

ON THE CONCEPTS OF VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENCE
IN HINDUISM AND INDIAN SOCIETY*
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How do we understand those Indian ascetics who have developed an extremely elaborate martial tradition and yet have always taken strict vows of non-violence, especially when, for some ascetics today, that tradition has been put at the service of the most extreme forms of Hindu militancy? And how is that tough union leaders can, with conviction, share the same ideas as Gandhi, or that Brahmins scarcely hesitate before using the stick, even though they loudly and insistently advertise their faith in non-violence? These ways of acting, which are often paradoxical in our eyes, may however allow us to reconsider our understanding of the concepts of violence and non-violence in Hinduism, for there are many aspects of Indian society and culture which effectively contradict ideas — taken for granted since Gandhi — about the role of violence in them.

The problem of violence can be approached in many different ways. For example, the forms that violence takes may be studied in the hope of understanding its causes and implications better, in order to find a cure for it and to denounce its use. This is the approach taken in many works that are specifically devoted to examining the various forms of violence which exist in Indian society.

Another approach is to ask, in a more general way, about the role played by violence in society. Then the question is about the place that violence comes to have in the establishment, perpetuation, transgression or subversion of social ties. As all research devoted to the anthropology of violence shows, however, such approaches become far more complicated once one takes into account a degree of relativism in relation to values, and allows for the possibility that what obviously appears as violence to us is not necessarily seen as such in another culture.¹ Moreover, it is even harder

* *Authors' note:* This text has benefited from the comments of Jackie Assayag and Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, who are hereby thanked.

to analyse what exactly violence represents when its definition is always and crucially at stake, not only between different cultures, but also in the very heart of each society.

Thus it is necessary to specify that, in this volume, we do not claim to have revealed or denounced the forms of violence existing in Indian society;² nor are we even claiming to contribute, except very indirectly, to any general anthropology of violence. That is not to say, of course, that such an ambition would be useless or illegitimate, but only that our perspective is different. We have sought a better understanding of the terms in which the question of violence has been discussed within Indian culture, and more specifically in Hinduism. Given such a limited aim, we were immediately able to evade various pitfalls inherent in all research devoted to violence, but we have come across others instead, which are more directly connected with the present state of research on Hinduism and Indian society.

Translator's note: This article is a translation (with some brief additional passages) of 'Introduction: pour une interprétation des notions de violence et de non-violence dans l'hindouisme et dans la société indienne', the editors' introduction to *Violences et Non-violences en India: Puruṣārtha*, 16 (Paris, 1993), pp. 9-21. In the text, 'we' sometimes collectively denotes the authors of the twelve articles contained in 'this volume'; the articles (all in French except for Das and Bajwa's) are listed here with translated titles: Gérard Heuzé, 'Non-violence in the midst of violence: lessons from the Dhanbad coalfield', pp. 23-51; Charles Malamoud, 'On dissuasion in ancient India', pp. 53-60; Jean-Luc Chambard, 'Violence in a Hindu village: a woman's suicide among the Barbers and the "legitimate violence" of the dominant castes in central India', pp. 61-80; Boris Oguibénine, 'On the rhetoric of violence', pp. 81-95; Denis Vidal, 'The remains of the feud', pp. 97-123; Madeleine Biardeau, 'Ancient Brahmanism, or the impossibility of non-violence', pp. 125-39; Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, 'The initiation of the Devi: violence and non-violence in a Vaishnavite story', pp. 141-54; Gilles Tarabout, 'Magical violence and non-violence: witchcraft in Kerala', pp. 155-85; Marie Fourcade, 'The so-called "Criminal Tribes" of British India: colonial violence and traditional violence', pp. 187-211; Véronique Bouillier, 'The violence of the non-violent: the fighting ascetics', pp. 213-43; Veena Das and Rajiv Singh Bajwa, 'Community and violence in contemporary Punjab', pp. 245-59; Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Hindu processions, political strategies and Hindu-Muslim riots', pp. 261-87. This translation is by C. J. Fuller who thanks Gilles Tarabout for his help in checking it.

¹ See, for example, *Études Rurales*, 95-96: *La violence* (July-December 1984), and D. Riches (ed.), *The Anthropology of Violence* (Oxford, 1986).

² See Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi, 1990).

