends upon how we perceive it. There are two points which seem to be significant. Firstly, such characterizations imply that the behaviour under description is a deviation from the normal. But there are no descriptive criteria to identify the normal. Consequently, where the deviation from the normal occurs in a given case cannot be defined. I am not implying that we do not recognize the non-normal behaviour. We do distinguish an act of cruelty from that of kindness. But what counts normal for one may not be normal for another. A certain behaviour may, for example, be considered as an expression of respect or regard whereas others may interpret that as demeaning conduct or a sign of a servile attitude. Similarly, what may appear to some as insolent or irresponsible behaviour, may just be normal to others. A violent action is considered destructive, injurious, harmful or hurtful etc. But, an action so characterized is not confined to any particular behaviour structure. One can harm, injure or destroy another in a variety of ways. Similarly, injury, harm or damage cannot adequately be defined in terms of some specific physical or visible effects of an action alone. Injury or damage is not always visible. It does not mean that the characterization and recognition of what is considered a violent action is totally subjective or that it is a matter of individual caprice. Beliefs, attitudes, socio-cultural norms and the like which an individual shares with his community condition the identification of what he considers as violent, injurious or harmful. Secondly, such characterizations have an other equally important feature, i.e., they function evaluatively. When we say that such-and-such act is violent, it has in it an element of, "Don't do it". I shall take up this point later. Presently, it would suffice to say, on the

basis of the above, that an analysis of the notion of violence purely in naturalistic terms would be totally inadequate.<sup>1</sup>

Ordinarily, for instance, we associate violence with the use of strong physical force by some person (s) leading to some injury or harm to another where the other could either be some beings (s) or some property. It is obvious that not every use of strong physical force constitutes violence. Snatching a person off the road from coming under an approaching car would hardly be considered as an act of violence, though it may require tremendous amount of physical force and may also result in injury to both or one of them. Whereas pushing a person off the railway platform with the Rajdhani Express steaming in may be a relatively simple matter as to the force required, yet the action would be considered patently violent even though it may not lead to any harm.

It is tempting to distinguish a violent action from an un-violent one in terms of the aim or purpose of the agent. A violent action would then be defined as one which is aimed at causing injury or harm. Therefore, the latter example in the above is a case of violence—for the purpose of pushing the person is to do him harm. As in the former case the agent does not aim at harming him, it is not violent. Effective though it might seem at first glance, a second thought would reveal how unserviceable it is. Not all violence is violence per se. Many a time one takes recourse to what is considered violence not to harm the individual on whom it is practiced, but as a corrective measure—to make him remove injustice, or acknowledge a right or to stop him from his misconduct. Revolutionary violence in particular has the ideal aim of creating a society free from exploitation of man by man. Here, one should not raise the issue of wrongness and rightness of violence. That is beside the point. I am only considering the definition of violence given above. And, on this definition, it seems to me, violence would only mean violence per se. But, that is not how we ordinarily use the word "violence". Alternatively, one may wish to define violence in terms of some mental-states 'behind' the overt behaviour. What a mother does when she thrashes her erring child, or a doctor when he performs an operation is not violence, because presumably such acts are done with love and care. But when a similar looking overt behaviour issues from

'hatred' or 'ill-will', it is violence. Thus, for example Prof. Mohanty holds : "Merely inflicting physical pain on the other, or even injuring the other's body is not eo ipso an act of violence... It is not so much the overt act as the state of mind behind it which determines whether an act is violent or not... The essence of violence, it may be said, is hatred and ill-will".<sup>2</sup> Taking recourse to 'mental state' in defining "violence" would not do any better either. Hatred, love or ill-will are dispositions which often manifest themselves in the overt behaviour of a man, but that is not to say that hatred or ill-will are necessary correlates of violent action. Hatred and ill-will signify different sorts of dispositions towards the person they are directed to. To harbour ill-will towards a person is to nurse a desire that some harm may fall on that person, though the person who has ill-will may not do anything actively to make any harm befall him. Whereas hatred for a person need not be accompanied by such a desire, it may only mean a great dislike or contempt for the person. It does not have to express itself in any specific kind of behaviour. Furthermore, one may be led or provoked into violence without any feeling of hatred or ill-will towards the person on whom violence is done. A hired killer, for example, may murder a man simply because he is being paid for it. His action and that of a prison executioner are in this respect similar. Killing, for both of them, is a matter of job and that is all that there is to it. The point I am trying to make is that although violence may be accompanied by a certain kind of 'mental state', conceptually the two are independent. Therefore, to understand the notion of violence adequately, one will have to look for something other than the aim or purpose of, or the 'mental state behind' the action characterized as violent.

