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Thoughts, Ideologies and Public Policies

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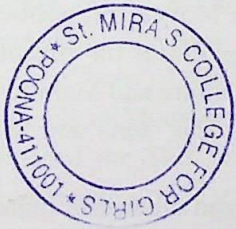
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*- Chief & Executive Editor*



*Jayab*  
**Principal Incharge**  
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**Is Non-Violence relevant in the Age of Violent Politics?**  
 (Reference to Violent Identity Politics in Maharashtra)

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**Abstract:**

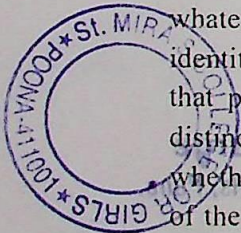
*Politics is the struggle for power. How to achieve this power, by what means and how to use this power have been intriguing questions since the existence of man-kind. Political thinkers have advocated numerous theories on power and justified various means to achieve power and have also recommended justifiable use of this power. These theories have to be studied keeping in mind the age, time and place as to when and where they were formulated. Theories tend to be understood subjectively and according to one's own perceptions. The means to achieve power and the end, which is use of power have been elaborately been discussed by thinkers like Karl Marx and Mahatma Gandhi. Contemporary students of political science have always tried to find answers to contemporary problems in these age-old theories. One such problem is the problem of violence in achieving power by political parties and use of violence in politics of identity. This paper intends to discuss violence and politics of identity in Maharashtra and try to locate if non-violence is still relevant in the political sphere.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Crisis, Belongingness, Violent Politics, Non-violence

**Introduction:**

Identity politics has become an important feature of political activities and political mobilization all over the world. It has also been a prominent subject of discussion in Indian politics. Rise of low castes, religious identities, linguistic groups and ethnic conflicts have contributed to its significance in India. Violence is being used by different groups to achieve the fulfilment of demands by combining orchestrated public outrage and coercion. Such violence has found support of political parties, civil organizations as well as general public. Maharashtra has witnessed politics of Marathi identity. The Samyukta Maharashtra Movement, politics of Shiv Sena and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) - all formulate a platform for enhancement of identity politics with enforcing the ideas of Marathi pride, Marathi culture and Marathi language. Use of violence in this context by two regional political parties- Shiv Sena and MNS is the discussion of this paper.

"Identity politics signifies a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups". These social groups are defined by their identity which is usually based on race, ethnicity, gender, language or religion or whatever identity that the person understands to be his identity. A person may have multiple identities but it is the identity which he or she recognizes to be the important one that determines that person's identity. "Identity politics promotes difference and separateness to stress one's distinct identity. People getting together and mobilizing on the basis of a common identity, whether race, ethnicity, gender, caste or religion, to put forth their demands or assert their rights of the State and society is termed identity politics". Identity politics is demand for recognition, and we have seen it emerge in both developing and developed nations. It is a way to achieve





empowerment, recognition and political representation for social groups by using the very same characteristics that distinguished and differentiated them from the others and make use of those differences to achieve separate identity rather than achieve equality. In India identity politics based on religion, caste, language, ethnicity or tribal identity can be easily identified. Sometimes one of these factors is solely responsible and sometimes they are responsible in combination to each other.

### Marathi Identity

The politics of India was characterized with the politics of language in the early period of independence. The citizens of India demanded to be organized on the basis of language. Linguistic agitations could be seen in many states. The Marathi speaking population demanded and agitated for the state of Maharashtra with the inclusion of Marathi speaking territories in India. The Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti was formed to agitate and fight for the unilingual state of Maharashtra with Mumbai (Bombay) as its capital.

The state of Maharashtra was formed in 1960 after a series of violent demonstrations by Marathi speaking people. These people formed the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti and led a movement called Samyukta Maharashtra Movement (United Maharashtra movement). This movement started off with peaceful agitations but when their demands were neglected and the demand for Andhra Pradesh was accepted the agitation took a violent turn. This agitation characterizes formation of a Marathi identity by instilling the idea of regional pride and linguistic affiliations.

With the formation of the state in 1960, the Marathi speaking population created their distinct identity as 'Marathis' as the movement stressed the idea of Marathis being a distinct group with different characteristics, literary and symbolic affiliations in the language. Marathi leaders, authors, literature, culture, customs and traditions were highlighted and encouraged during this period. This 'Marathi identity-asmita' created during that period has since then played an important role in politics of Maharashtra.

The Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti formed during this period was a united front of all opposition parties who led the agitations for a united Maharashtra. After 1960s however the influence of the Samiti decreased. The Shiv Sena was formed against this background in Maharashtra. The Shiv Sena started as a nativist organization fighting for the rights of what it called the 'sons of the soil'. It took an aggressive stand against the outsiders- the south Indian population in Mumbai. This idea received huge response and with this support Bal Thackeray established the Shiv Sena. Shiv Sena was thus born out of the feeling of resentment about marginalization of Marathis in Mumbai. The party in the 1980s focused on Hindu identity but today we find them focusing on and switching between both the Marathi and the Hindu identity. According to Prof. Suhas Palshikar, Shiv Sena's functioning depended on two characteristics- oratory and mass hysteria. Speeches were characterized by volatile language, aggressive communication skills and aggressive challenges for Shiv sainiks. According to Eckert, the organization's use of violence appealed to its followers. Action orientation with simplified plausibility of ideological position made Shiv Sena's appeal very attractive and easy to serve- easy to consume. Violence thus played an important role in creating and stabilizing the idea of Marathi identity which was formed during the Samyukta Maharashtra movement and utilized by Shiv Sena



This issue of Marathi pride was ignited again by establishment of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) in 2006. Raj Thackeray, nephew of Bal Thackeray formed MNS after splitting the Shiv Sena. It started with the development plank and an all-inclusive agenda but changed this stance in 2008. The party aggressively put forth the agenda of Marathi identity. The party agitated against migration of people in Mumbai especially the north Indians from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They revived the idea of sons of soil initially put forth by Shiv Sena. For Shiv Sena the outsiders were from south of India, for MNS the outsiders were from north of India. Both these parties aggressively claimed of restoring Marathi pride with the use of violence. If we analyze the underlying factors for agitations by both these parties, these factors are very similar. Both these parties agitated for jobs- employment for Marathi youth combined with Marathi language, pride and culture.