Gandhi did not always succeed in persuading his compatriots to practise non-violence, as the often dramatic history of the Indian nationalist movement shows. But he was able to give the impression, most especially in the west, that non-violence really is, above all else, the cardinal value of Indian civilisation, of its culture and society. This claim can be put forward enthusiastically or, as is more common, sceptically: but in either case, in the west, the concept of non-violence is generally understood not only as an ideal, but also as an expression of idealism or as the antithesis of realism. Thus non-violence is considered to be a frame of mind which may be desirable in the abstract, but which — on all the evidence — retains no more than a distant relationship with reality. Such a viewpoint also fits perfectly with the stereotypes, widely expounded about India and Hinduism, which have long stressed the 'idealist' character of the civilisation and its people. The result of such stereotypes is that news about violence in India is often received with surprise, and sometimes even with commiseration.

In fact, as should be underlined, Gandhi's own point of view was much more nuanced. As Bhikhu Parekh observes: 'Gandhi contended that, contrary to the general impression, there was a deep streak of violence in Indian culture'. Gandhi chided his friend C. F. Andrews for insisting that non-violence was the central theme of the major Indian texts: "'I see no sign of it in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*, not even in my favourite Tulsidas'".³ In reality, how the concepts of 'violence' and 'non-violence' are defined cannot be understood if they are dissociated from each other, because in Hinduism non-violence is not reducible to either a refusal to engage in violence or a denunciation of it. Rather, as the articles in this volume show, violence very frequently legitimates itself in the name of non-violence as well.

Problems of Method

The time is past when anyone could be satisfied, in studying non-western societies and civilisations, by synthetic accounts giving an illusion of total knowledge. This is not only because the quality of such works can be vitiated by particular prejudices, which are nowadays often denounced in the body of critical scholarship that has emerged from research on colonial

³ B. Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* (London, 1989), p. 48.

ideology and orientalist traditions; it is also, perhaps, simply a result of methodological factors. After all, for societies so radically different from our own, how can we actually get through the slow work of comprehension and knowledge accumulation that, as everyone recognises in relation to their own society, is so necessary?

The anthropology (as well as the history) of India and its civilisation has developed rapidly since the 1950s by questioning many of its own assumptions. Thus anthropologists in particular have attacked the tendency to see Indian society as no more than a mixture of heterogeneous cultures and communities, a tendency that gave insufficient attention to the social and cultural factors which would allow its unity and homogeneity to be explained.

While stressing the homogeneity of Indian culture, however, the scholarship of Dumont and Pocock, Marriott and others — which made use of the body of knowledge provided by the orientalist tradition — was in its turn exposed to new criticism. Thus such work was criticised for attending too exclusively only to the realities which seemed to testify to the most specific and characteristic values of Hinduism, at the risk of helping to perpetuate a conception of Indian civilisation which appeared to other authors as essentialist, monolithic and unhistorical. In particular, it has now been shown that some institutions and values supposedly belonging to the very foundations of India's cultural and social traditions were far more profoundly redefined and altered by the colonial presence and ideology than had previously been supposed.

During the last two decades — in history first of all, but also in anthropology — a marked inclination to scrutinise the premises on which the majority of analyses of Indian society were based has therefore emerged. Alongside such a critical re-evaluation, far more attention has also been paid to population categories, forms of discourse, modes of behaviour or systems of values that were previously completely marginalised or hardly studied at all; in particular, we have in mind the work of the Subaltern Studies school.

As a result, research devoted to both society and culture in India has reached a decisive stage in its development. Our accumulated knowledge is now greater and more diverse than it used to be, and today there is even a real dialogue among different disciplines. Yet new questions have also

emerged. To give but one example: nobody can seriously doubt the central importance that has to be granted to the set of traditions and beliefs characteristic of Hinduism if one wants to understand Indian society and its values properly. But equally, if not more so, nobody would claim to establish with complete confidence the precise influence of those traditions on the society as a whole, even leaving aside problems in tracing the history of the traditions and their transmission over the 'longue durée'.

Furthermore, we could be simultaneously at risk of returning to a conception of history and society that is, once again, too fragmented, and actually adopts a perspective closer than might be thought to colonial ideology, in which any unity or coherence in Indian society and culture was flatly denied. It is one thing to show, as Romila Thapar rightly does, that the very notion of Hinduism is indissolubly linked to the distinctive ideology of the colonial period, but it is quite another to deny, in the same breath, that there was any content to that label by reducing every belief to what is now conveniently called 'invented tradition'. Similarly, we must pay attention to all social and cultural forms that do not necessarily correspond to the dominant culture at any given period in the society's history, and yet it is just as crucial that we do not then lose sight of the importance that the dominant ideology can have because it is indeed dominant.

