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Shades of Violence in South Asia
Introduction

The present volume of *Cracow Indological Studies* stems from a project focused on the plethora of forms in which violence and aggression manifest themselves in Indian cultural traditions, right from the Vratyas of the Vedas up to the contemporary literary production.[1] Not limited to, but predominantly centred on literary imageries of aggressiveness and violent agency, this project takes into consideration actors as diverse as kings, monastic orders, communities of ascetics dwelling

[1] *Violence: Aggression and Domination in Indian Culture* established under the program "Excellence Initiative—Research University" at the Jagiellonian University for the years 2022–2024. More about the project in Cielas Leão, Pontillo and Sudyka 2024: VI–VIII.

on the margins of the society, religious sects, social movements, poets, saints, intellectuals who struggle to assert their unique agency in face of colonial hybridity (Bhabha 1994), nationalist visionaries who trade ideas across the globe (see Martin Hříbek), but also widows, outcastes, tribals, women, children suffering mistreatment and malnutrition, in other words, all those who find a surrogate voice in writing that has taken upon itself to represent them. Our aim was to scrutinise not only the most conspicuous forms of violence, i.e., physical aggression, but also its pervasive though elusive forms, like systemic and epistemic violence; hence, to foreground our so nuanced inquiry, we opted for 'shades of violence' in the title.

Aggressiveness was always considered an inherent feature of the institution of kingship in India. To administrate and protect their domains, rulers were expected to take recourse to violence. *Arthaśāstra* considers war as one of the tools necessary to rule a kingdom. In the context of linguistically, religiously, and ethnically diverse Indian society, further divided by caste and class, violence intensifies when there is an overlap of different potential reasons for exclusion (gender, age, ethnic, religious, or linguistic identity). Thus, Indian literature and art provide depictions of various manifestations of violence playing out in public and private sphere. Furthermore, the violence exerted by human beings on the non-human world is clearly perceived already in the Vedic period. However, with time, the use and the justification of violence appears to blur in favour of the notion of *ahiṃsā*, first so elaborated around the middle of the 1st millennium BC. Reasonings regarding the subject of just violence and *ahiṃsā* have continued to inform modern Indian debates, among them those on the concept of nation and the anti-colonial struggle as well as the more contemporary engagements like environmental activism.

The legacy of the precolonial and the colonial times continues into the contemporary period, for the state apparatus has institutionalised certain forms of violence, for instance, in dealing with actors perceived as the enemies of the state or its unity, like the freedom fighters in the colonial period or the vocal representatives of ethnic and religious minorities in the North East India or Punjab in the more recent times (see

Maria Puri). Moreover, in contemporary India, some segments of the society employ violence to coerce marginalised or minority groups such as women, Dalits (socially excluded caste groups formerly called 'untouchables') or Adivasis (indigenous peoples) into submission (see Sanjukta Das Gupta). Such structural violence results from the way society functions and is intended to further solidify existing social order, i.e., disciplining certain members of society to maintain prevalent social divisions and the current status quo. As violence tends to intensify at the intersection of gender, age, ethnic, religious, or linguistic identity, etc., Indian literature, including literature belonging to a broad group of texts referred to as 'life writing' (autobiography, biography, diary, memoire, and other akin genres), depicts various aspects of violence: physical, psychological, economic, political, cultural, ethnic, caste, etc.—all playing out in public and private spheres—right from the very subtle to the most drastic forms.

Any inquiry into the notion of violence, regardless of its philosophical, geographical or temporal scope, cannot escape an agent/perpetrator—target/victim like scenario which this notion inherently implies. While such an opposition, of the bearer of violence and the sufferer, is often reduced through a certain kind of moral reasoning to the binary of an evil perpetrator and his innocent victim, it may be easily overlooked that it is the very frames of such a moral reasoning that ultimately bring about change and act as shifters on the stage where the actual acts of violence take place. Those seen as terrorists in the past, like Bhagat Singh, executed by the British authorities in 1931, become officially recognized maverick revolutionaries as the stage shifts. Some of the marginalized of yesteryear gravitate towards the core of the hegemony.

