

**Indian theological Association (ITA) 2011 Statement
VIOLENCE IN TODAY'S SOCIETY
AN INDIAN THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE**

1. We, the members of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) gathered in the National, Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), Bangalore during May 23–27, 2011 to consider and deliberate the theme of the yearly ITA seminar: "Violence in Today's Society: An Indian Theological Response." The theme was chosen because of the violence caused by warring nations, fundamentalist and extremist groups, individuals who harbour a gender bias, opposing forces in the state-sponsored operation Green Hunt, Multinational Corporations with an eye on profits, and persons in general who are intolerant of others and try to eliminate those who do not conform to their own views.

2. Violence appears in many and diverse forms. The end result, however, is frequently a diminishing of humanness in the world of men and women, disruption and destruction of community life and activities, and a future that is bleak and closed to transcendence. Violence is also seen as the harmful use of force by a person or group against another person or group. Unease concerning violence arises because it usually sets in motion a train of happenings that are unpredictable and fortuitous. The quantum of injury, hurt and despair caused to the victims of violence, especially the weak and children, is immeasurable.

3. Our reflection led us to examine the different contexts in which violence has been unleashed on defenceless persons and groups, and on the underprivileged sections of society: the Dalits, Tribals, women and children. Our deliberations made us aware of the underlying and overt causes of such violence, their ramifications and the need to respond to their ever-increasing menace. Our response as theologians obliges us to understand and articulate how religion can be a force that counteracts or minimizes violence in its damaging forms. Our response included some concrete ways in which we can deal effectively with violence that negates life for many and destroys the humanness which characterises men and women as images of God.

I. THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE

4. We are situated in the context of an unjust structure caused by free market globalization and capitalism. The structure permits the free movement of capital that is profitable to a few but damaging to the vast majority of people who lack the basic amenities of life. Besides, those who make profits frequently do so at the expense of justice and the environment. In the process, large numbers of the marginalized, rural poor, Dalits, Tribals and fisher people are slowly being killed. Their deaths reflect a sinister violence perpetrated in our society. The following sections itemize those groups of people where the damaging impact of violence can be clearly seen.

5. **The Adivasis:** The concept of development and effective governance as understood by the profit-oriented ruling elites is very different from that of the Adivasis who are accustomed to a participatory mode of decision-making and an egalitarian sharing of resources: food, water, land and labour. In fact, the state apparatus itself sees the need for necessary measures to protect the rights of Adivasis. For example, the *Draft of Mines and Minerals Bill 2010* seeks to provide 26 % shares in the mining companies for people holding traditional rights to the land. Even so, thousands are displaced and many are killed in the crossfire between armed Maoists and the state forces. The issues of unemployment, impoverishment, deprivation of land and the denial of basic amenities remain unsolved. In general, Adivasis suffer from the cruelty of neglect and the violence of dispossession.

6. **Dalits:** Caste-based hierarchies as well as class-based stratification have wrecked Dalits. Many Dalits still endure acute poverty and are routinely deprived of their dignity as human beings. Often, educational facilities are denied them so that they remain illiterate and are forced to become bonded labourers. On occasion, they are driven to suicide since opportunities for leading a dignified existence are denied them. Violence is perpetrated on Dalit groups in two ways: at times they are reviled not only as insurgents fomenting sedition and guilty of treachery, but also as rebels who subvert the caste order that is advantageous to the concerned authorities. Perpetuation of social stereotypes of inferiority—by referring to them as polluted, untouchables, impure, low and backward—leads to feelings of self-hatred, humiliation and isolation and affects the self-image of Dalits. They are demonized frequently as politically violent, culturally vile and constituting a problem of law and order.

7. **Women:** Violence is a persistent, multi-layered and undeniable reality for women and cuts across communities, class, and caste. In 2008, the National Crimes Record Bureau reported 21,000 rapes, 23,000 kidnappings and abductions, 8000 dowry deaths, 81,000 tortures and 40,000 molestation cases. The Domestic Violence Act 2006 defines violence against women in all its dimensions: physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic. Women suffer from verbal aggression to severe abuse—marital rape—in many families, and in circumstances where they should feel most safe — their homes! Sexual violence becomes the means for taking revenge or

intimidating others as was seen in the Godhra carnage, the Khandamal riots, and other caste-related conflicts, where women's bodies and their sexuality became the targets of violence. Certain socio-cultural traditions deprive women of property rights, and dowry deaths continue despite legal measures. In this context it should be admitted that in the Church there are cases of clerical arrogance against women religious in which sacraments are denied to them as punishment for real or imagined slights. The 2011 Census Report shows an appallingly skewed sex ratio of 914 females to 1000 males despite stringent legislation being passed like the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (PNDT Act) in 1994. In limiting their growth to the boundaries set by gender norms, e.g., merely nurturing, caring and pleasure-giving bodies, and in their refusal to recognize and realise their spiritual and intellectual potential, women do violence against themselves.