If the most original research in recent years has been that which allows us to 'deconstruct' a large number of the concepts on which knowledge of Indian society and culture has been based, the very success of those studies means that new requirements are going to be imposed on us before long. Thus it will plainly be necessary to ask again not only about the factors that give Indian civilisation its diversity, richness and multiplicity, but also about those that were able to contribute to giving this society its global identity as a unity. The latter problem has to be grasped by asking, in concrete terms, how the transmission of Indian culture's most central traditions and values has been played out, and that question arises as soon as we cease to consider their existence as a simple matter of fact.

It is from such a perspective, above all, that the articles in this volume have been brought together. In choosing to study the modes of behaviour and texts which raise the problem of concepts of violence and non-violence in Hinduism, we claim no exhaustive treatment of them. Furthermore, we pretend neither to trace the history of those concepts nor to specify their

overall influence on Indian society. We will have achieved our goal, however, if this volume allows its readers to gain a better feel for the important, specific features pertaining to violence found in the Hindu tradition, without any need to appeal to implicit and untestable assumptions about the purported essence of this society and civilisation.

The Elements Constituting Hindu Representations of Violence and Non-Violence

Distinguishing, sacralising and euphemising violence

The endeavour to set out the conditions for the exercise of meaningful violence — by definition opposed to violence 'without religion or law', which is a symptom of disorder — has been an essential part of the Brahmanical tradition. In the Vedic period, the oldest known to us through the texts, sacrifice serves as the great ordering principle and as the foundation of the universe itself, including the 'natural' world. In that period, various forms of violence — such as abduction or conquest during contests with other potential sacrificers, or the killing of animals — were exalted since they were inscribed in ritual. Indeed, it is in relation to this sacralised violence, a second type already split off from anomic violence, that the first speculations about *ahimsā*, the 'non-desire-to-cause-any-harm', appear to have been built. We are reminded of this by Oguibénine's study of how the Hindu ideal of non-violence evolved gradually from Vedic violence to Brahmanical sacrificial practice, which sought to attenuate and even obliterate any trace of violence. The term *ahimsā* has benefited from an unexpected posterity, because later discussions about 'non-violence' have been focused on it, although the vocabulary of 'violence' — coercion, aggression, murder — is far more diversified. In its origins, the term displays a twofold characteristic: on the one hand, its field of reference is narrow because it refers above all to ritual, and on the other, it is a secondary elaboration because it is defined both within the context of and in relation to the violence of sacrifice, already constructed as another type.

In this respect, Vedism is far from proposing a uniform point of view. From the most ancient hymns to the later texts, it is possible to trace an evolution, as well as contrasting positions. Initially, what seems to be at stake is less a preoccupation with ethical order than a concern to avoid the

vengeance that the victim could inflict in the other world. Thus the victim must be 'appeased' so that it 'consents'. The act of putting to death is rhetorically denied: in sacrifice, 'killing is not killing'. Plants are substituted for animals, which reduces the inauspicious fallout of violence, but not its nature. That sacrificial violence is euphemised shows that it has not lost all its menacing characteristics, despite its sacralisation. As Oguibénine suggests, the highly distinctive details of Vedic sacrifice, just as much as the countless interpretations of it which have been given, are unceasingly aimed at minimising the violence committed in sacrifice; this would scarcely make sense if sacrifice had the effect of neutralising all violence. Moreover, rather than analysing sacrifice as a ritual which abolishes violence, it is necessary to understand it as a complex operation in which rite and rhetoric complement each other, and which aspires to give to violence a consistently more reduced and abstract form, so long as the supreme effect that issues from the ideal offering — wherein the sacrificer is himself the victim — is not lost.

