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From Violence to Hope

The Relationship Between Media,
Information, Memory and Identity and
the Hindu-Muslim Conflict in
Contemporary India

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भूमिका

लोग नफ़रत क्यों करते हैं? क्यों वे दूसरे लोगों या समूहों से हिंसा से व्यवहार करते हैं?

इन्हीं सवालों ने प्रस्तुत शोध कार्य को रूप और दिशा दे दी।

एक साल के लिए भारत में रहकर, मैंने अंतर-सामूहिक नफ़रत और हिंसा का स्तर देखा जो रोज़मर्रा जिंदगी के हर छोटी से छोटी घटना में महसूस किया जा सकता है।

सिर्फ़ धर्म ही नहीं, बल्कि वर्ग और सामाजिक स्तर भी लोगों के बीच हिंसक व्यवहार का कारण हैं।

हिंसा सिर्फ़ भारत या दक्षिण एशिया में नहीं होती है, पर ये तो इंसानियत से संबंधित है, वक्त या जगह पर ध्यान दिए बग़ैर। जो प्रक्रिया लोगों या समूहों के बीच संघर्ष की वजह बनती है, चाहे वह धार्मिक, भाषिक, जातीय या राजनैतिक ही क्यों न हो, उसी को इस शोध कार्य में गहराई से देखने का प्रयास किया गया है और इसी लक्ष्य पर ध्यान केन्द्रित करते हुए शोध कार्य चार भागों में विभाजित किया गया है —जानकारी, मीडिया, स्मृति और पहचान— जानकारी हिंसक कैसे बनती है उसका परीक्षण करने की कोशिश की गई है।

निम्नलिखित रूपरेखा इंसानों के मन की प्रक्रिया को सरल तरीके से समझाती है:

1. मीडिया के माध्यम से हम जानकारी प्राप्त करते हैं (कोई हमें कुछ बता देता है)।
2. हम जानकारी सुनकर उसे मन में रखते हैं (हम उसके बारे में सोचते रहते हैं)।
3. वह जानकारी हमारी पहचान का हिस्सा बनती है।
4. वही जानकारी याद करके, अवतीर्ण होकर हमारे व्यवहार को बदलती है।

तो, अगर हम समूहों की पहचान पर इस रूपरेखा को इस्तेमाल करें, तो ये मुख्य बिंदु निकलते हैं:

1. मेरा परिवार मुझे बता देता है कि मैं 'X' समूह का सदस्य हूँ।
2. समय के साथ वह जानकारी "मैं 'X' समूह का सदस्य हूँ", दोहराई जाती है।
3. मैं 'X' समूह के सदस्य के जैसे स्वयं को पहचानता हूँ।
4. मैं 'X' समूह के अच्छे सदस्य के जैसे व्यवहार करता हूँ।

उसके बाद यही पद्धति नफ़रत और हिंसा का वर्णन करने के लिए भी इस्तेमाल की गई है:

1. मेरा परिवार मुझे बताता है कि 'Y' समूह के लोग अच्छे लोग नहीं हैं।
2. वही जानकारी –'Y' समूह के लोग अच्छे लोग नहीं हैं–, वक्त के साथ दोहराई जाती है।
3. मैं खुद को ऐसे व्यक्ति के रूप में पहचानता हूँ जो 'Y' समूह के लोगों से नफ़रत करता है।
4. शब्दों से या कार्यों से, मैं 'Y' समूह के लोगों के विरुद्ध कार्य करता हूँ।

परिवार के नाम के जगह पर, हम 'मास मीडिया' का इस्तेमाल कर सकते हैं। इस तरह, हम मीडिया इंडस्ट्री समूहों की पहचान और हिंसा पर ज़िम्मेदारी दे रहे हैं। जब इस संदर्भ में, हम ऐसे लेख या पोस्ट पढ़ते हैं, जो बार-बार इन समूहों को दुश्मनी और एक-दूसरे के खिलाफ़ प्रस्तुत करते हैं, समुदायों के बीच संघर्ष दोहराकर उसे लगातार बढ़ावा देते हैं।

जानकारी प्राप्त करने के बाद, स्मृति इस प्रक्रिया में बहुत महत्वपूर्ण है। यह न केवल मीडिया द्वारा फैलाई गई जानकारी को रखती है, बल्कि पहचान के निर्माणों के आंतरिक सामंजस्य को भी रखती है और विस्मरण के माध्यम से उन सभी तत्वों को समाप्त कर देती है, जो उस निर्माण के लिए उपयोगी नहीं हैं या हानिकारक हैं।

संक्षेप में हम यह कह सकते हैं कि पहचान, जो या तो हिंसक हो सकती है या शांतिपूर्ण, बार-बार दोहराई गई जानकारी और स्मृति के माध्यम से बनाई जाती है। यह दूसरों के प्रति व्यवहार का आधार होती है। अंततः, जो जानकारी हम प्राप्त करते हैं, उसे प्राप्त करने के तरीके को बदलकर, हम एक-दूसरे के प्रति व्यवहार को भी बदल सकते हैं।

Introduction

Why do people hate? Why do people act violently towards other individuals or groups?

These questions gave the direction and shape to this entire work.

Having lived in India for one year, I have witnessed the degree of inter-communal hate and violence, which are being expressed also in the smallest instances of everyday life.

Not only religion but also class and social status determine a huge degree of violent behaviour among the citizens.

Of course, this does not apply only to India or South Asia but concerns the very nature of man, regardless of time, place or any other kind of context.

This paper wants to look into the process that causes people to hate and act violently against other people belonging to other groups, being the group religious, ethnic, linguistic or political.

The framework elaborated here is composed of four elements —information, media, memory and identity— and tries to explain the way the information becomes a violent act. Simply put, the framework describes the functioning of the human mind:

1. I acquire information through a media (someone tell me something)
2. I retain that information (I continue to think about that something)
3. that information becomes part of me (my identity)
4. That information —retained and embodied— causes a change in my behaviour

This framework can be applied to virtually every situation of the human experience, which entails an identification, either of the self or of the group.

1. I see on TV that Barcelona plays football well and wins a lot of matches
2. Every time I watch football, I remember that Barcelona plays well and wins a lot of matches
3. I identify myself as a Barcelona supporter
4. I buy a Barcelona shirt

However, the same reasoning also works on the opposite.

1. I see on TV that Chelsea plays football badly and loses a lot of matches
2. Every time I watch football, I remember that Chelsea plays football badly and loses a lot of matches

3. I identify myself as someone who does not like Chelsea's football
4. I don't buy a Chelsea shirt

These light-hearted examples are useful to illustrate the functioning of the framework on a superficial level.

However, these two examples started with "I see", a fact that implies a direct experience. The problem arises when —and this happens in most cases in our life— we don't have direct access to the primary sources of our judgements, and thus, we have to rely on external sources to get our information, such as other people or mass media which we bestow with trust and credibility.

Hence, the majority of the ideas we form in our minds and the acts we perform every day, are the consequences of indirect experiences and someone else's judgements.

This process, common to every person to a more or lesser degree, bears "beneficial" or "harmful" consequences.

Looking into the problem of inter-communal and identitarian hate and violence, knowing this scheme can help to understand how feelings of hate and enmity are formed, making a first step towards either the de-powering or the fuelling of the conflict. In these contexts, the scheme is composed of two parts. The first regards the formation of the communal identity:

1. My family told me that I belong to the community 'X'
2. The information that I belong to the community 'X' is repeated through time
3. I identify myself as a member of the community 'X'
4. I act as a good member of the community 'X' should act

The second part regards the opposition with another community:

1. My family told me that the people of the community 'Y' are bad people
2. The information that the people of the community 'Y' are bad people is repeated throughout time
3. I identify myself as someone who hates the people of the community 'Y'
4. I act against the people of the community 'Y' in words and activities

I used the family as a main informant, but it can be exchanged with the broad category of mass media. In this sense, the media industry has a major responsibility in creating the conditions for

regulating the salience and the intensity of what people think about a certain group and thus, how people act towards that group.

In this sense, presenting articles or posts which repeatedly present and describe the two groups as enemies and opposites tends to fuel and reiterate the conflict between the communities.

After information, memory plays a crucial role in this process. It not only retains the information spread by media, but it also keeps the internal coherence about the identitarian constructs and, through oblivion, it eliminates all those elements which are not functional or harmful for that construction.

Hence, to sum up, it can be stated that identity, which can be either violent or peaceful, is created by repeated information reiterated and remembered through memory. Moreover, identity is the basis for our behaviour towards others, and thus, modifying the kind of information we receive and how we receive it changes the ways we behave towards others.

In contemporary India, this is particularly salient in the relationship between the majority Hindu community and the other religious minorities, in particular the Muslim one.

The enmity between Hindus and Muslims, at least in the way we know it today, can be traced back to 1947, when India and Pakistan gained independence from the British Empire.

The division of the two countries was itself made on a religious basis, and since then, the episodes of hate and violence between the two communities never stopped, becoming also a field of political encounter and propaganda since the ruling party in India, the BJP, is actively promoting hate and violence as a tool to promote its campaigns.

The work is divided into four chapters and follows the hereby structure.

The first chapter (*Media and Information: the Tools for Shaping our Reality*) will take into consideration the topics of “information” and “media”. Starting from the axiom, which says that we “cannot not communicate”, we will talk about the generative power of information, that is, how information can shape our ideas, actions and identities, giving shape to “what” or “who” we are as individuals and as groups. In this first section, Paul Watzlawick, Gilbert Simondon, Claude Shannon and John Wheeler will provide the basic concepts and ideas to analyse the world of “information”.

Further, the chapter will deal with the topic of “media” and their nature as “extensions” of man. Here, guided by McLuhan’s famous sentence “media is the message”, media will be analysed with a diachronic and a synchronic perspective in order to underline the ever-perpetuating nature of the media, whose power adapts to the epochs without changing its inner functioning. Then, it will be

traced a brief history of media, which highlights the following steps: language, writing, print, radio, television and the web. This chain of evolution will lead again to our initial thesis: during history, media changed only in their shape, not in their functioning, which remains the same and is the transmission of information to the most people as possible. Here the problem of massification and individualisation is also taken into consideration.

Finally, the chapter contains a brief section which analyses the use of social media during the Indian General Election of 2024.

The second chapter (*Memory and Identity: The Shapes of the Message*) is divided into two parts. The first deals with the problem of memory while the second with the one of identity.

In the former, memory is studied both from a philosophical and scientific point of view. Starting from Plato, I will take into consideration and compare the “storage” and the “dynamic” model of memory. Here, following Cimatti, Kandel, and Bartlett, memory will be described not as functioning with a “selection and pick” process but rather with a “narrative” processing of writing and re-writing memories. In this, the roles of repetition and literary types will be particularly underlined as two of the main memory facilitators. Further, the relationship between technique and memory will be explored, putting particular attention on how mass media have the power to shape collective memory, giving it a central role in community life and politics. Last, I will deal with the topics of the archive and oblivion, which means how the power can form or delete sets of useful information.

As I have said, the second section regards identity. Drawing from Brubaker & Cooper’s article *Beyond Identity*, I will proceed with a critique of that concept, analysing both the individual identity (self-identification) and the group one. In this first part, I will strongly rely on the works of Sigmund Freud, Neil Korobov, Benedict Anderson and Francesco Remotti.

From here, I will proceed to analyse the relationship between group identification and violence, studying how this can be amplified in an uncontrolled group environment. The deep bond between identity and violence is also looked at from the perspective of power and how this plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of group representation and conflict.

The last section will be a digression about the points of contact between technique, identity and surveillance in the context of the Indian Adhaar Card.

The third chapter (*Narratives of Violence: Voices from the Hindu-Muslim Conflict*) is more specific to South Asia. Here, I will report and analyse several narratives of the Hindu-Muslim conflict from the 20th and the 21st centuries. I have taken different narratives —poems, pamphlets, short stories, extracts of novels, public speeches— and of various authors —Iqbal, Savarkar, Manto, Mohan

Rakesh, Krishan Chander, Modi, Owaisi— in order to see the continuity of the “narrative of violence” through the decades and the interchangeability of terms and descriptions between the two communities. Further, in order to prove the continuity of the “narrative of violence” through time and space, I will act upon the texts, changing the context-specific and the community-specific words. This process will allow me to observe the universality of the “narrative of violence”, a fact that aims to deconstruct the one-sided instances which aim to depict and define the parties as the “good ones” or the “bad ones” not leaving space for any shade or nuance.

In the fourth and last chapter (*Narratives of Hope: Forgotten Memories of a Shared Past*), I will review all the steps of the work —information, media, memory and identity— in order to propose ways of using them not for generating “narratives of violence” but “narratives of hope”, which means aimed at creating and promoting the coexistence and the toleration between the communities. In the last section of the chapter, I will take into consideration three historical “narratives of hope”: the idea of *ṣulḥ-i kull* in the context of the Mughal Empire, the Bengali tales of Satya Pīr and the case of the Karnal protests of 1946.

Through this structure, this work aims to find new ways to de-power acts of hate and violence between communities or, at least, make the readers aware of the functioning of the mechanisms which govern our relationships with other individuals or groups.

1. Media and Information: the Tools that Shape our Reality

Meruma non era più un luogo remoto. Alcuni abitanti dissero che avrebbero reso la loro vita più comoda, mentre altri capirono subito che le strade servivano all'esercito.
(Demick, 2024, p. 68)

This chapter is the first step of a four-folded framework that includes the ideas of information, media, memory and identity, designed to further investigate communal violence in contemporary India.

This first chapter delves into the concepts of information and media, and it is aimed at describing them as necessary and ever-present factors in human history.

The analysis will also investigate the relationship between power, information and media that has always governed human interaction, intended as a process of mutual influence and hierarchy.

The chapter is divided into six sections.

The first section looks into the problem of communication as a necessary process. Starting from Watzlawick's claims, "We cannot not communicate", and the "social brain theory", I try to reinstate the impossibility of not communicating by challenging the opposite view, brought ahead by Micheal Motley.

The second section regards the nature of information. Exploring the thoughts of Gilbert Simondon, Claude Shannon and John Wheeler, I emphasise the "generative" nature of information, that is, the power of information to give shape to the world and to our thoughts.

In the third section, I will reaffirm McLuhan's famous statement, "The medium is the message" against John Lechte and Sybille Krämer's "dying messenger".

In the fourth section, I will briefly analyse the relationship between media and power through history to show how the power dynamics of media use followed the same paths despite the latter's technological evolution.

The fifth section delves into the problems of media massification, "hypersocialisation" and "information overload" in order to show how media are shaping our relationships with the world and with others.

The sixth section is a brief account of some of the digital strategies used by India's leading party, the BJP, deployed during the campaign for the last general election in April and June 2024.

1.1 The Necessity of the Information: the Impossibility of Not-communicating.

“Non si può non comunicare” (Watzlawick et al., 2008, p. 43).

This simple sentence is individuated by Watzlawick, Helmick Beavin, and Jackson as the first axiom of meta-communication. But what does it mean that we, as humans, are unable to not communicate?

Watzlawick, Helmick Beavin, and Jackson describe the concept of communication as something that “implies an effort and defines the relationships between humans, something that completely influences us, regulates our relationships with our conspecifics and governs our identity, memory and self-awareness” (ivi, p. 29).

The reasoning behind the sentence “we can’t not communicate” is quite simple, and it is based on the fact that there is no opposite to the act of communicating. Even if we try, with all our efforts, not to communicate, this very act is itself communication. Thus, silence or inaction should not be misunderstood as non-communication but only as forms of non-verbal communication. For example, take a group of friends. When a member of the group is not participating or participating less in the conversation, it does not mean that he/she is not communicating, it means that he/she is expressing some sort of discomfort or simply the will to not participate through non-verbal communication.

Moreover, silence, “intended as a lack of a publicly discernible response either to conduct reflective of a legal position or to the explicit communication of a legal position” (Lewis et al. 2019, p. IV), is a common practice in diplomatic relations. Sadly, an example of this can be identified in the silence of the International Community during the bombardments of the Israeli Government against the civilians in Gaza. Far from being a form of “non-communication”, this silence represents the assent of the International Institutions to what is happening in the Middle East.

These examples served to explain that even the passivity and inaction of the subjects are indeed the source of information and, thus, of communication.

This happens precisely because we can not imagine a “non-behaviour”, and “non è possibile non avere un comportamento” (Watzlawick et al., 2008, p. 40). That is because every way in which we pose ourselves in front of others is interpreted and de-codified by our interlocutors.

This has also been suggested by neurophysiological analysis, which has shown that “our brains have evolved to process and interpret social signals from others who we believe have intentional

minds with goals, desires, and plans [...] In other words, humans have evolved to socialise and interpret the social signals that our relationships create and communicate”. (Aral, 2020, p. 122).

It is precisely this relational aspect that is highlighted by Watzlawick, Helmick Beavin, and Jackson. It seems to be a primary aspect of communication. As they write, “*ogni comunicazione ha un aspetto di contenuto e uno di relazione di modo che il secondo classifica il primo*” (Watzlawick et al., 2008, p. 46).

Specifically, the relational aspect of communication can be described through the categories of “report” and “command”, which represent the basis of communication and the way communication is practised by humans.

From this notion of communication, it can be concluded that the very act of communicating, as an act of reporting and commanding, always implies a form and a hierarchy that is generated between the two or more communicating subjects, and it can be emphasised or de-emphasised by the same subjects during the exchange of information.

This “hierarchical nature of communication” will be further explained in this chapter by analysing the power dynamics, struggles and even conflicts that have involved communication channels throughout history. In this regard, W.J. Bernstein states that “the deployment of power in civil societies —politics— is nothing more and nothing less than an exercise in communication” (Bernstein, 2013, p. 46).

The “hierarchical nature of communication” is not expressed only by the “command” aspect but also by the “report” aspect.

If “report” is understood as the spreading of information—in the next section, I will attempt to give a better explanation of the term—from one subject to another; it can be observed how this simple and daily act is infused with the power of making people change their ideas and thus their behaviour.

Thus, I can re-think Watzlawick’s words, and from the impossibility of not communicating, I can talk about the “impossibility of not influencing others”.

However, the axiom “we can’t not communicate” is challenged by Michael T. Motley, who argues that this vision encourages equating communication with perception and eliding the interactive dimension of communication.

In his article of 1990, Motley argues that “the claim ‘one cannot not communicate’ is more contradictory than axiomatic” (Motley, 1990, p. 18).

He sets four arguments against this claim.

In the first argument, he critiques Watzlawick's association between communication and behaviour. First, Motley argues that "if we maintain the postulation that communication involves symbols, it is possible not to communicate since not every behaviour is symbolic" (Motley, 1990, p. 9). He distinguished between 'symbols' communication (i.e. language or gestures) and 'symptoms' (i.e. blushing, yawning or scratching). The difference, according to Motley, is that "when a sign is selected by a sender (from among other potential signs) to be employed within an intentional message, it becomes a symbol; and when it occurs on its own, as a result only of its natural indicators, it is a symptom" (ivi, p. 7). In other words, Motley implies that symptoms don't represent a form of communication.

Secondly, he argues that "if communication involves encoding, then it must be possible not to communicate since it is possible to suppress encoded behaviour and possible to produce non-encoded behaviour" (ivi, p. 9).

Thirdly, Motley states that since communication is interactive, requiring the active participation of both the sender and the receiver. According to him, "it is not communication when the receiver has only a passive role" (ivi, p. 10) and when the receiver interprets the sender's message without the sender's goal.

Lastly, he argues that since communication has a degree of fidelity —intended as the congruence of the receiver's interpretation of the message and the sender's goal— "when one is not producing behaviour subjects with fidelity assessments, one is indeed not communicating" (ivi, p. 12).

In the following section, I will try to refute Motley's arguments and reinforce the axiom that states that "one cannot not communicate".

For this, I will start drawing from the studies of Robin I. M. Dunbar and his colleagues on what is called the 'social brain hypothesis'.

This hypothesis attempts to explain the "extraordinary size and complexity of the human brain by appealing to particular pressures that a species adapted to social interaction would have had to face, ranging from deception to cooperation to ways of obtaining food and ensuring offspring" (Adolphs, 2009). In other words, this hypothesis, which "is being confirmed by more and more studies" (Dunbar, 2024), argues that "our brains have evolved and are bigger compared to the ones of other animals" (Ruff et al., 1997), precisely to detect others' expressions and forms of communication, both verbal and non-verbal.

Although this does not directly disprove of Motley's arguments, it is a starting point. The fact that the complexity of the human brain is deeply linked to communication and social relations

underlines the extraordinary pressure that the need to understand others' behaviour has had on our physiology.

Now, to directly address Motley's arguments, I will try to approach them one by one.