In Walter Benjamin's fatalistic vision, the 'Angel of History,' is forced to fly backwards by the storm from paradise, a metaphor for the idea of linear progress, and is unable to reconstitute the past, which appears to him as a pile upon a pile of debris.[2] The Angel is a disempowered,

[2] Walter Benjamin's famous quote about the Angel of History comes from his 1940 essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: "A Klee painting named *Angelus*

unvoluntary witness to continuous destruction. While this vision may be perhaps one of the most radical takes on the dialectics of violence and progress, Benjamin's critique, however, reifies the idea of linear progress at the same time: the storm is unstoppable because it is blowing from a singular paradise. Such singularity is all but alien to most streams of Indian thought. Evil is never banal (Arendt 1963), which is clear from the narratives of communal riots, gang rapes, or inter-caste violence. On the contrary, it is deeply intimate. Ashish Nandy was perhaps the first thinker to point out this kind of intimacy in showing how colonialism was damaging both to the colonisers and to the colonized, when he rejected "the model of the gullible, hopeless victim of colonialism caught in the hinges of history" (Nandy 1983: 2). More recently, Shruti Kapila (2021) argued that the 1947 Partition was actually a civil war between the intimates—neighbours, friends, and family members—which challenged the notion of violence as external, geopolitical or impersonal. In Kapila's view, fraternity in India was forged through violence among kin, communities, and ideological peers, and intimate enmity has remained at the root of political transformation. Fraternity and fratricide thus become two sides of the same coin, both enabling and damaging the communion. Thinkers like Gandhi, Savarkar, and Iqbal grappled with intimacy as the condition of political belonging, an intimacy that could either lead to ethical solidarity or violent exclusion. Intimacy is what links together domestic violence (Karlekar 1998) with communal riots. The thin thread of intimacy interwoven with danger of violence may be traced not only in the ideas of prominent Indian political thinkers but also in literary representations of convoluted

Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (Benjamin 1968: 257).

relations between castes, genders, religious communities, or state agencies and various marginalised segments of society.

In keeping with the Indian tradition of commentary, ancient heroes and their conflicts are given new expression in contemporary literature and on the silver screen. Marginal characters from the epics evolve from despised sufferers into contemporary heroes, such as the demoness Shurpanakha, dealt with in one of the papers of this volume (see Puja and Nair). The danger that such role reversals pose to the established power structures may be perceived as extremely acute, as a 2018 incident in Maharashtra shows. In protest against the #MeToo movement, a crowd of 'harassed husbands' burned an effigy of Shurpanakha (India Today 2018).

The present volume focuses on such literary representations of violence where nuclear bombs fall in modern Sanskrit poetry (see Hermina Cielas Leão) and more gentle violence speaks of gender anxiety of the Bengali middle class (see Weronika Rokicka). However, this volume does not aim to quantify violence in India or explain its origins (see, for example, Paul Brass 2003 and 2006). Even when it comes to communal violence, this is achieved through poetic witnessing or narrativization (see Monika Browarczyk). The exception to the general focus on literary and political discourses is a reflection on warfare in inscriptions on the medieval South Indian hero-stones (see Daud Ali) and a typology of violence against tribal communities in India, exemplified by the Lodhas of West Bengal (see Sanjukta Das Gupta). Nevertheless, the persistent focus on representations of violent acts, whether symbolic, epistemic, or physical, across various South Asian contexts, lends coherence to the papers in this volume.