It is important to distinguish between the two senses of the word "violence", i.e., normative and descriptive. The normative sense of "violence" implies violation with reference to what happens when an act of violence is done; whereas the descriptive sense of violence relates to the manner of doing violence. The etymology of the word "violence" is revealing in this connection. It suggests that the word "violence" is derived from the Latin word, "violentus", which has the sense of force, vehemence, fury, intensity and impetuosity etc. The word, "violentus", is further qualified by another Latin word "violare" which means

"to violate", "to break", "to transgress", "to infringe", and "to injure" etc. "Violentus", thus, signifies the manner of doing, the descriptive aspect; and "violare" relates to what happens, the normative aspect of violence. The two senses of "violence" can, perhaps, be better appreciated, if we consider its use in the context of natural and non-natural events or phenomena. When we speak of a storm or river being violent, it implies vehemence or force of some defining feature of a storm or river. A river is characterized as violent when its flow or current is very strong; similarly a storm is said to be violent when its turbulence is unusually high. There are, however, no descriptive conditions for such characterization for the same reason as mentioned earlier that what is usual is not definable. Although the characterization is predominantly descriptive, it would be absurd to speak of motion or explosion as intentionally violent. One may of course intentionally generate a violent motion; but intentionality is not attributed to motion. Consequently, the use of violence is normatively neutral here. Similarly, phrases like "violent death" or "violent pain" are also normatively neutral. As contrasted with the above, there are contexts where "violent" or "violence" is used predominantly in the normative sense. Being profane to a temple or church may do violence to some one's religious sentiments.

It may be said that I am confusing between primary and secondary uses of "violence", and that the primary or proper use of "violence" involves reference to physical harm or injury caused by bodily interference. The question as to which use of "violence" is primary and which is secondary, though not easy to settle, is not pertinent to the present discussion. What is essential to the primary use of a word must be shared by its secondary uses as well, for other wise the use would be plainly improper. And, if the dictionary is any guide to the ordinary usage, I can only report it here. The Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1961), for example, speaks of violence as "exertion of any physical force so as to injure or abuse", "an instance of violent treatment or procedure", as well as, "injury in the form of revoking, repudiation, distortion, infringement or irreverance to a thing", and, "intense turbulent or furious action" etc. Now, one may indeed define violence in terms of physical harm or injury caused by bodily interference; but it would be arbitrarily too restrictive.



Although, perhaps useful operationally, conceptually it would be unilluminating. If the claim is to be authenticated with reference to its usage, one cannot do it simply by citing those instances where it does refer to physical harm caused by bodily interference of which there are undoubtedly many. Injury to one's 'soul' can be much more painful and agonizing than injury to one's body.

Now, although the descriptive and the normative senses are not mutually exclusive, there are contexts, as we have seen, where only one of them is emphasised or is of significance. Crimes of physical assault are obviously such that they involve descriptive as well as normative aspects of violence. In contexts where it is the normative sense of violence which is of significance, presence or absence of strong physical force is relatively of less importance. One may, for instance, commit a murder in a variety of ways, e.g., by strangulating, by stabbing, by shooting or by administering poison. Each of these requires varying degrees of force; but starving a person to death hardly requires any noticeable physical strength. Nonetheless, starving a person to death is not doing any less, if not more, of violence than strangulating him to death. Indeed, in a trivial sense, almost any action employs some measure of physical force, and to that extent it is present in a violent action too. But it would be erroneous to think that the use of physical force, much less, strong physical force, is a determining factor in violence.

The undue emphasis on the presence of physical force and physical injury seems to result from the fact that street crimes such as burning of property by a rioting mob, looting, raping or killing, because of their sudden, conspicuous and shocking character both in terms of the force employed and the resultant damage done tend to dominate our attention when we think about human violence. However, even with regard to such conspicuous cases of violence, it is not merely the observable features of these acts and their consequences which constitute violence. Damage of property, say of jhuggi dwellers' huts, by ruffians is considered violence, but the same thing when done by the municipality is not violence. A gherao of unscrupulous management by industrial workers in support of their demands, howsoever legitimate they may be, is violence. But, a lathi-charge



