

India 2025 : Likely Levels of Violence

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Introduction

In the history of a country, especially one so “aged” as India, twenty five years is a very small period indeed. And yet, twenty five years can be a very long time, a very eventful time, a very transforming time.

In terms of economic prosperity, India has little to show even fifty years after it became independent. That things seem to be changing now is a different matter. We will have to wait till 2020 or 2025 to see whether the current economic reforms bring widespread economic well being, if not prosperity. At the same time, to India’s enormous credit, when it became independent, famine loomed over much of the country, like a long shadow of death. Twenty five years later, famine as a threat had all but disappeared. Today, India has already emerged as one of the world’s largest producers of so many food products – milk, milk products, fruit, rice, sugar, wheat etc. Our granaries are overflowing and we don’t seem to know what to do with our food. Ironically, one-third of India still lives below the poverty line.

Violence is a worldwide phenomenon and has dogged humanity all through history. The twentieth century, with two world wars and the Holocaust was perhaps the bloodiest period mankind has ever experience. Things now seem to be changing, wisdom seems to be at last dawning on humans and for the first time in human history, peace seems to have a chance.

Violence need not necessarily have a cycle or pattern, though broadly, it has of late been seen that violence diminishes with prosperity, showing its profound economic dimension. Nevertheless, the violence that came with independence

to India and Pakistan had little to do with economics or prosperity. One often wonders what would have been the degree of violence in 1947 had India and Pakistan then been highly prosperous nations. Hong Kong slipped into China so effortlessly, so non-violently, though the comparison may not seem quite appropriate.

In the first twenty-five years after India's independence, there was little change in the pattern of violence. On the one hand, communal violence between Hindus and Muslims continued as a British Trojan horse, drawing Indian blood repeatedly. A new phenomenon, however was the birth of rural insurgency, which began as an utterance against feudal oppression and exploitation and has continued in a nagging kind of way as a left-oriented ideological movement called Naxalism. Both these forms of violence continue to dog India till today, both with political underpinnings. However, Babri Masjid gave the BJP such a bad name that it seems to have diluted the party's anti-Muslim virulence. The party has now opened its doors to the Muslims. Even if a political ploy, it is a revolutionary and ideologically antithetical ploy.

While there was little change in the extent of violence in the first twenty five years after India's independence, there was a dramatic transformation in its overall character in the next twenty five years — the period between 1972 to 1997, during which India witnessed literally an explosion of terrorism on its soil.

Before, however, looking at the possible scenario of violence in India in 2025, let us look back a little at India's experiences of violence. Most intriguingly, whatever its professions, India is not and has never been an utopia of peace and non-violence. The perplexing question is why has the idiom of violence been so preponderant in India, a land of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, all basically

soft, pacific religions ? Despite the martial character of Sikhism, it too has scarcely indulged in aggressive proselytization and lacks the crusading ethos. India is also the land of the Buddha, of Mahavir, of Ashoka and Gandhi, all incomparable evangelists and global exemplars of non-violence, all inalienably part of the great Indian ethos. India has also given more religions and sub-religions to the world than any other country and has taken in its embrace religions that originated in other countries, giving haven to those persecuted elsewhere. India is also a land with a unique culture of vegetarianism, again a dimension of the same Indian ethos of non-violence. No other country has such a large, almost bigoted vegetarian population, with almost entire communities totally vegetarian, out of sheer faith. In the Indian caste system, the Brahmins and the Vaisyas have traditionally been vegetarians, with only the Kshatriyas and the Sudras taking meat. Again, in the Indian caste system, only Kshatriyas fought the wars, leaving a large majority of the Indian population out of the ambit of warfare. Thus, the Indian ethos is hardly warlike, and yet India has had more than its share of wars, starting with the mythological Mahabharata.