Making the violence in sacrifice sacred and making it euphemistic have therefore been in constant tension with each other since ancient times. This tension is also found in the later Brahmanical texts studied by Biardeau, principally the *Laws of Manu* and the *Mahābhārata*. In these texts, the question of vegetarianism, for example, is the subject of sometimes contradictory rules; some passages permit the consumption of meat whenever it derives from sacrifices, whereas others accord a superior value to abstention. The same tension can be found later, from the sixteenth century onwards, among the theistic movements, when Vaishnavite and Shakta sects oppose each other over the practice of animal sacrifice, as is shown by Clémentin-Ojha's study of a north Indian Vaishnavite text from the early eighteenth century. In a different context and without any specific connection to Vedism, the tension can finally be seen in the modern period as well as among the hill populations of Himachal Pradesh described by Vidal, whose article mainly discusses the tradition and practice of feuding among Rajput clans. In the hills, everyone, even Brahmans, eats meat, but only if it comes from animals offered in sacrifice. Furthermore, some of the murders caused by forms of traditional rivalry between warrior clans were also interpreted from a sacrificial viewpoint, and they did not — at least until Independence — lead to any serious guilt or impurity for the

perpetrators. Even in cases of this kind, however, the violence inherent in the acts was not eliminated, for it crystallised on the ghost of the victim, which became dangerous to its own clan, rather than on the murderer, until the destructive effect was redirected onto the enemy clan.

Internalising violence

Not much is known about the actual historical conditions that gave birth to the high evaluation of vegetarianism in the ancient period. This evaluation led to the displacement and extension of 'non-violence' from the domain of ritual action to that of the rules governing personal life. It could have appeared among the 'renouncers' (see Oguibénine and Biardeau) who, in their quest for personal salvation, cut themselves off from mundane social ties, or it could even have come from a dynamic process already present in Vedic sacrifice.⁴ In any case though, from very early on, asceticism served as a model for enlarged conceptions of non-violence, which linked together two characteristics.

The first characteristic, as Oguibénine emphasises, is the product of an internalisation of sacrifice, of a channelling of sacrificial violence on to the ascetic himself. His fasts and privations, and the fact that he thus becomes his own oblation, mean that the ascetic accumulates inside himself a formidable magical power, which makes him into an enemy or an ally of the king. The ascetic then becomes simultaneously representative of both 'non-violence' and limitless power, and a central and recurrent figure in all representations pertaining to violence and non-violence, as the majority of contributions in this volume show. The second characteristic is that the renouncer's non-violence appears as linked to his disinterest in worldly goods, which is sometimes highly theoretical in nature, as Bouillier's study of north Indian fighting ascetics shows. Such disinterest can be curiously reinterpreted within the context of political action by kings or those who play their role, and it allows for the legitimation of all kinds of coercion, even the most brutal.

⁴ A point of view defended by J. C. Heesterman in 'Non-violence and sacrifice', *Indologica Taurinensia*, 12, 1984, pp. 119-27.

Guaranteeing order

At no time during the ancient period did the question of *ahimsā* arise for the king in exercising his own function, as is underlined by the work of Biardeau and Malamoud. The king's role is to guarantee the maintenance of a global order, the *dharma*, and to that end practically all means are acceptable.

Thus Malamoud, in his remarks on dissuasion in ancient India, begins with the classical treatise on the art of government, the *Arthaśāstra*, and reveals the fundamental pragmatism that should guide the king's actions. Peace is not considered as superior in value to war, but instead as one possible form of relationship with other kingdoms. Moreover, the 'good' king is, above all, a victorious king, that is a conqueror. The terror that he inspires externally, like the threat of punishment (which should be deployed with discrimination) within his kingdom, constitute means of deterrence to maintain order, as well as an inducement to his subjects to practise *ahimsā* in their own lives. Hence the peace of the kingdom becomes a sign of the quality of his rule. The ideal of non-violence does not imply that all violence is totally excluded; not only is violence legitimate when it is a matter of safeguarding order as a whole, but a refusal then to engage in it would actually be considered a serious lapse.⁵

In the *Mahābhārata* epic, as studied by Biardeau, this 'pragmatism' is located within a renewed perspective that connects royal power and individual salvation. Thus styles of reflection that developed among the renouncers are introduced into the epic and are expressed in the form of praise for the renunciation of the fruits of action. The king must act, and this includes killing human beings, but he does so in the name of *dharma*. Pushing this radical perspective further, the epic affirms that any attempt to escape from violence, understood as an attack on any form of life whatsoever, is doomed to failure: from this point of view, the ascetic is simply wasting his time. What counts is not abstention from violent action, but the rigour with which the actor detaches himself from any personal investment in his action. Each and everyone is violent, but each and everyone can also remain non-violent in his innermost being. If the legitimization of royal violence is not in itself peculiar to India, it undoubtedly

⁵ In this respect, the Buddhist conception of the king has to cope with still more formidable contradictions, for Buddhism rejects any legitimization of royal violence by a specialisation of social functions.

is a specifically Indian characteristic to try to situate the personal salvation of the king within his dispassionate exercise of unavoidable destruction.

