

War, Violence, and the State

Aloka Parasher Sen

Professor of History (Retd.), University of Hyderabad. Email: aloka_parasher@yahoo.co.in

Political Violence in Ancient India

by Upinder Singh,

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The appropriation of ideas from the past for their use (and perhaps abuse) has been a common practice. The professional historian moreover, has to be alert to the way her craft is presented to define the past. Surely, it can no longer be her concern to only narrate “the past as it happened” but rather, it has become necessary to reveal the dynamic ways in which the past itself engaged, discussed, debated and dialogued with ideas that defined the times gone by. When one discusses the history of ideas, the necessity to capture the many possible discourses becomes a pre-eminent task. If this is achieved then the history can no longer be considered the claim to truth, which can then be open for authoritarian appropriation to represent the past and be used in the present. Upinder Singh brings to the table her new book on *Political Violence in Ancient India* and one cannot miss its contemporary relevance. This is essentially a political history emphasizing ancient Indian political thought with a clear intention to sieve out the significance of violence and debates around it. The intention to do so is triggered by the simplistic idea that is commonly prevalent about India, that she was, and is a nonviolent society.

The historical narrative of this book specifically focuses on the period between 600 BCE to 600 CE using Brahmanical, Buddhist, Jaina texts and inscriptions. Apart from discussing ideas around violence in their historical contexts, the book also narrates actual incidents of violence, some of them, like the lack of mention of foreign invasions into India from the north-west, the author finds difficult to sketch based on existing sources available. At a first glance of the content page of the book one gets the impression that this book is thematically organized but immediately in the Introduction (pp.14-18) the author clarifies that the first three chapters entitled ‘Foundation’, ‘Transition’ and ‘Maturity’ are indeed those that lay bare the evolution of

ancient Indian political thought chronologically to be between 600-200 BCE, 200 BCE-300 CE and 300-600 CE respectively. For the specificity of the historical narrative in highlighting particular ideas around violence, the sources she uses for each of the chapters (pp. 16-17) are also clarified at the outset. The next two chapters are indeed thematic entitled ‘War’ and ‘Wilderness’ but one must mention here that the author discusses each of these themes within the above mentioned closely crafted chronological parameters in the hope that the readers are able to link the well laid out pattern of the evolution political ideas on violence discussed in the first three chapters to the specific discussions on War and Wilderness, which are intended to highlight the practice of violence. The actual incidents of violence are described in a broad variety of ways, with the actual wars fought being the most common, to intentions of economic and social exploitation also being considered to embed elements of violence.

It is our submission that the rise of primary state-formation all over the ancient world has the idea of war and violence embedded in their very origin and existence. In fact, violence in war is also integral to what anthropologists and historians call clan based chiefdom or ranked societies. In early India this would allude to the Vedic period. This aspect of human history is so intrinsic to the creation of identities and political sovereign spaces that studies around violence become part of the larger narrative of the political history of a region or country. It is thus with ease that historians have narrated the conduct of wars, the military greatness of rulers, their skills in different aspects of warfare and so on that it has eluded them that they have actually been writing about political acts of violence. For ancient India, these kinds of political histories are rampant but they do not overtly bring out the notion of violence in the very formation, existence or demise of a political entity or state.

Upinder Singh too defines her work to be “grounded in political history” (p. 11) but with a determined aim to highlight the element of violence in its narration using all types of sources – written, in texts and inscriptions, and visual, in sculptures and on coins. Thus, the main thrust in chapter four, which is about actual descriptions of War (pp. 244-366) and attitudes towards it have to be seen against the above background of discussions around the origin of the state and its maintenance. This is recognized by the author, and in this sense, the content of a major part of this book is not unique to India.

