Cultures of Violence and *(a)himsaic* Historiography: The Indian Subcontinent, a Million Mutinies Again?

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> *The ongoing presence of the evil dead [colonial statues] in public spaces ensures that the principles of murder and cruelty which they personified will continue to haunt the memory of the formerly colonized people, saturating their imaginary and their everyday places, causing within them a bizarre eclipse of consciousness, and preventing them, ipso facto, from thinking with any perspicacity.*

<div align="right">Achille Mbembe (2010, 44)</div>

> *If Aung San Suu Kyi finds Gandhi adaptable to the requirements of Burmese decentralization, she also brings to her reading of Gandhi a prior Buddhist understanding of both* ahimsa *and kingship ... We could argue that for both the African American civil rights movement and for Aung San Suu Kyi, Gandhian ahimsa is valuable primarily because it supplies a process and a conscience.*

<div align="right">Leela Gandhi (1996, 142-144)</div>

I

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt argues that the excessive use of terror by totalitarian regimes marks a rupture in twentieth century violence, heralding yet a 'novel' form of governing as well as administering violence that is far removed from the means and methods of quotidian violence. In much the same way, given that "modern societies are saturated with images and representations of violence" which have "arguably never been so embedded into our cultural, economic, and social fabric", Brad Evans and

Terrell Carver (2017, 1) characterise the problem of our times as the "Age of Violence". For Leela Gandhi, however, a tendency for "pathological over-identification" with violence in post-war intellectual histories is subject to an ethical critique through *ahimsaic* historiography; a rigorous *askesis* of Gandhian non-violence in which the colonised subject can no longer be seen as a passive victim of moral perfectionism ('other-regard') in Western discourses, but as an active agent, if not a self-appointed cynic, whose very imperfectionism lies at the heart of his/her inner suffering (Gandhi 2014, 154, 150, 133, 153, 20; see also Gandhi 1996, 109). As if inverting this view, in his provocative essay "The Colony: Its Guilty Secret and Its Accursed Share", Achille Mbembe (re)locates the figure of terror in the very genealogies of violence that Gandhi seeks to circumvent: "he who inflicts terror himself, having once been its victim, is the quintessential contested subject of the postcolony."[1] These various ethical, historical, counter-discursive and even Messianic injections into the phenomenon of violence are perhaps a glaring testimony to the heuristic limits of its very "epistemic endosmosis" (Dabashi 2009, 213) that resist specific culturalist attachments to theoretical ornamentation. This is especially true when confronted with the paradox of our times that once-labelled "terrorists" become national heroes, and even go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize – Yasser Arafat, Nelson Mandela and Menachem Begin, to name a few – and Nobel Peace Prize winners, like Aung San Suu Kyi, ascend to power with the blessing of tyrants and war criminals. It thus comes as no surprise that Leela Gandhi's (1996) portrayal of Aung San Suu Kyi as the flag-bearer of Gandhian *ahimsaic* legacy meets its own uncanny double: *himsaic* historiography.[2]

Considering the fact that the twenty-first century, too, has been a witness to 'novel' forms of violence such as planes crashing into tall structures, the swift occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the so-called war on terror against an ever-evasive enemy, state sponsored coercions, xenophobic backlashes, forced migration, corporate plunder of nature and the life-world – to say nothing of the new technologies and tactics unleashed by drone attacks, the use of private armies, contract prisons, invisible and extra-judicial killings, digital surveillance, and clandestine operations –, one wonders whether the conventional parlance of violence is adequate to capture its multiple trajectories that pervade, permeate and penetrate contemporary global politics. Or does such parlance call for an urgent revision, both through semantic and conceptual interventions? If the answer is in the affirmative, then how can we bracket South Asia as the exclusive zone of cultures of violence?

One may argue that a special issue devoted to "cultures of violence" in South Asia is wont to perpetuate, once again, the image of an orientalist *heart of darkness* which is dialectically opposed to the zones of bliss and serendipity of the Western world; or even reinforce the hackneyed distinction between the sublime violence vs. savage terror in European theories of the sublime that so conveniently reduce the non-European other to "a figure of fear and terror"

