

# Exploring Non-violence: A Seminar Report

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The papers presented at a recent seminar on “Exploring Non-violence” acknowledged the porosity of the idea of non-violence, particularly with respect to praxis or what can be thought of as “learnt non-violence”.

A three-day seminar on “Exploring Non-violence” was held at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS), from 20-22 October 2008, in which 22 papers were presented by scholars coming from around the country and from outside. The four main themes explored in the presentations at the seminar were: (1) Religion as a Source of Violence and Non-violence, (2) Non-violence and the Discourse of Protest/Resistance/Change, (3) The Modern Condition: Primacy of Violence and the Relegation of Non-violence, and (4) Non-violence and the World Today. Comprising 10 sessions the seminar attempted to span the gamut of issues relating to non-violence. On one plane, the papers engaged with the totality of the concept, while at another they acknowledged the porosity of the idea of non-violence, particularly with respect to praxis or what can be thought of as “learnt non-violence”.

## Stemming from Religion

The theme of “Religion as a Source of Violence and Non-violence” was explored in five presentations spanning two sessions. The papers recognised the pervasiveness of violence as being symptomatic of man’s basic disposition which may give rise to situations in which non-violence may seem to be actually incompatible with order or justice. But they also hold and further indicate subtle debates that point both at the futility of violence as well as at the awesome social and moral responsibility of the dispenser of justice on occasions, where non-violence is not a manifest option.

In ancient India, ahimsa was an instrument/agency of action rather than the real action itself, and one did not encounter the development of an autonomous and full-scale philosophy of ahimsa in early India, but as appendages of larger philosophies. Even in Buddhism, ahimsa was part of *sheel* (conduct), and enjoyed a lower status in comparison to *karuna*

(compassion) and *maitreyi* (love, benevolence). The brahminical attitude to ahimsa was considerably more complex which was reflected in the Mahabharata, particularly two episodes: the procrastination of Arjuna before Krishna at the beginning of the war of Kurukshetra, and the remorse of Yuddhishtira before his brothers, notably Arjuna, at the end of the war. In normal situations ahimsa was part of dharma and cohered with it, but during abnormal conditions/special occasions, ahimsa was thought to be dispensable in the establishment of dharma, though this responsibility was given only to the select few.

Similarly Islam, insofar that it is a religion “not of the anchorite but of active social beings”, approves and even advocates violence in multiple forms for the integration of the spiritual with the political, and that of the individual with the social. The use of violence, either by the state or the individual, becomes an “intensely spiritual exercise” as the attempt to establish justice falls not merely in the domain of the mundane and the earthly, but also in the realm of divine obligations. Imperial wars, acts of rioting or terror, and the suppression or oppression of minorities automatically get excluded from the ambit of jihad, which in Islamic theory, is not a war against the unbelievers but against injustice, whether perpetrated by a believer or a non-believer.

Even the idea and tradition of a righteous war, however, just becomes ambivalent when one is close and passionate to the concept rather than distant and analytical. Non-violence has both a rich religious genealogy and a deep ethical purpose. In spite of assertions to the contrary, the insistence on individual responsibility for violence never did go away completely from the traditions. This connotes the enduring possibility of a reunderstanding or reinvention of the traditions which could form a powerful component in the dialectic of violence-non-violence, depending on the level of one’s proximity to the issue. Literary/historical figures such as Vidura, Yuddhishtira, Rabbi Hillel, represent the human striving for non-violence in times of oppression and war.

No religion permitted violence at the level of its basic doctrines although there

The scholars who participated in the seminar were: S C Bhattacharya (Kolkata), George Gispert-Sauch (Delhi), Jalalul Haq (Aligarh), Rudolf C Heredia (Delhi), Arindam Chakrabarty (Hawaii, The USA), Sumanta Banerjee (Dehradun), Ramdas Bhatkal (Mumbai), J P S Uberoi (Delhi), Tridip Suvrhu (Ahmedabad), R C Tripathi (Allahabad), Rajarshi Dasgupta (Delhi), Harish Trivedi (Delhi), Neelum Saran Gour (Allahabad), Jani de Silva (Malabe, Sri Lanka), V Geetha (Chennai), Rehana Vally (Pretoria, South Africa), Manas Mukul Das (Allahabad), P C Mathur (Jaipur), J S Bandukwala (Vadodara), Rajiv Vora (Gurgaon), Niru Vora (Gurgaon). Peter Ronald deSouza, Director, IIAS, gave the welcome address, and Gangeya Mukherji, convener, introduced the seminar themes. Syed Shahabuddin (Delhi) gave the valedictory address with D L Sheth (Shimla) in the chair.