Firstly, I find that Motley is wrong when he says that symptoms are not a form of communication. For example, blushing —a natural and involuntary sign, a consequence of a physical or psychological state that is common across cultures and geographical boundaries— what Motley defines as a “symptom”. I find that not considering blushing a form of communication is not correct since this “symptom” communicates to others a particular state of the subject. Apart from blushing, many other examples of “symptoms”, that are indeed forms of communication, can be found.

As for the second point, I contend that Motley's argument is flawed. Even if it is true, as he states, that “it is possible to suppress encoded behaviour and produce non-encoded behaviour” (Motley, 1990, p.9), this does not prove that it is possible to not communicate.

Referencing the first response, it can be claimed that non-encoded behaviours, what Motley calls “symptoms”, are forms of communication precisely because they tell something about the subject.

Motley's third argument is the most salient since it refers to key aspects of communication: interaction and intention. Even Motley himself states that “it becomes somewhat a matter of opinion as to where we draw the line on just how active or participatory the parties must be to satisfy the postulate” (ivi, pp. 9-10).

Although the use of the word “opinion” weakens Motley's argument, I will return to our blushing example to better understand the situation. When someone blushes, a universal and unintentional behaviour, others around them acknowledge it and understand that the subject is embarrassed or shy¹, and thus, they act accordingly. I argue that the entire process can be described as communication since, although it is not intentional, it implies action from the receiver, or at the very least, the acknowledgement that the subject is blushing and then the choice to act or not. I believe that what Motley declares to be only perception is actually an instance of non-intervention.

Motley's final point is about communication fidelity. The response to this argument can be drawn from the previous point. Intentionality is not a criterion for describing human communication. Thus, fidelity —intended as the accordance between the receiver's interpretation of the message and the sender's goal— is irrelevant. Moreover, even if I use intentionality, the mismatch between the receiver's interpretation of the message and the sender's goal does not mean non-communication

¹ These are the meanings that blushing has in the context I am living in. I am not aware if blushing has different meanings in different contexts anyway, it is not important for this analysis. Moreover, in this case, the supposition made by the observer is correct, but there might be some cases in which a particular behaviour is misinterpreted.

but a wrong communication. In this sense, if Motley's argument is pushed to the extremes, it essentially defines miscommunications and misunderstandings as non-communications, so it has to be refuted.

In this section, I have endeavoured to explain and defend Watzlawick, Helmick Beavin, and Jackson's axiom that states that humans can't not communicate.

In the following section, I will try to describe communication by looking into the word *information* and its meaning.

1.2 The Creation from Inside: the Generative Nature of Information

The word "information" comes from the Latin verb *in-formare*, which means "to shape, fashion, form, form the idea of a thing, to represent, sketch, delineate and as the last meaning to inform, instruct, educate" (Lewis & Short, 1969).

It is interesting how in most of the Romance languages and English, the verb "to inform" and the word "information" have maintained only the last meaning. The primary meaning of the verbs *informare*, *to inform*, *informar* and *informer* in Italian, English, Spanish and French respectively, is "to tell or give a fact or an information" (Pearsall, 1998). This loss of meaning produced a deficit of understanding about the function and power of information.

Nowadays, people have forgotten that information is not only a "fact provided or learned about something or someone" (ibid.), but it is something that shapes our behaviour, mood, and actions from within. In other words, our behaviour, mood, and actions are highly dependent on the information we receive from the environment.

In this context, it is also interesting to briefly present the root of the word *poetry*. It comes from the ancient Greek verb *ποιέω*, which means "to make, build, produce, and create" (Montanari et al., 2015a). In Greek and Roman antiquity, it was very clear that words, in the form of information, poetry or speech, have a deep generative and "moulding" capacity to physically transform the listener's mind. If we wish to illustrate the power of information with an example, it can be said that information is like the hands of the craftsman shaping a vase made of clay. This concept will be further analysed in the section about the nature of media.

This "generative" power of information has been well understood by the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (d.1989).

Information plays a crucial role in his philosophical theories, elaborated in his doctoral thesis *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique (l'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information)* published in 1964.

Simondon's theory is based on the principle of individuation. This principle is “capable of accounting for the characteristics of the individual without a necessary relation with the other aspects of the being that could be correlative to the appearance of a real individuated entity” (Simondon, 2020a, p. 1).

Individuation is seen as a postulate by Simondon, who describes it as “containing within it the very explanation for what is individual in the individual, thereby accounting for its haecceity” (ivi, p. 2).

According to Simondon individuation is the process which leads to the formation of the individual from a pre-individual being that is characterised by metastability, non-identity and non-unity.

The pre-individual being is not characterised by static equilibrium or quiet, which are the features proper to the individualised entities, but by metastability, a concept that is strictly bonded with the idea of potential energy.

In physics, potential energy is defined as the “energy held by an object because of its position relative to other objects, stresses within itself, its electric charge, or other factors” (Jain, 2009).

Thus, the pre-individual being is characterised by an energy that is not activated yet, but that exists in the making, “dal quale la degradazione dell'energia, consecutiva ad uno stato di sovratensione del sistema, produca processi di differenziazione e di individuazione” (Garelli, 2022, p. 21).

“The pre-individual being is also characterised by non-identity and non-unity, becoming a being that has to be considered not as substance or matter or form, but as a tense, supersaturated system above the level of unity [...] a being that is more than a unity and more than identity” (Simondon, 2020a, p. 4).

That is because unity and identity merely apply to one of the phases of being, “posterior to the operation of individuation” (ivi, p. 5), namely the individuated entities.

But how do the individualised entities individualise themselves from the pre-individual being? It is precisely here that the notion of information comes into play.

According to Simondon:

“information is that entity through which the non-resolved systems' incompatibility becomes an organizational dimension in the resolution; information supposes a phase change of a system, for it supposes a first pre-individual state that individuates according to the discovered organization; information is the formula of individuation, a formula that cannot

exist before this individuation; we could say that information is always in the present, actual, for it is the direction according to which a system individuates” (ivi, pp. 11-12).

In other words, information is the source and the cause of the individuation, which means that information is somewhat responsible for the identity (a theme that will be further explored in the next chapter), unity and individuality of beings since it implies a change of phase, a change to the status of the subject.

It is precisely for this reason that Andrew Iliadis calls Simondon’s philosophy a “deeply informational one” (Iliadis, 2013, p. 2).

To sum up, for Simondon, information was a “sort of pattern for individuation that produces resolution” (Rantala, 2019), identity and unity from the non-identity and non-unity.

Iliadis argues that Simondon’s approach to informational ontology is a type of extension of the Mathematical Theory of Commutation (MTC), one that “accounts for the indeterminacy of information’s interactive existence and that furthered the concerns of the earlier cyberneticists” (ivi, p. 6).

The Mathematical Theory of Communication (MTC) was elaborated by Claude E. Shannon in 1948, and it is still regarded today as the foundation stone of the theory of information. Shannon recognised information as the reduction of uncertainty, a quantifiable measure grounded in probability theory. From this foundation, he developed an objective scientific framework, complete with a distinct unit of measurement known as the binary digit or “bit”.

The bit essentially represents the capacity to store a binary of information, corresponding to the answer to a “yes or no” question or the value of either zero or one.

Shannon's innovative approach introduced the idea of “interoperability” across various forms of information.

The bit remains the smallest unit of information that can be conveyed, serving as a fundamental building block in the representation and transmission of messages.

This framework has had profound implications for the fields of communication, computer science, and information theory, establishing a basis for understanding how information can be efficiently encoded, transmitted, and decoded in the presence of noise and uncertainty and across different media.

It is precisely the concept of “interoperability” that interested Simondon, as in the possibility to “express the compatibility of two disparate realms” (ivi, p. 12), namely between two individualised entities or between the pre-individual being and the individualised entities.

The French philosopher rejects the idea of information as mere data, message or signal, acknowledging that “the most important thing is the system where the information is constituted [...], and it should not be confused with information signals and media signals” (ibid.).

Shannon’s idea of the bit was further brought ahead by physicist John Wheeler (d. 2008). While studying quantum physics, he elaborated the famous sentence “it from bit”. He argues that:

“[...] every particle, every field of force, even the spacetime continuum itself — derives its function, its meaning, its very existence entirely — even if in some contexts indirectly — from the apparatus- elicited answers to yes or no questions, binary choices, bit. It from bit symbolizes the idea that every item of the physical world has at bottom — at a very deep bottom, in most instances — an immaterial source and explanation; that what we call reality arises in the last analysis from the posing of yes-no questions and the registering of equipment-evoked responses; in short, that all things physical are information-theoretic in origin and this is a participatory universe” (Wheeler, 1989).

This statement represents an important step forward from Shannon’s theory. Wheeler is saying that the physical reality and its elements exist only as answers to the “yes-no” questions we give through the *apparatus* that is represented by the media itself.

The “information-theoretic” origin of things reflects in some ways Simondon’s idea of information’s generative power.

The all-embracing nature of information acknowledged by Shannon, Simondon and Wheeler, and then traduced in the concept of interoperability, is then central for conceiving information and communication as never-ending processes deeply entailed in human nature, regardless of place, time or language.

Simondon himself points out the continuum of the information-individuation process by stating that

“[...] individuation also undoubtedly exists for the living being as an absolute origin, but it is doubled by ongoing individuation, which is life itself, according to the fundamental mode of becoming: the living being conserves within itself an ongoing activity of individuation; it is not merely a result of individuation, like the crystal or molecule, but a theatre of individuation” (Simondon, 2020a, p. 7).

The idea of the living being as a “theatre of individuation” is crucial in compiling a comprehensive history of human information, capable of studying the exchange of information without any boundaries in terms of place and time.

Thus, it becomes easy to put together, for example, the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press and the birth of social media and discover that the power dynamics of production, control and diffusion—and thus of memory collecting and identity formation and replication— remain the same.

In this regard, the text *Information: A Historical Companion*, edited by A. Blair, P. Duguid, A. Goeing and A. Grafton, provides precious insights into the ever-lasting nature of information and its relationship with power in several periods and geographical contexts.

While discussing the newspaper revolution in the Modern Era, the authors state:

“Individuals highlighted the capacity of newspapers to foster an informed citizenry by relaying information cheaply and quickly over vast distances. These ideals were not always realized, but their expression became commonplace. Information in the form of reference books, maps, and single-sheet broadsides remained important, but regular and timely access to newspapers and other periodicals was increasingly seen as vital to understanding the world and effecting change within it” (Blair et al., 2021, p. 129).

Now, in order to prove my thesis that information and communication transcend the artificial divisions of time and space, let’s remove the time-specific terms from the excerpt above:

Individuals highlighted the capacity of _____ to foster an informed citizenry by relaying information cheaply and quickly over vast distances. These ideals were not always realized, but their expression became commonplace. Information in the form of _____, _____ and _____ remained important, but regular and timely access to _____ and other _____ was increasingly seen as vital to understanding the world and effecting change within it (Rearranged from Blair et al., 2021, p. 129).

Next, I will insert other terms in the blank spaces related to another era, such as our digital-driven period. The result will be something like this:

Individuals highlighted the capacity of the web to foster an informed citizenry by relaying information cheaply and quickly over vast distances. These ideals were not always realized, but their expression became commonplace. Information in the form of books, magazines and newspapers remained important, but regular and timely access to social media and other digital news sources was increasingly seen as vital to understanding the world and effecting change within it (Rearranged from Blair et al., 2021, p. 129).

The resulting paragraph is a striking example of how communication and information are inseparable from human evolution and that the differences occur only in a matter of scale and precision. The same experiment can also be done in the following way, always maintaining the truth and the validity of the authors' statement:

Individuals highlighted the capacity of literacy to foster an informed citizenry by relaying information cheaply and quickly over vast distances. These ideals were not always realized, but their expression became commonplace. Information in the form of stories, emissaries and social gatherings remained important, but regular and timely access to books and other written sources was increasingly seen as vital to understanding the world and effecting change within it (Rearranged from Blair et al., 2021, p. 129).

In these first two sections, I have tried to put thesis in motion by presenting the ideas of “communication” and “information”.

“Communication” has been described as a continuous and necessary process, inscribed into the very nature of human beings across time and places, a process that, regardless of all our efforts, we cannot get rid of.

On the other hand, I have tried to highlight “information”’s generative and manipulative nature, that is, in other words, the power of information to shape and mould ideas, minds, memories, and identities.

However, in order to have a comprehensive theoretical framework, I have to delve into the meaning of “media”.

1.3 The Extended Body: what is the Nature of Media?

The concept of media has been lengthily discussed and analysed by many scholars and from several disciplinary points of view.

The word “media” is often indented with a dual definition by which it refers to “the formal or technical, conduits that enable communication *and* to the organisations and industries through which certain communicative activities—in particular, the production and circulation of news and

entertainment— are orchestrated in their most technologically advanced states” (Blair et al., 2021, p. 601).

However, as I will discuss, the idea of “media” as something that “stays in the middle” and its understanding entails a more complex description and analysis.

After decades of discussion and philosophical enquiries, the question that still concerns the specialists and makes them argue is: in the process of communication, is the medium perceived or not?

The most eminent defender of the first hypothesis—which says that the medium is well visible and shapes the communication process—is Marshall McLuhan, who expressed this idea in the popular statement “the medium is the message”, which appeared for the first time with the publication of his 1964 *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*.

McLuhan’s argumentation begins with a simple assertion: “Man, the tool-making animal, whether in speech or in writing or in radio, has long been engaged in extending one or another of his sense organs” (McLuhan et al., 2011, p. 4), and today he has developed “extensions for practically everything he used to do with his body” (Hall, 1959, p. 79).

So, since for McLuhan, “the medium is the extension of the several functions of the body, it becomes the message because it shapes and controls the scale and form of human association, action and interaction” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 9).

Taking the example of the electric light that is, according to McLuhan, “a medium without a message”, the Canadian scholar argues that the “content” of any medium is always another medium. “The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph” (ivi, p. 8).

In other words, McLuhan argues that the characteristics of a medium modify the message and how we perceive it. In particular, the scholar is interested in how different kinds of media have shaped our nature by shaping the function of our senses, altering the relationship between them and thus changing our way of perceiving reality and the way we interact with it.

To illustrate this point, he gives the example of the changes brought by the introduction, in the Renaissance, of the space between words on our way of reading and thus on our way of understanding the texts.

Because of the manuscripts’ *scriptio continua*, for centuries, “reading” meant reading aloud to better understand and separate the words. With the separated words, this problem was overcome, and people started reading faster and in silence, a thing that, for McLuhan, produced a “divorce between eye and speech in the act of reading. The recognition that in reading from left to right, we

make incipient word formations with our throat muscles was discovered to be the principal cause of “slow” reading” (McLuhan et al., 2011, p. 94).

The same process of sense-shaping can be observed in the fact that we have lost the ability to make calculations in our heads since we started using the calculator.

These small examples illustrate well what McLuhan intended with the sentence “the medium is the message”, that is, the fact that media shapes how we produce and receive messages.

On the other hand, I would like to present the hypothesis opposed to McLuhan, which perceives the medium as something that disappears during the process of communication.

These ideas have been collected in a recent book by John Lechte. Lechte criticises McLuhan, arguing that “the phrase ‘the medium is the message’ expresses that the content of any medium is largely irrelevant compared with the structure of that medium itself” (Lechte, 2023, p. 3). Moreover, in an interview that McLuhan released for playboy, he stated that “the content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stencilling on the casing of an atomic bomb” (Norden, 1969).

To counter this idea, Lechte introduces the concept of the “excluded middle by which non-appearance will be seen to constitute the essence of medium” (Lechte, 2023, p. 22), and a medium’s success “depends on its disappearance” (ivi, p. 4).

This position is also supported by the work of Sybille Krämer, who states that “the smoother media work, the more they remain under the threshold of our perception [...] and only noise, dysfunction and disturbance make the media noticeable” (Krämer, 2015, p. 31).

Both experts insist on the notion of the medium as the *terminus medius* of communication, something that “fulfils its function in the process of its own elimination, comparing it to the figure of the dying messenger” (ivi, pp. 36-7).

Ultimately, Krämer states that “the primary function of media is transmission, they do not directly produce anything; they do not possess any demiurgical power” (ivi, p. 75).

It is precisely in this that the difference between the two conceptions of media lies on. While for Krämer and Lechte, a new road is just a road, which simply connects you from point A to point B, for McLuhan, a new road is something that makes you think that point B is now reachable.

Additionally, the very fact that point B is now considered reachable and no longer a far and unknown place has countless consequences on people’s understanding of reality and, thus, on new scientific discoveries or on the production of literature and art.

1.4 From Language to AI: how Technique Shapes Information

To better understand the debate on the nature of media, it is necessary to delve into the “complex and extensive relationship between media and technological evolution through the crucial steps represented by language, writing, the mechanisation of writing and the electronic encoding of information” (Bernstein, 2013, p. 20).

This section aims to apply the above theoretical framework to several historical contexts in order to prove two points. The first is that the power of media shapes our understanding of the world in a McLuhanian fashion. The second that the power dynamics that have unravelled around access to communication technology, are the same without any difference in space and time.

1.4.1 Language

The first media that needs to be taken into consideration is language itself.

Since the birth of humankind, language has become a tool of governance and hierarchy production.

In this regard, the ṚgVeda can be taken as an eloquent example.

The ṚgVeda “was composed in the north-western region of India, roughly between 1500 BCE and 900 BCE” (Kuruvachira, 2016) by a literate élite, but it emerged as “a canonical collection rearranged for ritual use only around the sixth or fifth century BCE” (Galewicz, 2020).

It represents the most ancient work of the Indo-Aryan tradition and is considered one of the first instances of establishing brahmanical power.

In ṚgVeda 10:90, there is the myth of creation in which the act of dismembering the “cosmic man” (*puruṣa*) gives birth to the world and the social institutions within it.

This passage describes how from the different parts of the *puruṣa* came the hierarchical, hereditary and social groups that formed the society at that time, namely the Brahmans, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisya and the Shudras. These groups laid the foundation of the hierarchical, hereditary and social groups which still exist today and have a profound impact on Indian society and politics².

² Describing the evolution and the structure of the Indian caste system and its implication in contemporary society and politics will get us off the topic. For an insight into these themes, I refer to Dirks, N. B. (2001). *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton University Press, Meghwanshi, B. (2020). *I could not be Hindu: The story of a Dalit in RSS* (N. Menon, Trans.). Navayana, Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste: The annotated critical edition* (S. Anand & A. Roy, Eds.). Navayana, along with the academic production of M.N. Srinivas

The twelfth verse of ṚgVeda 10:90 recites as follows:

“brāhmaṇo.asya mukhamāsīd bāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtaḥ |
ūrūtadasya yad vaiśyaḥ padbhyāṃ śūdro ajāyata ||”
(ṚgVeda 10:90-12)

R.T.H. Griffith proposes this translation:

“the Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made.
His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced”
(Griffith,1995).

The fact that the brahmins are said to come from the mouth is indicative of the power that was attributed to the word and language, even at the time of the composition of the hymn.

While the ṚgVeda is just one of the several examples of how the power of the word in the guise of a *sacred* and thus “unquestionable” entity has been a tool of control, on the other, it represents the most ancient one. Three millennia later after its composition, it determines the power dynamics in the most populous country in the world.

1.4.2 Writing

Recent studies that combined archaeology and neuroscience have dated the birth of writing “around the late fourth millennium in Mesopotamia” (Overmann, 2016). According to Denise Schmandt-Besserat, it stemmed from more ancient count systems of “small stone tokens used to measure agricultural resources in the region of the Fertile Crescent” (Schmandt-Besserat 2022) from about the 7000 BCE.

Originally used to symbolise quantities, over time, these tokens evolved into “flat tables with the symbols of the tokens written on them, and after this, the cuneiform alphabet took shape” (Bernstein, 2013, p. 29).

Both tokens and early scripts shared three common features. First, they freed humans from the limitations of memory. Second, they almost certainly imparted to those who mastered them enormous advantages over those who did not. Third, these tokens probably served a central role in “the formation of history’s first city-states around 3300 BC” (ivi, p. 31).

The power of this new media was immediately understood by the literate elites who exploited the new —and highly complex, and thus inaccessible— cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts to exert power over increasingly large populations and geographic areas. “It is no coincidence that the rise

of the world's first large-scale empires in Mesopotamia and Egypt followed fast on the heels of dramatic improvements in cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing, respectively" (ivi, p. 14).

Because reading and writing were technically difficult and expensive, literacy was a characteristic reserved for a restricted elite who came to form the backbone of the power institutions. "The scribe became the ancient equivalent of a high-tech entrepreneur, whose command of the era's cutting-edge technology —literacy— gave him an unbeatable edge on the road to wealth and power" (ivi, p. 15).

Thus, the ruling elites discovered a new tool to control and influence the illiterate folk, who found themselves excluded from the very process of power negotiation and application.