(Morton 2007, 37). We therefore certainly do not overlook the pervasive *zeitgeist* endemic to *other* histories and *other* genealogies of violence, but for the purpose of this occasion, cautiously narrow down our focus to the Indian sub-continent, which has been host to a series of events in the recent past that could aptly be described as cultures of violence. These include, but are not restricted to, the terror strikes in India and Pakistan; the continued political deadlock and anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka; the persecution of Rohingya minorities at the Bangla-Burma border; the violent legacy of the Maoist revolution in Nepal; the cow vigilantism and the broad-daylight lynching of minorities in India; the Jallikattu protests in Tamil Nadu; attacks on Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims; insurgency violence in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur; the assassination of pro-secularist bloggers, activists and journalists in Bangladesh; the continued assaults against sexual minorities – and the list goes on, like a horizon of eternal hostilities marked by a vicious orgy of death and destruction. In the wake of such developments, it becomes abundantly clear that the nation states in South Asia have failed to consolidate a civic-political framework that can ensure proper observation of human rights and just governance. Violence continues to be used politically, communally as well as on religious grounds, and in recent years, it has shown peculiar culturalist tendencies throughout the subcontinent. The aim of this special issue is to document, diagnose, and more importantly, to theorise the various modalities of social and political vicissitudes, which are meted out by violent responses from both state and non-state actors across the region.

II

Having said that, it would be too simplistic to read the existing modes of violence through the jaded dichotomies of state vs. non-state violence, terrorism vs. counter-terrorism, or sovereignty vs. secessionism. Such Manichean formulations or 'war of positions' – to use Gramsci's term – remain alive and well in much of the sociological and political science discourses today, with the exception of a few recent works that explore the *communal bonding* forged through violence between and among states and non-state actors (Fradinger, 2010; Staniland, 2013). Moira Fradinger, for one, argues that violence serves as a "necropolitical link" between "the borders of a community of equals whose paradox is the ability to close its borders on the basis of consensus" (2010, 18, 29). Likewise, Paul Staniland observes that in times of war and intense hostilities, "we see … shared sovereignty, collusion, spheres of influence, and tacit coexistence that blend state and non-state power, often alongside neighbouring areas of intense combat" (2013, n.p.). Implicit to these approaches is the notion that there is no regime and, by implication, no culture of violence that is not derivative of structural violence of the state, or the 'mythic violence' of the law (Benjamin 1978, 290). This caveat is perhaps best captured in the literary imagination of South Asian writers, of which we wish to underscore three specific examples below.

In *Cracking India* (1991), Pakistani novelist Bapsi Sidhwa provides a graphic account of the eponymous splitting of the nation's body, as witnessed through the eyes of the young protagonist, a polio-ridden, crippled orphan called Lenny:

> The processionists are milling about two jeeps pushed back to back. They come to a halt: the men in front of the procession pulling ahead and the mob behind banked close up. There is a quickening in the activity about the jeeps. My eyes focus on an emaciated Banya wearing a white Gandhi cap. The man is knocked down. His lips are drawn away from rotting, *paan*-stained teeth in a scream. The men move and back and in the small clearing I see his legs sticking out of his groin – each thin, brown leg tied to jeep … There is the roar of a hundred throats: 'Allah-o-Akbar!' and beneath the growl of it: the revving motors (135).

This incident, the prime *mise-en-scène* of the novel, serves as an allegory for the *cracking* of a uniform organic body of the nation. While it is the "mob" which carries out the cracking – the splitting asunder of a Hindu Banya who ironically bears the same caste as the name-bearer of his cap, Mahatma Gandhi –, it is the distant "roar of a hundred throats: 'Allah-o-Akbar!'" that serves as the ideological justification, if not full absolution, for their cruel act. In this redoubled allegory of splitting both the nation and its father, the main addressee turns out to be a limping protagonist whose paralytic gaze becomes fixated on the legs (of the victim) she couldn't have. A painful reminder of bodily/corporeal violence, the signature passage of Sidhwa's novel evokes an arresting imagery of the congenital violence of two nations which are not only disjointed at, but are essentially conjoined by, the same severed 'groin'. Here, if the two disjointed legs represent the two nations, the polio-ridden Lenny becomes a prime witness to the disjointed groin which, as it were, cripples all the implicated parties in question: India, Pakistan, and their subjects.