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is a difference between the scripture and the practice of adherents. Each community digs itself into a kind of cultural trench warfare, with the attendant dilemma of retreat or mobilisation. To anticipate such a painful dilemma, the possibility of “cultural disarmament” needs to be explored, and more significantly, “religious disarmament” as a metaphor for “tolerance and dialogue”, involving a truly open intra-religious and inter-religious dialogue. The concept of forgiveness as a political possibility, which is apparently antithetical with justice, however, seemed feasible when collated with an inquiry into the process of forgiveness and reconciliation as idealised in various religious and legal traditions, and embodied in personalities such as the prophet Ezekiel, the lawgiver Manu, and the prophet Mohammad and institutions such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

### Non-violence and Social Change

The theme of “Non-violence and the Discourse of Protest/Resistance/Change” was discussed mainly in the presentations which explored both the potentiality as well as the limitations of non-violence as an agent of social change in a defined social setting. It was also discussed by presentations engaging with the “modern condition” and the “psychology of non-violence/violence”, which concretised possibilities of transforming one’s own self through a near perfect realisation of non-violence, and by extension, provide society the means thereof, as has happened in the past with personalities exploring transformation with trans-embodiment and inner whisperings.

The discussion thereafter extended to the theme of Non-violence Today, with overlaps between the virtue, testability, and the rituals of non-violence, and its expression and embodiment in contemporary literature.

The different forms of violence range from direct physical assault to indirect physical harm such as deprivation and dispossession, while rebellion of the dispossessed against their exploiters for setting up an egalitarian order constituted an altogether different kind of violence. State violence was frequently directed against such uprisings. The Indian state

was required to demonstrate a sense of discrimination between various kinds of violence; and greater resolve in evolving an alternate framework of policy and administration towards redressing social inequality. Another model for: “homo socialis” would have to be internalised in civil society, as different from the Hobbesian premise of *homo homini lupus*, for resolving, within the paradigm of contemporary political realism, the contradiction of using violent means for non-violent ends.

### Present Scenario

Recent historical writing is distinguished in its normative approach to the paradigm of violence/non-violence, by its recognition that violence is not even a “necessary” evil for human progress. Gandhi was the leading harbinger of this change and his concept of trusteeship can be applied to all inequalities in human society. Since structural imbalances would remain inherent in even an ideal society, Gandhi’s ideas of trusteeship, with the “advantaged” behaving as trustees for the “disadvantaged”, could diminish social rancour and enable non-violence to be the agency of change.

The one source of self-frustrating violence in inter-religious and inter-cultural relations in the present world is the drive to retaliate and to refuse to reconcile, to repeat a wrong of past on the pretext of restoring justice and protecting “honour”. Although violence and vengeance are basic animal instincts, the possibility of inner resistance to the impulse for a counterblow is an especially human attribute. There is therefore a fundamental untruth and dissembling involved in any act of retaliation which dresses up a jealous emulation of the aggressor as teaching him a lesson. The “weaning away from the misperception of vengeance as honourable” can succeed on the strength of a counter-rhetoric that identifies aggression not with power but with weakness. In Sri Lanka, although militarised inter-ethnic conflict and social oppression have apparently reinforced the tenor of violence in politics, the egalitarianising forces flowing from liberal notions of subjectivity have acquired new shapes with the ideas of ahimsa gaining

in relevance. For instance, young Sinhalese workers on a construction site appeared to believe that rather than diminishing their masculine self-image, being ahimsaka (moral figure) actually enhanced their masculine credentials. The virtue of ahimsa, combined with industriousness and competence, inspired respect and conferred status.

Issues of expediency and technicism informed decision-making in history and contemporaneity. Martyrdom, formed as an institution of civil society against the state and built upon vicariousness and the trans-embodiment of the self, as in Christ, Imam Hussein and Gandhi, could be judged as being violent or non-violent on the truthfulness of the martyr’s cause, the evaluation of which is alternatively independent of, and dependent on, what is commonly called the congregation. Non-violence is neither a technique nor an instrument but an ontological imperative. The fact that in the absence of ahimsa, Gandhi’s quest for self-realisation cannot endure, becomes authentic in the context of his need and ability to hear his inner voice.

