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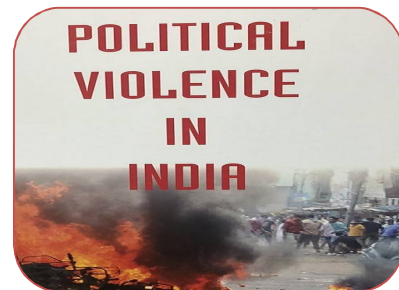
**CHARACTERIZING VIOLENCE IN INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT:  
CONCEPTUALIZING THE VAGARIES OF NATIONALISM**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study examines the complex and often contradictory role of violence in the landscape of Indian political thought, focusing particularly on its intersection with nationalist ideologies. Drawing from classical, colonial, and postcolonial texts, the research traces how Indian political thinkers have conceptualized violence—not merely as a physical act, but as a political strategy, a philosophical stance, and a moral dilemma. The study interrogates how figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, and others differently positioned violence within the broader struggle for nationhood, social reform, and sovereignty. The research also explores how nationalism, often envisioned as a unifying and emancipatory force, carries with it internal contradictions that may legitimize or obscure violence in various forms—whether structural, symbolic, or direct. By critically analyzing primary texts and contextualizing them within both historical and theoretical frameworks, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ambivalence toward violence in Indian political discourse and highlights the vagaries of nationalism in shaping ethical and political responses to conflict.*



**KEYWORDS:** Indian Political Thought, Violence, Nationalism, Gandhian Philosophy, Ambedkarite Politics, Postcolonialism, Political Ethics, Decolonization, Symbolic Violence, Sovereignty.

**INTRODUCTION**

Violence, as both a political tool and a philosophical problem, occupies a central but deeply contested space in Indian political thought. From the anti-colonial resistance of the early 20th century to contemporary debates on identity, state power, and dissent, violence has been conceptualized in multiple, often contradictory, ways. Nowhere is this ambivalence more pronounced than in the context of nationalism, which in India has historically functioned as a rallying cry for liberation while also fostering exclusions, hierarchies, and silences. The Indian nationalist movement—led by figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and others—produced a diverse and sometimes discordant body of thought on violence. Gandhi's doctrine of ahimsa (non-violence) is perhaps the most iconic rejection of violence as a political strategy, yet even within his framework, the boundaries between passive resistance and moral coercion are not always clear. Conversely, Ambedkar's critique of caste-based structural violence repositions the problem: for him, violence is not only a matter of physical force but also of systemic injustice encoded in social

institutions. Figures like Bose, meanwhile, openly embraced militarized nationalism as a necessary means to achieve political sovereignty.

This study aims to characterize how violence is theorized, justified, condemned, or rendered invisible within Indian political discourse. It also seeks to examine how nationalism itself—despite being a unifying force—contains within it a set of internal contradictions, often generating or legitimizing violence under the guise of unity, security, or cultural identity. These “vagaries of nationalism” challenge any straightforward moral evaluation of violence and compel a re-examination of its role in the making and maintenance of the nation-state. In doing so, this work engages critically with political theory, philosophy, and history to uncover how violence functions as both a symptom and a strategy in India’s political life. It interrogates not only explicit acts of violence but also symbolic and structural forms, asking how political thinkers have approached the ethical dilemmas and political consequences of both resistance and rule.

## **Aims and Objectives**

### **Aim**

To critically explore how violence is conceptualized within Indian political thought and to examine how these conceptualizations intersect with, challenge, or reinforce the narratives of nationalism.

### **Objectives**

1. To analyze key Indian political thinkers—such as Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and others—and their differing stances on the use, ethics, and forms of violence.
2. To interrogate the role of nationalism as both a unifying and divisive force, particularly in its ability to obscure, justify, or generate various forms of violence (physical, structural, and symbolic).
3. To evaluate the ethical dimensions of political violence in the context of colonial resistance, postcolonial state formation, caste oppression, and communal tensions.
4. To examine the internal contradictions and “vagaries” of nationalism, especially how these affect the framing of political legitimacy, sovereignty, and dissent in Indian political discourse.
5. To contribute to broader theoretical discussions in political philosophy and postcolonial studies by situating Indian thought within global debates on violence, resistance, and the moral dilemmas of nation-building.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The relationship between violence and nationalism in Indian political thought has long been a subject of scholarly debate. Existing literature spans political philosophy, postcolonial theory, historical analysis, and ethics, reflecting the diversity and depth of the discourse. This review surveys key works and intellectual traditions that have shaped current understandings of violence in the Indian political context.

### **1. Gandhian Thought and Non-Violence**

Mahatma Gandhi’s concept of ahimsa (non-violence) is foundational to Indian political ethics. In works such as *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi rejected all forms of violence as morally corrosive, advocating instead for satyagraha (truth-force) as a form of ethical resistance. Scholars like Raghavan Iyer (1973) and Bhikhu Parekh (1997) have explored the philosophical roots of Gandhian non-violence, emphasizing its metaphysical and spiritual dimensions. However, critics such as Ashis Nandy and Judith Brown have pointed to the limitations and paradoxes of non-violence, especially when faced with structural injustices and systemic oppression.