If the rise of political states or empires is a significant aspect of human activities in our past, then, the ideological justifications for their existence, the contours of the legal structures

that would validate the acts of making, controlling and sustaining these entities had also been pondered over by the ancients. It is for this reason that all ancient thinkers, including those in ancient India, have had to grapple with advising kings and lords on how they were to undertake wars, use violence to both defeat the enemy but also maintain it as an element of state power to control upstarts and protests, and so on. The clarity and specificity with which these ideas get articulated is when full-fledged state systems, around the mid-first millennium BCE, are in place, as then, the ideological justifications for the use of violence and war became a necessity. For ancient India in particular, writings on legal treatises, books on governance and their translations are many and the discussion of violence seems to be part of the larger purpose of these texts that have in mind the exigencies of creating a powerful state and maintaining Order in society. Thus, once again it is no surprise to us that our ideas of the nature of history we write had impeded any special focus on the philosophical reasons given to justify war or the use of violence. A major part of the book under review captures the dilemma these thinkers faced in discussing violence and non-violence to legitimize their presents.

In the first three chapters we thus actually see an argument that is about the *potential* of political violence. The author mainly describes and narrates the view of different political theorists from Kautilya to Kamandaka; the fervent discussions in the didactic portions of the Epics; the moral and ethical issues embedded in Buddhist and Jaina texts to explicate the differences in their views on ideal kingship in relationship to when war was to be considered legitimate, the issues around justice and punishment and of course, around the role of the ideologies of dharma, artha and karma in the way they entwine to highlight the tension these scholars present between the efficacy of the use of violence and when it should not be used. In this context she puts forth the argument that there was no single theory of ancient ideal kingship or violence. The author rightly points out that the directives of what the state was expected to do is often times entrapped in ethical and metaphysical questions and so these texts cannot be taken to have been literally followed by kings in ancient India. In fact, she clearly mentions that the Kautilya's idea of a powerful and aggressive state "did not exist in historical time but in the author's political imagination" (p. 461) and that he was much ahead of his times.

This assertion only reminds one of the fact that each of the sources used by Singh have to be read in different ways. Texts like the Arthashastra and the Nitisastra are prescriptive in

nature while those like the Epics are grounded in a notion of the past that at best, can be called the historical consciousness of a society or people rather than a description of actual historical events. Both in these epics as well as in the kavyas a considerable dose of memory in the representation of events is inherent in their very nature. They thus present certain limitations in using them as authoritative sources since they are based on perceptions not necessarily shared by all those who they were supposed to represent or, on whom violence was meted out while leaving aside, most certainly, those who were not part of these, predominantly elite, discourses. In many cases these descriptions are panegyrist and exaggerated making it difficult to talk of absolute violence. In fact, Singh notably does not use the word genocide at all. Rather, what is reflected in her work is the dilemma in many of the ancient sources on the use of violence and its justification vis-à-vis and the ethical superiority of non-violence, which is always shown as a mirror to the former. But since we tend push our understanding of the recent more contemporary usage of these terms to the past, the tenor of her book, to a layperson, would erroneously suggest that ancient India was uniquely violent, rather vile and barbaric in its political and religious get up. A close reading of the book in fact suggests the opposite. In fact, the author on more than one occasion is concerned to emphasize first, while introducing her work that: "...violence and non-violence were subjects of lively debate in ancient Indian thought over the centuries, and this debate was marked by an intensity and diversity that was unparalleled elsewhere in the ancient world" (p. 6) and then, to also conclude it with the words that: "Even more unique is the intensity and longevity of the discussion of violence and non-violence, both at the individual and the political level, which is not found anywhere else in the world" [p. 461].

Culturally diverse societies have to contend with distinct ideological viewpoints. They also have to contend with handling difference as a norm. Most poignantly, when using sources rooted in religious texts as historical evidence, the so-called religious sensibilities get thrown up in peculiar ways. In the particular empirical situation of the Indian subcontinent, as represented by her literary ethos, there are few contemporary sources from within the social milieu of the times that can be attributed to those hurt or those on whom the crime was perpetrated. Thus, this raises a fundamental question: was it that this society did not witness any large-scale torturing and slaughter of its population or, that the sources of the period chose to be silent about it? Singh's book ably shows that none of the sources for ancient India were silent about these issues. Her deep reading of texts and inscriptions, irrespective of religious affiliation, shows that

