

# The Dynamics of Violence in Everyday Living – An Indian Context

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## **A fierce climate**

On May 13 2021, all of Indian newspapers and media broadcast the singular ghastly tale of hundreds of floating dead bodies in the Ganges and the rivers of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Governments and states were fraught over the numbers & causes of these dead bodies from COVID, further unfolding the nation's incapacity to mourn the loss of unaccountable human lives. It was a murderous end, leaving behind innumerable aching hearts and tormented existence of children, parents, friends, lovers who had lost their loved ones. A total denial of dignity in death to the bodies, while an abrasive disregard to the need of surviving families & friends in search for peace and closure in their loss. An utter deplorable success of a system that subjugates human entities, their living, and also their death.

Traditional Hindu cremation rites comprise burning the body, but all electric crematoriums were flooded with dead bodies waiting in long queues over 24hrs, while manual cremation burning-wood were being sold in the black market. The community assigned corpse-burners, usually referred as the '*doms*', considered to be the lowest-caste in community, were desperately seeking ways of survival against ages of destitution using this catastrophic moment to their momentary advantage. Often poverty may harness such violent survival angst that reinforces the belief that a little money could buy omnipotence and invulnerability against century long socio-political & economic structural oppression. Such brutal actions of survival-continuum may often stimulate internal confusion at the individual level, prompting unconscious disassociative processes, disregarding adversity of others. Underlying this survival appropriation lies an inherent apprehension of a constant fragile simmering entity fighting against an unempathic system, fearing a total eradication of one's being, an internal collapse of a fragile ego structure. When a paralyzing communal engagement from birth comprises a violent systemic embodiment of poverty and politics, it may often consequentially tend to trivialize every other intersubjective human exchange of commitment, making the body of the human agency the site of all battles for sole survival. Thereby, making every striving act, no matter how violent, a justified bare necessity for that existence. The rage expressed through ghastly actions becomes a part of regular life of the 'collective bemoaners'. "When a *loss* (ital. mine) is associated with experiences of helplessness, passivity, shame and humiliation, mourning is accompanied by other psychological tasks such as turning helplessness and passivity into assertion and activity and reverting shame and humiliation" (Volkan, p. 46. *On Deaths and Endings*, 2007). Here, the *loss* begins with the annihilation of the self itself.

At another level, the health industry exploited the pandemic, making death a business to make profit – oxygen cylinders were stocked up to fabricate dearth in the market of COVID and then later sold in exorbitant prices in the black market. Could the elaborate Hindu death rituals in India (conducted by the high-

caste Brahmins/priests, comprising the cleansing & dressing of the body, smearing it with *ghee* for cremation, followed by weeks of the mourning period where one wears & eats meagre, before breaking it with a community feast) that follow after a death, bear the nuances of an inherent effort towards a socio-cultural, structural purgation of a corrupt order? An order that surreptitiously dictates a life founded on self-denial and renunciation prompting possible attempt to cultural reparation for its guilt? Perhaps this transmitted communal cultural guilt of a merciless order gets transformed to personalized filial transgenerational guilt that had for so long kept families tied up together in its status-quo plight, but has now suddenly snapped with a violently restless and ruthless consumer culture that is so easily available for the individual's instant self-gratification. This cultural transition from the gravity of myths and rituals to a ravenous consumerists' satiation for instant pleasurable fulfilment, yet ironically trivial and thus its repetitive urgency, holds magnetic attraction for today's time.

### **“Necessary ruthlessness” (Mark Borg)**

India is ripped apart by its age-old violent antitheses of class and caste where money acts as a symbol to acquire an illusory life of invulnerability. Often money acts as a sole guise to procure social dignity. Based on the reliable foundation of the politics of poverty, commercialism generates a certain individualized sense of fancy pleasure and fulfilment that money alone can buy. Thereby, prompting a counter spree of 're-production' of a violent culture of exalted entertainment for community distraction. Subsequently it encourages a culture of “the practise of ignoring (disassociating) the suffering of others, enacting ruthlessness as a status quo approach to living, making it seem (and often actually be) *necessary*” (Mark Borg, p.181, 2007). Dogmatic political ideologies thrive upon a systemic, structural reinforcement of such divides, promoting projective 'otherness' of the collective dissociated self-states that one finds most unacceptable. Subsequently it structurally propagates murderous

'otherness' through caste & class divides, gender discrimination & colour prejudices.

