

Dealing with Conflict and Violence:
The power of attitude

An end-of-course Monograph by
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1. Introduction

We live in an increasingly violent world. Where there are bridges to be built people erect walls. One act of violence can trigger off a chain reaction, and an unending vicious cycle that seems impossible to come out of. Violence, either between countries, or between groups within a country, inside families, is often a reflection of the conflicts and struggles going on inside people, and communities.

In the following pages, I will attempt to look into some different forms of violence, and the different ways and stages that people go through in coping or dealing with violence. Finally, I hope to share some insights into ways of coping with conflict which can show us a way out of this vicious cycle of violence.

2. Violence, problems, conflict - understanding these

Violence is usually identified with physical violence, which is visible and has a physical impact. But when we go deeper, we soon realise that even a harsh word expressing a negative emotion is an act of violence on another person. Violence is often present in relationships, not only between family members, but also in social, economic and other interactions between people, between oppressor and the oppressed, between the ever-acquisitive man, in his relationship with nature.

Going even deeper one even comes to the realisation that in many ways people are often unconsciously violent to their own selves. For example, when, as a result of certain adverse circumstances facing us, we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by negative emotions, or wallow in self pity, it not only prevents us from growing and living, but can also lead to a further deterioration of the situation, and of ourselves.

Normally behind most violent acts, words or thoughts, are problems and sometimes conflicts. These problems and conflicts may be of various types, and of varying intensities.

2.1 Conflict

Some scholars conceptualize conflict as the negative extreme of a consensus-dissensus range of human behaviours. At one end are such behaviours as consensus, agreement, goodwill, sharing, joint problem solving, cooperation and compromise. In the middle we find behaviours such as competition, disagreement, bargaining, negotiation, persuasion, rivalry, protest, confrontation, even clashes (all within the approved norms of the culture/society within which they take place). At the disapproved extreme are violence, destruction, norm violation, coercion, repression, humiliation, murder and war.

2.2 Causes of conflict There are different reasons for conflict. Sometimes conflicts arise because of unmet needs of people, because of differences in values (very often the reason for fundamentalism), unequal power relations, and also as a result of victimization.

The ‘victim attitude’, is often a major cause in perpetuating a cycle of violence.

The victim is at first stunned by some violent act that shatters a previous norm or equilibrium. When victims are convinced that they have been attacked undeservedly feelings of loss may be accompanied by anger, and anger may grow into rage. Victims may also become fearful of unpredictable future attacks – often intensified by feeling powerless to provide for their own safety. Such a combination of suffering, anger, powerlessness, and fear are raw materials for becoming closed and defensive. If a threat of repeated violation persists, victim groups tend to become closed and fanatic, to polarize the world into a ‘we versus them’ battleground, and to turn to violence, in turn becoming victimizers of others.¹

“Violence signifies the end of conversation, blurs our sense of time, cause and effect, and feeds upon itself. As an instrument of liberation, it has a tendency to become illusory, as the oppressed begin to speak the language of oppression. It produces a spiral of justifications for brutality, enabling its perpetrators to take on the guise of victims.”²

3. Coping with violence – Some reflections from my diary

A letter to the people of Assam...

November 1998

“It has been a difficult period in my life, since the fourth of July when my husband Sanjoy went with the ULFA for a discussion, and disappeared soon after. Days and weeks and months of fear, anger, helplessness, confusion followed, as we ran from pillar to post to find Sanjoy, or at least get some authentic information as to his whereabouts and his well being. We tried everything, meeting politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, human rights activists, social workers, and religious and spiritual leaders in our search for Sanjoy.

There were numerous stories doing the rounds: the ULFA saying that Sanjoy had fallen off a cliff and died, the Assam police saying that he was probably killed on the 4th of July itself, the Central government with its various snoop agencies unable to come up with any credible information. Gradually everyone seemed to give up all hope, and believe in the worst, even if there was no proof. Well, almost everyone. Some of us who know Sanjoy well, and retain our faith in humanity, continue to believe that he is somewhere, making the best of the circumstances that he has found himself in, and will return to us one day...

However this letter is not only about Sanjoy.

It is about searching for the truth, and for answers, as well for strength in order to overcome problems and find solutions.

What is our normal reaction when confronted with a very difficult, traumatic situation? Let me share my experiences. I am sure that people in Assam, and elsewhere have been through similar situations, and have learned a lot in the process.

The overwhelming feeling is of being victimized. 'Why did it have to happen to me, to us? After all we were doing everything with the best of intentions – trying to help the people of Majuli, where we worked.' Trying to suppress fear and panic, we rushed around doing things in reaction to what others suggested or our oppressors dictated. Fear gave way to anger, when things did not turn out the way we wished them to. It was only normal. We tried harder, calling this one, that one, met anyone even remotely concerned with Assam or with the ULFA, but found nothing reassuring. And got angrier, cynical, condemning the ULFA for the violence and lies that they were perpetrating, blaming the government for its inaction, criticizing the press for spreading rumours and stories not based on facts. The result? I met only falsehoods and more falsehoods when I looked for answers from the world outside.