violence, crime and punishment were dealt with within the larger understanding of statecraft. However, two issues that emanate from using ideologically oriented texts as part of our historical narratives is their underlying ethos of the nature of human life and condition and, still further, a deeper philosophical understanding of violence and human action perpetrating it has to be kept in mind. Thus, for instance, as amply elaborated upon by earlier scholarship the ideology of karma views acts of violence, both by agents and recipients, as part of a larger scheme of maintaining or destroying dharma or 'order' in society and, therefore, the good or bad fruits of these actions would be witnessed in the next life. Even more striking is the example of king Ashoka, who Singh discusses in detail that brings forth the element of remorse and regret articulated by him as a perpetrator of violence after the horrific Kalinga war. There is also the case of the king Kharavela, a Jaina, who did not want to undertake war at all. The nuances of the pros and cons of conducting War and its horror as encapsulated in the Mahabharata has also been pointed out by Singh except that in this case, despite the lament, the War was taken to its logical end. The former as an ideal for posterity was difficult to emulate, nonetheless, it is something that on the Indian sub-continent makes the study of violence as an uncontrollable instrument of power even more problematic. In fact, its use necessarily hinged on the role religion played in defining the character of the state and, most importantly, the ethical and moral issues around which the notions of evil and violence were couched.

Concomitantly, the way the dominant Self looked at the 'Other' was also dependant on the maintenance of Order. Each of these chapters is related to how the ancient State had to handle or, was asked to handle its relations with the enemy or the 'Other' that were impediments to its existence. The establishment of *dharma* over *adharma* was eulogized by all kings irrespective of their individual faith. A constant string of concern was to find a balance between good and evil, chaos and order underlying the fact that evil and/or chaos were never absent in society. Rather, efforts both individually and collectively, had to be made to strike a balance, as violence could not be totally avoided. Seen from this perspective one can hark back to the primeval myth of the origin of the Universe in the sacrifice of the Cosmic Being that partook in the violent act of tearing apart its body for the sake of creation. This violent origin then is connected to all right and bad actions to the extent that war and treatment of those that represent chaos has been linked to this idea. The details elaborated in chapter five on Wilderness can thus be read as that space, which was outside the purview of legitimate Order since the inhabitants of

the forest, often called the mlecchas, were outside the system that created the four varnas out of the body of the Cosmic Being. In fact, their origin as discussed in the Epic and Puranic literature emerges out of the body and limbs of Nandini, the magical cow of sage Vasistha as beings whose existence had to be explained but not quite accepted. The mlecchas here included the various categories of foreign groups known in ancient India like the Yavanas, Sakas, Pahlavas, Hunas and so on. Though Singh mentions that there is an absence of the mention of their invasions into India, (p. 363) there is in fact a text called the Yuga Purana that does mention one such invasion that was conducted by the 'red-eyed' ruthless Amalata who not only caused immense destruction in the wake of the War but was also responsible for the destruction of the varna dharma society. The mlecchas as the 'Other' – both the tribes and foreigners --- had thus to be dealt with severity since they were a perpetual threat, disturbing Order. More than War against them, for which specific evidence is rare in the ancient texts, it is the constant fear of them as a potential threat to the state and society that made even Ashoka, who otherwise had given up war, note in his inscriptions that tribes that did not fall in line with his orders could be treated in a violent way. This did not mean that the forest remained out of bounds for the state society. Singh elaborates on several images and reactions from texts that showed an engagement with the forest as a site for exile, for economic exploitation, for the royal hunt and importantly, as a site for the rishis setting up their ashrams, which has led her to conclude that “the interface between the state and the wilderness, which *must have been marked by a great deal of violence...*” (p. 462).

Both maintenance of our present sovereign status as a nation state as well as ideologically justifying the use of war and violence to protect it, or counter it, continues into contemporary times. The modern context is absolutely different from that of the ancient. In fact, in the long journey from the ancient, one has to also look deep into the medieval and then colonial times in India to contextualize each of these periods and how different components of our present grew to draw on notions of violence from the past and its relevance today. That moral questions of the use of violence as discussed in this book presaged its use makes us realize that the tension between *himsa* and *ahimsa* had always to be resolved. The latter was never an easy option to accept since the ultimate aim was to establish and maintain a powerful state. The book under review could as well have been titled “Notions of Violence and Nonviolence in Ancient India” to better capture its contents and the spirit of the overall argument Upinder Singh has brought forth.

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