In this current technological era of surveillance, human beings are increasingly estranged from human connect and continuity. An element of reductionism transforms the human subjectivity to an easily disposable object. An extraordinary cultivation of desensitization and banalization rules prevalence in today's age, giving rise to a "manichaeic" (Werner Bohleber, p. 126, 2003) replica of the world, further enhancing the dividing line between good and evil, friend and foe, segregating the 'other' from 'us' in ultimate capacity. The split becomes more sharp and concrete when "the manic defense militates against a sense of social responsibility, since it defends against precisely the depressive guilt that, in the Kleinian model, leads to reparative concern for others. This defense is characterized by clinging to a sense of omnipotence, denial of psychic reality, an associated flight into action as opposed to thought, and massive projective identification" (Altman, p.330, 2005). Does the unaccountable loss of lives in the past two years in India prompt such a national denial of its due social responsibility, basking in its statutory omnipotence, creating further divide within its people between rich and poor, high and low caste, rural and urban? The utility and productivity of the human body are the only criteria for its relevance in this consumerist mechanized era. Herbert Marcuse argued that the contemporary collective ego ideal comprises the growth of a popular extremism that is boosted by the joint force of technology and an authoritarian ideologue. He said, "with the devaluation of the body, the life of the body is no longer the real life, and the negation of this life is the beginning rather than the end" (2011, p. 125). Thereby, implying an inception of disavowal and antithesis of the common persons' existence that is submerged in a covertly seductive violence of a conflictual, yet enthralling, debaucherous system.

India with its colonial history and innumerable other foreign invasions, has been a battlefield of dead bodies and exploding grounds that demanded repeated political reassigned boundaries of states, cities, villages. Continuous dislocations and uprootedness for the community counter-resonated a collective

basic lack of trust and primordial anxiety that often got embodied through superstitious beliefs in daily life. In 1976, Leo Rangell wrote about the disruption of the 'ground' and the attachment to one's land or surroundings as a psychic prerequisite for sustenance of environmental, social equilibrium, that reflects on the social entity of the being. India being essentially an agricultural land, the ground has even more significance for its common people who devote their bodies/being to nurture the soil for food and sustenance. When that basic ground disintegrates, the self may apprehend its annihilation along with it, which the people of India have repeatedly encountered in its political division of land over centuries. That is when certain communities who have withstood repeated traumas through wars, invasions, politics, poverty, may express more vulnerability towards mistrust and splitting, breeding probable pervasive social paranoia and internal disillusion. The community sharing of this primordial anxiety may in turn counter produce 'societal regression' (Volkan, 2002), enhancing belief in magical powers which equally contains such fierce collisions. Interestingly it simultaneously upholds an exhilarated culture of worshipping deities, closest to their sense of god, that get popularized by orthodox canonized doctrines of a violent political practice of the right-wing. Anyone or anything that does not fall within this canonized doctrine gets treated as an 'unassimilated foreign body' that needs to be systematically eradicated. Thereby, nurturing an electrified, polarized climate of right and wrong, good and bad, 'us' and the 'other'. The instillation of fear cements the subject to remain captivated in the paranoid-schizoid position and resist any transformation into the depressive state.

### **“Sexed subjects”: (Todd McGowan)**

Todd McGowan refers to Foucault's concept of 'biopower' in his paper, *The Sex in Their Violence* (p. 47, 2019), in which he explains biopower as that which “transforms the terrain of politics from a public realm of dispute and contestation into a biological

realm that concerns itself with life and the body" (p.48). As Foucault amplifies, the violence of biopower lies in its production of a 'bare life', that gets countered by its vital product, which is technology. This technology churns a delusive life by creating a magical sense of its illusory power that one desperately attempts to imitate and capture. McGowan explains that the control exercised by biopower over 'bare human life' is by introducing death (and the everyday fear of it) – or, in other words which he calls 'sexuation' – into regular life. "Biopower masks the sexualized nature of its violence. It addresses itself not to living beings but to sexed subjects and to their modes of enjoyment" (p. 49).

Life seems to get engulfed by a clandestine, irresistible, charming and seductive violence in daily-life practices. By imitating a frenzied armour of a brutal macabre dance of hundreds of dead bodies shooting up in its rivers, is the Indian national superego, its political practice and administration, masquerading daily life with a salient necro-culture, making death & morbidity a casual, mundane element of basic existence wrapped up in daily leisures & entertainments through a popular consumer captivation? Governed by the pleasure principle, and making entertainment a ruling embodiment of existence, the ego is encouraged to take precedence over reality principle in a systemic, structural manner that stealthily establishes a 'sexuated' existence for its humankind. The transformation of human lives to "sexed subjects" gets initiated from childhood with the propagation of a systemic drive of programmed mass-entertainment even at the basic sphere of education. It inculcates an entertainment that is devoid of any cathartic enrichment of either affective or cognitive evolution of the self/the ego. A totalitarian sweep of every intellectual exercise gets covered up with miraculous, uncanny thrills of an automated world of magical entertainment.