Compared to the spoken language, the written word enabled the ruling classes to create organisational systems that would later evolve in cities and empires.

An example of this is represented by the Akkadian king Sargon, who, around 2300 BCE, went on to conquer a large swath of territory extending from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. In short, during the mid-third century BC, advances in cuneiform script allowed Sargon and his successors to assemble and rule the world's first great empire. Not only did this new tool enhance the political and administrative reach of the leader, but it also enabled him to deploy, for the very first time, a nationwide propaganda campaign driven by the magical effect of the tablet on an illiterate population. After 2300 BC, the Fertile Crescent had "no place for a king without an army of scribes" (ivi, pp. 48-9).

In this regard, Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that the only phenomenon with which writing has always been concomitant is the creation of cities and empires, in other words, "the integration of large numbers of individuals into a political system and their grading into castes or classes [...] It seems to have favoured the exploitation of human beings rather than their enlightenment [...] The primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery" (Lévi-Strauss et al., 1974, p. 299).

Although his position is quite radical, it shows that the media are *vocēs mediae* themselves. On the one hand, the beneficial effect of writing is undeniable: it allowed ancient human groups to thrive through better management of resources. On the other hand, it became a prerogative of a selected few, enhancing —in the same way the other media will— the hierarchical and manipulative nature of communication.

Alongside the formation of power institutions in the forms of ruling figures, laws and stratified social structures, writing started the thill ongoing process of organisation and storing of knowledge in the form of written records.

Thus, along with the evolution of writing methods and materials, the records accumulated, and, at a certain point, a selection was needed. So, “in different parts of the world, compilers, librarians, and archivists were constantly making choices about what to keep and what to remove, and these choices were driven by political concerns” (Blair et al., 2021, p. 54). The issues of the archive and oblivion will be further investigated in the next chapter.

Thus, writing can be seen as the first medium which allowed the ruling end educated groups to exert a form of organised and structured power that was no longer only military and violent (over the bodies) but also more subtle and intellectual (over the minds).

1.4.3 Print

After writing, the biggest shift in terms of communication technologies was print. It permitted the reproduction of text and thus their rapid and cheap diffusion also outside of the traditional centres of cultural production and reproduction, which in Europe were the Church and the courts.

This not only played a crucial role in the spread of literacy but also sparked a revolution that undermined the stability of traditional power institutions, giving rise to new ones.

However, while print “gave the wings to the human mind” (Janssen, 1928), it rapidly became a tool that amplified the power of the elites over the minds and, thus, over the bodies of people, making it more specific and more accurate.

What is known as the ‘Gutenberg Revolution’ was no more than an improvement in materials. The movable types existed even before 1450, but they were not precise and not accurately made. Gutenberg’s contribution was in the “the mass production of individual bits of letter type which became so finely made that the few thousand blocks required for the average page fitted perfectly together” (Bernstein, 2013, p. 161). This production was made possible only because of the emergence, in Germany, of a new metal industry from the late medieval period.

Moreover, while in East Asia, the xylographic print was cheaper and required fewer resources and engineering knowledge, in Europe, printing was a commercial and capitalist venture from the start. Printers who lacked the necessary funds partnered with publishers who provided the capital. For example, “Gutenberg could not repay the loan taken out to cover his initial expenses and lost his business to his creditor, Johann Fus” (Blair et al., 2021, p. 68).

The consequence of this was that in the first stages of the print era, this new technology remained a prerogative of a new elite that decided what to print and what not to, just as it happened with the early writing technologies.

However, print materials fostered the spreading of literacy among ordinary people, evident by the rise of vernacular publications against the ones in Latin. Just one year after the publication of Luther's thesis, in 1518, the Strasbourg printers ran off approximately equal numbers of German and Latin pamphlets; "by 1522, 90 per cent were in German" (ivi, p. 168).

The revolutionary power generated by this new technology can be understood through the work of Benedict Anderson, in which the scholar gives the print special credit for forming the concept of nationalism and, thus, for the creation of several national identities in Europe.

He argues that "the development of print-as-commodity is the key to the generation of wholly new ideas of simultaneity" (Anderson, 2016, p. 37) through space and time and also of reproducibility.

The spread of print materials, backed by large profitable enterprises, contributed to giving prominence to the vernaculars at the expense of Latin and to standardising those languages. According to Anderson, "these print languages laid the basis for national consciousnesses by creating unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars, dominated by languages which, through the fixity of the print medium, became themselves fixed" (ivi, pp. 44-5).

Along with the standardisation of language, print material contributed to the creation of what Anderson defines as "imagined communities, groups of people who, even though they will never know most of their fellow members, believe to be part of the same horizontal community because certain institutions, whose power works through the print medium, have said so to them" (ivi, pp. 5-7). Anderson claims that these imagined communities formed the core of modern European nations.

1.4.4 Radio and Television

A crucial problem that was taking shape with the advancements in communication technology was that the last media were expensive, and thus, each "technological shift", at least in its early stages, required huge capital investments, leading to the creation of monopolies of control.

This was especially true for radio and TV, so that, "already in 1934, lawmakers in the U.S. were lamenting that the whole thing was tending towards centralisation of control" (Bernstein, 2013, p. 247).

Even though, as we have seen, these dynamics of "media monopolisation" have existed since the emergence of language, the most evident precedent can be individuated between the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century when telegraphic cables spread all across the globe. Crucial for divulging news, they were owned and operated not by governments, but by "a relatively

small number of companies that ranked among the world's largest and most powerful multinational corporations" (Blair et al., 2021, p. 213), The same happened with radio, television and later, with internet.

Another aspect that became clearer with the emergence of electronic media such as the telegraph, radio and then the internet, is the deep bond between this new technology and the military. Still today, many innovations, especially those linked to information and communication, are coming from military research and development and thus have innate "weapon-like" characteristics.

Radio, for example, emerged to play a "substantial role in military communications on both sides in World War I, but at that time, it carried little political or cultural freight" (Bernstein, 2013, p. 246).

It was only in the twenties that radio began to invade the time and the space of private citizens. In this regard, "the first commercial radio stations, the KDKA in Pittsburg and the WWJ in Detroit started their operation in 1920 in the United States" (ivi, p. 263).

Thanks to the new scale in range and simultaneity, radio played a crucial role in America's 1932 elections and helped Roosevelt win. He made a tacit deal with the leaders of the nascent broadcast industry, who must have cast a nervous eye on state ownership of radio across the Atlantic and on the emergency economic conditions at home: "I'll keep my hands off your stations as long as you provide me with access and deny it to my opponents" (ivi, pp. 264-267).

Radio and television were so successful because they transmitted emotions in a way which was not possible with print alone. Moreover, at least in their early stages, this communication of emotion was amplified by the fact that these media were consumed in groups, i.e. with the family, the members of the party or in public hearings. In this regard, Hadley Cantril touches the core of radio—and then of television—by writing:

"By its very nature, radio is the medium par excellence for informing all segments of a population of current happenings, for arousing in them a common sense of fear or joy and for exciting them to similar reactions directed toward a single objective" (Cantril, 1982, p. xii).

Cantril wrote this in 1940 when television was only a futuristic idea. However, his words also apply to this new media, which "in 1948 was present in less than 2% of U.S. homes but by 1960 in almost 90% of them" (Spigel & Dawson, 2008).

1.4.5 Web

In 1941, a scared Hadley Cantril, talking about the dangerous effects of radio, wrote: “The day cannot be far off when men in every country of the globe will be able to listen at one time to the persuasions or commands of some wizard seated in a central place of broadcasting, possessed of a power more fantastic than that of Aladdin” (Cantril & Allport, 1941, p. 3).

That day came when, in 1998, Google was launched for the first time. The web exponentially augmented all the characteristics of media I have discussed before at an unimaginable pace.

It will take us too long to describe in depth all the revolutions brought in by the web³. Instead, I will focus on one aspect, the concept introduced by Sinan Aral, of “hypersocialisation”, since it is well explicative of how the advancements in communications technologies are shaping the global society.

The studies summarised in Aral’s work point out that the *Hype Machine*, intended as the real-time communications ecosystem created by social media, “has an unprecedented power in spreading behaviour change in every field of our lives” (Aral, 2020, p. 191), the reason being the augmentation, till the extreme terms, of sociality.

The problem lies on the fact that this *hypersocialisation* is not a simple augmentation of sociality between humans, but it dove us into interacting more and in creepier ways with machines.

Sociality has not simply been ‘rendered technological’ by moving to an online space; rather, “coded structures are profoundly altering the nature of our connections, creations, and interactions” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 20).

On social media, we can have the illusion of interacting with real people —friends, news outlets, influencers— but, in reality, “our connections are algorithmically conditioned and governed by the socio-technical and political-economic configurations of specific media platforms, namely the algorithms” (Bucher, 2018, p. 7).

It can be said that on social media, we are interacting directly with the machine, and the machine is interacting with us as well, modifying itself and changing the more it gets to “know” us.

³ For this reason, I refer to the present books: Aral, S. (2020). *The hype machine: How social media disrupts our elections, our economy, and our health and how we must adapt*. Currency.; Bucher, T. (2018). *If ... then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford University Press; Eichhorn, K. (2022). *Content*. The MIT Press.; Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press.; Taddeo, G. (2024). *Social. L'industria delle Relazioni*. Giulio Einaudi editore.; Vaidhyanathan, S. (2012). *The googlization of everything: (and why we should worry)*. University of California Press.; Vaidhyanathan, S. (2021). *Antisocial media: How Facebook disconnects US and Undermines Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

The issue is that behind a veil of imagined impartiality —that comes out from the nineties’ internet utopia— these algorithms, governed by trade-secret protection, are never neutral. They represent a precise set of criteria, assumptions, values, put there by someone and that will “shape the ways in which information is presented, organized, and indicated as being important” (ivi, p. 34). In other words, algorithms mould online communication between us and other people by choosing what, when and how we see things.

In this section, I have tried to demonstrate how the extreme condition in which people are living today is just the latest consequence of a history that has been going on since the dawn of humanity. Once we are aware of the connection between political power and access to communication technology, “it becomes obvious throughout all human history” (Bernstein, 2013, p. 19).

1.5 Media massification: media and the problem of being individuated

Another significant issue regarding (mass)media is the problem of being individuated. Since people have relied on the same media to communicate, these platforms have guided individual expression towards a shared commonality.

Turning our attention back to Simondon’s ideas, he stated that information arises from individuation. Although for the French thinker, “information is never a given thing, there is no unity and identity of information” (Simondon 2020a, p. 11), it can be argued that if information is the same, the resultant individuations will have some degree of resemblance. Thus, when information is extended to a mass scale, there is the risk of a “massification” of society, namely the levelling of every individual towards only one *forma mentis*, not so much in the contents but in the way of thinking.

Marshall McLuhan argues that “the revolution of writing, which has relegated men to a visual world, has also brought as a consequence the homogenising of experiences” (McLuhan, 2011, p. 144).

Beyond this, printed books as the first uniform, repeatable and mass-produced items in the world, “provided endless paradigms of uniform commodity culture for the sixteenth and succeeding centuries” (ivi, p. 186).

This “uniform commodity culture” that saw books as its new medium for transmitting knowledge and language is recognised by both McLuhan and Anderson as the basis of the rise of European

nationalist feelings, harbouring, at their very core, tension towards a new kind of unity/identity that was promoted through printing. Anderson is right in pointing out that these communities were “imagined” “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives, the image of their communion” (Anderson, 2016, p. 6).

If we look closer, we can find the seeds of Aral’s “hypersocialisation” in the form of a first expansion of human sociality beyond the individuals known personally. People, then like now, found themselves in a situation in which the community they live in expanded, often without any significant changes for individuals, except perhaps for a different kind of taxation. Meanwhile, the ideas and the conceptual worlds of individuals got inevitably, often unconsciously and unwillingly, negotiated, modified or even lost.

Today, the homogenisation process has not changed, what is different is the scale on which it is happening and, thus, the kind of “imagined communities” it creates.

If in premodern Europe, the “imagined communities” were founded on a linguistic standardisation, today, the standardisation is ideological. Just as the new languages were constructed by the media, today, the new communication technologies build ideologies that are even more fixed and self-referential, with several consequences on memory and identity, topics I will address in the next chapter.

As Aral points out, the Hype Machine “hypersocializes” us, making our individual judgments systematically and algorithmically interdependent, “polarising us into homogeneous communities” (Aral, 2020, p. 252).

However, the problem does not lie in the degree of polarisation in the sense of radicalisation of political thought. As shown by Getzkow, “it has remained more or less the same since the sixties” (Getzkow 2016). The issue of today’s polarisation lies on the fact that “people — Americans in this case— are identifying every aspect of their ideology and identity along two distinct lines that correspond to the party ones” (Aral, 2020, p. 266), which means that “more people hold either liberal or conservative-leaning views across the board of their existences” (Getzkow, 2016).

It is like one’s political affiliation should define all tastes, tendencies and preferences according to unwritten but well-established and mass-recognised criteria.

Again, using Anderson’s categories, these “imagined communities” have precise and finite boundaries, beyond which is present another “imagined community” that was formed by the same dynamics of homogenisation and standardisation.

The different scale between Anderson's communities and the contemporary ones reflects the difference between the media involved. At that time, books and newspapers were consumed once in a while and for a certain period of time and not everyone could access them, today, each one of us is exposed to these homogenising effects all day long without a break.

Shah, Rajadhyakha and Hasan call this phenomenon "information overload". According to the scholars, "in this situation, we increasingly define information as a "condition" of our existence, a condition of naming ourselves and each other [...] Our questions of agency, choice, freedom, and truth are all tied to conditions of informationality" (Shah et al., 2022 p. 27).

This environment of ubiquitous information has put us in a state of perpetual alert, always in need of getting the latest news. This frenetic mode of information fruition eliminates the time between the reception of an information and the next, depriving us of the necessary time to process and further examine the news we encounter, creating a fertile environment for the spreading of rumours and fake news. As noted by Harari:

"In the past, censorship worked by blocking the flow of information. In the twenty-first century, censorship works by flooding people with irrelevant information. We just don't know what to pay attention to, and often spend our time investigating and debating side issues. In ancient times having power meant having access to data. Today having power means knowing what to ignore" (Harari, 2017, p. 462).

Moreover, several studies (Marsden et al., 2006; Bawden & Robinson, 2020; Phillips-Wren & Adya 2020) have highlighted the fact that information overload is the cause of mental fatigue, a loss in decision quality, mistakes in judgements, stress and attention deficit.

"Information overload" has shaped a kind of human who is always worried and on alert but who, at the same time, is numb and does not have the capacities to overcome the situation in which they live.

This was also described by McLuhan, who addresses "civilised people —the ones 'taken hostages' by print (and digital) media— as numb in their perceptions" (McLuhan, 2011, p. 32), a state which the Canadian scholar describes with the figure of Narcissus —paired with the word "narcosis"— who was "so hypnotised by his image reflected in the water that he drowned himself" (McLuhan, 1994).

As a cause of stress and tension, information overload can be further understood also as a root of aggressive behaviour among people.

Several studies underlined the correlation between stress and aggression (Barik et al., 2013; von Dawans et al., 2021; Kruk et al., 2004).

With this insight, we can identify a correlation between information overload and human aggression that has not only been individuated in the content —politically and socially polarising— but also in the nature of the media itself.

The scale of the “communities” described by Anderson is different from today’s because of media consumption frequency and the deeper effect and scope of homogenisation, polarisation and by information overload.

These factors enhance all the characteristics of Anderson’s “imagined communities” to the extreme, leading to fragmentation among individuals and communities and generating fierce violence between the different groups.

The issues of identity and violence will be further analysed respectively in the third and fourth chapters.

1.6 The Weaponised Information: the Political Use of News in the Indian 2024 General Election.

Having laid down a theoretical framework for how to deal with communication and information, I would like to briefly show the relationship between power and media through a case study of contemporary politics, namely the Indian General election of 2024.

Between 19th April and 1st June 2024, more than 642 million Indian citizens —a turnout of 63.88— voted to elect the 18th *Lok Sabah*⁴ since the Country’s Independence in 1947.

Besides being labelled as the ‘biggest democratic exercise in history’ by various news outlets, these elections are interesting for the extensive and capillary communication strategies adopted by the several parties predominantly the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which cost hundreds of million US dollars.

The data reported by the Wire show that in Meta ads alone (advertising on both Facebook and Instagram) the BJP spent \$205 million, while the Congress spent approximately \$119 million (Mukhopadhyay, 2024), with a rise of respectively 128% and 140% compared to the 2019 General Elections.

⁴ The Lok Sabah is the lower chamber of the Indian Parliament. It is composed of 543 members, each one representing one constituency of the Country.

The dramatic surge in Meta ads spending reflects the importance that the “Hype Machine” has assumed as a vehicle of political propaganda.

In this section, I will outline the social media strategy adopted by the leading party, the BJP, which has been in power since 2014 and which has relied heavily on the new media for its political campaigns. (Fitria, 2024; Neyazi et al., 2024; Jaffrelot, 2021; Sinha, 2017; Williams et al., 2021).

1.6.1 Social Media & WhatsApp

Social media platforms in India have become a “breeding ground for manipulative practices to shape narratives and build public opinion” (Srinivasan, 2023).

Over the years, the BJP has developed an intricate net of institutional and non-institutional agents, including paid agencies, influencers, celebrities, groups, voluntaries and bots, to generate and spread content through every social media platform.

Research and investigations have unfolded the cascade-like functioning of BJP IT cells. Amit Malviya is the national chief of the party’s IT and social media operations. “Under him, there are centres at the state, district, assembly and municipal levels, municipal being responsible for the administration of cities and towns” (Kaur, 2021).

The great advantage of this network comes from its presence at the very grassroots levels of social media communication, which is WhatsApp.

The localised nature of this media, which is also the most used in the Country⁵, goes even further than the municipal level of societies and colonies⁶. The grassroots workers share hyperlocal information about development activities and work done by their party with voters in their area, highlighting the information that is “closer” to the single voters.

This networked system allows the party command to “centrally share information through the chain of WhatsApp groups — bypassing the editorial filter of news media and reaching the highest number of people possible” (Bansal, 2019).

But where does all this content —mostly visual and written— come from? Investigations, which also included interviews with former party workers, have unveiled a network of WhatsApp and Telegram groups that are used to internally communicate amongst cell members and share toolkits

⁵ According to [statista.com](https://www.statista.com), India is the country with the most WhatsApp users, 493 million in 2021. Moreover, according to [similarweb.com](https://www.similarweb.com), WhatsApp is the most downloaded app both in the Google Play Store and in the Apple App Store in India.

⁶ Societies and colonies are groups of houses or apartments in which usually people from the same community — religion, caste— live. Societies and colonies are managed by an administrative body which takes care of the community issues and matters. Some of these housing clusters have shops and other facilities inside, such as common rooms and gyms, to foster a ‘community sense’.

on when, where, how and what to post, with links to Google docs in which were contained all the information in many languages.

Further research on a specific X (former Twitter) hashtag, #YuvaShaktiWithModi,⁷ has traced back to the author of this document, who appeared to be a social media team leader at MyGov India, a platform made to enhance “citizens’ engagement with administrative bodies⁸” (Kaur, 2021; Strick, 2021).

1.6.2 Sangathan Reporting and Analysis (SARAL) app

To survive and perform at its best, the *Hype Machine* needs tons of data to tailor the best message and deliver it to the right person based on our specific interests and online behaviours.

In early 2023, BJP made available for download the “Sangathan Reporting and Analysis (Saral) app”, which in January 2024 “had more than 2.9 million downloads from the Google Play store” (Jaswal, 2024).

While the app was advertised as a way to “better connect with voters and with the party’s workers across India by conveying the policies and the programmes of the party” (ibid.), the app raised concerns about data collection and digital privacy issues.

When first opened, “the app asked the users to put all their personal information, like their phone number, address, age, gender, religion, caste, social categories such as scheduled tribes and castes, parliamentary constituency, voter identity number, and professional and educational details. Users can also upload their photographs” (ibid.).

On the one hand, the app was used ‘actively’ by the party to identify the booths —the smallest subdivision of an electoral district in India, signifying a community of people who cast their ballots at the same polling booth (ibid.)— where the support for the BJP was the lowest and thus to drive all the efforts in a geographically specific way through rallies and targeted campaigns.

On the other hand, the app, which also had the function of recording people’s presence at BJP events, provided the party and its workers with a “big brother” power over its voters.

The key point I wish to argue is not the app itself as a new form of media through which power is exercised more diffusely but rather how two decades of “online dwelling” have made us rethink the value we place on our personal data.

⁷ A pro-Modi hashtag, literally translated as ‘The energy of the youth with Mod’, was part of a campaign aimed at gaining consensus among the younger generation.