Arrangement of the articles in the volume is partly chronological and partly based on the linguistic identities of thinkers and creators of the literary texts under scrutiny here. **Daud Ali**'s essay, "Rural Violence and Warfare in Medieval South India: The Evidence of Hero--Stones", may be seen as a link between the two previous volumes with their focus on ancient and premodern India, and the present one which looks at the more contemporary narratives of violence. Ali's study of hero-stones dating from the 9th to 13th centuries, collected

from the districts of lower Karnataka, provides insights into the violence that was an everyday occurrence in the medieval Karnataka; the sources and the topic itself have received little research attention to date. Building on a thorough typological survey of various kinds of conflicts depicted on hero-stones, Ali attempts to explain why violence was endemic to that society. Not only was the rent collected through the threat of violence, but the trading networks were also protected through force, as was the competition for agrarian resources such as cultivable land, water, and livestock. Interestingly, violence stemmed also from the aspirations of certain groups' representatives, who were driven by the desire to embody the ideal of a hero, or *vīra*. As Ali states, this concept formed the basis of rural nobility and was the foundation of social hierarchy, as well a practice through which individuals and groups sought to aggrandize themselves. He further notes that "the distinction between 'warfare' and 'rural violence' in this society was a matter of degree rather than kind." Earlier researchers have usually focused on royal military campaigns, overlooking the world of struggle and violence that was not recorded in the *praśasti*s of the monarchs, but which may be glimpsed thanks to the extinct hero-stones. A study of hero-stone inscriptions reveals the existence of complex relationships, thus providing a new understanding of the nature of state, society, and conflict in medieval South India. Based on an in-depth analysis of rich sources, i.e., inscriptions collated from the 350 hero-stones located in the districts of Hassan, Mysore and Chamrajnagar, Daud Ali draws attention to these crucial research questions. One must note that the article is accompanied by photographs of eight of the discussed stones, and most of the photographs were taken by the author during his field research.

The subsequent articles in this volume look at violence in the modern world, notwithstanding the fact that some of the featured authors discuss the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* characters (but through the lens of the present-day interpretation), and Sanskrit poetry, a subject which is usually associated with creativity that flourished most prolifically from Kālidāsa to the Indian Medieaval Period. Despite Sheldon Pollock's proclamation of the death of Sanskrit (Pollock 2001),

works written in this language continue to thrive among certain groups of Indian society. **Hermina Cielas Leão** explores this relatively unknown and under-researched body of literature in the article devoted to the theme of violence in the works of Harshdev Madhav, a contemporary poet writing in Sanskrit, the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2006 for his Sanskrit poetry collection *Tava sparśe sparśe*. As Cielas Leão points out, Madhav's Sanskrit poetry covers a wide range of themes. He does not hesitate to address in a poetical manner contemporary issues such as political and social problems or his responses to them. Among his numerous poems, some touch on matters connected to wars, acts of terrorism and other violent events. Although Harshdev Madhav does not reject traditional forms and techniques of classical Sanskrit poetry, he is eager to experiment with new genres and stylistic devices, also in his works dealing with the present-day acts of violence. These include examples of free verse, haiku and typographic poetry. Poems such as the typographical "The Bomb Blast" (*Bāmbavisphoṭaḥ*), poet's reaction to the 1993 Mumbai bomb explosion, or "A Desire for Death" (*Mumūrṣā*) which speaks of a specific form of auto-aggression, namely the suicide, as well as a handful of other poetic texts by Madhav, are translated and analysed by the author of the article. As Cielas Leão sums up, "Harshdev Madhav does not step away from the problematic and difficult topics but embraces them in forms innovative for Sanskrit writing."

"Violence in Modern Indian Thought in the Mirror of World War II" by **Martin Hříbek** scrutinises views on violence as voiced by three leaders of the anti-colonial movement in India, i.e., Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar. Interestingly, Hříbek's focus is on intellectual responses of the three thinkers to the violent turmoil of the World War II in Europe and as how the said intelectuals' reflections on violence of the period speak to violence in modern Indian thought. Hříbek argues that the need to ponder over Indian discourse on violence is even more relevant in the light of present appropriation of the past by the right-wing party in power. Departing from Gandhi's radical views on the notion of the paramountcy of *ahiṃsā* or the passive non-violence resistance

of the Czech people in response to the turbulent developments of 1938 in Czechoslovakia which allowed annexation of a part of its territory by the Nazi Germany, Hříbek makes a thought-provoking observation regarding reception of Gandhi's thought in the West. He writes,

> […] non-violence too cannot be taken as a universal principle, as it floats around a more substantial ontological category of Hindu religious morality, that of purity, a relative quality a degree of which can be attained through iterative acts of cleansing.

