When violence scars democracy

Unless we reclaim the language of the Constitution, secularism, and individual rights, violence, hate and bigotry will win

Reading political scientist Neera Chandoke’s new book, *The Violence in Our Bones*, against the backdrop of the mind-numbing incidents of violence in recent weeks — the SUV that ploughed through protesting farmers at Lakhimpur Kheri, Uttar Pradesh (UP), the young men being shot and beaten to death in public view while protesting against eviction drives in Assam, mobs shutting down meat shops for Navaratri in UP — forced me to confront uncomfortable truths about India’s flawed democracy.

Violence is routine. It is, in Chandoke’s words, neither an “aberration nor outside the provenance of democracy”. Indeed, from the founding moment of the Indian Republic to the present, violence has coexisted “not very happily but not that uneasily” with democracy. Democracy, when carefully nurtured, can and does set limits on violence, but it can also stoke a politics of power that takes the form of violence. In India, democracy and violence occupy the same political space.

Coming to terms with violence also pushes us to ask what it would take to reclaim the spirit of the project of democracy, its aspiration of genuine representation, equality and justice. It may seem naïve to ask this question, given the current juncture in our politics, but if, as a society, we do not collectively search for a political consensus that can negate violence or, more pragmatically, limit it to the margins, political violence may well consume whatever limited democratic aspirations we hold. Saving democracy requires rescuing it from violence.

In her exposition, Chandoke finds answers in Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence that can guide us out of violence. But, against the backdrop of current realities, the construction of a consensus will require a political reckoning with the nature of violence we confront today and a willingness to reclaim a political language based on constitutional principles, a language that eludes our political class.

Some honest, plain speaking on the nature of violence is important. First, sites of violence have moved beyond major riots to everyday events: second, social media has given violence a new kind of visibility; and third, violence has visible State sanction. Uprising supporters to pick up sticks and fight farmers, and a blatant call to arms by a central government minister in the days of heightened communal tension in New Delhi. But beyond coarsening the political discourse, State sanction has also found expression through changes in law, best illustrated in the introduction of new laws preventing inter-faith marriages or “love jihad” — laws that give legitimacy to perpetrators of violence.

Against these realities, the only serious path to challenging violence is by confronting the beast of communalism and hate head-on. But, for the moment, and this is an argument I have made repeatedly in this column, public discourse and the political opposition has chosen to eschew the very language needed to counter this beast — the language of our Constitution, of secularism, of fraternity.

It is only through a language of secularism, a language that privileges individual rights and freedoms, that we can challenge the hatred and bigotry that underpin the violence we confront today. Without secularism, we do not have a language through which to craft a politics of solidarity, of peace, of harmony. Yet, in today’s environment, to defend secularism and invoke constitutional values, despite the brief moment in the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act protest, where secularism was reclaimed, is to defend the flawed politics of our past, a politics of opportunism and appeasement.

Political opposition to violence has protested, outraged, challenged lack of due process. But without the courage to craft a language that directly tackles hate and bigotry, that offers a constitutional vision to replace the politics of polarisation, these protestations have little credibility or moral authority. The spectre of violence will continue to haunt us and our flawed democracy will continue to live with, as Chandoke reminds us, “the violence in our bones”.

Yamini Aiyar is president and chief executive, Centre for Policy Research. The views expressed are personal.