⁸ Link to the website of MyGov.in: <https://www.mygov.in/>

This brief analysis of the BJP's salient example underlines, I argue, the 'panopticon aspirations' that today are common, in a more or less overt way, to every government of the world.

The Indian case must be understood not as "geographically specific" but as situated within a global context in which the power of media and of their owners is exponentially growing through the emergence of new technologies. These are being shaped around the individual both as a data source as seen in the contest of "SARAL" app and as a data destination, as exemplified by the targeting in political campaigns through WhatsApp and social media.

Thus, the evolution of media communications towards an individual dimension has allowed the power to spread in a more personalised and single-centred and, thus, more efficient way.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to shed some light on the concepts of "information" and "media" and the dynamics of power behind them.

After having described the notions of communication and information, the core idea of this section was that the ways in which people behaved and are behaving with information and media have never changed since the birth of language.

Since the dawn of human history, the necessity of communication implied a media, and the media, in turn, implied a hierarchy, a division between those who control⁹ the media and those who are controlled by the media.

On the one hand, those who control the media, a small "media-educated" minority, find in them a way to exercise their power —whether political, economic, religious, cultural or of other kinds— over the majority by communication and reinforcing what Sperber calls "cultural representations" (Sperber & Origgi 1999), namely the set of ideas and beliefs that are produced, reproduced and shared inside a human group.

On the other hand, the vast majority, in most cases unaware of the power of media, have been slowly disenfranchised from "participation", that is, that

“esperienza in comune che troviamo come motivo fondante l'origine di tutte le culture, e come condizione della veicolazione dei messaggi che all'interno vi si scambiano, e che

⁹ Here by 'control' I mean both financially —i.e. Meta owns Facebook or the Rupert Murdoch News Corp owns the Wall Street Journal —and semantically —i.e. the brahmins decided that the idea expressed by the word 'brahmin' was qualitatively better than the one expressed by the word 'shudra'.

risultano intelligibili perché iscritti nella medesima simbolica originata dalla comune esperienza” (Galimberti 2009, pp. 843-4).

Throughout the history of power in communication, the emergence of new technologies, with the consequential augmentation of the processes of polarisation, homogenisation and *information overload*, represented the shifts that contributed to changing the shape and the scope of power, but not to its inner dynamics. Over time, power has become more individual-centred and thus more effective.

In the next chapter, the analysis will focus on memory and identity and on how their reconfiguration and negotiation through mass media are used as a tool to convey power and, ultimately, to generate violent and anti-social behaviours.

2. Memory and Identity: the Shapes of the Message

“Forse è questo che chiamiamo personalità, null'altro che una selezione casuale della ricca varietà di maschere che teniamo immagazzinate nel ripostiglio della memoria” (Tanpinar et al., 2014, p. 64).

This chapter is divided into two main sections.

The first delves into the topic of memory, and it is divided into four sub-sections. In the first, I will present the functioning of memory both from a biological and philosophical perspective. The second looks at the profound relationship between memory and technique and how it unravelled throughout history. In the third, I will explore the power of media to shape memories. The fourth and last sub-section deals with the issues of oblivion and the archive and how they were used to pursue specific power instances.

The second section will investigate the issue of identity, and it is divided into four sub-sections. The fifth describes the process of indent formation in individuals and groups. The sixth sub-section explains the complex tie between identity and violence and how rigid identities are often the source and cause of conflict. The seventh one deals with the role of power over the development of identities. Finally, the eighth and last sub-section takes into consideration the case of the indian Adhaar to describe the relationship between identity, technology and surveillance.

2.1 From the Storage Model to the Dynamic Model: Memory in Theory

Memory has always been a significant aspect of human existence.

While it is possible to live with a bad memory, without memory and memories, it would be impossible to do even the simplest tasks of our everyday lives, such as driving a car, cooking, having relationships and so on.

Being so crucial for our existence, memory immediately became one of the biggest objects of research and thought, and people started asking, “What is memory?” and then “Is memory even a thing, or is it a process?”.

Centuries of thinking about memory have led to numerous disagreements and only a few understandings. One of the latter is that memory is something that, in one way or another, physically changes what and how we think.

However, philosophers, neuroscientists and other specialists are still arguing and discussing where it is, how it works and especially, what it is.

A common definition sees memory as “the faculty of encoding, storing, and retrieving information” (Zlotnik & Vansintjan, 2019), but it seems quite limiting. Even if there have been improvements in the science of memory put forward by several disciplines, in this centuries-long debate, the opinions have broadly divided into two sides, which I will call the “storage model of memory” and the “dynamic model of memory”.

2.1.1 *The Storage Model of Memory*

The storage model of memory understands our brains as empty spaces filled up by memories, as something that physically exists inside our minds. One of the first instances of this concept can be traced back to Plato, who, in the *Theaetetus*, introduced the idea of memory as a block of wax:

“SOCR. (continues). There remain, then; the following cases in which, if anywhere, false judgment can occur.

THEAET. What are they? Perhaps they may help me to understand better. At present I cannot follow.

SOCR. Take things you know: you can suppose them to be other things which you both know and perceive; or to be things you do not know, but do perceive; or you can confuse two things which you both know and perceive.

THEAET. Now I am more in the dark than ever.

SOCR. Let me start again, then, and put it in this way. I know Theodorus and have a memory in my mind of what he is like, and the same with Theaetetus. At certain moments I see or touch or hear or otherwise perceive them; at other times, though I have no perception of you and Theodorus, I nevertheless remember you both and have you before my mind. Isn't that so?

THEAET. Certainly.

SOCR. That, then, is the first point I want to make clear that it is possible either to perceive or not to perceive something one is acquainted with.

THEAET. True.

SOCR. And it is also possible, when one is not acquainted with a thing, sometimes not to perceive it either, sometimes merely to perceive it and nothing more.

THEAET. That is possible too” (Plato, 2017, p. 121, 192C-E).

This idea of memory as something which has to be written will gain great support in the following centuries, so much so that scientists will coin the idea of *memory trace*, to describe the physical trace of the changes left on the brain cells by the memory.

More than this, in the myth of Theuth, contained in the Phaedrus, Plato reinforces the idea that memory is something *inside* the mind (ένδοθεν, 275a4) when comparing it with the memory “outside” the body (έξωθεν, 275a3), that is the technology of writing. I will come back to this myth while discussing the relationship between memory and technique in the next section.

Moreover, in Medieval Europe, the conception of memory as a “place inside the body that has to be filled” and of “memories as objects” gained momentum. In his *Confessiones*, St. Augustine uses this metaphor more than once.

“There is stored up, whatsoever besides we think, either by enlarging or diminishing, or any other (X, 12).

These things do I within, in that vast court of my memory (X, 14).

Great is this force of memory, excessive great, O my God; a large and boundless chamber! who ever sounded the bottom thereof? (X, 15)” (St. Augustine et al., 1942)

The metaphor of memory as “something blank that has to be written” was also addressed by Sigmund Freud. He described memory as a “mystic writing pad”, “un dispositivo composto da una tavoletta di cera ricoperta da un foglio di celluloido su cui è possibile «incidere», con uno stilo appuntito, delle tracce che si cancelleranno non appena il foglio verrà sollevato e staccato dalla tavoletta di cera a cui aderisce” (Cimatti, 2020, p. 19).

Compared to Plato’s block of wax, the ‘magic notes’ introduced the idea that memory can learn new things without eliminating the previous ones by storing them instead.

The idea that memories leave a trace in the brain was used by the psychologist Donald Hebb in the fifties. He gave a scientific explanation to this phenomenon through the ‘cell assembly’ theory.

Hebb argues that:

L’apprendimento è costituito da un cambiamento nello schema di conduzione all’interno del cervello che deriva dall’esperienza e provoca un cambiamento del potenziale di risposta [...] Se la modifica dello schema di conduzione persiste, si ha memoria; e, sembra chiaro, la persistenza indica che l’apprendimento deve consistere in un cambiamento relativo a vie o neuroni specifici. In altre parole, dev’essere un effetto localizzato (Hebb & Farabegoli, 1982, p. 144).

This explanation is widely accepted even in contemporary neuroscience, and recent studies have underlined and reinforced the role of neuronal modification in the process of memory encoding, that is, “the acquiring the information from outside” (Liu et al., 2021; Panzeri et al., 2023) but the problem of “memories ad things” remained.

Finally, the idea of memories as “things” inside the mind has also been reinforced by the proliferation of digital technologies in the late twentieth century. In devices like computers and smartphones, “memory”¹⁰ is truly an “inscribed storage” from which the systems can fetch content when needed. With the ever-growing use of these devices, human memory has been compared to technological memory, and the process of remembering started to be explained as “una interazione tra questi due sistemi [RAM e ROM]: in ultima analisi si tratta di recuperare una informazione «salvata» nella memoria a lungo termine e di ricostruirla nella memoria a breve termine” (Feyles, 2013, p. 91).

2.1.2 The Dynamic Model of Memory

Even if the storage model of memory has been supported for a long time both from philosophical and biological research, there are several issues with the idea of memories “as ‘objects stored inside the mind’, and it is not accurate to talk in terms of a perception leaving a memory trace in the brain” (De Brigard, 2014).

Once again, Plato introduces another conception of memory in the Theaetetus, comparing it to an aviary.

“SOCR. Once more then, just as a while ago, we imagined a sort of waxen block in our minds, so now let us suppose that every mind contains a kind of aviary stocked with birds of every sort, some in flocks apart from the rest, some in small groups, and some solitary, flying in any direction among them all.

THEAET. Be it so. What follows?

SOCR. When we are babies we must suppose this receptacle empty, and take the birds to stand for pieces of knowledge. Whenever a person acquires any piece of knowledge and shuts it up in his enclosure, we must say he has learnt or discovered the thing of which this is the knowledge, and that is what 'knowing' means.

THEAET. Be it so.

SOCR. Now think of him hunting once more for any piece of knowledge that he wants, catching and holding it, and letting it go again. In what terms are we to describe that -the same that we used of the original process of acquisition, or different ones?” (Plato, 2017, pp. 132-3, 197d5-198a4)

¹⁰ In computer science, there are two types of memories: the ROM (Read-only Memory) and the RAM (Random Access Memory). ROM is a non-volatile memory used to store and retrieve data. RAM is a short-term memory that is needed to temporarily store data that is actively being used or processed and it is deleted when the device is turned off.

“SOCR. Well, our illustration from hunting pigeons and getting possession of them will enable us to explain that the hunting occurs in two ways: first, before you possess your pigeon in order to have possession of it; secondly, after getting possession of it, in order to catch and hold in your hand what you have already possessed for some time. In the same way, if you have long possessed pieces of knowledge about things you have learnt and know, it is still possible to get to know the same things again, by the process of recovering the knowledge of some particular thing and getting hold of it. It is knowledge you have possessed for some time, but you had not got it handy in your mind” (ivi, pp. 133-34, 198d).

This idea of knowledge, and thus of memory, as something volatile, is also found in the research of Eric Kandel, who won the Nobel Prize for medicine in 2000. He studied a particular mollusc, the *Aplysia californica*, which happens to have a small number (20.000) of large ganglia¹¹, making it easier to study this animal compared to others. Kandel’s research highlights the difference between long and short-term memory. The former would cause temporary “functional changes” in the number of synapses, while the latter would cause permanent “structural changes”, creating new neural clusters.

The findings are summed up by Kandel as follows:

“First, activating long-term memory requires the switching on of genes. Second, there is a biological constraint on what experiences get stored in memory. To switch on the genes for long-term memory, CREB-1 proteins must be activated and CREB-2 proteins, which suppress the memory-enhancing genes, must be inactivated. Since people do not remember everything they have learned—nor would anyone want to—it is clear that the genes that encode suppressor proteins set a high threshold for converting short-term to long-term memory. It is for this reason that we remember only certain events and experiences for the long run. Most things we simply forget. Removing that biological constraint triggers the switch to long-term memory. The genes activated by CREB-1 are required for new synaptic growth. The fact that a gene must be switched on to form long-term memory shows clearly that genes are not simply determinants of behaviour but are also responsive to environmental stimulation, such as learning. Finally, the growth and maintenance of new synaptic terminals makes memory persist. Thus, if you remember anything of this book, it will be because your brain is slightly different after you have finished reading it. This ability to grow new synaptic connections as a result of experience appears to have been conserved throughout evolution” (Kandel, 2006, pp. 275-6).

On the one hand, Kandel’s research confirms that certain types of memories are “inscribed” in our brains much like physical entities. On the other hand, he states that other types of memories are not things but processes constantly being made and re-made.

¹¹ Ganglia are a dense group of nerve-cell bodies present in most animals. Their function is to ‘send’ the neural impulses from the brain to the other parts of the body.

The rebuttal of memories as physical things stored somewhere was also supported by Karl Lashley, a highly criticised scientist for his cruel experiments, who has found that “memories are not localised in a specific place but diffuse in several areas of the brain and through millions of neural connections” (Lashley, 1950). This finding opens up a huge range of possibilities for understanding how our brains work.

First of all, the activity of remembering, far from being a mechanical process of bringing out the information, can be described as a continuous re-invention and re-making of memories. As rightly pointed out by Cimatti, every time we recall old memories, we narrate them to ourselves and others. Hence, the memories are mediated by our language and capacity to narrate them, which ultimately is the capacity to put together several episodes, giving them complete meaning. Cimatti so beautifully puts it:

“le parole hanno, rispetto alla nostra memoria, una funzione simile, dare una direzione e un ordine – appunto l’ordine del racconto, della storia – a una molteplicità altrimenti indeterminata, quella della miriade di «piccole percezioni» che in ogni istante popolano la nostra mente, ognuna in competizione con tutte le altre, e ognuna con un suo tempo e un suo ordine potenziale” (Cimatti, 2020, pp. 75-6).

The consequences, both for the individual and the community, will be analysed in the next section. Now, I will look at the dynamic model.

This representation of memory as a linguistic operation has also been investigated by psychologist Fredric Bartlett. In his most well-known work, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1932), he highlights the fact that, with repetition, the memory loses some details, typically the ones that appear stranger to the subject. Over time, they become more generic and trivial.

From these findings, Bartlett concludes that there is a tendency to give a “form” to the memories according to familiar categories. This means that “our brain has a sort of ‘confirmation bias’ and tends to store memories according to certain ‘types’ we form throughout our life” (Bartlett, 1995, p. 83).

Furthermore, people tend to rationalise the memories, reducing “the [memory] material to a form that can be readily and ‘satisfyingly’ dealt with” (ivi, pp. 93-4).

These findings provoke thousands of new questions, such as the role of time in memories or the existence of memory in non-human beings. Unfortunately, I cannot explore all these ideas in this

paper or I will stray from the main topic. What interests us most about the nature of memory in the context at hand can be summed up in the following points:

First, memory, at least part of it, is not a thing, but a dynamic process that exists in the continuous making and remaking of itself.

Second, since they are not fixed, “our memories are constructions/interpretations of the event we want to remember” (Cimatti, 2020).

Third, this process occurs through language: “remembering is a narrative act” (ibid).

Fourth, the construction of our memories is a process of rationalisation: “remembering is an effort to give shape and sense to our unorganised memories” (Bartlett, 1995).

Fifth, this rationalisation happens according to several “forms” or “schemas” we have in mind, which we have acquired during our growth, leading to a sort of “confirmation bias” by which we remember what we have always remembered.

Next, I will analyse the relationship that has always existed between memory and technique.

2.2 Separated at Birth: Memory and Technique.

“Theuth came to [Thamus] and displayed his technical inventions, saying that they should be passed on to the rest of the Egyptians; and Thamus asked what benefit each brought. As Theuth went through them, Thamus criticised or e praised whatever he seemed to be getting right or wrong. The story goes that Thamus expressed many views to Theuth about each science, both for and against; it would take a long time to go through them in detail, but when it came to the subject of letters, Theuth said But this study, King Thamus, will make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory; what I have discovered is an elixir of memory and wisdom.’ Thamus replied ‘Most scientific Theuth, one man has the ability to beget the elements of a science, but it belongs to a different person to be able to judge what measure of harm and benefit it contains for those who are going to make use of it; so now you, as the father of letters, have been led by your affection for them to describe them as having the opposite of their real effect. For your invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through lack of practice at using their memory, as through reliance on writing they are reminded from outside by alien marks, not from inside, themselves by themselves: you have discovered an elixir not of memory but of reminding. To your students you give an appearance of wisdom, not the reality of it; having heard much, in the absence of teaching, they will appear to know much when for the most part they know nothing, and they will be difficult to get along with, because they have acquired the appearance of wisdom instead of wisdom itself” (Plato, 2017, p. 123, 274d5-275b4).

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato discovered an issue that is still tormenting us today: the technique as an extension of our memory. He recognised that the inevitability of human technological progress — personified by a god— would have caused humans to depend on it.

In the first chapter, we already saw how the birth of human language was a consequence of the need to count and keep those counts to hand, which was “the first step which contributed to freeing humans from the limitations of memory” (Bernstein, 2013, p. 31).

Even if they express opposing positions, in both Plato’s and Bernstein’s research, memory seems to be inseparable from the first technological tool, which is writing.

Drawing from the terminology used by Bernstein, I can introduce Leroi-Gourhan’s position on evolution, history and memory. According to him, human evolution and history are characterised by a series of progressive “liberations” from the genetic memory, the pre-programmed genetic code inscribed in our DNA. In the case of humans, the “liberation” occurred through the exteriorisation of human capacities and by the substitution of the organic with the inorganic.

In other words, “in order to survive among other animals which were already equipped with attacking-defence tools like claws or shells, humans, characterised by physical and mental maladjustment” (Leroi-Gourhan, 1977, p. 289), had to “exteriorise” all their capabilities, liberating themselves from a predeterminate life, or in a platonic fashion, “provoking their eternal atrophy and dependence” (Feyles, 2013). Ultimately, humans have also exteriorised their memory, first into writing and print and now, to a more problematic extent, into digital technologies.

Two main consequences can be drawn from Leroi-Gourhan’s theory. The first, supported by Cimatti, is the hypothesis that memory is not really inside us but outside.

“l’esperienza del tempo, e quindi della memoria, non è tanto qualcosa che dobbiamo cercare dentro il cervello, quanto piuttosto negli strumenti esterni con cui gli animali (umani e no) «misurano» il tempo. la memoria, nel senso di ricordi che possiamo raccontare, a noi stessi come a un altro (cioè la memoria episodica e in generale quella semantica), è qualcosa che ha a che fare con il mondo esterno, non con quello interno e privato. in questo senso quello della memoria non è un fenomeno psicologico, bensì tecnologico e sociale” (Cimatti, 2020, p. 47).

In other words, he argues that since we have always been dependent on external devices to recollect and access memories, these are not inside our brains but outside since the technological tools represent the only ways in which we can express and tell our memories.

Interestingly, this bond between memory and the technological apparatus in the transmission of oral traditions can be observed. If I draw from Milman Parry’s studies on the *Iliad* and Yugoslavia’s oral

poetry, it can be stated that “repetition” was used as one of the first techniques to maintain and preserve memory. From his studies, I can see that the repetition in the context of literary production produced certain “types” of character.

If we compare these findings with Bartlett’s, we observe some similarities, which could help me to better understand the relationship between memory and technique. It seems that they share the crucial feature of “repetition of models”, a concept that will be central when discussing identity formation.

Without entering the ‘which comes first’ loop, it can be observed how both human memory and the technology for memory have evolved, seamlessly influencing each other from the same basis, which is a narrative basis. This link was also pointed out by Feyles:

“L’unità tra tecnica e memoria-linguaggio induce a pensare che entrambi siano «espressione della stessa facoltà dell’uomo» . La capacità di manipolare uno strumento e la capacità di articolare un linguaggio appaiono come il risultato dello sviluppo della medesima area cerebrale” (Feyles, 2013, p. 47).

Recent neuroscience studies (Simonyan, 2019; Thibault et al., 2021) have highlighted the role of the basal ganglia in setting the pattern for the facilitation of voluntary movements and simultaneous inhibition of competing or interfering movements, along with “the control of a wide range of complex non-motor behaviours, including emotions, language, decision making, procedural learning, and working memory” (Simonyan, 2019).

The second consequence that can be drawn from Leroi-Gourhan’s theorisation is the “collective” aspect of memory. Once the memory is externalised through the technical object, it becomes of public domain and thus a public memory.

In several passages, Cimatti also underlines this aspect of memory. His argument can be summed up with this sentence:

“il ricordo individuale è sempre un evento in qualche modo sociale, perché ricordare significa usare su di sé una mnemotecnica esterna, sociale appunto” (Cimatti, 2020, p. 128).