## **The disavowed woman**

India has always sanctioned prevalence to the eastern philosophy of the mind/soul over the body and material existence. One wonders if such metaphysical predilections could also be a probable cultural construct of sublimated defense against age-old socio-politically crafted structural economic deprivation. Over the years India has seen a systemic subjugation of women's subjectivity along with its caste system. Menstrual taboos of periodically cleansing the 'dirty' bodies of women reaffirmed the myth of abjection of women, installing the 'fear of defilement' in them. "Dirt then is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate element" (Mary Douglas, 1984, p.35). Thus, a methodical construction of a brutal patriarchal order establishing women as the 'outcast other' to be eliminated, whose physical entity held value only as 're-productive engines' or as 'entertainment objects', cloaking both motherhood and female sexuality with perverse, sexuuated enunciations.

Does the woman's body/entity become "the 'transitional object' between two families, attaching homes for others to reside, to thrive, giving up her own sense of belonging? Does the woman's body become the symbolic vacillating site of that construction of others' home, a well to feed-off from? In that context is her body meant for only others' nourishment – a probable link to India's cultural transformation of bodily sexuality of the woman to a deification of motherhood that provides sustenance? Is it through motherhood that she indirectly searches for her claim to her sexuality? Where does she look for nourishment for her own self, what happens to her bodily desires, pleasures?" (Basak, 2021)



### *Clinical Vignette*

Bijaya grew up in a village of Bangladesh in a joint family. Comparatively their house was smaller in size with two rooms used for all purposes (eating, welcoming guests, sleeping), a kitchen, and a long corridor-come-balcony where she and her siblings studied in the evenings, while slept at night. The house did not have enough space for any toilet. So, the women of the household would wake up in the break of dawn to complete their open-defecation, and bathing in the near-by pond. Bijaya would do the same to get ready for school. She felt very ashamed of this. Her sense of self-disgust got further enhanced when she started menstruating. Cleaning her body during that time became such an embarrassing task for her. She never invited any of her friends or teachers at home because there was no toilet at home. This situation continued till Bijaya was in high-school, when finally the family managed to build an enclosed basic toilet within the courtyard of the house, by which time she was almost about to leave her village for India to pursue her graduation.

Bijaya finished her post-graduation studies in India and got herself a teaching job in a school in Bengal. She lived in a working women's hostel with one room, and an attached toilet for herself. She felt very happy that she could finally have an enclosed toilet, and all to herself. She even willingly agreed to pay extra to get her own toilet. This was like a major achievement for her – she decorated and cleaned her toilet with much care – perhaps a symbolic way of caring and adorning her 'private parts' that created so much of trouble, embarrassment for her since childhood. She enjoyed her private time in her own toilet. Though her life achievements so far have been fairly commendable, yet her sense of inferiority was enormous. She felt very sad, inferior, and unaccepted. She found her skin colour very dark, her English not good enough, her mannerism not polished, financially poor – all of which hit her even harder after coming to India, her new and second home, built on her own capacity.

## A recurring dream of hers while living in India

*Her favourite professor from university in India was visiting her house in her village. She was very excited that such a renowned professor would visit her place in such a small village. It was a great honour for her and her family. She invited her respectable neighbours to her house to meet him. She prepared tea for her professor with much care. But she started trembling desperately when she put her hand out with the cup of tea for him. She felt ashamed of her dark hand, he will see how dirty it was. Also, she knew that the moment he had the tea, he will then need to use the toilet. And then he will also get to know how poor she was, who never even had a toilet at home. She wanted to bury herself. And at that very moment she would wake up from her dream with fierce anxiety, as if the trembling of her hand had taken over her entire body.*

Her excitement of having her favourite professor coming over to her house and her piercing shame with her body, wanting to bury herself, may have together ignited her body trembling (could be an unconscious rhythmic body movement in sexual excitement while at the same time the buried shame of years finding a frantic somatic outlet). Waking up from her sleep after wanting to 'bury herself' in the dream was perhaps her inner angst for life to wake up and claim it. Further associations of her 'dark, dirty' hands comprised her childhood agony of using her hand to clean herself with leaves and water after defecating out in the open in her village. That reflected her ambivalence, sense of dirt and terrible shame. Her unconscious desire to reach out to him with her hand where the cup of tea acted as a transitional object that connected her to him may inflame her deep-seated internal 'fear of defilement' along with her excitement, prompting such fierce ambivalence & anxiety in her dream. Perhaps the cup of tea was also acting as a bridge between her rural and urban lives in the two different countries, trying to resolve its internal conflict through its recurring cycle.