For Golwalkar, who also contemplates situation in Czechoslovakia around the same time, violence therein is a natural consequence of the failure of the nation state, which is not homogenous culturally and has to accommodate minorities because of external dictate (i.e., the League of Nations). Lastly, Hříbek follows closely the line of argument of Ghosh, a revolutionary turned a spiritual guru, who, looking at Nazi Germany, condemns false construct of a 'collective subjecthood' which leads to aggression towards 'collective national egos.' The article, among other conclusive statements, declares, "The entire discourse on violence and non-violence thus can be interpreted as a projective exploration of what the dharma of the nation-in-becoming should be."

Weronika Rokicka's analysis of the Bengali feminist author, Bani Basu, and her acclaimed novels focuses on the portrayal of the insidious nature of patriarchy within Kolkata's educated, urban middle class. The paper explores a system of "gentle violence," where psychological manipulation and economic control replace overt physical force and are perpetrated by the so-called respectable husbands. It traces the conventional narrative arc of female protagonists—from submissive wives to self-confident agents of change—who ultimately are forced to pay for their rebellion. A central idea is that "perpetrators of violence are often not stereotypical monsters, but educated, cultured men who use nonphysical means, such as manipulation or humiliation." This subtle abuse is insidiously enabled by a society that values the impeccable image of the ideal family, forcing women to conceal their suffering behind a facade of domestic harmony.

Anna Trynkowska explores the continuity of classical and modern Indian literatures exemplified by Sunil Gangopadhyay's short story "A Bird's Mother" (*Pākhir Mā*). Set in 1960s rural Bengal, it weaves a tragic narrative from the complex interplay of environmental degradation and social injustice. When a young Lodha man, a member of a marginalized indigenous tribe, kills a rare, beautiful white crane for food, his act provokes a brutal massacre of the Lodha community by the outraged villagers. The paper offers a compelling analysis, suggesting the story is a modern reinterpretation of the ancient *krauñca-vadha* episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The author exposes societal hypocrisy, showing how the agricultural community "dehumanizes the landless indigenous people, placing them on the same level as wild animals, and even at that level treats them as 'others.'" This dehumanization justifies violence, revealing a stark contrast between the reverence for the endangered wildlife and the indifference towards equally vulnerable human beings.

Poems written in response to the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 are explored by **Danuta Stasik** in her article "Poetry on Combat for Secularism and Democracy: Witnessing Ayodhya 1992." Stasik provides an in-depth analyses of Hindi poems found in two collections, i.e., *Apnī zabān* and *Yah aisā samay hai,* both edited by Asad Zaidī and Viṣṇu Nāgar, and published in 1994. (The first volume contains some Urdu poems, too, and they are published in the Devanagari script.) Stasik's is the very first attempt at the analysis of poetic expressions that were penned and published in reaction to the said event which marked the climax of an aggressive right-wing campaign that redefined politics of post-independence India and ensured power for the conservative forces. The volumes in focus were published by the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust created in 1989 to "resist the forces threatening the essentially pluralist and democratic spirit of creative expression" (https://sahmat.in/aboutsahmat.html). Poems in *Apnī zabān*, authored by eighty-four poets, were selected from texts received in response to newspaper calls for anti-communal works; these were further supplemented by contribution from some well-known poets, like Śamśer Bahādur Siṁh and Nāgārjun. The second collection, titled after a poem

of Manglesh Dabral, presents poems by hundred and five poets and intends to be "A Selection of Contemporary Hindi Poetry" as stated in the subtitle. However, the poems therein, too, were selected by editors with a view to safeguard democracy and secularism. Stasik analyses themes and motifs found in the collected poems and organises them into five thematic groups, which are later exemplified by quotations of relevant verses. In the concluding paragraph, Stasik underlines the fact that the collected verses are to be viewed as a response to violence by 'poet-witnesses' and 'poet-citizens', and that these poetic responses offer them and their readership an "escape from the memory of lived trauma or the fear of living through it again."