It means that the technologies with which we give sense to our memories are, and always have been, public. Already in 1925, Maurice Halbwachs proposed to take seriously the notion of a collective memory that captures how a community of people view the world, share common beliefs and images, agree on a certain set of facts, “organise the community and communicate with each other through a unique language” (Steels & Sartoris, 2021, p. 81).

In the next sections, I will further investigate the role of collective memory in making the “archive” and in the process of community identity formation.

Having described the profound relationship between memory and technology, I can go back to Plato’s myth and review his judgments. While he correctly emphasises the atrophy that the excessive use of the technique can have on our memory, he seems not to take into consideration the high dependence —if not a certain degree of unity— between memory and external supports.

2.3 Memory and Mass Media: a Complex Relationship

Now that I have established that memories are mediated by language, I can expand on Cimatti’s reasoning. Since our language, both visual and spoken —images and words— is shaped through mass media, it can be argued that it has a central role in shaping our memories and, thus, our identities as rooted in the (collective) memory.

In this context, I look back to Anderson’s research once again. His “imagined communities” are a product of the standardisation of language enacted by the spread of print.

“Print capitalism¹²”, he argues, gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation (Anderson 2016, p. 44).

Besides Anderson, the relationship between media and language was analysed by more recent studies such as Abbasova (2019), Bahri et al. (2023), Bell (1995), Carvalho (2004), Cladis (2018), Dhongde (2001), Hjarvard (2004), Marchetti (2017), Muhr (2003), Natsir et al. (2023), Sayers (2014), Stuart-Smith et al. (2013) and many more. These studies from several different geographical contexts and on different media highlight the global and continuous scale of the phenomenon. Backed by plenty of research, it can be stated that media have always had a profound influence on our language, and since language is the way in which we codify our memories, media plays a crucial role in defining the limits by which we can remember and form memories.

However, media don’t influence only the limits of our memories but also the content of our memories.

¹² According to Anderson *print-capitalism* represents the diffusion of print materials, supported by capitalist enterprises which is at the base of the modern nations.

If, as Cimatti argues, memory is always, to a greater or lesser extent, a “reconstruction” (Cimatti, 2020, p. 126), then all it needs to do is change our present perceptions and ideas about the word to reshape the memories we have about that particular issue.

Once again, there is a vast amount of literature on how media can act upon the content of our memories until creating false ones (Austin & Strange, 2012; Chu, 2024, Garry & Wade, 2005, Garde-Hansen, 2011; Meyers, 2019; Miller & Gazzaniga, 1998; Pezdek et al., 1997; Roediger & McDermott, 1995; Wade et al., 2002).

Even though most of it refers to “old media” such as TV and newspapers, there are also some studies on new media (Bartoletti, 2011; Giaccardi & Plate, 2017; Hoffman et al., 2001; Segovia & Bailenson, 2009), but the research is still limited.

However, considering the ubiquity of the new media and their multi-sensory nature, I argue that the studies on the old media can also be applied to the new forms of media, especially social networks.

Even though more studies are needed in this specific field, having outlined the environment of “hypersocialisation”, “information overload” and “media homogenisation” in which we live today, we could argue that the same conclusion of those studies could be applied to social media.

To better explain this brief but dense concept, I will provide an example showing how the use of particular words, repeated and disseminated by media, has an effect in shaping the past and, thus, people’s memory.

I will analyse the term “Hinduism” and how it was applied to past events and objects in order to create a supposed “Hindu” past¹³.

In the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “Hinduism” is defined as “A major religious and cultural tradition originating in India, characterized by a belief in reincarnation and encompassing a variety of gods representing aspects of a supreme deity; this regarded as constituting a single religion” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023b).

While there are some discrepancies about the exact year in which the term appeared for the first time, it is generally agreed that it came into existence during the last twenty years of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, there are earlier occurrences, starting from the sixteenth century, of other European terms such as *Gentoos* or *Hindu* that indicated the “non-Muslim inhabitants of India”.

¹³ Since the issue around this term represents a huge matter in contemporary India on the definition of what is Hindu and what is not, I will study of the identitarian consequences of this terminology in the next chapter. In order to not create confusion, in this section, I will only concentrate on the usage of the word in a past context in order to highlight the modification of past and memory through language and media.

Even though it is a modern category, it has been used to refer even to objects from the second millennium BCE, such as the Harappan seals, a series of small stone seals dated around 2500 BCE. One of these depicts a sitting figure surrounded by animals.

The Government website for the “Indian Culture¹⁴” describes it¹⁵ in these terms:

“This rare seal shows a seated figure in yogic posture, probably Shiva (also known as Pashupati). It is usually thought that the figure has three faces although the one in question has just one, the legs of the figure are bent twice, heel to heel and his toes are turned downwards. His arms are outstretched and his hands are rest on his knees. From the wrist to the shoulders, the arms are covered with bangles. He is wearing triangular necklaces and his head is crowned with a pair of horns creating a tall headdress. On either side of the "God" are animals - an elephant, a tiger, a rhinoceros, a man and a buffalo.

A horned headdress implies beastly characteristics. All male figures with horns on Harappan seals have been believed to suggest an association with Siva's imagery since Siva is strongly associated with the bull. Thus Pashupati seal is also called 'Proto-Siva'. The shape created by the hands of the figure (Mudra) and Yogic posture (asana) are linked with meditation and yogic practices. Therefore it has been surmised that some beliefs and practices of Harappa civilization were the base of the Indic religion. Further, the animals surrounding the male figure have been related to Siva's Pashupati avatar as he is the 'Lord of Beasts. The arrangement of four animals suggests a mandala, a cosmological diagram known in Saivism and other Indic religions. The pair antelope which gift broken off indicates Buddhist iconography and the seat resembles a throne, used in Indic religions to highlight the rank of the person who is sitting upon it” (From Indian Government Website, in the section of Indian Culture).

Besides the idea of ‘Hinduism’ associated with the figure of Shiva and yoga, we can observe the use of more modern categories such as “God”, “Shaivism” and “Buddhist iconography”.

Since we don’t have any written sources which describe the artefact, even the use of the word “God” can be contested as we cannot be sure that the figure represented is a “God” in the meaning we give to the word today. The same reasoning applies even more strongly to the terms “Shiva” and “Buddhist iconography”.

However, this terminology has created the memory of a past in which the aforementioned categories existed in the sense we understand them today. The consequences on identity, both individual and collective, will be further explored in this chapter.

In this section, I have taken into consideration the extensive literature on media and language and media and memory. This research helped us to state and reinforce the fact that media —rightly

¹⁴ <https://indianculture.gov.in/>

¹⁵ <https://indianculture.gov.in/museums/pashupati-seal>

defined as “the first draft of history” by Garde-Hansen— plays a crucial role in both shaping the limits of our capacity to remember (language) and on the content of our memories, till the extent of creating false memories.

These conclusions represent a cornerstone of my general thesis. In the next section, I will add another piece of the puzzle, exploring the roles of oblivion and the archive in memory-making, preservation and repetition.

2.4 Oblivion and the Archive: Memory in Practice

In describing memory and its relations with the human mind and techniques, I voluntarily left out two main domains of memory: oblivion and the archive.

In this section, I will delve into these topics to underline the role they play in the functioning of memory and in identity formation.

2.4.1 Oblivion

Even though it is often considered the opposite of memory, it is more useful to consider oblivion as the selection of what to remember and what to forget. Hence, oblivion is a fundamental aspect of the memory process, and without forgetting, we cannot live. If the complexity and extension of the memory are the same as the living experience, the difference between the past and present disappears, and the memory will become the experience itself. Although it seems a destructive process, it is essential for the healthy functioning of our minds.

Recent studies in neuroscience, psychology and psychiatry (Anderson & Hulbert, 2021; Berry et al., 2024; Costanzi et al., 2021; Fawcett & Hulbert, 2020; Nørby 2015, 2017; Staniloiu & Markowitsch, 2012) have reiterated the role of forgetting not only in mental health—for the treatment of several diseases such as anxiety or depression—but also in the development of our brain and some tasks of our everyday life.

Cimatti’s argument is in line with these studies:

“Per questo l’eccesso della memoria —come incessante ripetizione del rischio identitario— è sempre sul punto di limitare la libertà, la creazione del nuovo, di sbarrare la strada all’imprevisto che apre strade inaspettate” (Cimatti, 2020, p. 173).

He argues that without oblivion, people would be stuck in an eternal present without any possibility or change to imagine something new. What the author calls “excess memory” can be identified with “information overload”. Hence, the overwhelming flood of information, which eventually becomes memories in which we are stuck, represents a limit for the unexpected and unforeseen, both on an individual and social level.

The same issue was already put forward by Bernard Stiegler at the end of the nineties. In *Technics and Time vol.2*, he suggests that contemporary technical mediation, in its “live” and “ubiquitous” form, has destroyed the crucial lag time between an event and its archivization (Stiegler, 2009, p. 100). This new modality of information has created the impression of the absence of oblivion and selection. However, as Stielger argues, this is a mere illusion, because the choice is still there, in the form of “even-ization”, meaning the selection of what can be an event and thus broadcasted and what can not.

The creepy aspect of this new form of narration is that “events, whose narration occurs along with their unfolding, can not be criticised and reflected upon” (ivi, p.41).

This situation reiterates an old problem: who controls the media? Who makes the choice about what we remember?

The issue was raised both by Cimatti and by Stiegler:

“[...] la memoria è sempre in qualche modo politica, perché è un’attività sociale (le mnemotecniche sono strumenti sociali) e perché implica sempre una scelta di cosa e come ricordare” (Cimatti, 2020, p. 128).

“Memory is always the object of a politics, of a criteriology by which it selects the events to be retained” (Stiegler, 2009, p. 9).

I would like to present the answers given by Adorno and Horkheimer, and apply their ideas to the current digital environment. Like Steilger, they consider “the cultural industry” as the entity making the choice. But what do they mean by this expression?

This “industrial dimension” is described by Stiegler as “a vast array of equipment controlled by economically determined calculations” (ivi, p.100) which is dominated by a few multinational/international actors, namely the “industrie internazionali dell’informazione, della comunicazione e dell’intrattenimento” (Feyles, 2013, p. 76). From now on I will define this group of companies as the “content industry”, as opposed to the “framework industry”, which I understand as formed by

the big tech companies, responsible for creating and implementing algorithms, here defined¹⁶ as “the non-neutral, personalised systems that manage the content we see online based on our past online activities and our personal characteristics such as location, age, and gender”.

This idea is well described by Taina Bucher:

“Algorithms do not simply change with the event; they also have the ability to change the event. In the era of big data and data mining, algorithms have the ability performatively to change the way events unfold or, at the very least, change their interpretation” (Bucher, 2018, p. 28).

I argue that today the *imprimatur* right, that is the “power to make the selection” on what we see and thus remember, is shifting from the hands of the “content industry” to the ones of the “framework industry”. This is because the way we access the majority of the news and entertainment content is through algorithmic mediated platforms, such as social media, websites or search browsers.

Many surveys have found that digital platforms (news websites and apps, searches, social media and podcasts) are by far “the preferred news sources in the United States” (St. Aubin & Liedke, 2024), in Europe (European Commission 2023) and in India (Krishnan 2024).

The same can be said about the entertainment industry, where most people in the aforementioned geographical contexts use digital platforms to access visual and sound content (Lupis 2023; (Regnier, 2024; Torbidoni et al., 2024). This shift from the “content” to the “framework industry” has occurred precisely because these companies, among which Meta, Google, Microsoft, Spotify and Netflix stand out, have created and promoted the conditions of existence and visibility of diverse pieces of content in a global and standardised manner but always with the aim of profit-making.

2.4.2 Archive

The derivation of the word *archive* provides us with an interesting opening for this discussion. It is connected to the ancient Greek *arké* (ἀρχή), which has both the meaning of “inception, beginning, origin, first element” (Montanari et al., 2015b) but also of “command, power, sovereignty, authority, government” (ibid.)

¹⁶ This is the definition of a particular kind of algorithm, made up by me with the intent of highlighting the crucial role that algorithms have in presenting online content to us. I have willingly put less weight on the technical aspects of the systems. If the reader is interested in those, please see Knuth, D. E. (1998). *The art of computer programming: Sorting and searching* (Vol. 3). London, England: Pearson Education.

In the Oxford English Dictionary, the word *archive* is defined as “A place in which public records or other important historic documents are kept” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023a) and as “A historical record or document so preserved” (ibid.) however, these definitions don’t describe the complexity of the phenomenon.

In his book, Feyles tries to give a complete definition of the archive based on four points. The first is “regularity” of the archive, which implies a certain order by which information is stored. The second is “partiality”, by which the archive is always a selection of information according to several criteria, both formal and substantial. The third is “authority”, the relation between archive, power and identity. The fourth is “planning”, which means that “un archivio è sempre istituito con una finalità precisa” (Feyles, 2013, pp. 198).

In this section, I will emphasise the connotation of the archive as a mode and *locus* of power in order to illustrate how it contributes to maintaining and perpetuating sets of ideas while excluding and forgetting others. In this regard, Feyles writes:

“[...] prima ancora e più ancora che uno strumento di sapere l’archivio è un luogo di potere. Non esistono archivi innocenti e questo è vero in un duplice senso: da una parte l’archivio è sempre il prodotto di una attività istituzionale, che seleziona, omette, distorce; dall’altra parte l’archivio è essenziale tanto per l’istituzione quanto per la legittimazione del potere” (Feyles, 2013, pp. 36-7).

This statement corroborates and extends what I have written in the first chapter: every new media technology implies an educated elite who can control the media, creating social and economic disparities.

However, the influence they exert through the media is not limited to the present but is also projected simultaneously to the past and the future with the creation of an archive.

To the past, because the archive is meant to represent the historical legitimisation of power in the eyes of the non-elitarian groups. To the future because the archive is also intended to show and pass on the greatness and the glory of the represented power to future generations.

In this sense, the *ius archivi*, the power to build an archive, can also be seen as the mediated form of the human desire to survive throughout time, a form that has been a prerogative of the ruling class or the dominant elite that needs the archive to exert the power.

“[the archive] represents enormous power over memory and identity, over the fundamental ways in which society seeks evidence of what its core values are and have been, where it has come from, and where it is going. Archives, then, are not passive storehouses of old stuff,

but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed” (Schwartz & Cook, 2002).

Hence, throughout human history, the *ius imperi*, intended as institutional powers such as nations, reigns and empires, has had exclusive control of the *ius archivi*.

An example of this could be the National Archives of India (NAI) and how it was used by historians of late medieval and modern India to write “a definite history of India” (Aziz, 2017). The Imperial Record of India (IRD) was established in Kolkata in 1891, then it moved to Delhi in 1911 and, in 1947, with Independence, it was renamed the National Archives of India. Since then, the NAI has been preserving public records of the post-1947 period, covering major episodes in the formative years of independent India and being the “official source of the history of the Country” (ibid.). The aim of the NAI, especially in a crucial moment such as Independence, was to create a coherent history which could be used to legitimise the basis of a new, united country.

However, the narration presented by the NAI is just a part of the history, and it has been challenged by what are collectively called “subaltern studies”, defined as the project to develop a “history from below paradigm to contest elite history writing of Indian nationalists” (Fisher, 2001) and giving voice to those who were excluded by the official archive. This includes women, Dalits or tribals who, not having access to the media, built their archives through oral histories, which only since the start of the century are being studied and considered within academia.

The direct relationship between public institutions and the archive has then been modified by the emergence of the web, which provides space that opens the possibility of a participative building of the archive, mainly through social media. Thus, the institutional bodies, owners of the *ius imperi*, have lost the power on the *ius archivi*. Moreover, the archive has shifted towards a more individual dimension where people, not the institutions, are responsible for building their personal archives. In the next part, I will analyse the identitarian repercussions of this.

If it appears that the authority on the *ius archivi* has been democratised, it is an illusion. Far from being possessed by national entities, the *ius archivi* is now in the hands of what I have called the “framework industry”.

Many examples reflect the power of the “framework industry” both upon the oblivion and the archive.

One of them refers to the ongoing situation in Palestine, which has been constantly present in international media since 7th October 2023.

Many users and news sources have reported an alleged “shadowban¹⁷” by the major social media platforms, including X (former Twitter), TikTok and Meta’s Facebook and Instagram, on pro-Palestinian content during the first period of the conflict. In an interview released for Techpolicy.Press Marwa Fatafta, an expert on digital rights for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), has talked about a “systematic pattern of censorship on Palestinian voices on social media” (Hendrix, 2024b). In this interview, she stressed the global phenomena of the alleged censorship since not only the accounts from Palestine would have been silenced but also the ones which show some kind of support for Gaza.

The same conclusions were drawn by Brooking, Maskhoor and Malaret, who, in December 2023, published an article in which they addressed social media’s content moderation policies, especially the ones which regard graphic content¹⁸, as a key part of the problem “since their functioning algorithmically shapes people’s perception of the conflict” (Brooking et al., 2023).

Besides these two articles, the issue was not only reported by several news sources (APCNews, 2023; Hassan, 2023; Mejdoup & Gungor, 2024; Paul, 2023; Shankar et al., 2023; Younes, 2024) but in 2021 a report issued by Meta itself has stated that

“Meta’s actions in May 2021 appear to have had an adverse human rights impact on the rights of Palestinian users to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, political participation, and non-discrimination, and therefore on the ability of Palestinians to share information and insights about their experiences as they occurred” (BSR staff, 2022).

Even though Meta denied every allegation of news manipulation during the 2024 conflict, “blaming a bug” (Capelouto, 2023), this example highlights the fact that, either willingly or unwillingly, the “framework industry” owns the technical power over oblivion and thus on the formation of the archive. Hence, either because of the bug or because of a precise political will, the archive can be one-sidedly modified and re-shaped

As rightly pointed out by Brooking, Maskhoor and Malaret:

“Should this digital content simply be allowed to disappear, it could one day disappear from human memory as well” (Brooking et al., 2023).

¹⁷ In the Cambridge English Dictionary, a shadowban is defined as an act of a social media company limiting who can see someone’s posts (= messages or pictures on social media), usually without the person who has published them knowing:

¹⁸ Graphic content (GC) refers to material that is visually explicit or detailed, often depicting scenes that are intense, violent, sexual, or otherwise disturbing. This can include violence, sexual content or disturbing imaginary.

While this was an example of archive manipulation “in the making”, several studies have underlined the possibility of creating false memories. Numerous experiments and research have demonstrated that it is possible, to some extent, to create false memories in the minds of individuals. For example, Pezdek et al. have found that planting false information is easier if these “fake memories” have some degree of plausibility. From these results, the scholars argued that:

“[...] Once a false event is judged to be true then details of the generic script for the event as well as details from related episodes of the event can be “transported” to the memory for the suggested false event. Thus, memory for the false event becomes developed by this related information in memory” (Pezdek et al., 1997).

This, along with the works of Roediger & Mcdermott, Goff & Roediger and Loftus, confirms the extremely fragile, uncertain and manipulable nature of memory (Goff & Roediger, 1998; Roediger & Mcdermott, 1995; Loftus, 1997).

The same conclusions were also drawn by neuroscience. In 2013, one research demonstrated that “it is possible to generate an internally represented and behaviourally expressed fear memory via artificial means by optogenetically¹⁹ manipulating memory engram-bearing cells in the hippocampus of a mouse” (Ramirez et al., 2013).

Here, I conclude the first part of the second chapter. In this section, I discussed the topic of memory, its functioning and the relation that exists between memory, power and technique. In the next part of this chapter, I will delve into the topic of identity, focusing on how it is shaped by media and memory and how, just as media and memory, it can be described as a *locus* to mediate and exercise power.

2.5 The Uncertain Nature of Identity

Identity, both individual and collective, has always represented one of humanity's great questions, and it has been studied by several disciplines and points of view.

¹⁹ Optogenetics is an experimental method in biological research involving the combination of optics and genetics in technologies that are designed to control (by eliciting or inhibiting) well-defined events in cells of living animal tissue. Unlike previously developed experimental methods of light control, optogenetics allows researchers to use light to turn cells on or off with remarkable precision and resolution (down to individual cells or even regions of cells) in living, freely moving animals (Deisseroth 2018).

In the famous article *Beyond Identity*, Brubaker & Cooper criticised the use of “identity” as an analytical concept. They argue that we have not been able to describe with due precision and accuracy the multitude of social processes on which it has been used and “imposed” since the fifties when the term acquired more and more prominence in the academic world.

Acknowledging all the limitations and restrictions that this word implies in its usage, I will define here the various meanings it will assume in this text.

I will use “identity” as the field in which the negotiation of and the battle for power unravel. In this sense, the power over “identity” means the power to choose the categories onto which people identify themselves and others. To better explain this, I can take into consideration colonialism and see how the battle over the identities of the colonised subjects was won by the colonisers, who defined their identities through some analytical criteria such as race, tribe or culture.