Three dynamic elements

Sacrificial violence, internalised violence and punitive violence are the three dynamic elements which, in practice, constantly interact and combine with each other, so as to generate a variety of configurations at the heart of the 'classical' tradition. Moreover, as that tradition is reinvented, it explicitly refers to these three elements. A few brief examples will illustrate this.

In opposition to Shakta sects revering the Goddess, the Vaishnavite tradition has progressively rejected the idea that the killing of an animal can be justified within the framework of sacrifice. A hagiographic tale from the eighteenth century, studied by Clémentin-Ojha, shows that this Vaishnavite conception of 'non-violence' finally triumphs because a double compulsion is at work. There is the coercion which comes from the magical power of an ascetic, notably when he submits himself to the internalised violence of a fast, and there is also the coercion which comes from the Goddess herself who, once she has been 'converted' to the superiority of *ahimsā* by the human saint, does not hesitate to use her weapons to punish those who do not yield to this view of *dharma*.

The fighting ascetics studied by Bouillier justified their initial recruitment, in particular from warrior castes, in terms of a 'disinterested' need to protect the non-combatant renouncers of their order. At issue was the defence of the *dharma*, a legitimisation of armed activity which then allowed some ascetics to become mercenaries or to discharge the princely function at the local level. Feared too for their magical power, derived from their asceticism, such men all took a vow of *ahimsā* which thus corresponded in practice to vegetarianism.

In general, for Brahmans as a caste, more so than for others, 'non-violence' is a vocation. In the central Indian village in which Chambard lived, the Brahmans are economically and politically 'dominant', and they ensure respect for the local social order. As Chambard's discussion of their recourse to violence shows, this order is conflated with the Brahmans' defence of their own position. Hence the Brahmans themselves do not hesitate to resort to strong-armed methods as soon as they perceive a threat to their position — whether it comes from a modification of the relations of

power with the service castes, attacks on their purity, or doubts about the ethnographer. On each occasion, breaches by others create a crisis which the Brahmans are quick to resolve by any means and with right entirely on their side.

Plainly, knowing how to evaluate the extent to which the use of violence conforms to the ideal of 'detachment' is problematic. Thus, as Heuzé demonstrates in relation to a contemporary coalfield at Dhanbad in Bihar, such an ideology of detachment is the one to which recourse is made, even today, by people who are pursuing their own vested interests, as well as those who are not. Hence everyone proceeds to legitimate his own violence with a very similar rhetoric, which proves that in this case we are dealing with a set of shared values. And if violence is justified as soon as it is deployed in the name both of a global order and of the people who will enjoy the resulting peace, how can we analyse the situation of those who are identified as the causes of disorder, but will often only be the victims of the order that is then established? This problem, moreover, is comparable to the one raised by Biardeau, when she emphasises the absence of a concept of the 'rights of man' *qua* man in the Brahmanical tradition. Violence is not so much thought of in universal, 'moral' terms in relation to its victims, but rather in the context of a problematic directed towards limiting its inauspicious consequences *for the perpetrators*.

To conclude this section, let us note that there are other representations of violence which are equally traditional, but do not spring from Brahmanism, or at least are not made explicit in Brahmanical texts, even if there may be some recourse to classical references (for example, from the epics). Three brief illustrations follow.

First, there are the 'chains of vengeance' or vendettas which are known throughout the whole of India, and are discussed here for Himachal Pradesh by Vidal and among the Sikhs by Das and Bajwa, whose article describes two opposite forms of violence — martyrdom and feud — as modes of defining 'community' in contemporary Punjab. In these vendettas, the murders are integrated into well-defined patterns of social exchange and rivalry.

Secondly, there is the figure of the martyr, who concentrates within himself the violence of others and not, like the ascetic, his own. The martyr transforms the violence to which he submits, and ideally accepts willingly,

into a weapon against his oppressors (see Das and Bajwa). This is a conception of violence which, paradoxically, is not always so far removed from Gandhi's of his own non-violence; it is also found in the action of some dissident Marxist trade-unionists linked to the 'tribal' and Dalit movements (see Heuzé).