And then, refusing to believe the lies, and somehow just knowing that the truth was otherwise, I learned to look within myself. This happened partly as a survival instinct, in those terrible days of stress, and partly as a result of help from friends, who introduced to me a whole new world of peace within. Although I have always believed in a Divine Power, I had never been religiously or spiritually inclined. I had been living my life at a mental- emotional-mental level, without having felt the need to explore other realms of my being. And when I turned within myself for answers, for peace, I found that I had been a stranger to my real self. I started getting drawn more and more towards this self. And in the process I found glimpses of what I was searching for. Peace and the Truth. However misleading and cruel the world outside maybe, my inner being does not fail me. It gives me the strength, not only to continue and cope, but also take a fresh look at life, separating the lies from the truth.

Gradually one is learning, even if it is with great difficulty, the necessity of rejecting negative emotions, feelings and thoughts. I no longer feel angry with ULFA or with the people of Assam. It has been a cleansing of sorts. of discarding old reactions and habits, that only hinder, never help.

The most difficult part has been getting rid of the victim syndrome. By admitting to being a victim, I was unconsciously acknowledging that the ULFA and the State had a power over me. The world outside was also reiterating that. But as I learned, more and more, to look within myself, I found that no human being, however powerful he or she may be has any power over the *real* me, cannot hurt the real me.

So, by giving in to, and sometimes being overwhelmed by negative emotions and thoughts, I was being untrue to myself, underestimating and misunderstanding myself. And only hurting myself in the process.

You will ask why I am sharing all these details about myself with you? The answer is, because all that is happening in Assam and in the rest of the country, is a reflection of what is happening within each one of us.

The 16 months that we lived in Assam, before the ULFA abducted Sanjoy, allowed us a glimpse into the strengths of your state – the hardworking rural population, the natural resources, the celebration of life, not often visible to the world outside. How can it be visible? Even Assam's own people seem to be blind to her strength and beauty. Instead they have let themselves get overwhelmed by problems, and in the process also caught in the victim syndrome, and its ensuing vicious cycle. It is easier to blame the 'enemy outside' – the immigrant labourer, the business classes the Central Government, to get angry and take to violence. Accepting that the protests are often valid, has the violent form of protests helped in bringing the state any closer to peace and prosperity? The frequent bandhs, are no big deal for those who earn regular monthly salaries, but for the thousands of labourers who have to live on daily wages, it is a difficult time to pull through. And the frequent extortions, kidnappings, and murders have only aroused revulsion in the hearts of people. Further, as the track record of the ULFA shows, the very people, who take to arms to fight a inhuman system, imbibe many of the very things they are supposedly fighting against - oppression, undemocratic procedures, suppressing different views, arbitrarily using guns, just because they have them.... And worst of all, getting caught in deceiving themselves and the world. Till it gets more and more difficult, even for them, to distinguish the truth from the lies. Hate and violence has only led to darkness.

The time has come now, in Assam, to look for answers and for the truth, within. Only that can show the way out of the darkness and the falsehoods that engulfs Assam, and her people. It is time to reaffirm the strengths and the true power of Assam, from within, by her own people. It is time to throw away the victim syndrome, and think and work together, to work towards a new dawn, using the power of love, and based on truth, knowledge and wisdom of the land.

It will be a difficult process, but the only path to certain victory.”

4. The Process of Change

At different times in their lives almost every human being, group, or nation, finds itself faced with violence. This violence could be of different kinds – brute physical kind, or of a more subtle nature. Either way it is the effect can be traumatic. The ordinary reaction in such situations is to get thrown off balance and to be overcome by negative emotions. Some people go into an extreme state of paralysis as a result of the shock, while some others take the other extreme of ‘an eye for an eye’ mostly out of a feeling of wanting revenge. In between these two extremes, there are of course other coping mechanisms.

The way that one deals with crises depends to a large extent upon one’s *attitude* to life, and to circumstances.

A.S. Dalal, in “Psychology, Mental Health and Yoga”, defines attitude as a mental set which predisposes one to *perceive* things in a certain way, to feel towards things in a certain way, and to be prone to react towards things in a certain way. Thus an attitude influences all the three basic elements of behaviour, namely, thinking, feeling and willing.

The psychology of yoga throws more light into the understanding of attitude, by going into the different parts of the being. It looks upon man’s subjective nature as a composite of distinct, though intermixed and interacting parts of the being, each with its own characteristic consciousness. One’s predominant attitudes depend on which part of the being dominates one’s nature. Broadly, there is the outer and the inner being. We are normally identified with our outer being – which is made up of three parts – the physical, the mental, and vital or emotional. However, the outer being is only an expression, not one’s real self. This real self, is a deeper consciousness of the inner being, which we can discover progressively with inner growth.