"The negation of the fundamental core of a being, that is their self (*inclusive of the 'body' and its emitting sexuality*), would naturally suffer significant emotional harm that may leave its scar

on the psyche of the woman" (Basak, 2014). It creates a profound narcissistic injury bringing about disassociation between the self and the body, subsequently making self-agency an immensely difficult acclaim. This covertly coercive and culturally depressive position offered to women in India as a 'natural' fall-out of its fundamental disavowal, abandonment, of her primary self by its own superego (parents as well as society), leaves her with a bottomless emptiness, an unfathomable narcissistic wound for life. "The sinister black of depression, which we can legitimately relate to the hatred we observe in the psychoanalysis of depressed subjects, is only a secondary product, a consequence rather than a cause, of a 'blank' anxiety which expresses a loss that has been experienced on a narcissistic level." (Green, p. 146, 1986)

This culturally insinuated and socially applauded depressive position in India for women often elucidates deep clinical depression, and not the Kleinian depressive position, which may subsequently lead to massive decathexis in the primary maternal object, that is – one who remains alive physically but is psychically dead for the child (Green, A. 1986). The mother's introject of external violence, in play with her quality of decathexis turns into internalized individualized self-violence that further gets privately transmitted to the child through her passivity. Often caring may act as a guise for counter production of anxiety investment shrouding love.

In the Indian context most often the annihilation of subjectivity for the woman may severely effect her capacity for mentalization, paralyzing her from churning vitality or to experiencing pleasure, making 'the pleasure of simply being alive' a forbidden and punishable act. In this context, guilt in the woman usually acts as a foundational cohesive mechanism for the self in its primary relationships. Guilt that does not necessarily lead to reparative attempts but that which stirs hostility towards the self leading to persecutory guilt. This complex psychic contour gets further communicated to the child, making probable incoherent, affective disassociations in its inter-subjective, intra-psychic configuration. The subject's love may get captivated in its pledge to the emotionally unavailable mother making it difficult

for self-individuation and self-agency, as well as affecting its ego capacity to mourn for significant losses. As if a potent ambivalent state that writhes vulnerability, and a forthcoming melancholic position since childhood, stays enmeshed with persecutory guilt as psychic attachment for the hollow created by the symbolically 'dead mother'.

### *Clinical Vignette*

Anita sought therapy at the age of 32, married for 7yrs with a daughter of 5yrs. When she came for therapy she was pregnant by 2-months with her second child. She was working for 10yrs with an organization in the social sector for child-rights and women's empowerment. Her self-awareness was high, so when she came she clearly articulated – "my family has problems, which is increasingly making me a very angry person. I think I have anger issues, just like my father, whom I hate. He does not exist for me. But what is really disturbing me is my mother – I get so angry with her these days, at times can't stand her. Yet, if you ask me, I really love my mother" – her eyes filled up with tears saying this.

Clearly her sense of family to where she belonged was her family of origin though she had her own family and children. She hated her father ever since she found out (at the age of 12/13yrs) that her father had sexually molested her cousin (maternal aunt's daughter, whom she was very close to). Her immediate doubt was whether he had also molested her but she did not remember that, though she could not rule it out completely either. She was not sure why, but she always felt uncomfortable with him since childhood. And this ambiguity deeply disturbed her, disordered her cognitive-affective processes. It was not just his anger that she found scary and avoided him, but she would also avoid any body contact with him. For example, she remembered that while sitting at the back of his bike as pillion on her way to school she would consciously hold herself tight so that she did not lean on him. She did not like the way her father looked at the school girls and their mothers. She felt he was a

*ganda-log* (bad man). Throughout her school life she never invited any of her friends at home, fearing her father may make advances on them. She looked at her friends' fathers and wished her own father was like theirs, someone that she could be safe with, proud of. But she was ashamed of her father. She could never tell her mother any of this. Internally she felt very angry with her, as if her mother was not aware of any of this, was an ally to her father. Perhaps this shared silence regarding this issue was also the internal unconscious point of connect, identification, and anger for Anita with her mother.