8. **Children:** Children are the future of society but also easy targets of violence. Corporal punishment meted out to school-going children continues in our days. They also suffer from discrimination in school because of caste or gender. Some are maltreated in their own homes and run away to escape further physical harm and humiliation. Unscrupulous persons are known to harass and intimidate children so that even suicide becomes a desirable option. Sexual exploitation (sex tourism) leaves children severely damaged psychologically. In recent years, child abuse in Church-related institutions has drawn attention to the vulnerability of children and the misuse of religious authority.

9. **In General:** No single theory suffices to explain the phenomenon of violence present in today's society. The situations in which violence occurs are complex. While biology and culture may help us to understand the origin of violence, many other factors like dominant power structures, economic deprivation and political expediency are responsible for the presence of violence in our times.

10. While violence can be described as force that is used to achieve a particular goal, it can also refer to the force that is found in nature, e.g. the severity of a storm that brings death and destruction in its wake. Violence as forceful action can be justified in self-defence, protection of property or in a struggle for survival but often enough violence is, in fact, the abusive, damaging, destructive, illegitimate and unjust use of power.

II. RESPONDING THEOLOGICALLY TO CONTEXTUAL VIOLENCE

11. In responding to violence in today's society, we seek the help of religion. The spirituality of religion emphasizes values that bind together the members of a community. The experience of the divine influences their ethics and fosters a life-style that enables persons to commune with the divine and be at peace with their neighbour.

12. One could question whether violence must necessarily be understood as fundamentally perverse? Or rather, is it to be understood as a neutral or good force that can be distorted in a perverse manner? In today's world,

violence is often seen as an easy way to attain goals even though it disregards human rights, the voice of reason and values that speak of justice and peace.

13. While the First Testament is noticeably violent, the divine condemnation against injustice is powerfully brought out in the great prophetic texts. These castigate the priests, princes and false prophets for abusing their privileged position for amassing wealth, power and prestige rather than humbly and justly serving the poor of Yahweh. (Micah 3:9-12; 6:8; Amos 1:6-8) Jesus, the proclaimer of “*shalom*” stands in the great tradition of these prophets. (Jer 1:10) What makes violence sinful is its destructive force that opposes the creative and liberative divine purpose.

14. In the person of Jesus Christ, one can note the passage to his death as being also the road to victory, for in dying he attains eternal life. Jesus’ Incarnation means that he enters the world of violence to transform it into a world of dignity and fullness of life for all. He achieves this through deconstruction of what is ungodly and contrary to the will of God.

15. Jesus Christ encounters violence in his life by being faithful to his God-given mission. In true freedom and love, and animated by God’s Spirit, he confronts various forms of violence. Proclaiming God’s reign of love he fights evil even to the extent of becoming a victim of violence. In doing so Jesus takes upon himself violence and overcomes it by refusing to yield to its power. In this sense, Jesus practised paradoxically a ‘violence of love’. His options and actions are vindicated by God who raises him up from the dead by the power of the Spirit.

16. The ‘violence of love’ in the context of oppression takes the form of resistance, protest, *satyagraha*, standing for justice. It is seen as active and empathetic solidarity with those whose human dignity and personhood are violated. Jesus’ liberative engagement is not merely “suffering for others” but positively acting against oppression—he suffered as a result of his protest and not because of his passive submission. The violent death of Jesus becomes the price he pays for accepting his mission. Often, interpreting the cross as a symbol of passive submission has become instrumental in subduing the “rage of protest” with which many oppressive and violent situations can be actually overcome.

17. With his teachings and praxis and his genuine solidarity with the victims of violence, Jesus put forth his own ways of deploying force to challenge the scribal interpretation of law and bring back the temple to its pristine purity. He reversed the entire value system upheld by the legalistic elite and imperial autocracy that tyrannized ordinary people. What mattered to him was the uncompromising criterion of promotion and protection of life when it was endangered. He was not preoccupied with evolving leisurely discourses on the virtues of non-violence, or the vices of violence as the starting point of getting engaged with the life-struggles of the victims of violence. The programme of a liberative theology addressing violence would

also involve a theology of resistance. It is a subversive theology, emerging from the voices and struggles of women and men who have become the victims of violence. It is founded on the conviction that it is collective resistance, not compliance, that can purge the destructive venom of violence from the lives of people.

18. In the history of the Catholic Church, one can note times during which violence obscured the saving and liberating action of God. The post-Constantine era saw the Church put on the trappings of a secular monarchy and become intolerant towards other religions within the Roman Empire. One also recalls the violence done to the Easterners by the crusade in 1204. Nor can the violence of the Inquisition be forgotten. As a sociological entity, the Church also embraced the structural violence that was endemic to the society of succeeding ages.

19. The Church did reform and the many saints and persons who denounced violence testify to the continuing action of God in the world of men and women. In 1994, Pope John Paul II wrote a letter of apology to women. In 2000, he sought forgiveness for the violence committed by the Church down the centuries particularly for abetting forms of racism and colonialism, discriminating against women, denigrating the religion of others and causing division in the Churches.