Thirdly, there is the protection offered to one's own victim; this is a tried and tested device that consists of protecting those who have been made to taste aggressive force, and it is as much at work in the coalfield studied by Heuzé as it is in the constructs of witchcraft in Kerala described by Tarabout. Fourcade's article discusses the so-called 'Criminal Tribes' of colonial India, and her analysis of the relationship between thieving and guarding in south India shows that there it depends on a complex system for the collective, non-localised regulation of violence, in which ideas of honour are just as much involved as an unfeeling calculation of damages. Such a system could only come into conflict with the British desire to guarantee the maintenance of centralised order, as well as with a view of society that tends to distinguish sharply between policemen and thieves.

Constructing meaning

The dynamic elements outlined above, whether or not they arise from the Brahmanical tradition, have a single *raison d'être*: to render violence meaningful. The studies in this volume show that this elaboration of meaning is oriented by two principal axes, which cut across each other: one defined in relation to the act of killing and the other in relation to 'non-violence', however that phrase might be understood.

The semantics of murder

The denial of murder in the sacrificial context — 'to kill is not to kill' — which is a strictly rhetorical modification of the semantics of murder (see Oguibénine), has already been noted. There are, however, other aspects as well.

Whether sacrificial offering or punishment is involved, the nature of the victim is not unimportant (see Oguibénine and Biardeau). The series of possible surrogates in sacrifice — from humans to animals, from animals to plants — implies a continuity of beings, as well as a gradation not of the violence done to them, but of its risks for the sacrificer and thus of the

'meaning' conveyed in the violence. In the same way, before the enactment of laws during the colonial period, human lives were not equivalent in the face of death, even when killing was executed in the name of *dharma*, for their value depended on the caste of the person who carried out the act, as well as that of the victim. Killing a Brahman is not the same as killing an Untouchable; the two acts do not signify the same thing. The meaning of the act of killing, whether it is legitimate or not, is not given once and for all in any absolute sense, since it is inscribed in the ideological and social relations of power.

Moreover, to legitimate a killing — in a sacrifice, in a vendetta or for the protection of *dharma* — is also to exonerate the killer from the consequences of his action; legitimation confers a positive value on the act and in fact eliminates violence as such from it.⁶ Other forms of violence, however, never are or never could be eliminated from social life. Acts of violence by others, which lack the legitimacy that can be granted to one's own violence, as well as random, futile violence, are all devoid of ethical value. From the killer's point of view, the distinction between 'meaningful' and 'meaningless' violence frequently works by calling on a rhetorical language of desire and necessity in which a higher mediating category intervenes, such as the gods, *dharma* or 'non-violence', but also loyalty to kith and kin, socialism or progress. Then too, the evaluation of the 'necessity' in question is inscribed in the relations of power. After all, as the *Arthaśāstra* (the treatise analysed by Malamoud) emphasised long ago, the good of the kingdom is identical with the king's struggle to retain power, and this kind of argument, without sounding too discordant, can be adopted by the mafia-like trade-unionists of the coalfield (see Heuzé).

The relationship with non-violence

As we have seen, for different spokesmen and in different historical periods or contexts, 'non-violence' can take on very different meanings, such as vegetarianism, refusal to sacrifice animals, detachment from the fruits of action, and (since Gandhi) a style of political activity. Moreover, this polysemy is undoubtedly essential in order that non-violence in itself can nowadays be represented as a *single* value that is widely shared throughout

⁶ In contrast, in Buddhism, the sovereign's violence is not effaced, and remorse consequently plays an important role.

India. Such unanimity rests on a misunderstanding that covers up all the variations and levels of meaning the expression can assume. Whatever meaning is according to it, however, the very fact of marking out non-violence, and usually granting it a positive evaluation, cannot but modify considerably the meaning that can be assumed by violence, even though it does not expunge it or prevent its appearance.

First of all, simple realism generally dictates that non-violence is only possible if it is defended and protected by violence. What is then valued is the non-violence that violence allows. This outlook is described in practically all the articles in this volume, and is perhaps most strikingly in evidence in the studies by Clémentin-Ojha and Bouillier. These two authors open up a new perspective on asceticism by showing, as a matter of fact, that the ascetic's individual vocation, oriented towards non-violence, requires this ideal to be propagated within society and, if necessary, to be defended by force of arms. The quest for non-violence on the part of individuals thus appears as a choice of lifestyle and as a moral category that would be incapable of realisation outside the network of social ties, including those to which the ascetics are subject. Such a quest therefore has to take place within a form of society that makes it feasible.