or firing by police on either an unruly or an orderly demonstration is establishing order and peace, no matter how many people die or are injured. George Sorel, for example, while distinguishing violence from un-violence remarks : " the term violence should be employed only for acts of revolt; we should say, therefore, that the object of force is to impose certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order. The middle class has used force since the beginning of modern times, while the proletariat now reacts against the middle class and the state by violence ".<sup>3</sup> Prof. Riga makes the distinction somewhat differently by introducing the notion of rational power. He says, " We simply cannot identify physical force with violence, for force can be defined as that measure of rational power to accomplish a reasonable end ".<sup>4</sup> Therefore, for Prof. Riga, the use of force by the police is not violence but the exercise of " rational " power to establish reasonable ends, which in the above case presumably are law and order.

In referring to the above definitions my purpose is only to emphasise that the use of force should not be confused with violence. I should, however, not be understood to imply that I accept those in their entirety. I do not for instance, consider that the concept of violence can be adequately explicated in terms of any particular socio-economic class as Sorel does. Nor do I think that force can appropriately be defined as " rational power ". Inadequate though they are, they seem to suggest an extremely important factor in violence which is generally overlooked. That is the factor of violation of norms of conduct set by an authority. The use of force by police or other state agencies has the sanction of state authority. Theirs is not thus a violating act. Hence, what the police does is not violence. The state by virtue of its authority, has the power to enforce its decisions, even by employing force, if necessary. Whereas a similar act when done by private individuals in violation of state authority, constitutes violence. This does not, however, mean that every violating act is an act of violence. The violating act must be potentially injurious, hurtful, or destructive.

It might appear as though I am restricting violence to what is commonly known as political violence. Political violence on the

above account would imply adoption of legally unauthorized or illegitimate modes of action or protest to achieve political ends. However, I am not using "authority" in the limited sense of legal or political authority alone.

Perhaps a few brief remarks with regard to the notion of authority would help clarify matters in this connection. Usually, we think of authority in terms of some individual or organization which has the right to take any decision and command their obedience. The Oxford English Dictionary speaks of "authority" as "power or right to enforce obedience; moral or legal supremacy; the right to command or give ultimatum", and also, as "power to influence the conduct and actions of others, or power over the opinions of others". The idea of an "auctor" in possession of some peculiar sort of "power" to exercise influence on others seems to be implicit in our ordinary use of "authority". Here, however, I am not laying much emphasis on the idea of the "auctor" in authority; instead what seems to me of importance is the peculiar function of authority to regulate human behaviour in different spheres of human interactions. Acceptance of authority does not mean submission to an 'auctor'. Rather, it is to participate in a rule governed activity. To participate in a rule governed activity is to accept, as Peter Winch says—to whom I owe much of what I am saying here, that there is a right and wrong way of doing things "...there is an intimate conceptual connection between the notion of authority on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the notion of there being a right and wrong way of doing things".<sup>5</sup> It is the rules of the game that determine whether or not a given move on the chess-board is right. Similarly, in areas of characteristically human activity, the decision as to what is right or wrong in any given case is taken by appeal to established practices and norms. The sphere of authority extends to all those areas of human conduct where there are established ways of doing things. "...the notion of an "established" way of doing things is essential to the notion of authority as such."<sup>6</sup> Therefore in speaking of authority I am not referring to the legal sanctions alone, but also to other socio-cultural norms in a society. For the legal, the moral, the religious, and the social systems of ideas as a totality constitute a regulative framework within which an individual conducts himself.

In conclusion, I shall briefly restate the main theme which I tried to develop in the above discussion. "Violence" or "violent" does not designate any property. To characterize some action as violent is to consider it a deviation from the normal. Recognition or identification of a violent action is, however, not determined by its observable correlates alone; instead, more importantly, it is a matter of interpretation. A violent action is considered as injurious, harmful or destructive etc., but these are not definable in terms of their observable features alone; nor are they confined to the physical. They themselves are interpretative notions. To characterize an action as violent is not to describe it, it is a veiled evaluation. Therefore, violence cannot be defined in naturalistic terms. Further, "violence" has two senses: the descriptive and the normative. The descriptive sense of "violence" relates to the manner of doing violence. It implies, force, vehemence, impetuosity etc. The normative sense of "violence" signifies what happens when violence is done, meaning violation, injury, harm or damage etc. When employed in human contexts, it is the normative sense of violence which is of significance. And, in this context, "violent action" involves two factors: one, that it is potentially injurious, destructive etc., and, two, that it is a violating act.

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