

## When Will Senseless Violence End?

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On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2014 a road opening party of the Chhattisgarh Police and Central Reserve Police was ambushed by Naxalites and fifteen policemen were killed. An innocent civilian was also shot in the melee. The body of one of the slain policemen was booby-trapped with a bomb so that rescuers would also be blown up. This is the latest incident in a string of violent, armed attacks by the Naxalites on the security forces and other government agencies. The standard statement which is issued from government is that this is an indicator of the desperation of the Naxalites, who are cowards. The fact is that such incidents are not acts of desperation, the Naxalites are not cowards, the objective of overawing government is very clear, the attacks are professionally conducted and the government response is weak. Unless government decides to treat Naxalite violence as war waged against the Indian State, pulls out all stops and makes the total and physical liquidation of the Naxalites its objective we cannot restore peace. In the absence of peace there can be no democracy, no development and no redressal of grievances. In the absence of a clear vision government only encourages terrorism and lawlessness which, in turn, encourages violence in society at large.

One is brought up on a constant diet of how India is the land of Rama, the Just, the Maryada Purushottam, of Mahavir and Buddha, the apostles of peace, of Mahatma Gandhi, the great believer in satya and ahimsa, or truth and nonviolence. And yet India is a very violent society in which the Pindari and the Thug co-existed with the Sadhu and the Sant. It is a country in which the path of dharma and dhamma are said to lead to righteousness, but it is also a fact that India is the land of greed and self service in which one's interests are supreme and if it means that others cannot peacefully enjoy their rights, that is their bad luck. India is a society of laws in which not only is law breaking not punished, it is almost at a premium. It is a society in which we have reached the stage where public good is subsumed by sectarian, sectoral and even personal interests.

Violence has many faces. One is physical violence against a person or persons. This includes murder, rape, dacoity, physical assault, intimidation, illegal restraint, wrongful confinement and everything else which prevents a person from enjoying the freedoms given to him by the Constitution and which are natural to mankind. Increasingly one reads about rape and molestation of women, sexual abuse short of physical contact, religious intolerance leading to riots, protests which almost inevitably turn violent, closure of streets through chakka jam and of markets as a part of a bandh and physical intimidation through gherao. One even reads of assault on innocent people who might be enjoying a festival of which religious bigots disapprove.

In a country which guarantees freedom of speech and expression it is perfectly permissible to hold and propagate a particular point of view, to be critical of one's opponents and to chart a course of action and present it to the people. Dissent and disagreement are the essence of free debate, provided that the parameters within which the debate is to be held and the limitations on the language which may be legitimately used are clearly understood. That is why people are completely free to air different ideologies, political agendas, programmes and projects. However, when debate degenerates into abuse, when abuse takes the form of wild and

baseless allegations, when comment on one's opponents descends to the level of character assassination, when items are paraded as facts, but which are based on lies, then all this comes within the definition of violence. Today India is an extremely violent society, not only because of physical action but because we have become totally violent in the use of words.

In a society of laws it is the Legislature which determines the laws, rules and regulations according to which we shall be governed. I cannot think of a single Legislature in India which has legislated in favour of any form of violence, verbal or physical. Such laws would be struck down as being ultra vires. India has very progressive legislation. However, laws are meaningless unless they are implemented and that is the job of the Executive. For example, the Constitution permits freedom of assembly and speech, but the Police Act, the Code of Criminal Procedure and various other laws lay down that it is permissible to regulate assemblies in order to prevent inconvenience to people at large, as also speech in order to ensure that speech does not hurt the sentiments of others. Despite this processions are taken out without permission, they block thoroughfares and restrict the free movement of citizens at large, sometimes such blockage turns violent, but one rarely find the police willing to clear the streets. Religious processions, marriage parties, etc., block the roads. No one interferes. This encourages people not to bother about rules and regulations. The matter becomes even more serious when there are chakka jams and forced closure of shops. These are clearly illegal acts but generally the authorities ignore them. Then we have protests, for example, the recent one at 11, Ashok Road by the Aam Admi Party, which very soon degenerated into violence. How can a person protesting against a particular thing proceed to take the law into his own hands and cause physical injury and destruction of property? Every time we permit this to happen we engender contempt for law and encourage the growth of an environment of violence.

In a society where the law does not count there is bound to be violence against person and property, there will be physical violence against women and society at large will generally live under the threat of violence which targets society, social groups and individuals. That is why Yogendra Yadav could be attacked the way he was. That is why Arvind Kejriwal, as Chief Minister of Delhi, could take over an entire public space, disrupt traffic and makes citizens live in fear of their own safety because the ones violating the law were the ones in power. In such an environment democracy cannot be safe, the risk of violence will always be around the corner and people, in their yearning for public safety and good government, may support authoritarian rule. That is on what Indira Gandhi banked and for eighteen months she succeeded. The ephemeral nature of such a dispensation, however, caught up with her soon and the Emergency did not last more than two years. For that the Lord be thanked!

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