Furthermore, non-violence is one of the essential elements in legitimating the recourse to violence. As Heuzé notes, non-violence then transforms senseless violence into meaningful violence. Together with the deterrent use of terror (well discussed by Malamoud), non-violence thereby becomes an element of power and of the consensus that forms around it. Thus a leader, if he wants to be charismatic, must devote himself to avoiding all direct contact with the degrading events which he can nevertheless be instigating.

Hence the construction of meaning around violence or non-violence is always effected through the ideological and social relations of power to whose determination it is contributing. At the same time, such a construction is opened up both to a relativity of points of view and to a certain measure of specialisation within society.

Let us consider the relativity of points of view first. If violence is done by others, counter-violence does not have the same meaning and it is not truly violence anyway, because it is a question of legitimate defence; such a logic emerges strongly from the reactions of the Brahmins in the village

studied by Chambard, and it is also at the root of the discourse on witchcraft discussed by Tarabout. This kind of argument is also found among latter-day rioters. Inverting the relationship between aggressor and victim, rioters justify the massacres in which they engage by the need to 'defend' themselves and to 'teach a lesson' to their victims;⁷ the latter, as we can appreciate, are not only unable to share the aggressors' point of view, but suffer a violence that is all the greater because they cannot make any sense of it.⁸ The relativity of points of view is, in addition, connected to the fact that in India there is no unanimity on the value to be granted to non-violence; instead of being considered as a weapon to turn against oppressors, it can also be seen as a sign of weakness (see Jaffrelot, and Das and Bajwa), two attitudes expressed through contrasting ideologies and social roles.

To turn now to specialisation within society: although the violent defence of non-violence can be carried out by those with an interest in the latter (as among the ascetics studied by Bouillier and the Brahmans described by Chambard), in India it is more usual to delegate the task. As the logic of caste testifies, no other society, perhaps, has drawn distinctions so clearly between the roles and statuses of its members, in such a way that their behaviour can be regarded as perfectly legitimate and desirable, without a similar judgement being applied to society as a whole. Thus many divergent understandings and evaluations of violence, or non-violence, find expression alongside each other by being differentially articulated in social groups and relationships, the classical archetype of these relationships being the protection of 'non-violent' Brahmans by princes and warriors who value fighting (passionlessly, of course). The social polarisation of violence that emerges from this, together with all the restrictions that flow from the different levels of meaning ascribed to 'violence' or 'non-violence', is therefore one of the elements defining the identity of social groups.

⁷ A fact that is well illustrated by J. Spencer, 'Problems in the analysis of communal violence', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* n.s., 26:2, 1992, pp. 261-79.

⁸ On this subject, see the remarkable article by Veena Das on the riots in Delhi in 1984: 'Our work to cry: your work to listen', in Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence*, (*op.cit.*), pp. 345-98.

Constructing identities

Violence, therefore, is a criterion by which groups place themselves in mutual opposition or are opposed from the outside by others. Thus the coalfield studied by Heuzé is seen as a violent place by people living in the surrounding villages. The phenomenon is even more true for castes, as we see in the discourse on witchcraft in Kerala, in which the Brahmans as a group seem radiantly non-violent, whereas the low castes, in contrast, are charged with the worst kinds of occult violence (see Tarabout). It is crucial to note too that the dietary prohibitions specific to each caste are also directly connected with representations of violence (as inflicted on animals in particular), and that these representations — although obviously not only them — are therefore central to the definition of castes and inter-caste relationships. In traditional society, however, the complexity of these representations turns them into an essentially flexible tool for defining identities, which is open to diverse points of view. In some cases, though, group identity has been externally reified, notably by British rule and the western values of which it was a vehicle. Castes in which fighting was highly valued were classified as 'martial', though only if they were of middle or higher status, or 'criminal' if they were of low status. Fourcade's study reveals the stage at which certain castes were simultaneously frozen into a unique role and criminalised, in order to comply at one and the same time with the idea of a uniform ethical code for all, the 'scientific' vision derived from a kind of social biologism vigorous in the period, and the demands imposed by the centralised maintenance order.