Saadat Hasan Manto's famous story "Toba Tek Singh" (1955) takes this allegorical 'splitting' to another level through the metonymical superimposition of the nation's boundary upon its body. Set in Lahore, the story revolves around the exchange of lunatics between India and Pakistan about three years after partition. But given the inner timelessness of the story, in which the lunatics had "no idea what day it was, what month it was, or how many years had passed", the story might as well be set in the interregnum between the commencement of partition on 14 August 1947 and the publication of Radcliffe Line three days later. Although the protagonist of the story, a Sikh lunatic, has a name, "everyone called him 'Toba Tek Singh'" because of his obsession to know the whereabouts of his hometown by the same name. In his overzealous attempt to find out whether his hometown was in 'Hindustan or Pakistan' during the exchange, Toba Tek Singh makes a hurried move:

> … he stopped in the middle and stood there on his swollen legs as if now no power could move him from that place. Since the man was harmless, no further force was used on him. He was allowed to remain standing there, and the rest of the work of the exchange went on. In the pre-dawn peace and quiet, from Bishan Singh's throat there came a shriek that pierced the sky … From here and there a number of officers came

running, and they saw that the man who for fifteen years, day and night, had constantly stayed on his feet, lay prostrate. There, behind barbed wire, was Hindustan. Here, behind the same kind of wire, was Pakistan. In between, on that piece of ground that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh (n.p.).

Given the 'quest structure' of the story – to use a narratological term –, the Toba Tek Singh that lies in the no-man's-land can no longer be viewed as the lunatic himself, but the hometown of Bishan Singh. Seen from this perspective, the allegorical death of a town in a "piece of ground" that essentially belongs to, and is separated by, the ground beyond the barbed wire denotes an *internal* violence in which both the nation's body and the nation as body "lay prostate". In all its avant-gardist satire, Manto makes it abundantly clear that the object of his critique is not the lunatics themselves, let alone their violence, but the very *exchange of lunacy* between the two nations on either side of the barbed wire.

In Mahasweta Devi's "Douloti the Bountiful" (1993), the lunacy of such internal violence is pushed to extreme, if not absurd, proportions, while dislodging it from both the body and the boundary of the nation. Douloti, the eponymous protagonist of the story, a 27-year-old tribal woman and bonded prostitute who is sold and resold for a fistful of rupees by upper caste men, meets her fateful end near a hand drawn map of India in front of a crowd gathered to celebrate India's Independence Day:

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan [the local schoolmaster] do now? Douloti is all over India (Devi 1993, 94).

Unlike Toba Tek Singh's body, which lies "prostate" within the body of the nation, the body of Douloti filling the map of India allegorically juxtaposes the body of the bona fide nation with that of the body of a bonded prostitute at its margins. In so doing, Devi's story foregrounds the violence of *exclusion* that supplements the *bodily* violence of Sidhwa and the *internal* violence of Manto. In each case, the violence that is being thrust upon the nation's subjects – be they 'mobs', 'lunatics' or 'prostitutes' – is derivative of an originary violence borne out of the very means that make up the nation; its body, internal borders and external threat. As Ashis Nandy argues, such effacement of structural violence with that of societal violence often manifests as "'natural' political self of some cultures" (2009, 168) or as "regimes of narcissism":

In this respect, the killers who struck at New York on September 11, 2001 and the regimes that claim absolute moral superiority over them share some common traits. Both believe that when it comes to Satanic others, all terror is justified as long as it is counterterror or retributive justice. Both believe that they are chosen and, hence, qualified to deliver life and death in the name of righteous causes (169).

III

Nandy's caveat that the answer to the question why certain cultures are prone to violence does not lie with the ethno-religious particularities of a given culture but with "the desperation that has begun to crystallize outside the peripheries of our known world as a new bonding between terror and culture" (2009, 173) forms the conceptual basis for the understanding of cultures of violence discussed in this special issue. Echoing Nandy, the political theorist Banu Bargu (2014, 21) traces the origins of the "cultures of violence" thesis to

> [a] corollary of the religious fundamentalism argument … in which martyrdom is exalted, even if this exaltation may not be solely due to religious convictions. Scholars have argued that self-destructive practices can arise from a nonreligious construction of victimhood and the view that the political body is an "afflicted body" that needs to be reversed by radical action. It is a logical consequence, the argument goes, that struggles will be directed toward the attainment of martyrdom in geographies where the constant presence of violence, exacerbated by religiosity, has shaped popular culture and mechanisms of subjectivation to foster a widespread acceptance of self-destructive acts and even grant them legitimacy.

While Bargu is critical of the overemphasis on religious motivations of such cultures of violence rather than the "political contexts" within which acts of violence take place (22), others argue that

> … there is a direct link between exposure to violence over a long period of time and an acceptance of violence as a means of resolving interpersonal conflict or deal with frustrations in everyday life … Hence, the experience of prolonged violent conflict in areas such as Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Sierra Leone has arguably resulted in the use of violence as means of conflict resolution becoming embedded in their broader values and norms which guide behaviour in any one community, e.g. the local cultures (Eriksson 2013, 106).