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## 2. Ambedkar and Structural Violence

B. R. Ambedkar introduced a radically different understanding of violence—focusing on caste-based structural violence embedded in social and religious institutions. In texts like *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar critiqued Hindu orthodoxy and argued that social reform required dismantling systemic inequalities. Scholars such as Gopal Guru, Anupama Rao, and Sharmila Rege have emphasized Ambedkar's contribution to theorizing violence not as isolated physical acts, but as normalized social practices, thus broadening the framework through which violence is understood in Indian political thought.

## 3. Revolutionary Nationalism and Justified Violence

Contrasting with both Gandhi and Ambedkar, figures like Subhas Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh represent a strand of Indian nationalism that embraced armed struggle against colonial rule. Bose's speeches and writings justify violence as a necessary tool for liberation, drawing from European political thought and *realpolitik*. Scholars such as Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal have analyzed how these revolutionary ideologies diverged from Gandhian ideals, revealing a tactical pragmatism within certain nationalist factions.

## 4. Nehruvian Modernity and the Postcolonial State

Jawaharlal Nehru, while publicly committed to democratic and secular ideals, presided over a state apparatus that at times used coercive means to maintain national unity. Scholars like Sunil Khilnani, Partha Chatterjee, and Sudipta Kaviraj have examined the contradictions in Nehruvian nationalism, where liberal democratic ideals coexisted with centralized authority and state-sponsored development, occasionally enabling violence in the name of national progress.

## 5. Postcolonial and Contemporary Theoretical Interventions

More recent scholarship, especially within postcolonial studies, has further complicated the understanding of violence in nationalist contexts. Partha Chatterjee's work on the "inner" and "outer" domains of colonial rule, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's writings on subaltern agency, reveal how nationalist discourse often masks violence by framing it as civilizational or developmental necessity. The Subaltern Studies collective, particularly Ranajit Guha, also foregrounds peasant violence and marginalized resistance as politically meaningful, challenging elite-driven narratives of nationalism.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary approach rooted in political theory, intellectual history, and postcolonial studies. The objective is to critically examine how violence has been conceptualized within Indian political thought and how these conceptualizations are shaped by, and contribute to, the evolving narrative of nationalism. The research adopts a thematic and comparative design, focusing on the writings and political practices of key Indian thinkers. By analyzing both textual sources and historical contexts, the study traces the diverse ways in which violence is theorized, justified, or contested in relation to nationalist ideologies. Primary sources such as speeches, essays, letters, and autobiographical writings of thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Bhagat Singh are analyzed closely. This involves unpacking the philosophical assumptions, rhetorical strategies, and ideological positions embedded in their texts. The study uses tools from critical discourse analysis to understand how language constructs meanings of violence and nationalism. This helps identify implicit contradictions and shifts in moral reasoning across different thinkers and time periods. Each thinker's perspective is situated within the socio-political context of their time—colonial resistance, partition, caste politics, or postcolonial state-building—allowing for a nuanced understanding of their stance on violence. By comparing the approaches of different figures, the research identifies patterns and divergences in how violence is conceptualized. This includes contrasting non-violent ethics (Gandhi) with structural critique (Ambedkar) and militant nationalism (Bose, Bhagat Singh).

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The discourse of Indian nationalism, while historically celebrated as a unifying and liberatory force, is fraught with contradictions regarding its relationship with violence. On one hand, the nationalist movement produced powerful ethical frameworks—most notably Gandhian non-violence—that rejected coercion and force as legitimate political tools. On the other hand, the same nationalist project also saw the emergence of revolutionary movements that embraced armed struggle, and post-independence, a state apparatus that has often employed structural and symbolic violence to maintain order, suppress dissent, or enforce social hierarchies. This contradiction raises a fundamental problem: How is violence conceptualized, justified, or condemned within Indian political thought, and how do these conceptualizations shape and reflect the vagaries—the inconsistencies, ambiguities, and paradoxes—of nationalism in the Indian context? Despite a rich body of literature on individual thinkers like Gandhi, Ambedkar, Nehru, and Bose, there remains a lack of systematic engagement with how different forms of violence—physical, structural, symbolic—are theorized across their political philosophies, particularly in relation to the ideal and practice of nationalism. This absence becomes even more pressing in a contemporary political climate where nationalist rhetoric is increasingly invoked to justify exclusionary and sometimes violent practices.

## Further Suggestions for Research

This study lays a conceptual foundation for understanding how violence has been framed within Indian political thought in relation to nationalism. However, given the depth and complexity of the subject, several promising areas remain open for further scholarly exploration. Future research could compare Indian thinkers' views on violence with those of global anti-colonial intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Ho Chi Minh, or Nelson Mandela. Such comparative studies would enrich our understanding of the ethics and pragmatics of political violence across different postcolonial struggles. A deeper exploration of how violence—both nationalist and structural—is gendered could bring critical insights. Feminist scholars have highlighted how women often experience nationalism and violence differently, yet this remains underexplored in Indian political theory. Research could focus on figures like Savitribai Phule, Sarojini Naidu, or Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, or examine how contemporary feminist movements engage with nationalist narratives. While Ambedkar is foundational, there is scope to broaden research into how Dalit, Adivasi, and subaltern voices conceptualize violence and resistance outside elite political frameworks. These perspectives may offer alternative ethical vocabularies for understanding structural and symbolic violence within the nation-state.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