In this sense, “identity” will also be understood as the mixed set of behaviours performed as consequences of particular instances of power. A poignant illustration of this was provided by a friend of mine who, in front of the celebration for the building of the Ram mandir in Ayodhya²⁰ (i.e. a power demonstration), said: “I didn’t know that I was a Hindu till this moment”.

Another example is the words of Bhanwar Meghwanshi in the context of the preparation for the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, who said:

“The senior leaders who spoke were clear in their instructions that even at the cost of our lives, we must meet our objective of wiping out that stain of slavery, the Babri Masjid” (Meghwanshi & Menon, 2020, p. 17)

Interestingly, both of the cases contain a form of power that, more or less openly, is telling the subjects: “You are “like this”, and since you are “like this”, you have to act like the people who are “like this” ”.

2.5.1 *The Individual*

Escaping from the term “identity”, Brubaker & Cooper propose “self-identification” and “self-understanding” as more dynamic and less reified terms, which the authors define as:

“[...] the ways in which individual and collective action can be governed by particularistic understandings of self and social location rather than by putatively universal, structurally determined interests. “Self-understanding” is therefore the second term we would propose as

²⁰ I will further explore this topic in the next chapter.

an alternative to "identity." It is a dispositional term that designates what might be called "situated subjectivity": one's sense of who one is, of one's social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

From these words, it might seem that "self-identification" is a matter of choice and responsibility. Amartya Sen understands it in that way by saying:

"The freedom to determine our loyalties and priorities between the different groups to all of which we may belong is a peculiarly important liberty which we have reason to recognise, value, and defend. The existence of choice does not, of course, indicate that there are no constraints restricting choice. Indeed, choices are always made within the limits of what is seen as feasible. The feasibility in the case of identities will depend on individual characteristics and circumstances that determine the alternative possibilities open to us" (Sen, 2007, p. 6).

However, I argue that Sen does not take into account another limit to the supposed freedom of choice, which is the power that media exercises upon us, which I have previously discussed.

If we were to compare "choosing" one's identity with shopping, with economic restrictions as the only constraint, I would argue that "marketing" is an equally important and determining factor. Thus, the "choice" of identity is not as free as Sen believes, in the same way as shopping is not as free as we all might believe.

From a psychological perspective, self-identification is known as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person, and it is always unconscious, happening without our will or decision.

In this sense, "identification is ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness or aspiration, as easily as into a wish for someone's removal" (Freud 1960, pp. 46-7).

This initial pattern, Freud argues that during the life of individuals,

"it may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person [...] and we may suspect that this common quality lies in the nature of the tie with the leader" (Freud, 1960, pp. 49-50).

Hence, according to Freud, identification represents a continuous process in which individuals are constantly looking towards others to give sense to at least a part of who they are.

Again, we come across the conception of a “self-identification” —or social positioning— that is not rooted in the self, but that is the result of multiple impulses we receive during the course of our existence, which we elaborate into something that appears coherent and consistent to us.

To expand this idea, Neil Korobov proposes an interactional model for the development of self-identification. He argues that self-identification development

“is akin to being socioculturally and interactively “in sync” with the myriad demands of various social and cultural demands, which reflects an increasing fluency in practical social activity” (Korobov, 2015, p. 212).

He found the basis for this theory in three different branches of psychological research: social constructionism, ethnomethodology, and discursive positioning.

Korobov understands social constructionism as “an attempt to reverse the longstanding idea in psychology that relationships are derivative of individual minds” (ibid.). However, at the very root of the idea, there is the conception of language as something “informative” that is, as I discussed in the first chapter, something that has the power to give shape to reality and thus construct it.

Ethnomethodology is here intended as the understanding of self-identification as relationally responsive categorisations that are claimed, resisted, and otherwise used in communicative contexts to conduct social and personal life. Moreover, this approach stresses how people cause identity-relevant categories and use them to conduct social interaction. This promotes the idea of self-identification as the attribution of social categories to each conversation.

Finally, a discursive positioning approach also shows how discursive actions are, at times, ingredients in the constitution of identities as “interactional (not mentalistic) phenomena that are organised as part of the social maintenance of relationships and daily life” (ivi, p. 214). Korobov’s approach can shed light on the interactional nature of self-identification. He explains the idea as follows:

“[...] the meanings that our interactions have are primarily driven not by what we are thinking or feeling, but by what those interactions are designed to be doing as part of the social press of having an identity that is accountable within a context. The idea is that there is an interactional logic that drives identity processes, not simply a mentalistic one. [...] Positioning is thus understood by examining the dynamism of interactional accountability; that is, how speakers order conversations and thus manage relationships by orienting to certain identities or identity-rich categories” (ivi, p. 222).

While Korobov might be a little extreme in postulating the existence of an “interaction logic” as something fixed and pre-existent, the suggestions he makes are in line with what I wrote before about language and memory. His theorisation enables me to stress, without eliminating the other meanings and conditions, the relational aspect of self-identification, which is intended as the importance of external factors in the self-identification process. Thus, it might be conceived as an open stream where the repetition and the emphasis given on particular characters contribute to form what we commonly define as “identities”.

With these studies, I would like to stress the social (interactional) nature of self-identification, which does not answer simply the question ‘Who are we?’ but, first and foremost, the questions ‘Who are we in relation to others?’ and ‘Who are others in relation to us?’ To explore this concept further, I will move from self-identification to group identification.

2.5.2 The Group

In this section, I will delve into the formation of collective identification and the often violent consequences of this process.

We have seen how self-identification can be described as a continuous flow that is always in the making and remaking of itself. So, how is it possible that we observe people clearly divided into groups defined by their religion, nationality, football team and other identification criteria? Why in the flow are present these ripples or corrugations, which are common in more individuals? Why are people ready to die and to kill in the name of these ripples?

Before even taking into account Tajfel and Turner’s “Social Identity Theory” (SIT), I argue that these ripples are created by language and media that act upon memory in a way not dissimilar from Simondon’s individuation. In this process, the scope to which these ripples become salient and to which they last in time depends on how many resources —especially in terms of money— are spent on broadcasting and maintaining them.

Moreover, Feyles claimed that

“Il linguaggio è lo strumento complesso attraverso cui la memoria etnica si trasmette di generazione in generazione, assicurando la permanenza del gruppo etnico o sociale” (Feyles, 2013, p. 41).

Here, the term ethnic memory is introduced, which warrants further explanation. Fabietti understood the ethnic memory of a group as the “simboli evocatori dell’esperienza comune” (Fabietti, 2013, p. 189).

The term “ethnic” used here might cause confusion and misunderstandings. While Fabietti and Feyles apply this process of memory-making to those groups they define as “ethnic”, I would argue that this adjective is unnecessary. Rather, this process of group identification through memory applies to all kinds of human groups, from families to nations.

Now, two main questions arise.

Firstly, why not every “evocative symbol” becomes part of the group memory and thus of the group identification? In other words, why doesn't every group's identity survive?

Secondly, why some group identities are considered more important than others?

To answer these questions, I will build my argument on what we have found about the functioning of memory in the previous section. In particular, I am referring to “repetition” as mnemotechnic. I will rely on Hobsbawm’s words to describe the process of “invented traditions” that here can be understood as “invented identities”.

“Inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2013, p. 4).

The repetition that Hobsbawm talks about is the repetition of both symbols and practices that, as argued by Fabietti, are “evocative of a shared experience”. This is clearly visible in national identities where the flag, the monuments, the festivals and even the national football team are symbols and practices that remind you of a shared past with people you don’t know. At the same time, they remind you that since you are born in a particular piece of land, you have something in common with those people.

Following this reasoning, Anderson and Remotti agreed on the fact that the national sentiment created the nations and not the other way around. In other words, they argue that the nation as an institution appeared only after the people accepted, more or less consciously, the new collective identity (Anderson, 2006 p. 6; Remotti, 2010, p. 21).

Moreover, it has been found that repetition is one of the major factors that help build long-term memory (LTM). As I wrote previously, LTM is the result of permanent structural changes —new neural clusters— in our brains. Hence, LTM, built on repetition, allows us to store particular

memories, “which biologically change the structure of our minds for a time span that can be as long as our entire lives” (Plater et al., 2022).

Now that the primacy of language and memory in the group identification process has been established, I would like to introduce the SIT, elaborated by Tajfel and Turner.

SIT aims to explain the processes behind group identification. The theory is divided into three phases.

The first is “social categorisation”. This refers to the tendency of people to divide people into categories according to their attributes or behaviours. It has been observed that this bias is something people naturally do since the first months of their lives (Devine, 1989; Liberman et al., 2017; Weisman et al., 2014).

The second is “social identification”. It is based on the idea that once people think about themselves as a part of a group, they start adopting the behaviour and symbols of that group. In other words, they start using that group as a part of their self-identification. In this context, a group is defined as

“[...] a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it” (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Furthermore, “the social groups are crucial for the individual to define their place in society and their social positioning” (ibid.; Ellemers et al., 2002).

The last step of the SIT is “social” comparison, which describes the comparative nature of the social groups. It means that people define the individual as “similar to or different from, as better or worse than members of other groups” (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

The SIT and its consequences have also been studied and confirmed from a neuroscience perspective (Cikara et al., 2011a; Cikara et al., 2011b; Morrison et al., 2012; Scheepers & Derks, 2016; Volz et al., 2009; Yzerbyt et al., 2003). These findings have underlined the natural tendency of humans to divide and categorise people into different groups. In the next section, I will describe how the extreme extent of these human tendencies can generate violent behaviour between groups.

2.6 The Aggressive Self: Identity and Violence

“In qualunque contesto o livello si posizioni, ogni noi comporta un qualche grado di violenza dovuto alla distinzione originaria, al gesto di separazione che lo costituisce e lo fa esistere. Ma la rivendicazione dell’identità è un sovrappiù di violenza; è un tra- sformare la separazione da gesto momentaneo, parziale, provvisorio, funzionale, revocabile e rimediabile, in una situazione definitiva, permanente, bloccata, irrimediabile [...]

Con l’identità i noi si trasformano in isole, in fortezze, e si armano. [...] Con l’identità gli altri diventano una minaccia, reale o potenziale; si trasformano in nemici, da sopprimere, da allontanare, da cui in ogni caso distinguersi e difendersi. La violenza, i cui germi si annidano nella stessa formazione del noi, si manifesta, senza più freni strutturali (se non quelli dettati dal senso dell’opportunità), sia a livello ideologico sia a livello pragmatico, non appena si ritiene di dover affermare, difendere o imporre la propria identità” (Remotti, 2011, pp. 48-9).

This long excerpt from Remotti’s book, *L’Obsessione Identitaria*, poses a huge problem: how much violence is contained in groups’ identification processes? And further, how much of this violence is innate to the group dynamics themselves and how much is fuelled from the outside?

While the second question will be answered at a later stage, I will first analyse the processes that regard the very nature of group identities.

The study of group violence has a long history. For instance, Le Bon and Freud described how even the cultivated man becomes a barbarian in the crowd, losing his critical faculties in favour of the homogeneous common substratum, which is preserved as an ancestral heritage in man’s unconscious and because of its supposed ancestry, it is violent, emotional and non-rational (Le Bon, 1920; Freud, 1966).

Although these claims can be seen as an oversimplification of a very complex matter, they can be used as a starting point.

Since then, the research has evolved towards a neuroscientific approach, which aimed to observe the “change in biological patterns between interactions with in-group and out-group members, leading even to cases of extreme violence” (Lantos & Molenberghs, 2021).

The findings that are more useful for the actual research are:

First, when acting as a group, people tend to reduce the salience of their moral beliefs, and thus, they are more likely to have violent behaviours towards out-group members (Cikara, 2014; Jenkins & Mitchell, 2011).

Second, people tend to de-humanise out-group people, subconsciously legitimising the violence towards them (Cikara et al., 2010; Harris & Fiske, 2011; Harris, 2017).

Third, people have a positive effect when they see the misfortune of disliked out-group members while feeling more empathy when an in-group member is harmed (Cikara et al., 2011b; Cikara, 2015; Eres & Molenberghs, 2013; Hein et al., 2010).

Fourth, people don't see in-group members' actions objectively, leading to biases that can affect the moral judgement about those actions (Molenberghs et al., 2012).

These important findings highlight the fact that humans have inborn attitudes that would lead to conflict with out-group members. These are a legacy from the time of our ancestors, when

“members of out-groups often represented threats to the in-group, for example through competition for scarce resources or the introduction of new diseases” (Lantos & Molenberghs, 2021).

However, these cannot represent a justification and a full explanation for the discriminatory and even violent behaviours that we still witness in our contemporary era. Like other human appetites and unconscious tendencies, these can be regulated, augmented or suppressed by many factors and according to several willingnesses.

Referring back to the previous section, it can be argued that the fixation of group identities as closed entities —caused by the repetition of the stress put upon them— and the increasing importance that is given to them is accompanied by opposition and conflict against the out-groups. As I have pointed out in the work of Getztkow, “the main issue that affects contemporary groups' identities is that these identities are seen as totalising and abiding. In other words, there is the tendency to think that the political identity —reduced and simplified— of a group reflects the group's instances in all aspects, without any shade or variation” (Getztkow, 2016).

This over-simplification of the groups and their members leads to making the inter-group conflicts more violent and aggressive because the “others” are not simply seen as “another group” with the same group dynamics but simply as the “enemy”.

This will be particularly important since my work wants to underline the fact that the stress put by the media on the “Hindu” and “Muslim” identities in India and on their conflictual relationship, contributes to fuelling the violence and the hate between them.

In this section, I have laid out the basis for understanding the biological dynamic, which is at the root of inter-group biases and subsequent violence. In the next part, I will further investigate how these human natural tendencies are being manipulated by external factors.

2.7 *Divide et impera*: The Role of Power in Group Identification and Conflict

“To persuade people that they are one; that they comprise a bounded, distinctive, solidary group; that their internal differences do not matter, at least for the purpose at hand - this is a normal and necessary part of politics, and not only of what is ordinarily characterized as “identity politics” ” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

Now that I have observed how these inter-group biases are inscribed in the biological structure of humans, the second question has to be answered: how much of this violence is innate to the group dynamics themselves and how much is fuelled from the outside?

I argue that these regulations of group violence —that are regulations of group identities— come from the instances of the “power intended in a Foucaultian sense, that is, the power to create, use, highlight or hide the identity labels we use to make sense of the world” (Mounk, 2023, p. 33).

In this sense, the media have a double responsibility. On the one hand, they provide us with the terminology with which we can describe reality, and on the other, the limit within which we can think of reality.

In the media, group identities find replication and repetition, which stress them and thus give them a certain degree of importance and urgency.

This system of creation in repetition, however, is a double-edged sword. While it allows under-represented communities to form a vocabulary and gain a voice with which they can speak to the whole world, the repetition *ad infinitum* of particular group identities leads to the crystallisation of those identities, leveraging on the biological tendencies I described before, often having as consequences harsh acts of violence.

For example, a study conducted by Esses, Medianu and Lawson has found that newspapers played a crucial role in depicting immigrants and refugees in the United States and Canada as terrorists and threats to society, “creating more confusion and uncertainties in an already problematic environment” (Esses et al., 2013). In this case, putting the accent on these specific categories of immigrants and refugees creates the idea that these categories are only characterised by negative attributes, raising suspicion, fear and violence against them.

Another example of media-fuelled identity-based violence can be found in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa (SAF), especially in Rwanda, in the context of the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis in 1994 and in Kenya, in the violence after the 2007 elections.

In Rwanda, “the mutual suspicion between Hutus and Tutsis was partially formed by German and Dutch colonisers who, respectively in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, arrived in the country and pursued a divisive cultural and administrative policy, whose results were witnessed in the civil war in the nineties” (Fabiatti, 2013, pp. 208-11). The strong and opposing group identities created by the colonisers were further highlighted and confirmed by media, particularly radio, amidst the conflict, resulting in the Tutsis genocide in July 1994.

The national radio, near to the Hutu government, played on the already salient identities by exaggerating perceived historical differences between Tutsi and Hutu and spreading fears that Hutus could once more be the victim of suppression if Tutsis were to take over control in Rwanda. The propaganda was “wholly swallowed by Hutu peasants, who began to identify not as Rwandan but as Hutus” (Adeyanju, 2018). The emphasis put on the ‘Hutu’ identity led to the fact that people started recognising themselves only as Hutus, causing them to commit acts of violence and ferocity even against their own relatives, friends or neighbours.

The same dynamics unfolded in Kenya in 2007. This time, mobile phones played a major role in spreading hate and violence. The election, which brought the country to the brink of civil war, saw two main contestants. “On one side there was Raila Odinga from the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), supported by the Luo and Kalenjin communities and on the other Mwai Kibaki, exponent of the Party of National Unity (PNU)²¹ supported by the Kikuyus, Embus and Merus” (Harneit-Sievers & Peters, 2008).

The identitarian violence and conflict started with the election campaign. During the campaign, rumours fostering suspicion and mistrust were widely disseminated, and in the aftermath of the contested poll, rumours frequently gave credence to claims that advanced specific political agendas. “The use of SMSs in the circulation of rumours gave them an instantaneous spread, contributing to increased anxiety, sometimes leading to panic, and, on occasion, motivating people to

²¹ The Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) is the successor of a former grassroots people's movement which was formed in the 2005 Kenyan constitutional referendum, and in 2007, it was the biggest party in Parliament (source: <https://info.mzalendo.com/organisation/odm/>).

On the other side, the Party of National Unity (PNU) started as a coalition of several parties which came together in the occasion of the 2007 elections. (source: <https://info.mzalendo.com/organisation/pnu/>) For more detailed information, please see the readers to Hornsby, C. (2019). Kenya: A history since independence. I.B. Tauris and Murunga, G. R., Okello, D., & Sjögren, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Kenya the struggle for a new constitutional order*. The Nordic Africa Institute and Zed Books (Bloomsbury).

action” (Osborn, 2008). The media was used to circulate false voting processes and results, which Kenyans believed, but changed upon the release of official results. This created doubt over the political system and, in turn, suspicion from ethnic groups. This resulted in the 2007 post-election violence, where “more than 1000 people were killed and more than 500.000 civilians displaced” (Adeyanju, 2018). Again, the stress put on these particular identities by the media and government has made Kenyan people forget that just the day before the elections, their neighbour was just a neighbour and not a Luo or a Kikuyu.

2.8 Identity and technique: digital citizenship and the case of Indian Adhaar

In this section, I would like to explore the crucial role of technology today. When it comes to identity, technology has—and most probably will have—a decisive role in homologating identities in social media and digital citizenship.

Once again, we have to deal with an issue already underlined: the framework. Here, the “framework” expresses itself with the identification categories that you have to fill up in social networks during the registration.

As accurately pointed out by Gabriella Taddeo,

“[I social media] sviluppano parallelamente anche molteplici tecniche che hanno lo scopo di spingere verso l’omologazione e la convergenza delle identità e delle rappresentazioni su asset specifici. [...]. Le interfacce dei social sono quindi impegnate da una parte a valorizzare gli aspetti identitari unici, personali, specifici di ciascuno di noi, dall’altra a costruire modi di relazionarci a ciascuna individualità e a trovare affinità, occasioni di scambio, di contatto e interazione. Potremmo anzi dire che il design dei social si è occupato in maniera intensiva di rendere «usabile» l’io, ragionando sulla rappresentazione individuale come un’interfaccia che permetta agli altri utenti di navigare l’individualità di ciascuno e di «usarla» per diverse funzioni: aggiornarsi, ispirarsi, confrontarsi, relazionarsi, chiedere aiuto, competere ecc” (Taddeo, 2024, p. 55).

Once again, the digital tends, by design, to constrain our identities—in the same way it does with our language and memories—in boxes ready to be filled out.

Moreover, the emergence of the web in the nineties, with all its hopes and ambitions, created for the first time the possibility of acquiring new and fake identities in digital spaces. There is a big debate about whether the web should be an open space where people can explore their various and diverse

identities or if the real identity —the one on the ID card— should be used as a criterion even to access the web, creating a convergence between the digital and real world.

While I cannot outline the entire debate²² in this thesis, it can be observed that in the last few years, a winner is slowly coming out.

I am referring to the more and more frequent legal proposes that are pushing towards the overlapping of online and offline identities, a trend that started, according to Taddeo, with social networks.

To cite a recent example of how offline identity can be used for accessing the internet, in July 2024, several States²³ in the U.S. passed a bill that introduced age verification through a government ID to access adult content on the web. The same provisions are emerging also in Europe²⁴ where various countries are thinking about implementing this law.

Following the same logic, the Australian Government has recently announced a law that will ban access to social networks for people under sixteen since, according to the Government, these platforms represent “online harm for young people” (Dobberstein, 2024).