How does one explain this tantalizing Indian phenomenon ? Is it that Indian culture, evolved on high doses of morality, is oversensitive to violence and evil; hence the counter moral reaction ? It does appear that India's history has been an unending conflict between the Indian creed of non-violence and tolerance on the one hand and the natural human propensity towards violence on the other, with neither being inconsistent with the quintessential Indian ethos. Only India could have thrown up an emperor who could give up war after victory, as did Ashoka after his triumph at Kalinga. Not only did he renounce war, he renounced violence altogether and became a messianic Buddhist, gradually giving up eating meat as well. Only India could have thrown up an individual who could give up terrorism to become a sage and philosopher, as did Sri Aurobindo. Aurobindo was a freedom fighter and a revolutionary and with the

British in hot pursuit, he took sanctuary in the then French enclave of Pondicherry, where he founded his now celebrated ashram. Again, only India could have thrown up a unique personality like Gandhi who waged a struggle for freedom with the vehicle of non-violence, carrying with him the Indian masses and isolating those who advocated the path of terrorism and violence.

Could it be that saints emerge more easily in grounds fertile in sin and criminality ? Otherwise, where is the need for a land that is peaceful and tranquil to throw up a saint ! Was there so much criminality and violence in ancient India that as many as ten avatars of Vishnu had to come down to earth on different occasions to put it down ? And rather curiously, the avatars appeared on earth more to fight and destroy evil rather than to propagate a positive philosophy. Thus was Ram born to destroy Ravana and Krishna to annihilate Kansa and the Kauravas. Undeniably, in the process, Ram also showed by action and deed his exemplary personality, epitomizing all that is good and virtuous, and Krishna gave us the incomparable Gita. But they would not have perhaps deigned to come down to the earth if it was to only explain the mysteries of the universe.

With so many religions, indigenous and foreign, with so much of mythology directed against evil, with so many saints and godmen over the course of history, India should have transformed itself long ago into an embodiment of peace, virtue and non-violence. Yet that has never really happened. Not that there is more criminality in India's history than in the history of other nations. The entire world has in fact a far more enviable track record of violence and cruelty. India's history is a unique conflict between violence and non-violence, between good and evil, as these qualities have been perceived and interpreted over time. India's history shows that the Indian conscience has repeatedly

asserted itself in the shape of corrections whenever criminality has gone out of hand, almost like the cleansing appearance of Lord Vishnu's avatars.

Whatever the lessons or experiences of history and despite all the gore, bloodshed and cruelty that the 20th century witnessed the world today is without doubt getting increasingly civilised. For the first time in the history of mankind, global opinion in favour of peace, human rights and democracy has emerged as a strong and influential force. Hopefully in the next twenty five years, it should be able to exert even stronger moral pressure on nations, deterring them from such violent proclivities like genocide of minorities, ethnic cleansing, waging proxy war on other nations. Increasing globalization, which is bound to blur borders and integrate mankind, should also in the long term, reduce the incidence of wars and societal violence. This global pressure should help India ward off Pakistan's proxy war, not necessarily after another twenty five years, but possibly much earlier. Pakistan is already getting globally outcasted and may not be able to withstand global disapprobation for very long, especially because it is often accompanied with other suitable arm-twisting pressures.

On the other hand, India will also be under greater global pressure to greater fairness to its minorities, in particular Muslims and Christians. While the distrust that the Hindutva group entertains towards the Muslims can perhaps be rationalized as it does have a historical explanation, if not justification, their pointed targetting of Christians in the second half of the 1990s is neither forgivable nor justifiable.

Thus, the next twenty five years seem rather promising. Violence in the form of cross border terrorism should come down. Political and communal violence may, however remain and could get accentuated if the competition for political power become fiercer. And if India does indeed march ahead economically and

if poverty levels are substantially reduced, crime could also come down, though consumerism could exacerbate the entire scenario.