According to psychiatrist Karl Meninger, in dealing with adverse circumstances an individual normally goes through several stages. The first is Panic, which is a characteristic of the vital being. The second is Inertia (characteristic of the physical being), as a person overcome by shock, tends to get paralysed, or resigned, or tries to escape from it. However sooner or later, most individuals recover from this stage, and move on to confront their difficulties, thus entering the age of Striving. During this phase they are generally living in the vital being, governed by instincts and impulses. As a result they are still unable to find solutions, this state being governed by feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, conflict, anxiety and tension.

It is with the growth of the mental consciousness that one learns progressively to cope with the various stresses of life. This stage, which he terms as Coping, is marked by a sense of direction.

The final stage, Mastery, as conceived by Menninger, represents a further stage, when an individual meets the challenges of life with a clear sense of purpose, and with poise and serenity. This stage corresponds in Yoga, to the state of deeper consciousness of the inner being, as mentioned above. And behind both the outer and the inner being is the innermost being, called by Sri Aurobindo the psychic, the individual soul, supporting the mental, vital, physical and psychic evolution of the being. Mastery, from the point of view of the Yoga psychology begins when an individual, no longer completely identified with the physical, vital and mental personality of the outer being, learns to live progressively in the deeper consciousness of the Person within.

The question is how do we reach this stage? How do we prepare ourselves in such a way, so that we no longer get thrown out of balance when difficulties come our way, but learn to look at them as opportunities for improving oneself?

When I look back at my own experiences I see that the period immediately following Sanjoy's abduction, was one characterised by panic, fear and helplessness. The days were divided between trying to get help and information and periods of waiting. At these times, prayer was our solace – tidying up our tiny room, lighting the incense sticks and candles, and sitting down together to sing bhajans, hymns and other songs that we knew. Although I didn't realise it then, it was instrumental in keeping us together, and not breaking down.

Without being conscious of it, I had already started, almost intuitively, a period of self-purification of sorts. I went off fish and meat, for no special reason – I just didn't 'feel' like it. Later I realised that before I questioned anyone else's violent actions, I had to rid myself of any violence that I was party to. At the physical level, eating meat was one act of physical violence that I could think of.

During the days and weeks of waiting that followed, I had the chance to reflect on the violence of the entire incident, and the negative emotions that were threatening to overwhelm me – anger, suspicion, doubt, fear, despondency, amongst others. And somewhere along the way realised that if I was to be able to think and act effectively during this difficult period, I must rid myself of negative emotions that threatened to overwhelm at the drop of a hat! It was not easy. While fear and doubt were less difficult to eliminate, feelings of anger and impatience often surfaced in my interactions with people. While I was aware at a mental level, that these feelings had to be rejected what helped me actually accomplish this was the practice of certain techniques, that we learnt about during our five week course on the Power of Attitude.

One such useful technique is "Stepping Back". Not getting upset and reacting impulsively to any negative action or word from the outside, but taking a moment to go within oneself, and reach for peace. In this way, not only does one protect oneself from external aggression, but it is also very likely that when one does respond, the response will be more effective.

Practicing “Self observation” – the technique of looking at one’s actions and the feelings and attitudes behind these actions, helped me gain new insights into myself. I recognized the subtle ways in which the victim attitude crept into my being, and have subsequently made an attempt, to get rid of it, by trying to think of the brighter side. This process has also helped me gain a deeper understanding of conflicts and violence, and possible ways out of its vicious cycle.

It is necessary that the feeling of victimization must be dealt with and got rid of, before one can hope to arrive at solutions. Therefore an important part of the process of transition must be to enable victims heal themselves – to cope and deal with anger and fear, to forgive and stop wanting revenge, to give up the victim self image and build up one’s self image and self respect, maybe discover one’s hidden potential, and to channelize energy into constructive action.

Another important part would be to try and build bridges between the two sides – the victim and the victimizer.

Equally important would be to address the structural or the macro causes of conflict – for example, policies and programmes of large entities like the State or large business houses, that discriminate, oppress, and lead to exploitation of people. This is usually the most difficult to change, as structures are often entrenched. But it will be possible, if the victims, instead of getting caught in the victim syndrome and its negative outcomes as outlined earlier, can act collectively, and build democratic spaces to negotiate through dialogue and constructive action, their vision and plans for a more just society.

In the different steps outlined above, what is crucially important is the right attitude. Not only to cope with conflict and violent situations, but also to rise above them, to learn and to grow, however adverse they may be. If we approach difficulties with this attitude, then we are on the right path...

And when individuals begin looking at life and circumstances from this perspective, then gradually communities, nations and the world will also change. “If there is to be peace on earth, it must begin with each one of us personally.”³

References

- i) The sections 2.1 and 2.2 are from Social Work Approaches to conflict Resolution, by Benyamin Chetkow-Yanoov,
- ii) From “He Ram”, article written by Dilip Simeon in “Communalism Combat” February 1998. Published by Sabrang Communications and Publishing, Post Box No. 28253, Juhu Post Office, Juhu, Mumbai-400 059, India.
- iii) From Social work Approaches to Conflict Resolution. Op.Cit.

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