"How to speak of the unspeakable," asks **Monika Browarczyk** in her thoughtfully constructed article that examines how Hindi novels narrate the largely silenced, gendered violence of the 1947 Partition. She argues that literature provides a crucial space to confront this silenced history by moving beyond official accounts that sanitized the trauma inflicted on women. The argument is built on an extensive primary material with special reference to Geetanjali Shree's award-winning *Ret Samādhi* (2018), Yashpal's *Jhuṭhā sac* (1958), Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1973), and *Gujrāt pakistān se gujrāt hindustān* (2017) by Krishna Sobti. Two older novels by male writers, Yashpal and Sahni, thus stand juxtaposed to the more recent renditions of the gendered violence of Partition by the two female authors, Shree and Sobti. Regarding Shree, the analysis highlights innovative, intertextual technique, e.g., a surreal scene at the Wagah border where "the writers, the literary protagonists, and the writings themselves" converge. This metanarrative creates a powerful, multi-layered dialogue with the past, forcing a re-examination of the foundational violence underlying our understanding of the Partition. The paper thus explores how Hindi fiction serves as a vital medium for working through the complex, intergenerational legacy of the Partition, giving voice to experiences long shrouded in silence.

Maria Puri's "Reading Between the Lines: Dalip Kaur Tiwana's Reflections on Dissent and Violence in *Jimī̃ puchai āsmān*" examines violence in contemporary Punjab as narrated by a leading Punjabi

woman writer in a novel that employs rich intertextual references. In the opening section of her article, Puri presents biography of Dalip Kaur Tiwana and thus introduces her milieu and oeuvre. She then provides historical background of the 1947 Partition and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, the 'critical events' (c. Das 1995) crucial to understanding the process of identity formation of the Sikh community both in India and in the diaspora. Puri foregrounds these events as the historical frame of reference for the novel in focus. Examining novel's structure and timeline, she considers topics, which are omitted or merely alluded to, in other words, left for the audience to be read in between the lines. Needless to say, these omissions and allusions are directly connected to the history of violent and traumatic events at the centre of the novel. Reflections on the genre of *Jimī̃ puchai āsmān* follow, fictionality of the work is questioned as Puri proposes to read it as a part of 'serial autobiography' project (after Gilmore 2001) in view of other works by Dalip Kaur Tiwana. Interestingly, Puri references the underlying theme of the novel in focus by looking at other texts of culture that are grounded in the narratives of violence seminal to Punjab, namely a painting *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (*The Storming of the Golden Temple*) of 1998 by Amrit and Rabindra Kaur Singh) and a feature film (*Chauthi Koot* of 2015, based on Waryam Singh Sandhu's short stories published in 1998); these further contextualise the impact of violence on collective Sikh memory and on the novel under analysis. She likewise introduces Sikh scriptures as yet another significant frame of reference for reading the work in focus. To conclude, Puri links distinctiveness of *Jimī̃ puchai āsmān* directly to violence as it boils down to "its historical setting and its reticence to speak directly of violence even when it is violence that dominates the scene and informs all social interaction".