In the context of such prolonged conflicts, according to Chrissie Steenkamp (2005, 254), violence "loses its political meaning and becomes a way of dealing with every day issues … a socially accepted mechanism to achieve power and status in society". Correspondingly, *accultured* violence often has the disabling effect of foreclosing dialogue or other conciliatory solutions (Rose 2006, 49). According to Mark Juergensmeyer, "the foreclosure of ordinary options" is further compounded by a certain "satanization" of the world amongst politically marginalised communities who embrace revolutionary ideologies, and at times, when they do so for the sheer "symbolic power" gained through the public display of arms (2017, 228).

Deeply connected with questions of postcolonial justice and postcolonial governance, the essays featured in this special issue selectively respond to the conceptual currents outlined above to unpack the myriad reasons, genealogies and modes of sustenance of violence in South Asia. More specifically, we examine here the violent trajectories of the postcolonial "political society" (Chatterjee, 2011) and an emerging class of the "denizen/precariat" (Standing, 2014) in South Asia which is at once vulnerable to politics of exclusion and to

appropriation by an ensemble of the comprador class, including the popular right. These developments serve as a periodic reminder of V.S. Naipaul's description of India's independence in 1947 as a "revolution" in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). Taking note of frequent political uprisings in independent India, in his own cynical fashion – as equivocated by the provocative subtitle of his book *A Million Mutinies Now* –, Naipaul warns us of the impending implosion of "many revolutions within that revolution" (1990, 6). Naipaul's dystopic vision of post-independence India finds an unlikely echo in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: "India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivalled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God" (1982, 111). We revisit here India's tryst with destiny in the post-*Midnight's Children* era of autocratic governance wherein the denial of citizenship rights and brutal suppressions of public mobilisations have become routine occurrences. To wit, we investigate the current violent political flare up in Bastar, the vicious rise of communal polarisation, caste discrimination, and abysmal forms of poverty and corporate plunder of tribal lands in India to evaluate the alleged failures of the postcolonial state in meeting the constitutional promises made during 1947. The trajectory of hope and promise caused by the postcolony's rise as a free nation generated new tropes of liberation imaginaries that evoked universal forms of peace and alter-historiographies of decolonisation. A case in point, the sub-continental nations were key signatories to the resolutions of the 1955 Bandung Conference of Afro Asian Nations and the 1961 Non-Aligned Movement Resolutions in Belgrade. Yet, the alter-*askesis* of *ahimsaic* historiography (Gandhi 2014) and subaltern historiography (Chakrabarty 2000) which the newly liberated South Asian countries offered to the world through various decolonizing optics of provincializing/decentring Europe are all but abandoned today, having succumbed to neo-colonial hegemonies, and leading to yet another moment of "million mutinies" again.

In what Ayesha Jalal calls partisan violence as "the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia … a defining moment that is neither beginning nor end" (cited in Dalrymple 2015, n.p.), the subcontinent today is fraught with many marginalised and disenchanted communities who tendentiously favour violent methods, having exhausted all other conciliatory means. For their part, states in South Asia have responded with equally egregious extra-judicial methods of counter-violence, buoyed by the momentum built up by the so-called global war on terror (Malreddy 2014). From Sri Lanka to India and to Pakistan, states were quick to draw insurgency movements that posed a threat to their sovereignty into counter-terrorism discourses, while tacitly inducing, repealing and refashioning colonial anti-terror laws such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). By way of mimicking, importing and even domesticating the means and methods of the war on terror campaign in Iraq and Afghanistan, South Asian states began to deploy private militias, contract

armies and vigilante groups that bear such befitting names as *Salwa Judum* ('purification hunt'), Operation Green Hunt and SAMADHAN (answer in Hindi) against the insurgents. These measures are further subsided by custodial deaths, invisible killings and outright police encounters – a phenomenon unique to the region wherein the suspected criminals and dissidents are killed under police custody without administering due process.