### Concept of ‘Othering’

The contemporary discourse of non-violence was connected to the discourse on the nature of the modern state and to the concept of “othering”. The state which was initially conceived as a friend of rights and tasked with providing conducive conditions for social interrelationship, had in most cases become national, and therefore, partisan in a fundamental sense, occasionally endorsing and even inducing violence on the “other”, remaining amnesic of the fact that every annihilation of others inevitably leads to a creation of a

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different set of others. However, significant moments of othering were also effective moments of inclusion in history. Non-violent resolution of group conflicts was based on a process of othering in which the self-other boundaries were not impermeable such as in Gandhi, where an inversion of relationship turned the other into the self and vice versa. Revolutionary violence generates the blurring of the self and the other to the point where it becomes impossible to discern as to which is not being subjected to violence, in the ultimate sense of the term.

An analysis of the poetic discourses of revolution on Bangla literature revealed a free traffic between radical and reactionary sensibilities, and a striking similarity not only among socialist and fascist violence, but surprisingly also with Gandhi's style of self-making in politics. A critique of violence today must also imply a critique of this self-making. Historical appraisal of Gandhi's role in non-violent decolonisation is highly influenced by ideologies occasionally as intractable as to function as prejudice. This is evidenced by his dismissal/critique in a post-colonial discourse marked with strong Marxist predilections. Gandhi figures in a different mode of narrative representation in some acknowledged epics of Indian nationalism which have, however, stopped short of a direct endorsement of Gandhi in keeping with the frame of dialogic polyvocality and "unfinalisability" of the novel.

### For a Non-violent Climate

Books of peace emerge from an ordeal, works of recoil which spell out the process of wresting an inverse knowledge from a profound experience of devastation. Basic violence present as an alter reality rooted in nature itself, manifests even in the most "pacific consciousness". To a writer this searching/enquiry into the nature of inner violence and learnt non-violence turns into a state of creative evolution nourished by traditions of conscientious objection to war, and by the direct experience of peace communes.

Gandhi himself acknowledged that the political and ethical practice of violence is a learnt effort. The learning of non-violence may be aided by studies of

non-violent actions which communicate simultaneously through their rich symbolism as well as their political acumen, such as divergent modes of female public culture/activism as that of the peaceful resistance of the women of Greenham Common in the United Kingdom and the mourning and the memory rituals of Shi'ite women in contemporary Lebanon during Moharram. In the violence-ridden townships of South Africa, women were still willing to opt for non-violent protest against domestic violence, hoping thereby to witness a better world. In the primarily Indian township of Laudium, where the meanings of Indianness have changed from "embrace to disavowal", students confessed to their disinclination towards non-violence in countering interpersonal crime, and to their ignorance of Gandhi. They were, however, not inherently violent and acknowledged their yearning for a non-violent climate.

In India, experiments indicate the possibility of creating schools which would nurture the individual mind that could be an authentic vehicle of non-violence. The mind shaped in such a school would act very differently in the field of politics and would educate people to govern themselves through a democracy of relationship, dialogue and consensus rather than a democracy of empowerment, vote banks and struggle for rights. There was a potential for the application of Gandhian techniques of asymmetric civic resistance against state policies aimed at acquiring farm land for corporate industries. Readings of *Hind Swaraj* still evoked resonance, even among members of groups who were sworn to revolutionary violence out of a situation of oppression.

A series of such readings in western Uttar Pradesh had resulted in long-term initiatives of civic cooperation and communal harmony.

A personal statement, almost a testimony, contained an existential proposition regarding the "virtue" of non-violence. At the same time, it highlighted the tragic interplay between individual faith and communal posturing underpinning the violence in Gujarat, and how communities became prisoners of identities and hostile to positive actions. But still more significantly, the presentation reinforced the aspiration for saner times embodied in individuals who persisted in their attempt to reconcile estranged communities, even when it was in a way foredoomed insofar as even iconic religious figures were reluctant to acknowledge acts of crime, and apparently uninterested in forgiveness and reconciliation.

Our times required that the earlier tendency of absolutising non-violence be replaced by a more nuanced understanding of the concept. Non-violence and violence are intimate enemies, and the postmodernity of non-violence was drawing up with, and transforming, the concept of non-violence into a more normal contemporary quality. It was debatable whether Hannah Arendt's phrase, the "banality of evil", used in her reportage of Eichmann's trial for his role in the Holocaust, would be valid for the orchestrated group violence which confronts the marginalised today. It was in a sense appropriate that a sense of political urgency had entered the seminar which would perhaps speak to the larger public which is struggling for a way out of these dark clouds that are hanging over us.

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