### **Identity politics and violence**

Shiv Sena launched its attacks against the south Indians claiming they took away jobs from the Marathi youth. Similarly MNS claims that north Indians took away jobs in Maharashtra and hence Marathi youth face unemployment.

Both these parties use coercive and violent forms of action as instruments for raising their demands. The so-called popularity of the Shiv Sena and MNS represents this tendency. Earlier, the Shiv Sena excelled in the use of such techniques. But now it seems that most political outfits support public violence to mark their presence on the political scenario. Physical coercion and violence is used for claiming public resources and showing their anger if the claims are not fulfilled. 'The streets become the theatre of public political discourse and coercion the language in which this discourse is conducted.' Such incidences can be seen everywhere in the country and not only in Maharashtra. 'Everywhere, orchestrated public outrage is fast assuming the status of the main language of politics. Petty violence to systematically planned riots constitutes the broad spectrum of this politics of coercion. The politics of coercion and collective violence has two dimensions. In the first place, it is justified in the name of public anger and the exercise of democratic rights, thus making it difficult for the law and order machinery to deal with it effectively. Rioters are considered political actors and therefore entitled to deference. This, in turn, enhances the efficacy and attraction of violence to articulate demands. In the second place, the politics of coercion and violence unfortunately hold a certain value as spectacle. Hence there is tremendous media coverage of such instances. Images of violence depicted in the electronic media ad nauseam bring into sharp focus the effectiveness of the act and the "bravery" and anger of the actors involved. It seems that bad politics is becoming good business not just for the organizations engaged in it but for many others as well.'

### **Is Non- Violence Relevant?**

Non-violence means "personal practice of being harmless to self and others under every condition. It comes from the belief that hurting people, animals or the environment is unnecessary to achieve an outcome and refers to a general philosophy of abstention from violence. This may be based on moral, religious or spiritual principles, or it may be for purely strategic or pragmatic reasons."

Non-violence is a spiritual and political term. We intend to focus on political understanding and usage of the term. Non-violence was propagated by Mahatma Gandhi as the way of life, a way to retaliate and the Indian way to achieve independence from colonial rule.



His ideas of non-violence coupled with ideas of Satya and Satyagraha appealed the Indian masses which led to the Indian Independence movement. This methods has inspired world leaders and has been monumental in achieve peace in many parts of the world. As a method for social retaliation, nonviolent action has been considered as "the politics of ordinary people", reflecting its use by masses throughout the world and history.

Inspite of this, violence has been rising in political struggles and have gained popularity. The question arises is how and why does the general public support violence over non-violence? Why do they involve themselves in violent agitations and what are the factors for their involvement? Are unemployment, economic inequality and poverty the reasons for it? It is claimed usually that poverty can certainly make a person out raged and desperate, and a sense of injustice, related particularly to gross inequality, can be a good ground for rebellion - even bloody rebellion. The feeling of inequality coupled with poverty usually link itself to violence, but should be seen together with divisions between various factors such as nationality, culture and religion.

In case of Maharashtra all these reasons seem appropriate. Shiv Sena and MNS started their agitations by focusing on jobs for the unemployed then they combined this economic and social problem of migration with cultural, linguistic pride. This culminated in formation of a distinct Marathi pride. This Marathi pride is said to be hampered and endangered by south Indians in case of Shiv Sena and by north Indians in case of MNS. In short, one socio-economic problem has been politicized for gaining political popularity. This popularity comes with taking action- in the form of violence. The strength of both these parties has been the support and involvement of the youth population. Mary Katzenstein's observation about mobilization of the youth seems appropriate here, she says-, 'the forces which arouse the youth are distinct from those which mobilize the older population. Ideology or material incentives are central to most organizations, however, for the youth what is of key importance the feeling of belongingness; the exhilaration of being involved.' This force helped both the Shiv Sena and MNS to mobilize the youth.

Analyzing MNS support shows that it is not only the unemployed youth which supports them but the urban-rich-middle class who usually seems to have apathy towards politics and political parties also supports MNS. This class cannot be mobilized on the basic issues of food, clothing and shelter as they have achieved economically. This class however is looking for cultural and emotional bonding. MNS has used Marathi language, Marathi culture and Marathi pride as tools of cultural bonding for this class.

Lastly, does this justification regarding support to the party also justify violence? India is a democracy and in any democracy, various identities are bound to assert themselves politically and this assertion, within limits has its own legitimacy. It creates awareness and provides representation to all different and diverse groups. But if it crosses the limit and uses violence, it can cause serious conflict and destabilize the country. Hence, the researcher would like to raise questions for further discussions- will non-violence be of importance again or will it be limited to specific groups who do not have political ambitions? Will non-violence be just in texts and academic discussions and not in reality, in our daily lives? Or will people eventually will be disillusioned by violence again prefer non-violence?





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