A Map of Violence in India

Violence has had a multi-faceted physiognomy, at least in its articulation. This paper seeks to hazard an assessment on the possible fate of each of the key facets of violence in India especially whether each of them will ebb or flow or remain at the current level. Let us proceed from the micro to the macro, from the raw to the subtle, from this basic to the ideological :

- Starting with violence at the micro or base level, the level that touches the common citizen, let us see what will the crime situation be in 2025 ? Will crimes like murder, robbery, and rape continue at the present rate or will they increase or decline. By and large, the behavioural pattern of crime is governed by factors such as a country's economic well-being, and the extent of both urban demographic and claustrophobia. If one takes the 25 year period of 1975-2000 as a benchmark in the study of crime, one can reasonably conclude that broadly the crime scenario will be not very different from what it is today. One imponderable would be whether mafia crime and kidnappings for ransom would go up and spread to various parts of India.

However, if India's economic reforms do succeed in reducing economic disparities and in bringing down the levels of poverty, crime levels are also bound to decline somewhat proportionately. The more you have especially in terms of worldly possessions, the greater are your stakes in peace and order. The advanced countries hardly witness civil disturbances or street riots which are so common in India. In fact, mob violence is a phenomenon peculiar largely

to the underdeveloped and developing countries. One scarcely hears of mobs going on a rampage, burning buses and damaging public property in the highly developed countries of Europe, showing that mob violence diminishes as a country advances economically. However, mob violence in some of the developed countries occurs on account of embittered ethnic relations.

At the same time, as stated earlier, twenty five years is a very small period, especially for a huge country like India, with still a very large number of people living below the poverty line. Most of them will continue to be poor even if their overall income levels go up. So the middle class stake in peace will still not be there as a overwhelming moral force. Similarly, while the rate of growth of India's population may decline, the numbers will go on adding up, as will urban accretion. China opened its economy around twenty-five years ago and though it has more rapid economic progress, it still has a large percentage of poor people. And despite its totalitarian system, it can hardly be said to be low in crime. One is tempted here to refer to the Singapore example which has transformed itself from a poor, backward and crime ridden country to a modern, prosperous and a relatively crime-free one. But Singapore is just a city-state while both China and India are sub-continental nations. However, one cannot help but conclude somewhat brightly that once China and India become very prosperous, they will be all but rid of crime.

That does not seem possible by 2025, not even in China. Therefore, India in 2025 is not going to be an entirely safer place. By all reckonings, it will be as safe or as unsafe as it is today. But if our economic reforms widen the have and have-not divide, especially in respect of access to consumer goods, there could even be a boom in property crime of the type one witnesses even today in several highly developed western urban centres. In the U.S for instance, the downtown areas of most cities are unsafe and have been so for several decades

now, largely on account of inaccessibility of sundry gizmos and consumer goods to the have-nots (consisting largely of Blacks and Hispanics). If you are mugged on a New York or Chicago street, the criminal is after your money not because he does not have enough to eat but because he would like to buy the latest Armani clothes or the most sophisticated electronic gimmick available in the market.

The economic boom of the Clinton era has doubtless brought down the crime rate but crime has not exactly disappeared.

As India has little or no history of the street muggings and carjacking variety crime, it may yet be spared of it but consumer-oriented crime on account of increasing economic divide could manifest itself in the form of more house robberies and burglaries. With life expectancy likely to rise from 62 today to 76 by 2025, the population of senior citizens will go up somewhat dramatically making them more vulnerable to violence and robbery.

So far, India has been preponderantly poor with the super rich being few and far between and with a closed economy that provided most of its people with mediocre consumer offerings. Take Brazil as an instance. The economic divide there has been overwhelmingly stark leading to very high levels of street crime and violence in the big urban centres of San Paslo and Rio de janeiro. The break-up of the Soviet Union and the withering away of communism opened the floodgates of crime and violence like never before in Russia. The monotonous routine of the Indian economic scenario is also now giving way to an explosion of consumerism which could in turn lead to an explosion of criminality in the coming years. India will have to brace itself to meet it, check it and counter it because unlike Singapore, not everyone will become well of by 2025. India's per capita (PPP) stands at

\$ 1670 today as against the per capita range of \$ 6520 to \$ 29010 of the highly developed countries. By 2025, India can, even if one is very optimistic, reach a per capita range of \$ 7500 to \$ 10,000, way behind the PPP of the HHDs. At best, we can draw a comfort from China which opened up 25 years before us and where crime has not really exploded frighteningly. But the, China is totalitarian, India is not.