### Scope of the Study

This research critically examines how violence is conceptualized in Indian political thought, with particular focus on its entanglement with nationalist ideologies. The scope of the study includes a close reading and analysis of selected primary texts by influential Indian political thinkers—such as Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Bhagat Singh. Exploration of the philosophical, ethical, and political dimensions of violence—physical, structural, and symbolic—as framed by these thinkers. Analysis of how nationalism functions both as a unifying ideal and as a framework that can justify or obscure various forms of violence. Engagement with postcolonial, subaltern, and political theory perspectives to contextualize and critique dominant narratives. Thematic comparison of diverse ideological positions on resistance, sovereignty, and justice, across different historical moments—from colonialism to early post-independence India.

### Limitations of the Study

The study is primarily centered on pre- and early post-independence Indian political thought. As such, it does not cover in detail the contemporary evolution of nationalist ideologies or the use of violence in present-day India. The research limits its scope to a small group of canonical figures. While their works are influential, they do not represent the full diversity of Indian political traditions,

particularly regional, vernacular, feminist, or indigenous voices. The methodology is conceptual and textual, rather than empirical or data-driven. It does not include fieldwork, statistical analysis, or interviews, and therefore cannot provide empirical conclusions on how violence is experienced or enacted on the ground. Although the study refers to broader anti-colonial and postcolonial debates, it does not systematically compare Indian political thought with non-Indian traditions. Given the interpretive framework of the study, the conclusions drawn are subject to contestation. Different ideological or philosophical approaches might yield alternative readings of the same texts.

## DISCUSSION

The investigation into how violence is conceptualized within Indian political thought reveals a deeply pluralistic and often contradictory intellectual terrain, shaped by diverse ethical commitments, strategic imperatives, and historical contingencies. Central to this complexity is the figure of the nation—both as an aspirational political ideal and as a contested site of inclusion and exclusion. The thinkers examined in this study—Gandhi, Ambedkar, Nehru, Bose, Bhagat Singh—do not offer a singular narrative but instead present a spectrum of responses to the question of violence, each tied inextricably to their vision of nationalism. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence (*ahimsa*) stands out as a radical ethical rejection of violence not only in political struggle but also in personal and spiritual life. For Gandhi, violence corrupted both the oppressor and the oppressed. Yet, as this study reveals, even within Gandhian thought, there is an implicit tension between non-violence as a moral absolute and as a strategic instrument of resistance (e.g., *satyagraha*). The use of moral pressure or suffering as a form of resistance may itself constitute a subtle form of coercion, blurring the binary of violent vs. non-violent action. In contrast, Ambedkar's framework displaces the focus from individual moral action to structural forms of violence—particularly the entrenched caste system. For him, the violence of untouchability, exclusion, and systemic humiliation far outweighs the episodic violence of revolt or protest. Ambedkar's refusal to romanticize suffering reorients the discussion toward social justice, and invites a critical view of nationalist ideology when it obscures or minimizes caste violence in the name of unity. One of the central insights of this study is that nationalism in Indian political thought is not a monolithic ideology, but a shifting and often contradictory discourse. For Nehru, nationalism is tethered to the promise of modernity, rationality, and democratic governance. However, as postcolonial critics have noted, this vision often justified state centralization and suppression of regional and subaltern identities, raising questions about the violence of developmentalism.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how violence is conceptualized within Indian political thought, particularly in relation to the evolving and often contradictory narratives of nationalism. Through a close reading of key figures—Gandhi, Ambedkar, Nehru, Bose, Bhagat Singh—the research has demonstrated that Indian political theory presents no unified stance on violence. Instead, it offers a rich spectrum of perspectives, shaped by differing ethical convictions, political strategies, and social contexts. A central finding is the moral and conceptual tension between violence and non-violence in the Indian nationalist imagination. While Gandhi elevated non-violence to a moral absolute, Ambedkar reframed violence as an inescapable feature of structural injustice. Bose and Bhagat Singh, meanwhile, viewed revolutionary violence as a necessary tool of anti-colonial resistance, and Nehru's modernist nationalism often relied on the authority of the state, raising further ethical questions about coercion in the name of development and unity.

Crucially, the study illustrates that nationalism itself is not a stable or morally neutral ideology—it is a contested terrain, capable of uniting people against oppression but also of rationalizing exclusion, marginalization, and violence. The "vagaries of nationalism" lie in its ability to shift shape: at times calling for peace and sacrifice, at others enabling aggression and control. This investigation also underscores the importance of expanding the notion of violence to include structural, symbolic, and everyday forms, many of which are normalized or rendered invisible by dominant nationalist narratives. The silence around caste-based violence, gendered oppression, and religious

majoritarianism points to the limitations of mainstream political discourses that prioritize abstract unity over lived justice. In a time when nationalism is once again being invoked to justify both collective pride and coercive policies, revisiting these foundational debates becomes not only academically relevant but politically urgent.

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