At times Anita apprehended that she saw her own husband with similar mistrust and hatred like she felt towards her father. As if he will have to pay the price that her father got away with. When she saw her husband and daughter playing together she would feel disturbed, either doubting him, or being jealous of her own daughter —perhaps an unconscious stimulation to her desired father-daughter exchange. Or, is it in her Unconscious there were unacceptable sexual insinuations that got stimulated by the thought of her father's sexual transgression that she could not grapple with. Maybe that added further to her hatred against her parents, her own rage, which got introjected and re-played in her own family dynamics. Did these unconscious sexual stimulations add to her guilt and make her become over-protective towards her mother. But she did not want her own family to be a replica of such 'perversion' & ambivalence that she grew up with, hence she pursued therapy.

Anita used creative humorous ways of disassociating her pain and humiliation about her family in enactments which were a regular pattern in session. For example, she would announce "here ma'am, meet my father —by profession a businessman and by passion a paedophile"— and then break into a hilarious laughter, perhaps a manic effort in defence to the shocking parallels. On another occasion, while talking about her mother's cruelty towards her and a wife's devotion for her husband, she burst out, "have you ever seen a mother who is a 'paedophile-pujari' (priest), who worships my father. Maybe she does not want to give up her prestigious *pujari* status!" (Anita ironically hinted her mother's 'powerful status' to the grossly humiliated

reality that she actually lived in, little seeing her own cruelty against her mother).

Anita often wondered if it was for money that her mother had no choice but to stay with her father – so, a major part of her life Anita tried to earn a lot of money and save up as much as she could so one day she could 'save' her mother. Sadly, the girl-Anita who actually needed to be saved got lost in her mother's denial & indifference, and in her own fantasy where she became her mother's saviour. A fantasy borne out of the introject of her mother, unconsciously transforming her own painful feelings into counter-aggressive attacks on their common object, the father, the ever pervasive phallic object around which she had her own repressed fantasies. Whereas the indifferent mother imago continued to reside in a silent intrusive manner in her intrapsychic which was her line of attachment with her mother. As Chodorow says, "the maternal object-become-subject" is a denying subject. "This castrated, denying subject becomes, as a result of identificatory processes, part of the self of the girl even as the mother-as-object remains interpersonally and intrapsychically, an object of ambivalent love and hate" (Chodorow, 1974, p.16). The hope was that – Anita willingly wanted to engage in therapy to understand her pain, her love, and rage against her mother; while unravel what actually happened with her by her father, all that was burning her and her own family for years.

## **Post-independent India & a violent feminine imagination**

The colonized era in India may have found a collective meaning in life through their attachment to the tangible reality of the mother-land. The site of the 'mother-land', its symbolical body held deep-rooted psychic significance for that generation. The construction of a glorious national spirit may have acted as a manic collective defence, that suited time's calling, against a probable personal ground-shaking ambivalence in its filial orbit, the presence of a 'dead mother' in private life. With the gaining of India's independence the causality to remain collectively pledged to the mother-land was lost to its generation. In the

post-independent era, it got subsequently invested in similar frenzied passion popularising a fiery culture of worshipping idols of goddesses, replacing the earlier abstract soul & its spiritual harness in religious philosophy. A rising externalized, politicized, religious exaltation that was echoing a violent breed of 'sexed devotees' that replaced the passionate army of cadets of the nationalist era.

Fearing deadness of the self, the subject may often seek externalized means for psychic aliveness – be it through a violent devotion, or hypersexuality, or thrilling actions. By systemizing religious laudation in alignment with patriarchal virility, it became the post-independent Indian collective pledge to the goddess-mother, prompting further split between the real body of the woman and its projected cultural imagination of the ideal goddess-mother. A frantic compulsive need to imagine in order to compensate the vacuum of the real body of the woman. Thereby the flesh-and-blood real-woman's body, her femininity, her sexuality, her subjectivity, all became the 'culminating other' to be attacked – a political 'phallacy'/fallacy that conveniently replaced the 'older colonial foreign enemy' of the past with this emerging new woman of India. She needed to be either eradicated like a foreign body, or 'purified' & modified in semblance to the worshipped goddess. The increasing brutal violence on women in India, its independent women, lesbians, trans-women, in both urban and rural spaces unravels the dichotomy of a horrific devouring idolization of the mother-goddess and a burning contempt for the flesh-and-blood real woman. And thus, on the disavowal of the real-woman, on her dead body, ruptured the new violent culturo-religious feminine imagination of India, applauded by its phallic ideologue and right-wing politics.



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