20. Opposition to violence must bring peace but peace cannot be obtained without ensuring justice. To end violence, sincere efforts are necessary to secure justice for the victims of violence. Further, a person is not a mere object; he or she is a human person of transcendence so that to be human is not a matter of merely having food and drink and shelter but the ability to freely choose and follow one's vocation.

21. In this on-going struggle against violence we need to identify its varied forms. It is necessary to distinguish between an oppressive or repressive violence that maintains and perpetuates structures of injustice, and 'violence' that seeks justice. Such identification takes into consideration the asymmetry of power relations between the conflicting groups as well as the concrete socio-cultural situation of the victims of violence. Such awareness would preclude promoting a culture of injustice for the sake of being non-violent or endorsing violence in the name of promoting justice.

22. A theology of protest and resistance, truth and reconciliation – modelled upon Gandhiji's *satyagraha*, animated by genuine love and empowered by God's Spirit could become a reminder to people of their enslavement, and engage them constructively in a critical reflection of what is considered crucial and decisive to their lives.

23. A theological engagement with violence implies a re-envisioning of life as a new tapestry rewoven with strands of justice and peace in place of torture and distress. Confronting violence proactively can mean taking a political stand. In this is realized the politics of the Reign of God initiated by Jesus in the power of the Spirit blowing where it wills. (Jn 3:8).

III. COURSES OF ACTION

24. To bring about an end to violence, one must take sides with its victims, construct plans for actions of protest, and undertake efforts to deconstruct violent discourses, ideologies and systems so as to reconstruct persons, communities and systems according to the divine plan. The function of theology is not only to explain the reality of violence and human suffering but it must necessarily lead to action and the transformation of the world. Inspiring examples exist in our history: Buddha's movement of non-violent *dharma*, Jesus' praxis for the Reign of God, Gandhi's *ahimsa*, Ambedkar's movement for securing justice for Dalits, Birsa Munda's efforts to emancipate the Adivasis, and others.

25. Since the venom of violence has spread and affected many areas of human life—personal, interpersonal, social and political—remedial actions are to be taken starting from the basic micro level of personal correction, integration, inner healing, peace and reconciliation. Discovering the roots of humanness within oneself becomes thus a prerequisite to create conditions for transforming others and society at large. This process involves a deconstruction of inherited and learned prejudices against fellow human beings especially on the basis of sex and colour, caste and socio-economic status. It requires developing and practising spiritualities that can empower us for greater commitment.

26. Only persons who have overcome their personal prejudices and healed their inner wounds can stand up against violence around them and engage themselves creatively in the process of social reconstruction and transformation. Fighting against violence of all forms must be a disinterested and selfless action which springs up from the wellsprings of love and compassion.

27. The massive violence that victimizes countless numbers of voiceless people is perpetrated by social, political, economic and even religious structures and well-organized power centres which cannot be dismantled by individual efforts. Structural violence is subtle but deeply rooted and widely spread in the veins and capillaries of social life. Fortunately the human conscience is often awakened by many charismatic leaders who lead peoples' movements to counter the unjust structures and forces of violence with peaceful means of resistance. It is our Christian duty to support them with active participation in such movements like *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (NBA), *Control Arms Foundation of India* (CAFI), *International Active Network on Small Arms* (IANSA), *Men Against Violence and Abuse* (MAVA), etc.

28. As far as the Church is concerned, various forms of structural violence occur in the form of clericalism, gender discrimination, suppression of lay participation, ritualism and authoritarianism. There should be more scope for introspection and openness to criticism and greater appreciation of lay leadership. In the clerical pastoral formation the ideal of servant leadership should be promoted and the spirit of domination discouraged. There is

urgent need of a paradigm shift in the concept of authority in the Church which enjoys unquestioned and oppressive power with little accountability to the people of God.

29. No occasion should be missed to express solidarity with the oppressed, marginalized and underprivileged sections of the people in their struggle for justice and liberation from inhuman oppression. Effective programmes for building up awareness concerning the victims of different forms of violence should be an integral part of ethical, liturgical, religious and catechetical formation given to the young generation.

30. Violence in all its forms should be condemned and there should be immediate expressions of solidarity, concern and support to reassure the victims. The extremist Maoist violence cannot be justified even though their struggle for a just society is legitimate. At the same time, the encounter killings of militants and the type of violence resorted to by the state (Green Hunt) are unacceptable and merit condemnation. Resources are wasted in the production of weapons, especially nuclear weapons, and the arms race. In facing the evil of violence, the Church needs to join other groups of goodwill. Theological training and catechesis must insist on the true function of proclamation of the good news and support action that brings liberty and emancipation to those who suffer.

IV. CONCLUSION

31. Violence has affected our society in a variety of ways. It is an evil that has damaged individuals and communities. It comes to us in terror strikes and brings insecurity to all who would rather live in peace. It cuts across religious boundaries and no community or society by itself can hope to minimize its impact. Condemnation of violence by social and religious communities is not enough; what is needed is collaboration of different communities in overcoming violence and assuring the rights of all people in the building of a just society.

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