- At the another micro level, recent India has witnessed a kind of street violence somewhat peculiar to India. Given to the country by Mahatma originally as a form of peaceful public protest the satyagraha continues as a public protest, but is articulated in many forms — **dharnas**, hunger-strike, peaceful rallies, militant (read violent) rallies, **rasta rokos**, **rail rokos**, **chakka jams** etc. Most of them are political or politicised and often turn violent and have to be controlled by the police with the instrument of state violence. India is too huge and its problems equally huge, which are unlikely to be solved altogether by 2025. And with politics and democracy of the Indian kind expected to also continue till 2025, this kind of violence should remain with us till then.

If India's infrastructural shortages of water and power continue, populational impatience can continue to be expressed by public protest which could include violence. Economic liberalisation is bound to lead to increased migration to urban centres, further straining their infrastructure, burgeoning their slums, building bigger vote banks, heightening social tensions and increasing crime and violence.

- The objective of politics being power which is often the ultimate power, the stakes of the political players are high. And where stakes are high, principles and means do not matter. Independent India's electoral history

has been a saga of unbridled bloodshed. To capture booths and rig votes, the politician unabashedly started taking the help of criminals, who soon enough adopted the trade of politics to seek power for themselves. Today, no political party is free from the stigma of criminalisation and no one seems to be bothered.

With the Congress party having lost its preeminent political position in the country and with Atal Bihari Vajpayee left as perhaps the last charismatic political leader (no one else seems to be looming in the horizon at the moment), the days of strong and popular all India parties seem to be yielding place to regional parties. Today, regional parties are in power in Punjab, Haryana, Bihar, Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu, apart from some of the North-eastern states. The Congress party, however, is still in power in five states (Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Karnataka) and the BJP in just three states (U.P, Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka). In the left bastion of West Bengal, the Trinamool congress is emerging as a powerful regional party.

The emergence of regional parties in most states is bound to make politics and political contests fiercer, especially as they will be posing a strong challenge to the existing order. U.P and Bihar have already started spawning several regional parties. And West Bengal is a pointer of the shape of things to come. To counter the Trinamool Congress, the leftists have taken to violence in a big way and have physically and violently tried to oust the Trinamool from its newly created bases in South Bengal.

One can hardly expect major changes in the rules of electoral battles in the years to come. Electoral reforms are not easy and the will to usher in major reforms still seems to be lacking. Even if worthwhile reforms are brought about in the coming years and even if politics is cleansed of the criminal element, violence

in elections is not likely to disappear and can be expected to continue in more or less the same form and degree.

- Communal violence was after independence very much a legacy of the British policy of divide and rule. The partition of India and the bloodshed that followed left a long trail of bitterness. With the creation of a Muslim state of Pakistan inimical to India, a large section of the Hindu community found it difficult to come to terms with a secular India. Nor could the entire Muslim community living in India migrate to Pakistan. As such, communal violence continued to dog India even many years after independence.

Yet, Hindu communalism could never make a significant impact on Indian politics at the national level. At least, not till 1989. Though the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had captured power in some of the northern states and though it had shared power at the Centre during 1977-79, it had never appeared anywhere near capturing power at the Centre. But things changed after a court in U.P ordered the reopening of Babri Masjid. Not that the issue was by itself explosive. It was artificially made explosive by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad – RSS – BJP combine. The name of Ram, that epitome of goodness and sacrifice, became the focal point of militant Hindu communalism. First came the Shilanyas programme of 1989. It soured the communal atmosphere and there were riots, arson and deaths in several states. From a mere two seats earlier, the BJP was able to capture 84 seats to the Lok Sabha in the 1989 parliamentary elections. The BJP scented power and did not fail to realise that it could ride to power at the Centre on the crest of combative Hindu communalism. Came the Rath Yatra from Dwarka to Ayodhya in November, 1990, leading to more communal riots, widening the schism between Hindus and Muslims and giving the BJP as many as 119 seats in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections. Then followed the Ekta Yatra to Srinagar on Republic Day 1992. It was called the Odyssey of

