

## The changing nature of violence

Events in Thoothukudi on May 22 and 23 have helped turn the spotlight on the changing nature of violence, and the inadequacy of existing rules and procedures to deal with new-era protests. This should be instructive, for new-era protests are redefining the internal security landscape. At present no one, the courts of judicature included, seems to understand the shifting taxonomy of violence.

Current challenges to order are multifaceted. Thoothukudi is yet another incident in the expanding saga of industry versus the environment. This segment embraces pollution issues, from Sterlite's copper smelters in Thoothukudi to the tanneries spewing effluents in Kanpur, to the iron mines in Goa today. The mother of all environmental tragedies remains the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984.

Added to this list are the escalating violence resulting from caste conflicts — including the most recent Dalit uprising; farmers' woes across the country; the rape of young women and children; issues revolving around tradition versus modernity; the outsider versus insider syndrome, especially in the Northeast — and we have an unfolding vista of incessant conflict and violence. The issues involved in each of them are highly complex and need careful attention.

Reverting to the violence in Thoothukudi, resulting in at least three police firings and the death of over a dozen individuals, there remain many unanswered questions. The number of deaths in the police firing were unusually high for a situation of this kind, but no one has definitively disputed that the firing did not take place according to prescribed law and order procedures. References to intelligence failure and police excesses are inevitable in a situation of this kind, but do not answer the question of how peace could be maintained for 99 days, and it was the march to the Thoothukudi Collectorate on the 100th day that seemed to have triggered widespread violence.

In instances of this kind, it is vital to try to determine the actual trigger that led to the violence. For instance, in the December 2012 Delhi gang-rape case, it was the 'unsynchronised eruption of simmering anger' which seemed to have been the tipping point. A mere reference to failure of intelligence, the usual litany of charges against the administration, or to excessive use of force by the police is inadequate to explain the turn of events in Thoothukudi. The official version of the events on May 22, including that all procedures had been followed and that the orders to open fire were issued by empowered magistrates, have been openly challenged by the protesters. No answers are forthcoming as to what actually happened or transpired.

The widest gap separating the official version from that of the public is about the presence/absence of 'agent provocateurs' among the protesters. The official version highlights the role of such elements; the administration has identified quite a few such elements, some of whom reportedly belong to known militant outfits. However, reports of the presence of outsiders have been totally rejected by the protesters. It is no secret that many of today's large-scale protests across the country are prompted by militant elements from outside, who are pre-programmed to create chaos.

The Sterlite story is hardly unique. There are many parallels available, some that have an even longer gestation period. The qualitative difference from the past is that protests today are beginning to embrace entire communities. Agitations also tend more and more to be 'leaderless'. This is both a strength and weakness. Governments and even tribunals are today viewed by protesters with deep suspicion, limiting opportunities for adjudication. Contrary judgments at different times by the High Courts and the Supreme Court have hardly helped.

There could be many possible explanations for the unbridled violence on May 22. One could be

that as long as the agitation was confined to a limited area, it was easy to contain it. It was when the agitation on the 100th day moved beyond this arc that the character of the protests seemed to change. The likely additions to the initial ranks of protesters, of militants espousing different causes, appear to have led to a transmutation of the character of the movement and altered its trajectory. This is a phenomenon seen in other protest movements elsewhere as well.

This is the age of 'high voltage' revolt, basically an expression of repressed anger. Much of this arises from an "embedded wisdom" that the system is being "manipulated" in favour of the rich, the powerful, and the big multinationals. This is something that is not confined to India alone. It is not uncommon, even in the U.S., to hear accusations against big business of creating an economy built on deals, employing exotic and risky financial instruments, separating those taking risk from those who would bear consequences, etc. Government regulatory agencies often tend to be overwhelmed by the phalanx of lawyers that the big multinationals can throw at them, challenging and delaying for years on end decisions, especially when they believe that the verdict would go against them. With several hundreds of workers now thrown out of work following the closure of the Sterlite factory, the danger is that they could become new nodes for instigating fresh rounds of violence. This is an aspect that will need to be closely watched.

In Thoothukudi, the revolt was against Sterlite and its so-called disdain for the environment and the suffering of the locals. Far away in Bhangar, West Bengal, just a few miles away from Kolkata, for months villagers have been up in arms against a power grid project for which land had been acquired many years ago. The conditions may be different, but the opposition remains equally intense. In both instances, we see organisations genuinely interested in the welfare of the locals initially launching the agitations, which gradually tend to be taken over by extreme right-wing and left-wing organisations. The result remains the same: widespread disruption.

It is possible that the initial peaceful nature of the protests lulled the authorities into believing that matters were well under control. What they failed to understand was the metastasising nature of the protests and signs of the growing revolt of an 'underclass' against the so-called 'elite'. The police also do not seem to have taken into consideration the kind of impetus provided to agitational methodologies by the 'digital wave'.

Unfortunately, even now the authorities tend to look at current agitations through simple equations. They remain prisoners to Newton's Third Law. This is no longer a valid proposition. Physics today incorporates quantum mechanics which describes a micro-world of uncertainty and ambiguity. This is harder to measure. The same applies to the current world of agitations. Outdated ideas can no longer explain the complex nature of today's agitations.

This qualitative difference has not filtered down enough to effect changes in administrative policies and police methodologies. The latter consequently find themselves severely handicapped in handling agitations, especially those agitations sponsored by today's newest 'elite', viz. the middle class.

Advice from old-timers in the police on how to manage today's crowds, including the erection of barricades and promulgation of Section 144, have little relevance in the circumstances prevailing today. Police effectiveness is also hampered on account of several other reasons, including that they are often outnumbered by mobilised crowds, driven by indignation and rage, predisposed towards creating disorder. The police on their part need to realise that existing laws and procedures notwithstanding, merely putting faith and focus on strength is not likely to succeed. It ignores the asymmetrical measures available to today's mobs, and the limits that these impose on tactics and policies of a bygone era.

One final word — whenever situations of this kind arise, there are a spate of reports regarding

revamping intelligence and introduction of new methods to overcome the lacunae in intelligence collection. These are equally unlikely to succeed, unless the police strengthen their 'contextual' intelligence to deal with today's situations. This involves anticipating the meaning of 'street power' – enhanced by information technology and the presence of flash mobs. New 'smart tactics' have to be developed. Simply blaming the police is no answer to the growing volumes of protests everywhere.

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