Furthermore, the European Parliament has recently proposed the Identity Wallet, a voluntary platform that will enable “users” to easily and digitally open a bank account, enrol in a university, apply for jobs and access all kinds of governmental services such as pensions or tax payments²⁵.

While I was writing the text, I automatically wrote the word “users” instead of “citizens”. Besides underlining my low level of attention, this slip is quite significative of the fact that these two categories are slowly overlapping, with consequences that are not yet clear, causing concerns about privacy, safety of data and social control.

²² I refer the reader to Floridi, L. (2016). *The 4th revolution: How the infosphere is reshaping human reality*. Oxford University Press; Taddeo, G. (2024). *Social. L'industria delle Relazioni*. Giulio Einaudi editore; Turkle, S. (1997). *Life beyond screen identity in the age of internet*. Touchstone; Zuboff, S. (2020). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the New Frontier of Power*. Public Affairs.

²³ The law passed in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Tennessee. However, the bill was also proposed in Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio and even in the U.S. Congress, where it has to go through the approval process. Source: <https://action.freespeechcoalition.com/age-verification-bills/>

²⁴ France leads the European country towards institutional online age verification (Taverne et al. 2024), with Italy, Spain and Ireland following behind (Gardener 2024).

²⁵ These are the links to the Institutional websites of the Identity Wallet and of the Digital Identity.

<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-building-blocks/sites/display/EUDIGITALIDENTITYWALLET/EU+Digital+Identity+Wallet+Home#:~:text=It%20will%20be%20a%20secure,electronically%20sign%20or%20seal%20documents>

https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-digital-identity_en

In this regard, the case of the Adhaar in India is quite elucidative, and it can provide useful insights.

“The story of Aadhaar was similarly a story of not seeing what was in plain sight as well as what lay concealed, both of which powerfully affected the form that the system would take and the future it would create” (Shah et al., 2022, p. 7).

The Adhaar (meaning “base”, “foundation”, “backbone” or support in Hindi) program was announced in 2009 and implemented only in 2016. This government-run program, which can be adopted on a voluntary basis, assigns every citizen of India a unique twelve-digit number based on their demographic and biometric data²⁶, not taking into consideration their family or any other group. This number, which does not represent proof of citizenship but only of residence, is used for government services, financial transactions, mobile activation and access to welfare schemes such as unemployment benefits or subsidies.

When it was announced in 2009, Adhaar raised some concerns about the creation of a surveillance state. However, there was also hope. A digital number that defines identity was seen as detangling the individual from other kinds of identitarian constraints such as status, family, education, or employment —“all things to which numerous Indian residents had no access” (ivi, p. 78).

Nonetheless, history confirmed the fears more than the hopes.

These systems have indeed brought out several issues. Among them, there are:

Voluntariness: Adhaar claims to be voluntary and not mandatory. However, there are some inconsistencies. For example, Adhaar-based payments were declared mandatory for employees under the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)²⁷. Since the program is aimed at helping an economically disadvantaged section of the population, as argued by Jean Drèze, “No Adhaar means no food” (Drèze, 2021). Hence, even though Adhaar is not mandatory per se, it is needed to receive benefits from the government that, in some cases, represent the livelihood of those people.

²⁶ The demographic data are name, date and place of birth, gender, parents’ names and UID numbers —optional for adult residents— and address, permanent and present but with the explicit exclusion of race, religion, caste, tribe, ethnicity, language, records of entitlement, income or medical history of an individual (Shah et al. 2022, pp.78-9). The biometric data are fingerprints and iris scans.

²⁷ The Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is a welfare program started in 2005. It enhances the livelihood security of the Country’s rural households by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

Control and profiling: although Aadhaar formally does not include data about income, job and family ties, it has been described as a “bridge across discrete data silos²⁸, which allows anyone with access to this information to re-construct a profile of an individual’s life” (Shah et al., 2022, p.88). This infrastructure for digital citizenship was further extended in 2020 with the Arogya Setu App. The app introduced contact tracing to fight the pandemic. However, the app collected several kinds of data, such as name, number, gender, and travel history, using the phone's Bluetooth and location. This multiple-sided data collection has raised concerns about both the extensive and capillary scope of government profiling of individuals and the opaque nature of these systems. Like Aadhaar, “downloading the Arogya Setu App was officially declared voluntary, but the truth is that government employees were required to use it” (O’Neill, 2020).

Dalit and Tribals: The Aadhaar system was also criticised for its potential to *fix* identities forever. This problem is particularly relevant for Dalits and Adivasis, “whose identities should never be permanent, and they should be able to transcend them” (Deshmane, 2018). For example, when an individual from a particular caste engaged in manual scavenging is rescued, to benefit from rehabilitation schemes, they have to link the Aadhaar number with the scheme. Thus, “a profile as that of a person engaged in manual scavenging is created in the scheme database. The stigma of being a manual scavenger gets permanently fixed on their identity” (ibid). In this sense, the same identitarian dynamics present in social media it is observed: the standardisation and the crystallisation of social identities.

Civil Death: Another concern regards the concept of “civil death”. This term was used by the Supreme Court in 2018²⁹ to describe the way in which the “citizens’” rights and liberties are becoming conditional features of “users” bonded to the technical medium. Hence, if Aadhaar is turned off, either by mistake or willingly, citizens/users won’t be able anymore to access those services which in the past were taken for granted, such as opening a bank account or paying taxes. In India, this whole process is accelerated also by the Unified Payment Interface (UPI)³⁰, a government digital infrastructure that manages all kinds of payments. A recent report by The Print further analysed the situation in Rajasthan. Here, due to several issues like the mismatch of people’s

²⁸ Namely the National Personal Register (NPR) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), where the other information is stored.

²⁹ ‘Gist of the Challenge to the Aadhaar Scheme as Well as the Act’, Sec 59, Supreme Court of India, *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (retd) v Union of India*, Writ Petition (C) 494/2012 (2018), https://main.sci.gov.in/supremecourt/2012/35071/35071_2012_Judgement_26-Sep-2018.pdf

³⁰ UPI was first launched in 2016 and, since then, has recorded incredible success. It was developed by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), an organisation created by the National Bank of India. It allows people to pay for everything, from a single fruit on the roadside to a luxury car.

data in diverse databases and the erroneous declaration of deaths, individuals, especially unprivileged and fragile elders, are not getting pensions and help from social welfare programmes. The report says that out of the 9 billion pensioners in the State, 500,000 are not registered, while 1.3 billion are living the condition of civil death and have not been receiving a pension for years. More than this, “the itinerary for the correction of this data is a long fifteen-step process, which is not easy for an elder, often alone and not in good economic conditions” (Menon, 2024).

These issues and concerns have to be also seen in light of the Indian Government’s more frequent internet-blocking interventions. A recent report by the newspaper *Rest of the Word* has found that “between 2016 and 2024, the Indian Government shut down the internet 771 times in several areas in order to suppress riots or other political reasons, gaining the award of the Country which issues most internet shutdowns in history” (Bhattacharya et al., 2024).

These frequent internet shutdowns have had strong effects on a Country that is moving several services onto digital platforms.

Besides being human rights violations and tools of political censorship, the internet shutdowns in India are proof that the Government *owns* the identities of the citizens, at least because they can be “switched on or off” when required or when wanted by the authorities.

Here, there is another kind of identity which is no longer free and undefined but that is defined and whose constraints are used to control and limit people’s freedom.

This chapter aimed to illustrate the roles of memory and identity in the broader practices of power practice and negotiation. It also addressed the essential relationship between language, media, memory and identity, which is in play when any event happens, be it political, social, economic or other.

I argue that the processes described in this chapter and in the previous one have to be taken into consideration both for analysing reality and also for thinking about our actions and behaviours as humans in the world.

This chapter also closes the four-fold framework started in the first chapter. By this, I hope to have made it clear the process of identity formation and building from the basis of information, media and memory.

What I wanted to highlight with these two chapters was how the violent acts and the hate between communities are generated by a long process of information, memorisation and embodiment which

often is not even perceived by the individuals who find themselves to hate someone —or to act violently against someone— without even knowing the reasons.

However, the relation between information, media, memory, identity, and actions has not to be understood as a circle or a chain composed of discrete elements. Rather, these have to be understood as co-existing, interacting and overlapping in the same space and as affecting each other without any interruption of space or time.

In the next two chapters, I will analyse, through the theoretical system I have just examined, the complex dynamics behind the violence between the Hindu and Muslim communities in contemporary India.

3. Narratives of Violence: Voices from the Hindu-Muslim Conflict

Credo in un Dio crudel che m'ha creato
simile a sè e che nell'ira io nomo.
Dalla viltà d'un germe o d'un atòmo
vile son nato.
Son scellerato
perchè son uomo;
e sento il fango originario in me.
Sì! questa è la mia fe'!
(Verdi & Boito, 1887)

The first words of the title sum up the ideas of the previous two chapters. The narrative, built through the interactions and mutual influence of media, information, memories and identities, in most cases and most of the epochs, has produced violence.

This occurred partially due to the conscious manipulation of the media and partly due to the nature of the language itself. As I wrote in the first chapter, language is at the same time necessary and hierarchical, creating situations of conflict and collision.

In a series of interviews I conducted related to the Indian case, I was able to observe the prevalence of violence.

For those interviews, I analysed four samples, each composed of three family members. These members belonged to three different generations and were chosen as having a parent-child relationship. In other words, each sample was composed of a grandparent, a parent and their son or daughter. Their age varied, but all of the youngest members were between 18 and 30 years old, and the ages of their parents and grandparents varied accordingly. These families were chosen regardless of their geographical, social or educational backgrounds. I am aware that this can be frowned upon by many, but the exclusion of parameters was intentionally applied to not have a class-specific or location-specific result. However, it would be useful to further conduct state-wise research and then compare the results. Each sample was interviewed as follows.

First of all, each member was asked these questions alone:

1. Do you remember these episodes or historical characters?
 - Kabir & Ravidas
 - b. Akbar & Din-i-Ilahi
 - c. Dara Shikoh and his Majma-ul-Bahrain
 - d. Sare Jahan se Accha
 - e. Famine & food rationing in Karnal 07/1946

- f. 1946 Failed naval mutiny
- 2. If yes, what do you know about them, and how did you know about them?
- 3. Can you tell more episodes in Indian history when Hindus and Muslims have cooperated towards a common goal?
- 4. Do you remember these episodes or historical characters?
 - a. Aurangzeb
 - b. Indo-Pakistan War 1965-71
 - c. Partition
 - d. Babri Masjid Demolition
 - e. Godra train & Gujarat Riots 2002
- 5. If yes, what do you know about them, and how did you know about them?
- 6. Can you tell more episodes in Indian history when Hindus and Muslims have fought against each other?

Next, they were reunited with their family and a brief discussion between them about the topics was encouraged.

The interviews aim to understand how people from different generations remember key facts about Indian history.

The table reported here represents the answers to the survey. The green cells represent a right answer, the yellow ones an incomplete answer and the red ones a wrong or no answer.

The colours orange and green on the left side of the table indicate if the family identifies itself as Hindu (orange) or Muslim (green).

An interesting fact is that the patterns of knowledge often repeat themselves inside the different families. This could imply that the information about Indian history was passed upon the family ties, even if all members have been said to have gained the information from the school.

It is worth underlying that the struggle for Independence, one of India's greatest achievements and an event praised and celebrated also by the ruling party, has been commonly acknowledged as an objective reached thanks to the collaboration between both communities.

Even though the survey's sample is small in size, it is indicative of the knowledge Indian people have about their history. What I could understand is that history is seen and perceived just as something related to school, and thus, it is just memorised and not studied in depth or understood.

In light of what I wrote in the last chapter, this attitude towards history can be particularly dangerous since it can be changed and manipulated by the power in turn without people being aware of what is happening.

Here is the table with the results of the survey.

	a. Kabir & Ravidas	b. Akbar & Din-illahi	c. Dara Shikoh and his Majma-ul-Bahrain	d. Sare Jahan se Accha (1904)	e. Famine & food rationing in Karnal 07/1946	f. 1946 Failed naval mutiny		a. Aurangzeb	b. Indo-Pakistan war 1965-71	c. Partition	d. Babri Masjid	e. Godra train & Gujarat riots 2002
YOUNG												
MID												
OLD												
YOUNG												
MID												
OLD												
YOUNG												
MID												
OLD												
YOUNG												
MID												
OLD												

The aim of this chapter is to try to look at the “narrative of violence” as an all-embracing phenomenon which cannot be relegated to a specific side, party or organisation.

With the expression “narrative of violence”, I identify all the instances of language, mediated by every media that, after a time of sedimentation and repetition, generates division, hate, conflict and ultimately violence among people. I left this definition consciously broad and non-specific to highlight the fact that “narratives of violence” are present regardless of the epoch, social or geographical context.

After a brief introduction about historiography’s problematics in the first section, I will take into consideration three different groups of narratives in order to give examples and credit to my hypothesis. In the second section, I will compare Muhammed Iqbal’s poem *Taraana-e-Milli* (1924) with Vinayak Damodar Savarkar’s *Essentials of Hindutva* (1922).

In the third section, I will compare three short stories regarding partition, in particular, Mohan Rakesh’s *The Lord Of The Rubble*, Saadat Hasan Manto’s *Shareefan*, and Krishan Chander’s *The Letter of a Tawaif*. In this section, the stories will be first translated from Hindi or Urdu and then modified to show the universality of the “narrative of violence”.

In the fourth and last section, I will analyse four political speeches by Narendra Modi, Yogi Adityanath, Akbaruddin and Asaduddin Owaisi, which contain some instances of violence and instigation of communal hate.

Although all the sources analysed come from India and Pakistan, this chapter aims to show that the narrative of violence is created and repeated in the same ways at any time and space.

In order to further prove this point, I hope that more research will be conducted covering documents belonging to different geographical contexts and different epochs.

3.1 Minimising The Past: A Small Historical Background

Hindu-Muslim violence is one of the most studied and discussed topics both in academia and outside. It has been defined as “one of the most striking examples in recent years of the development of a cumulative research program in political science” (Chandra, 2006). Far from being only a political science topic, Hindu-Muslim violence has been largely studied also by other disciplines and points of view, such as history, sociology, psychology, religion studies, media studies and many more. However, this “overload” of literature did not find any accord among the scholars. In fact, the discussions, the doubt and the debates about the topic increased, making an already complex topic even more inaccessible.

The debate is heated, particularly when it comes to tracing back the origins of this violence. While a part of the scholarship stressed the role of the colonial rulers in fuelling the violence (Robinson, 2008; Tharoor, 2016; Truschke, 2016), others focused on the fact that communal violence was always present in India, even before the arrival of the British (Kruijtzter, 2009; Lorenzen, 2009; Nicholson, 2015; Verghese, 2016). This research for tracing back the origins of the violence has transformed into looking for the ultimate culprit, a useless and dangerous practice that enhanced the tensions between the communities.

This leads us towards a more general discussion about the role and consequences of history and historiography. Verghese argues that “historical legacies create cultures of conflict or cooperation that, reinforced over time through institutions, drive patterns of ethnic violence in multiethnic states” (Verghese, 2016, p. 4). I would add that this sentence would work even if we remove the word “ethnic”. Hence, we would have “historical legacies create cultures of conflict or cooperation that, reinforced over time through institutions, drive patterns of violence in or between states”.

Following the argument of my discussion, I must conclude that the writing and the study of history, in the ways it has been carried on till this day, has largely been a tool for the creation, promotion and diffusion of several “narratives of violence”.

This happened because of the perspectives from which history has been written. Since Herodotus, history has been written from a “national” point of view that created friends and enemies, allies and foes. The same logic also applies to the relatively recent branch of Subaltern Studies. Even though it made a huge step in writing history from below and demolishing the old narrative made by the elites, it ended up promoting the master-slave dynamic again, reiterating the existence of “good”

and “evil” characters and reinforcing the “narratives of violence”, just in a different fashion than the national one.

A different perspective was adopted by the branch of studies known as Global or World History. It represented a huge leap forward in historiography by brooding the spaces of enquiry and analysis and by relying on non-European sources. However, even if it succeeds in widening the national perspectives of “standard history”, it remains a “single” history written by one or more individuals who share the same beliefs and certainties.

In this sense, a history that could significantly decrease the “narratives of violence” would be possible only if it were written by two or more individuals belonging to opposite parties, such as Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, India and Pakistan. If it is possible, only then would historiography considerably reduce the violent consequences and the hatred that “have been generated during those centuries in which it has been an egoistic tale” (Subrahmanyam, 2016).

Having expressed these premises and wanting to adhere to the foundations laid down in the previous chapters, I will not present a historical background to communal violence. Rather, I will just briefly contextualise the “narratives” I am going to describe. The analysis of the passages presented hereinafter is designed to challenge the partisan and divisive nature of historiography, reversing the perspectives with which they have been written.

3.2 Iqbal and Savarkar

Under British rule, from 1857 to 1947, Bangladesh, Pakistan and most of India were part of the same political and territorial unity. After 1947, four big wars and many smaller conflicts occurred between these three countries in just fifty-two years. The exact number of casualties is difficult to find and reconstruct due to the scarcity and lack of precision of the sources. The military losses seem to have been roughly several tens of thousands among dead and wounded, plus there was an indefinite number of civilian casualties and displacements. Here is the “violence”. Now let’s look at the “narratives”.

During the struggle for Independence, the once-Indian identity somehow split, giving space for the religious identities to become more salient and, ultimately, predominant. These processes were complex and deeply rooted in the history of the people, the countries and the cultural production. For reasons of space and time, it is impossible for me to reconstruct the entire process that led to the

affirmation of these two well-defined identities. Hence, I will present here two significant pieces of literature which are believed to be at the base of the construction of modern India and Pakistan. These are the English booklet *Essentials of Hindutva* (1922), written by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, and the second is the Urdu poem *ترانہ ملی* (*Taraana-e-Milli*³¹) by Muhammad Iqbal in 1924.

V. D. Savarkar (d.1966) is considered to be the ideologic father of *Hindutva* (Hinduness) ideology. After studying law in London, he went back to India and took part in the Independence movement, but, unlike Gandhi, he chose the violent path. He was arrested for sedition in London and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Andaman Islands in 1911. “After his release in 1924 and until 1937, he was under house arrest in Ratnagiri in Maharashtra” (Asif, 2020 p. 9).

It was during the second captivity that he wrote *Essentials of Hindutva*. This booklet, along with the character of Savarkar, is considered the root of the “Hindutva” ideology, which has shaped a large part of India’s post-independent politics.

Mohammed Iqbal (d. 1938) “was designated the national philosopher of Pakistan Under the military dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq” (1978-88) (ibid.) and is considered to “have had a major role in the formulation of a national ethos for the Country” (Martin, 2020). In 1904 he composed the famous poem *ترانہ ہندی* (*Taraana-e-Hindi*³²), where he praised the quality of Hindustan as a whole, not divided by communal lines. The following verses are particularly emblematic:

مذہب نہیں سکھاتا آپس میں بیر رکھنا

ہندی ہیں ہم وطن ہے ہندوستان ہمارا

The religion does not teach us to fight against each other
We are Hindi, Hindustan is our motherland
(Original from rekhta.com, translation mine)

However, his idea about Hindustan as a united community changed drastically. Deluded by the divisive policies, in 1924 he composed the *Taraana-e-Milli*, which I am going to analyse.

³¹ Lit. *Anthem of the Community*.

³² The *Anthem of India*

I would place side by side some significant excerpts from *Essentials of Hindutva* (numbers from 1 to 5) and some verses of the *Taraana-e-Milli* (letters A to E) that will be analysed in combination (i.e. 1-A).

This analysis serves to highlight the unitarian nature of the *narrative of violence* and thus the identification of Savarkar in the words of Iqbal and of Iqbal in the words of Savarkar.