IV

Opening with Ashok Kumbamu's essay "Bury My Heart in Bastar: Neoliberal Extractivism, the Oppressive State and the Maoist Revolution in India", this special issue brings into focus one of the longest-running armed insurgencies in postcolonial history: the Maoist movement in India. In a critical (but appreciative) reading of Nandini Sundar's recent work *Still Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar* (2016), Kumbamu supplements with Marxist theory of the state – from its Hegelian underpinnings to neoliberal extractivism – to argue that the historical geneses of India's Maoist insurgency cannot be understood without an adequate theorisation of state violence. In contrast to Kumbamu's approach, Sally Carlton's essay "Democratic Voice and the Paradox of Nepal *Bandhas*" examines the *disabling* impact of *bandha*-culture (strikes, blockades, and shutting down of businesses and services) on Nepal's economy and the functioning of its democratic institutions at large. Although *bandhas* are not illegitimate forms of protest, the sheer frequency with which they are staged, combined with high levels of unpredictability, has the debilitating effect of circumventing negotiation, "curtailing the freedoms and choices of others, inflicting physical and emotional violence on the population". In an erstwhile South Asian context, Shelby E. Ward's essay "'My Body was a Poem:' Jean Arasanayagam's Poetic Body as Witness and Judge in Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict" offers a poignant reading of Sri Lanka's prolonged war by forging a poetic bond between "the body that writes and the body of writing". On the basis of this formulation, Ward argues that Arasanayagam's poetry, along with the poet's own positioning in the conflict, could be read *both* as "witness and judge" to the decades-long violence on the island.[3]

The two essays focusing on the majoritarian discourses of democracy – Emily Rook-Koepsel's "Ghosts of Indian Unity: Difference, Diversity, and Violence" and Prem Kumar Vijayan's "The Violence of Democracy" – shed light on the very violence instituted by the exclusion of religious, caste and ethnic minorities in the process of post-independence nation formation in India. Focusing on the implications of the Communal Violence Bill and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act to India's minorities, including the jailing of student leader Kanhaiya Kumar in 2016, Rook-Koepsel examines how "the state has time and again affirmed minority politics as a site of approvable violence – both symbolic and physical". In a similar vein, Vijayan revisits the infamous Hindu Code Bill as well as the Gujarat communal carnage in 2002 to

argue that in a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic society such as India, politics of exclusion and violence against minorities remain foundational to the very idea of democracy "as long as communities proclaim the supremacy of community rights over universal and fundamental individual rights, and assert these even in the face of contravening laws".

The next set of essays by Sanchali Sarkar and Karen Gabriel turns to some of the most pressing issues in the subcontinent: violence by men, women's safety, and the antimonies of gender oppression and liberation. In her essay "Security and Agency of Women in the Hyper-Masculine Space of Local Trains in West Bengal", Sarkar offers an insightful reading of public as well media discourses on violence by men against the commuters in 'women-only' compartments and 'women-only' trains. While arguing that 'women-only' trains do offer commuters a sense of safety, they also become an easy target for violence by men. In view of this paradox, Sarkar complicates the question of women's representation and agency by asking whether gender segregation in public spaces is liberatory or, in spite of its good intentions, has the opposite effect of reinforcing the existing gender disparities. Karen Gabriel's essay "Pornography and Liberation: Understanding Cultures of Violence" addresses these concerns by challenging the pseudo-liberationist tendencies of the porn-industry as well as porn scholarship. Situating the production and consumption of porn in the neoliberal ethos in general, and the South Asian context in particular, Gabriel examines porn influenced violence alongside other invisible forms of violence of the porn subjects. The banning of the production and consumption of porn in India – despite being the world's third largest consumer of porn – has led to peculiar forms of sexual violence through "filmed rape, molestation, [and] sexual harassment" which are not only distributed as porn, but are "inflected by the logic of rape".

The thematic diversity of these essays is further complemented by two interviews featured in the 'In Conversation' section: Khairul Chowdhury's "Narratives of Nation, War, and Peace in South Asia: An Interview with Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma from the Chittagong Hill Tracts" and Nadia Butt's "Violence and the Partition of India: Voices from Pakistan". These interviews, both connected to questions of ethnicity, religion and nationalism, offer original insights into the role of violence in the making, if not the marking, of their respective communal boundaries. In Chowdhury's interview, Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma reflects on the struggles of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) communities for political autonomy from the time of the India-Pakistan partition to the armed insurrection in 1976, and to the signing of the Peace Treaty with the Bangladesh government in 1997. If Chowdhury's interview is occasioned by the twentieth anniversary of the CHT Peace Treaty, Butt's interview commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the India-Pakistan partition. Taken together, the contributions here put forward the collective argument that there is no violence that is *indigenous* or *inherent* to

cultures of South Asia or beyond; rather, all cultures of violence should be read as *cultivated* violence as part of specific historical trajectories.

Acknowledgement

Notes

[1] Mbembe's position, as summarised by the editors Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton (2010, 15).

[2] The literal meaning of the words *himsa* and *ahimsa* in Sanskrit are violence and non-violence, respectively.

[3] We wish to alert the readers of Ward's essay to Manas Dutta's review of a recent work on Sri Lanka's war – Channa Wickremesekara's *The Tamil Separatist War in Sri Lanka* (2016) – in this special issue.

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