Unity but was more an odyssey of discord as it only further fragmented the Indian mosaic. The final denouncement came with the destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992.

The destruction of the mosque stunned even the Hindutva forces and they realised that they had perhaps unwittingly, exceeded themselves. The global disapprobation that followed left them bewildered and even ashamed. Meanwhile, in both U.P and Bihar, the frontline Hind heartland states, the BJP found itself left by the wayside on account of the assertion of the backward and deprived communities, and inspite of Babri Masjid. As such, there was a reappraisal of the party strategy and the subsequent Lok Sabha elections of 1996, 1998 and 1999 were spared the Hindutva frenzy.

After the Congress party lost power at the Centre in 1996, its political fortunes started waning. If anything, it has been suffering from an acute crisis of leadership. The resultant space was avidly grabbed by the BJP and the emerging regional parties. For once, the BJP emerged as a major political player at the Centre and even effectively captured power in 1998 without recourse to communal violence. The lesson was obviously not lost on the party and having also run the country for over two years now with the help of a number of secular allies, it is becoming somewhat ambivalent vis-à-vis its Hindutva agenda, though its needless targetting of the relatively harmless Christian community has been rather bewildering. If Bangaru Laxman's recent foray into the Muslim domain succeeds, Hindutva stridency can ebb further. In any case, the ground reality obviously is that as long as the Hindutva forces hold power, they will play the communal card in a low key. But once their hold on power is seriously threatened, the Hindutva ideology is bound to reassert itself and the current secular line can be unabashedly jettisoned. In such a situation, communal violence in a big way can return to the country.

The present Muslim population of India is quite different from the one that lived in India for two to three decades after partition. Its emotional links with Pakistan, or whatever have remained of them, have become quite tenuous. The persecution and insecurity of Mohajins in Pakistan and the collapse of its economy has also not helped the Pakistani image. The present generation of Indian Muslims, with scarcely any links, with Pakistan, had tended to identify itself with the Indian ethos and seems more integrated now than even before. This is a phenomenon that needs to be consolidated and not be lost. If the Muslim community is to be assimilated into the overall secular Indian ethos, the Hindutva forces will have to change their mind-set and their policies.

Unfortunately, India's mainstream political parties have always treated the Muslim community as a vote bank and have as such courted it via the route of fundamentalism, with the help of Muslim fundamentalist leaders. Vote bank politics could be applauded if it promoted the economic uplift and security of the concerned Vote bank. But in Indian politics, the vote bank has been deliberately kept underdeveloped and insecure so that it remains a source of political support. There has been little or no effort, especially in northern India to liberate the Muslim community from the cleric-controlled **madrassa-maktab** culture and open it to modern education which would have improved its economic status and quality of life. As the historian Mushirul Hassan says, "The grievances of most Muslims are social and economic and not religious. Yet time and again religious issues of no great consequence are drawn into the public arena. These are exploited to reinforce the hold of the traditional leaders." This malaise, he says, is more prevalent in the north, whereas in southern and western India, "Muslims have surged ahead.....as professionals, businessmen, traders and entrepreneurs."

If the present is any indication, communal violence will not entirely disappear by 2025. Politics will in all probability continue to govern its fortunes even after twenty-five years from now. Maybe it will ebb, perhaps on account of the emerging global moral force, which can be expected to become stronger by then, especially as the world shrinks further and global economic factors too exert their pressures. But in the politics of power, pressures are often cynically disregarded.