Moreover, in its concrete deployment, violence can serve either to constitute or dissolve social ties, and thus contribute to fashioning the social morphology. Three of the studies explicitly place emphasis on this point, although in the majority of the others this aspect of violence is also apparent just below the surface. Vidal demonstrates how the vendettas which make the clans in Himachal Pradesh oppose each other put into play a common ritual and social language, how they depend on rivalries but also on reciprocal obligations between the clans, and how they can be resolved through heroic tales that link together ancient adversaries. Simultaneously, therefore, both fission and fusion are in evidence in these 'chains of vengeance'. The same point is equally stressed in Das and Bajwa's article; as they show, among the Sikhs, these deadly exchanges are distinctive of the

Jats, who are characterised by these particular rifts. Furthermore, the Sikhs as a whole recognise their own unified, collective identity through the martyr, who is another, though inverted, figure of violence.

Finally, Jaffrelot's study of Hindu processions, and their connection with political strategies and communal riots, sheds light on the capacity that violence has for unifying one human group precisely by distinguishing it from others. In fact, this capacity is central to the strategy of radical Hindu militancy. By copying for political demonstrations the model of religious processions — in themselves propitious for a degree of unity among participants — and by provoking, in this setting, violent confrontations with the appointed opponent, the strategy seeks to create a split within the electorate along confessional lines, so as to unite otherwise unconnected 'Hindu' identities.

Conclusion: 'Tradition' and 'Modernity'

It should now be clear that in India the delimitation of meaningless violence, and the valuation or devaluation of non-violence, do not proceed without tensions or contradictions. These exist because of the inevitable disparity of viewpoints among the protagonists, the ideological inscription of violence in power relations, and the diversity of elements within representations of violence. According to the historical period and the context, interpretations and reinterpretations come into play on different levels of discourse, and in varying traditional and institutional frameworks. Thus Das and Bajwa, as well as Fourcade, show how traditional forms of violence (vengeance, banditry) take on a new twist within the judicial system established by the British. Thus, too, Vidal reveals the tensions that can exist, within the same tradition, between interpretations deriving from local versions of the *Mahābhārata*, conceptions purporting to be more 'orthodox' and referring to classical treatises, and modern reinterpretations of the latter.

The ostensible unity that seems to have been effected by the Brahmanical tradition — the key reference point for a major part of the population throughout the centuries — often actually consists of a relativisation and hierarchical gradation of distinct perspectives, and not of their effacement. More so than ritual or social practices in the strict sense of the term, it is common rhetorical forms which are thereby imposed. In the Brahmanical tradition, the high valuation of 'non-violence' — postulated

as superior to violence but not exclusive of it — could not have been the object of any consensus unless it was founded on the diversity of interpretations sanctioned by the polysemy of 'violence' and 'non-violence'. The continuity of the tradition is only made possible by means of these constant reinterpretations; they merge into the tradition and render it increasingly complex, and they also become so much freer because the tradition allows for the retention of contrasting points of view.

A significant reformulation is offered by the seemingly opposed tendencies represented by Gandhian ideas and radical Hindu militancy. Jaffrelot indeed emphasises that the two opposed strategies take up their positions facing a common perception of 'Hindu vulnerability' attributed to social divisions: the one, following Gandhi, strives to transform 'non-violence' into a political weapon, and the other, exemplified by the RSS organisation, seeks to promote a 'new Hindu man', who would be pugnacious and reject political non-violence as an additional sign of weakness. The two opposed viewpoints recreate the 'tradition' while claiming it for themselves; Gandhi's political non-violence is premised on his personal reading of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, in which the need for disinterested warfare is in fact set out,⁹ and the radicals redefine a Hindu man whose principal features have very little to do with the Brahmanical tradition.

In all this, we see a striking fact about the contemporary epoch. By extending the field of non-violence to social action as a whole, within a context in which western values were making progress, Gandhi paradoxically contributed to the development of two poles which tend to be seen in a mutually exclusive and no longer complementary way: it is violence or it is non-violence. This dichotomisation adds up to an extra step in the reinvention of tradition and represents the current stage of a process which has undoubtedly never stopped.

⁹ Several times over, Gandhi felt the need to justify his vision of the *Gītā*, for example in the face of critics who reproached him for taking a 'Christian' approach. Cf. the compilation of his articles in M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma* (Ahmedabad, 1950).