# Violence, Crisis, and the Everyday

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An important issue in considering violence at both the conceptual and empirical levels is the question of what counts as "violence" and how it is acknowledged. In many polities of the Middle East, including Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan, there is no clear boundary between war and peace. Conflicts have lasted over a long period and even the project of securing a future in which the struggle for decolonization and political autonomy can be kept alive faces enormous hurdles as everyday life is corroded by betrayals, accusations, and the sheer exhaustion of keeping political energies from waning. Most acute observers of prolonged conflicts recognize the corrosive effects of these conflicts on everyday life. In this brief thought piece, I want to reflect on one aspect of the problem: that of the relation between sexual violence as an aspect of dramatic and spectacular violence—in wars (including modern ones), pogroms against ethnic or religious minorities, or episodes of lethal riots between sectarian groups—and everyday forms of sexual violence that could be both part of the public domain and constitutive of domestic intimacy. Said otherwise, I am interested in how experience of violence travels from one threshold of life to another.

In my earlier work I wrote on the mass violence experienced during the Partition of India in 1947 by shifting the scholarly gaze from the stories of horror in which bodies were mutilated, women were raped, men were castrated to the work of time through which I describe how everyday acts of care, small in themselves, allowed life to be knitted together, pair by pair in a viable rhythm.[1] I also showed how the category of violence absorbed violent acts both against an enemy other and against intimate others such as sisters, daughters, and wives. I argued that narratives of Partition among the Punjabi survivors rendered the killing of close female relatives not as "violence" but as the terrifying obligation that norms of kinship and honor imposed on men. The affects that saturated the narration of these two kinds of violence were completely different.[2] However, while I was able to show how women who had absorbed the violence recreated life with a small l, I was not able to decipher how those who had raped and plundered women from other groups or killed their own beloved female kin carried these memories within themselves. Did they experience the self as completely discontinuous or was there a sense of continuity? There is some limited evidence that after the period of violence was "over," so to say, and both countries had returned to a semblance of normality, cases of rape sometimes came up before the courts and were explained during the trials as the "remainders" of the violence to which some men had become habituated because of the disorder of the Partition riots. I would have liked to think of conceptual frames through which such questions could be carried further.

Allow me the indulgence of some speculation here. For the last year, large cities in India, including Delhi, have become fearsome places for women as instances of gang rapes performed in public places surface with stunning regularity. The groups of men who perpetrate this violence manage to pick up girls and women from different locales;

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it could be a middle-class woman returning from work or a student going home with her boyfriend after a film or even a five-year-old daughter of a neighbor. Very often the groups of men include some minors whose actions turn out to be even more brutal than those of the adult men. One characteristic of this violence is that the men come largely from the low-income slums or shanty clusters. It is not that upper-class men do not engage in violence but that their acts are performed in more discrete places or do not come up in the public sphere and thus do not attract media coverage.

While attention has been rightly directed toward reform of the law to punish the perpetrators of rape and ensure greater security of women, I am haunted by the question of what makes boys as young as fourteen engage in such horrendous acts of violence. I wonder if the Hindu–Muslim riots that punctuate the life of cities can be circumscribed in time; do they have a beginning and an end or do they mutate into other forms of violence so that the freedom to rape women during the riots becomes a kind of male bonding that persists beyond the time of the riots? In the case of the Partition of India, Saumitra Jha and Steven Wilkinson have shown that those districts in the Punjab where disbanded soldiers from the British army were present saw greater violence than did other districts.[3] This is an important finding but the authors explain the difference entirely in terms of the capabilities of these soldiers to organize violence; they do not ask, what would explain the brutality of the violence? The question of rape and mutilation of women's bodies is completely eclipsed in this analysis. Unfortunately the discussion by Jha and Wilkinson gets completely caught into the presumed superiority of quantitative over qualitative methods and hence makes no reference to the important issue: what led to the brutality with which people were killed and women raped? While the geography of violence is very important to show, I do not think that the competence to organize violence is at the heart of the matter.

More specific research questions need to be asked about the functioning of gender in the lives of young men implicated in brutal sexual violence, of the kind we have seen in Delhi, enacted secretly but in public places. During a discussion with young male adolescents from one of the slums in Delhi that was organized by a nongovernmental organization, I was stunned to discover that none of the boys admitted to having experienced any friendship or feeling of closeness with a girl—not even with a sister, a cousin, or a friend's sister, never mind the possibility of befriending a girl. The conditions in the shanty clusters in which they lived were such, they said, that they spent most of their time roaming the streets when they were not at work or school. Even being seen talking to a girl would lead to admonishments from the elders, so where could they find the opportunity to forge friendships across gender, they asked? It was not that boys and girls never had affairs, but these were often based on little real acquaintance with each other: a few text messages, a few notes clandestinely smuggled, and then the "affair" would move to an elopement or end with a parent's discovery and a sound thrashing of the boy and the girl. Some marriages did result from these love affairs and were successful, but more often the possibility of such affairs simply resulted in deep suspicion about girls and a surveillance over their everyday activities.

Parents often complained to me that the environment (*mahaul*) of the slums was pernicious for adolescent boys. Complaints of *awragardi*, referring to a footloose form of living in which one fails to take up any responsibilities, were ubiquitous. What happens to ideas of masculinity when young men drift from one kind of provisional

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job to another? One of the things that gang rapes in Delhi have brought forth are the peculiar forms of bonding between older men and young boys. From the testimonies in courts that are emerging we now see that these groups of men—with ten to twenty years' difference in their respective ages—often went in search of prostitutes together. The minors were often away from home or were not integrated in the home. I think that the seeds for the breakdown of relations between generations are there even if they have not taken the lethal forms they have in places like the Congo or Sierra Leone, where witchcraft accusations against children or accusations of neglect against older generations seem to take vicious forms.

In societies caught in wars or insurgencies where there is an overwhelming dominant presence of an occupying force or highly fraught relations with a state experienced as a hostile external entity, the problems are perhaps of a different order. It is extremely hard to acknowledge that the freedom fighter honored for his heroism in the public domain might also be an abuser in the domestic domain. Given the long history of the civilization discourse of "saving women from their own men" that occupying powers have used to legitimize their own violence, what is known in India and elsewhere as the "woman question" becomes completely embroiled in other questions related to national pride or the sovereignty of a community. There are no "innocents" here, for those who seek to rescue women from their own men are no less suspect. The result is that the focus moves from the actual problematic of women who are sexually abused in the scene of intimate violence, or who experience violations of sexual integrity even within revolutionary movements, to that of the structures of justification and denial in the larger political discourse. If I were to name one question that needs consistent work in the context of prolonged violence, I would say that it is the issue of intersecting scales through which gender violence is given actual shape in such societies. Whether the scene is of a gang rape in Delhi or abuse faced by women protestors in Cairo or the silence around the burdens of continuing to love absent husbands who are prisoners in the struggle for Palestine, I feel that the question of gender, sexuality, and relations between generations should become an integral part of the scholarly and public discourse within and outside these societies so that the definition of violence itself expands to include the normal and the critical, the everyday and the event, within its ambit.

## NOTES

[1]See Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, Calif.: California University Press, 2007).

[2]Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3]Saumitra Jha and Steven Wilkinson, "Does Combat Experience Foster Organizational Skill? Evidence of Ethnic Cleansing during the Partition of South Asia," *American Political Science Review* 106 (2012): 883–907.

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