Only two of the articles in the volume do not pertain solely to literary production. One of them, authored by **Sanjukta Das Gupta**, namely "Violence and the Marginalized: The Lodhas of West Bengal," is a well-researched case study of the intersection of epistemic, structural and everyday violence against the Lodhas right from the colonial period, with the Lodhas, starting from 1916 till post-independence or

1952, being categorised as a 'criminal tribe' (see Trynkowska's article as another one that refers to a literary portrayal of the Lodhas). Despite the abolition of the category, Das Gupta argues that the community is still ostracised and hence remains one of the most backward Adivasi communities of Bengal. Moreover, it is stigmatised by both the so-called upper-castes and the marginalised communities including other Adivasis. The Lodhas, along with all Adivasi groups, remain targets of epistemic violence; moreover, with a view to further exploitation, are being notoriously branded as irrational, backward and violent. To start with, Das Gupta studies the history of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and its amendments, and maps the dynamics of Lodha's changing categorisations since the nineteenth century, from the criminal tribe to the de-notified tribe (1952), to the scheduled caste (1951), to the scheduled tribe (1957), to the Primitive Tribal Group (1969) and, finally, to the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (2006). She further scrutinises both acts of violence that the Lodhas suffered in the second half of the twentieth century and the community's proactive engagement with counteractions. In her analysis Das Gupta foregrounds,

> […] the multi-dimensional forms of violence against Lodhas which emerged from the systemic set-up of interaction among different social groups and is manifested through political-economic oppression and social inequality.

Importantly, she argues that in case of the Lodhas, it is "[the] epistemic violence [that] lies at the root of the structural violence as well as their lived experience of everyday forms of violence." The literary source that the article refers to as a witness testimony attesting to various forms of violence experienced by the Lodhas is *Ātmakathā (My Story)* of 1992, the autobiography of the first woman graduate of the community, Chuni Kotal, who later committed suicide unable to cope with continued stigmatization. It likewise discusses writings of Mahashveta Devi, a woman author who towered over Bengali literary scene, and whose texts sensitized readers to the plight of the Adivasis.

The final article in the present volume focuses on Indian literature in English and is authored by **S. Puja**. The paper uses the *rasa* theory to explore the psyche of Shoorpanakha (Skt. Śurpaṇakhā), a character in the modern English-language play, *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*, written by Indian playwright, Poile Sengupta. In her play, Sengupta addresses the issue of subjugation based on class and gender, advocating for the fair treatment of the so-called villainous characters from the epics of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[3] In her opinion it is the emotional journey of Śurpaṇakhā and Śakuni, that enables them to reclaim their voice and agency through emotions, reshaping their identity beyond the conventional portrayal of vengeful villains. In the present study, S. Puja examines the character of Śūrpaṇakhā through the lens of Bharata's *rasa–bhāva* theory.[4] Rather than treating it as a static aesthetic tool, the author uses that theory as a dynamic emotional framework to re-evaluate how affect, agency and narrative voice function in Poile Sengupta's play. The author convincingly argues that the *rasa* theory can be used effectively to identify the internal complexity of a character, offering a fresh perspective on the emotional experiences of marginalised voices in traditional patriarchal narratives, highlighting issues of gender, power, and social exclusion. While the epic tradition portrays Śūrpaṇakhā as emotionally inert, Sengupta's play reorders the production of *rasa*, thereby restoring emotional legitimacy to this female character from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. As S. Puja admits, "By doing so, *rasa* transcends its classical function, engaging with deeper emotional experiences and societal realities."

In the three consecutive issues of the journal *Cracow Indological Studies* (volumes 1 and 2 of the 2024 and the current issue), the authors

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[3] Sengupta's play is one of many contemporary works that feature marginalised characters from Sanskrit epics, or reinterpret their content, e.g.: the short stories collected in *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana* (Menon and Singh 2012); a play "Kanchana Sita" by Sreekantan Nair (2005); or a novel *Sita's Ascent* by Vayu Naidu (2012).

[4] The theory of *rasa* has already formed the basis for analyses of contemporary literary works and films, enough to mention Edwin Gerow' study "Rasa and Katharsis: A Comparative Study, Aided by Several Films" (Gerow 2002).

presented twenty-nine articles depicting various aspects of violence in Indian culture. The articles span different regions of India, draw on literature and documents in many Indian languages, and travel across time, right from the Vedic period to the present day. We hope that further engagements with the plethora of complex problems highlighted in our three-volume contribution will continue in the future, improving our current understanding of various forms of violence in India.

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