<p>1. In addition to these political developments, the great and divine mission that set in motion 'the wheel of the law of Righteousness' made India the very heart, the very soul of almost all the then-known world (p. 8)</p>	<p>A) چین و عرب ہمارا ہندوستان ہمارا مسلم ہیں ہم وطن ہے سارا جہاں ہمارا [...]</p>
<p>2. We, Hindus, are all one and a nation, because chiefly of our common blood - 'Bharati Santati' (lineage) (p. 17).</p>	<p>B) مغرب کی وادیوں میں گونجی اذان ہماری تھمتانہ تھا کسی سے سیل رواں ہمارا [...]</p>
<p>3. Everyone who is a Hindu inherits this Sanskriti and owes his spiritual being to it as truly as he owes his physical one to the land and the blood of his forefathers. A Hindu then is he who feels attachment to the land that extends from Sindhu to Sindhu as the land of his forefathers—as his Fatherland (p.36).</p>	<p>C) اے گلستان اندلس وہ دن ہیں یاد تجھ کو تھا تیری ڈالیوں میں جب آشیاں ہمارا</p> <p>D) اے موج دجلہ تو بھی پہچانتی ہے ہم کو اب تک ہے تیرا دریا افسانہ خواں ہمارا</p>
<p>4. The second most important essential of Hindutva is that a Hindu is a descendant of Hindu parents, claims to have the blood of the ancient Sindhu and the race that sprang from them in his veins (p. 41)</p>	<p>E) اے ارض پاک تیری حرمت پہ کٹ مرے ہم ہے خون تری رگوں میں اب تک رواں ہمارا [...]</p>
<p>5. Thirty crores of people, with India for their basis of operation, for their Fatherland and for their Holyland with such a history behind them, bound together by ties of a common blood and common culture can dictate their terms to the whole world. A day will come when mankind will have to face the force. Equally certain it is that whenever the Hindus come to hold such a position whence they could dictate terms to the whole world (pp. 53-4).</p> <p>(Savarkar, 1970)</p>	<p>(Text from rekhta.com)</p>

1-A or Asserting world dominance: The verse “A” can be translated as: “China and Arabia are ours, Hindustan is ours // We are Muslims, the entire world is our motherland”. Both Savarkar and Iqbal claim dominance for their respective communities over other people in the world. While Iqbal is referring to the military conquests of Islamic political formations³³, the concept of superiority is different in Savarkar’s discourse. Talking about Buddhism, which Savarkar sees as Hindu because it was born in India, he claims for his people a *spiritual dominance*³⁴ over the world. If I remove the detail, the substance of the message is the same in both authors, and it would sound something like: “My people are the greatest in the world, the others are nothing compared to us”.

2-E or The blood and the soil: The verse can be translated as “O Holy Land! In your honour we have died // Our blood still flows in your veins”. Here, the similarity is clearer. In both words, the authors have described a continuation between their blood and the nation. Here, besides the word *Hindu* present in Savarkar's work, I believe these excerpts are completely interchangeable and overlapping.

3;4-C;D or the connection with the past: The verses translate as follows: “O the garden of Andalusia! Do you remember those days // When in your branches there was our nest?” and “O River Tigris! You too recognise us // You waters are still our storytellers”. Both authors express the continuity of their community with the past. Iqbal elaborates on this concept by referring to Andalusia, the symbol of Islamic dominance in Europe and the Tigris River as one of the sources of the Muslim community. The same idea is expressed by Savarkar, who seeks a cultural continuation with the ancient Aryan people, who inhabited the lands between the Indus and the Ganga. Here, we witness two examples of memory construction. To be legitimated and accepted from within and from outside the communities, the Hindu and Muslim identities have to seek a *mythical* origin, in this case, symbolised by a particular land. These chosen excerpts may be different in form but are identical in meaning.

5-B or the dynamism of the communities: the verse can be translated as: “In Western valleys resonates our adhān // No one can stop our flow”. If, in the previous example, the authors looked at the past of the communities, here, they are projecting the successes of their parties in the future.

³³ Claiming that ‘China and India are ours’, Iqbal is referring to the Mongol lineage who dominated India with the Mughal dynasty (1526-1857) and to the Muslim dynasties who ruled Central Asia, here called ‘Chin’.

³⁴ The notion of India as the ‘land of spirituality’ finds its roots in the orientalist narratives. However, Savarkar’s idea of India as the ‘spiritual leader of the world’ has been taken out again by Narendra Modi and his BJP who are using the term ‘*Vishwa Guru*’, (the spiritual teacher of the world) as the role which the Country should have in the international context. For further information about this concept, please see de Estrada, K. S. (2023). What is a vishwaguru? Indian civilizational pedagogy as a transformative Global Imperative. *International Affairs*, 99(2), 433–455. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac318>.

Both claim the dynamism of their communities as an element that would grant them power over the entire world.

I have compared the personalities of Iqbal and Savarkar precisely because they are both considered the ideologues of their respective political formations, namely, a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India.

These examples aimed to show that two personalities believed to be complete opposites share the same kind of thoughts. Thus, the narrative that both use, a “narrative of violence”, is ubiquitous and cannot be confined to a single party, person or community. It becomes impossible, then, to look at these kinds of events with the categories of “good guys” and “bad guys”.

When a confrontation or a conflict is in play and when there is not any will to col down that struggle, every party will inevitably find itself engulfed in the “narrative of violence”, from which it is extremely difficult to escape.

3.3 Mohan Rakesh, Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander

In this section, I will take into consideration three excerpts from three different short stories regarding Partition. Using the same technique I employed in the first chapter to show the invariability of media, I will change all the community-specific elements from the stories to illustrate how the “narrative of violence” does not need any specificity but works regardless of context

3.3.1 Mohan Rakesh’s ‘The lord of the Rubble’

Along with Rajendra Yadav and Kamleshwar, Mohan Rakesh (d.1972) is considered to be one of the major representatives of the नयी कहानी (*Nayī Kahānī*³⁵), a Hindi literary movement which developed between the 1950s and the 1960s. Far from being the expression of a new and unitary ideological movement, this new literary tendency represented the “new fragmented middle class to which all the poets belonged” (Singh, 2016). The *Nayī Kahānī* emerged from a tough period for the Nation, weakened by the humanitarian tragedy that was Partition and by all the economic struggles of a newborn country. In this sense, the *Nayī Kahānī* was “the fruit of a disappointed urban middle

³⁵ Lit. *New Story*

class who struggled to make ends meet in a context where the old ways of life clashed with the new urban and industrial aspirations and needs of Independent India” (Cossio, 1990).

The common thing that brings the authors together is the adherence to reality that is not limited to a simple description, but that is preceded by a “critique choice” of the aspects of reality to insert into the stories. Hence, the literary pieces don’t have any messages; they are characterised as “tools for the common men to get knowledge about the reality in which they are living” (ibid.).

खिड़कियों में से झांकने वाले चेहरों की संख्या पहले से कहीं बढ़ गयी थी. उनमें चेमेगोइयां चल रही थीं कि आज कुछ न कुछ ज़रूर होगा. चिरागदीन का बाप गनी आ गया है, इसलिए साढ़े सात साल पहले की सारी घटना आज खुल जाएगी. लोगों को लग रहा था जैसे वह मलबा ही गनी की सारी कहानी सुना देगा कि शाम के वक़्त चिराग ऊपर के कमरे में खाना खा रहा था जब रक्खे पहलवान ने उसे नीचे बुलाया कि वह एक मिनट आकर एक ज़रूरी बात सुन जाए. पहलवान उन दिनों गली का बादशाह था. हिन्दुओं पर ही उसका काफ़ी दबदबा था, चिराग तो ख़ैर मुसलमान था. चिराग हाथ पर कौर बीच में ही छोड़कर नीचे उतर आया. उसकी बीवी जुबैदा और दोनों लड़कियां किश्वर और सुलताना खिड़कियों में से नीचे झांकने लगीं. चिराग ने डयोढ़ी से बाहर क़दम रखा ही था कि पहलवान ने उसे कमीज़ के कालर से पकड़कर खींच लिया और उसे गली में गिराकर उसकी छाती पर चढ़ बैठा. चिराग उसका छुरेवाला हाथ पकड़कर चिल्लाया, ‘न, रक्खे पहलवान मुझे मत मार! हाय मुझे बचाओ! जुबैदा! मुझे बचा...!’ और ऊपर से जुबैदा चीखती हुई नीचे डयोढ़ी की तरफ भागी. रक्खे के एक शगिर्द ने चिराग की जदोजहद करती हुई बांहें पकड़ लीं और रक्खा उसकी जांघों को घुटने से दबाए हुए बोला, ‘चीखता क्यों है, भैण के... तुझे पाकिस्तान दे रहा हूं. ले!’ और जुबैदा के नीचे पहुंचने से पहले ही उसने चिराग को पाकिस्तान दे दिया. आसपास के घरों की खिड़कियां बंद हो गईं. जो लोग इस दृश्य के साक्षी थे, उन्होंने दरवाज़े बन्द करके अपने को इस घटना के उत्तरदायित्व से मुक्त कर लिया था. बन्द किवाड़ों में भी उन्हें देर तक जुबैदा, किश्वर और सुलताना के चीखने की आवाज़ें सुनाई देती रहीं. रक्खे पहलवान और उसके साथियों ने उन्हें भी उसी रात पाकिस्तान देकर विदा कर दिया, मगर दूसरे तबील रास्ते से. उनकी लाशें चिराग के घर में न मिलकर बाद में नहर के पानी में पाई गईं (Rakesh, 1989, p.227).

In the following translation, I will underline in bold the context-specific terms, those which will be substituted.

Now, there were more people peeking from the windows. Among them, the rumour was spreading that something would have happened that day. **Gani**, **Chiraghdin**’s father, has come back, and the incident of seven years ago would come to light. People suspected that those rubbles would have told **Gani** the whole story. “That night, **Chiragh** was eating in the room upstairs when **Rakkha**, the fighter, called him down to tell him something urgent. In those days, the fighter was the king of the street. Even the **Hindus** were intimidated by him, let’s not talk about **Chiragh**, he was a **Muslim**. Leaving the morsel in a half, he came downstairs. His wife **Zubaida** and his daughters **Kishwar** and **Sultana** started peeking from

the windows. Just as **Chiragh** stepped out of the porch, the fighter grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, knocked him down and jumped on him. **Chiragh** grasped the hand in which the fighter had the knife and screamed: ‘No! **Rakkha**, don’t kill me! Help! **Zubaida**, please Hel...’. From upstairs, **Zubaida** screaming ran towards the door. One man of **Rakkha** grasped **Chiragh's** arm, which tried to get free, and **Rakkha**, holding down his legs with his knees, said: “Why are you crying? Son of a ... I am giving you **Pakistan**, take it!”

And before **Zubaida** could even reach the street, he gave **Pakistan** to **Chiragh**.

The windows on the street shut down. The witnesses locked their doors and freed themselves from any responsibilities. But even with the doors closed, they kept hearing the screams of **Zubaida**, **Kishwar** and **Sultana**. The same night, **Rakkha** the fighter and his fellows gave **Pakistan** also to them but in another way. Their bodies were found after a while, not in front of **Chiragh's** house but in the waters of a canal (The translation is mine).

Now, I will change the context-specific words in bald, with other context-specific words, this time underlined.

Now, there were more people peeking from the windows. Among them, the rumour was spreading that something would have happened that day. Rajendra, Rakkha's father, has come back, and the incident of seven years ago would come to light. People suspected that those rubbles would have told Rajendra the whole story. “That night, Rakkha was eating in the room upstairs when Chiragh, the fighter, called him down to tell him something urgent. In those days, the fighter was the king of the street. Even the Muslims were intimidated by him, let’s not talk about Rakkha, he was a Hindu. Leaving the morsel in a half, he came downstairs. His wife Roshni and his daughters Neha and Anjali started peeking from the windows. Just as Rakkha stepped out of the porch, the fighter grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, knocked him down and jumped on him. Rakkha grasped the hand in which the fighter had the knife and screamed: ‘No! Chiragh, don’t kill me! Help! Roshni, please Hel...’. From upstairs, Roshni screaming ran towards the door. One man of Chiragh grasped Rakkha's arm, which tried to get free, and Chiragh, holding down his legs with his knees, said: “Why are you crying? Son of a ... I am giving you India, take it!”

And before Roshni could even reach the street, he gave India to Rakkha.

The windows on the street shut down. The witnesses locked their doors and freed themselves from any responsibilities. But even with the doors closed, they kept hearing the

screams of Roshni, Neha and Anjali. The same night, Chiragh the fighter and his fellows gave India also to them but in another way. Their bodies were found after a while, not in front of Rakkha's house but in the waters of a canal (The translation is mine).

First of all, even when the changes are applied, the grammar and the syntax of the second text work, which means that linguistically, I did not apply any significant change. Secondly, for someone not familiar with proper names in South Asia, these two passages look almost the same. This person will barely see the differences, let alone understand them. Again, for a layman, no significant changes in terms of meaning were introduced.

Moreover, it can be said that this short story belongs to the category of verisimilitude. Even if these exact events never happened, it is clear that Mohan Rakesh elaborated this tale starting from his own memories or someone else's account. Historical records tell us that during Partition, stories like this happened across every city, both in India and Pakistan. Thus, in the same way, I take Rakesh's story as "credible", this can be also done with my modified version, removing any differences in the narrative and showing the universality of the "narrative of violence". Moreover, the same exercise of changing the names could be done with every situation regarding a war or a human conflict, and the results would be the same as the ones described above.

3.3.2 Manto's Short Stories

Saadat Hasan Manto (d.1955) is probably the most known Urdu modern author and one of the prevailing voices on Partition.

Although in many stories, he adopts a quite neutral perspective without explicitly using the categories of Hindu or Muslim—as I will show with the stories *گھاٹے کا سودا* (*Ghate ka Souda*³⁶) and

سوری (*Sorry*)—, in other works this difference is more marked, as I will show in the short story *شریفان* (*Shareefan*).

³⁶ Lit. *A Bad Deal*.

Ghate ka Souda

دو دوستوں نے مل کر، دس بیس لڑکیوں میں سے ایک لڑکی چنی اور بیالیس روپے دے کر اسے خرید لیا۔ رات گزار کر ایک دوست نے اس لڑکی سے پوچھا، ”تمہارا نام کیا ہے؟“ لڑکی نے اپنا نام بتایا تو وہ بھنا گیا، ”ہم سے تو کہا گیا تھا کہ تم دوسرے مذہب کی ہو۔“ لڑکی نے جواب دیا، ”اس نے جھوٹ بولا تھا۔ یہ سن کر وہ دوڑا دوڑا اپنے دوست کے پاس گیا اور کہنے لگا، ”اس حرام زادے نے ہمارے ساتھ دھوکا کیا ہے۔۔۔ ہمارے ہی مذہب کی لڑکی تمہا دی۔۔۔ چلو واپس کر آئیں۔“

(Manto 1952, p. 48)

Two friends chose one girl among the ten or twenty who were there and bought her for forty-two rupees.

After that night, one of the friends asked the girl: “What’s your name?”

The girl told her name and one of them complained: “We were told that you belonged to the other religion”.

The girl replied: “They lied”.

He went to the other friend and said: “These motherfuckers, they cheated on us... they gave us a girl of our religion... come one, let’s give her back”

(The translation is mine).

Sorry

چھری پیٹ چاک کرتی ہوئی ناف کے نیچے تک چلی گئی۔
ازار بند کٹ گیا۔
چھری مارنے والے کے منہ سے دفعتاً کلمہ تاسف نکلا۔
”چ ج چ ج چ۔۔۔ مشٹیک ہو گیا۔“

(Manto 1952, p. 57)

Cutting the chest, the knife reached till under the navel.

They cut the string which held the trousers.

Immediately, words of regret came out from the mouth of the killer:

“Tsk... we made a mistake”

(The translation is mine).

These two examples show how Manto was aware of the universality of the “narrative of violence”. Both in *Ghate ka Souda* and in *Sorry*, the author does not use any identity marker precisely to underline that brutality and violence are present in the nature of men, regardless of religion, nation, race or anything else.

However, in the short story *Sharifan*, the identity markers are present, but, as before, I will change the name in order to further prove my hypothesis of the totality of the *narrative of violence*.

جب قاسم نے اپنے گھر کا دروازہ کھولا تو اسے صرف ایک گولی کی جلن تھی جو اس کی دہنی پنڈلی میں گر گئی تھی۔ لیکن اندر داخل ہو کر جب اس نے اپنی بیوی کی لاش دیکھی تو اس کی آنکھوں میں خون اتر آیا۔ قریب تھا کہ وہ لکڑیاں پھاڑنے والے گنڈاسے کو اٹھا کر دیوانہ وار نکل جائے اور قتل و گری کا بازار گرم کر دے کہ دفعتاً اسے اپنی لڑکی شریفن کا خیال آیا۔

شریفن، شریفن!“ اس نے بلند آواز میں پکارنا شروع کیا۔“

[...]

ایک گز کے فاصلے پر ایک جوان لڑکی کی لاش پڑی تھی۔ ننگی۔۔۔ بالکل ننگی۔ گورا گورا سڈول جسم، چھت کی طرف اٹھے ہوئے چھوٹے چھوٹے پستان۔۔۔ ایک دم قاسم کا سارا وجود ہل گیا۔ اس کی گہرائیوں سے ایک فلک شگاف چیخ اٹھی لیکن اس کے ہونٹ اس قدر زور سے بھینچے ہوئے تھے کہ باہر نہ نکل سکی۔ اس کی آنکھیں خود بخود بند ہو گئی تھیں۔ پھر بھی اس نے دونوں ہاتھوں سے اپنا چہرہ ڈھانپ لیا۔ مردہ سی آواز اس کے منہ سے نکلی، ”شریفن۔“ اور اس نے آنکھیں بند کیے دالان میں ادھر ادھر ہاتھ مار کر کچھ کپڑے اٹھائے اور انھیں شریفن کی لاش پر گرا کر وہ یہ دیکھے بغیر ہی باہر نکل گیا کہ وہ اس سے کچھ دور گرے تھے۔

باہر نکل کر اس نے اپنی بیوی کی لاش نہ دیکھی۔ بہت ممکن ہے اسے نظر ہی نہ آئی ہو۔ اس لیے کہ اس کی آنکھیں شریفن کی ننگی لاش سے بھری ہوئی تھیں۔ اس نے کونے میں پڑا ہوا لکڑیاں پھاڑنے والا گنڈاسا اٹھایا اور گھر سے باہر نکل گیا۔ قاسم کی داہنی پنڈلی میں گولی گڑی ہوئی تھی۔ اس کا احساس گھر کے اندر داخل ہوتے ہی اس کے دل و دماغ سے محو ہو گیا تھا۔ اس کی وفاداری بیوی ہلاک ہو چکی تھی۔ اس کا صدمہ بھی اس کے ذہن کے کسی گوشے میں موجود نہیں تھا۔ [...]

گنڈاسا ہاتھ میں لیے قاسم سنسان بازاروں میں ابلتے ہوئے لاوے کی طرح بہتا چلا جا رہا تھا۔ چوک کے پاس اس کی مڈبھیڑ ایک سکھ سے ہوئی۔ بڑا کڑیل جوان تھا۔ لیکن قاسم نے کچھ ایسے بے تکتے پن سے حملہ کیا اور ایسا بھرپور ہاتھ مارا کہ وہ تیز طوفان میں اکھڑے ہوئے درخت کی طرح زمین پر آ رہا۔

قاسم کی رگوں میں اس کا خون اور زیادہ گرم ہو گیا اور بجنے لگا۔ تڑتڑ تڑتڑ۔۔۔ جیسے جوش کھاتے ہوئے تیل پر پانی کا ہلکا سا چھیننا پڑ جائے۔

دور سڑک کے اس پار اسے چند آدمی نظر آئے۔ تیرکی طرح وہ ان کی طرف بڑھا اسے دیکھ کر ان لوگوں نے، ”ہر ہر مہادیو“ کے نعرے لگائے۔ قاسم نے جواب میں اپنا نعرہ لگانے کے بجائے انہیں ماں باپ کی موٹی موٹی گالیاں دیں اور گنڈاسا تانے ان میں گھس گیا۔

چند منٹوں ہی کے اندر تین لاشیں سڑک پر تڑپ رہی تھیں۔ دوسرے بھاگ گئے لیکن قاسم کا گنڈاسا دیر تک ہوا میں چلتا رہا۔ اصل میں اس کی آنکھیں بند تھیں۔ گنڈاسا گھماتے گھماتے وہ ایک لاش کے ساتھ ٹکرایا اور گر پڑا۔ اس نے سوچا کہ شاید اسے ”گرایا گیا ہے۔ چنانچہ اس نے گندی گندی گالیاں دے کر چلانا شروع کیا، ”مار ڈالو مجھے، مار ڈالو مجھے۔“ لیکن جب کوئی ہاتھ اسے گردن پر محسوس نہ ہوا اور کوئی ضرب اس کے بدن پر نہ پڑی تو اس نے اپنی آنکھیں کھولیں اور دیکھا کہ سڑک پر تین لاشوں اور اس کے سوا اور کوئی بھی نہیں تھا۔

[...]
جھنجھلا کر وہ ایک مکان کی طرف بڑھا، جس کے دروازے کے اوپر ہندی میں کچھ لکھا تھا۔ دروازہ اندر سے بند تھا۔ قاسم نے دیوانہ وار گنڈاسا چلانا شروع کیا۔ تھوڑی ہی دیر میں دونوں کواڑ ریزہ ریزہ ہو گئے۔ قاسم اندر داخل ہوا۔
”چھوٹا سا گھر تھا۔ قاسم نے اپنے سوکھے ہوئے حلق پر زور دے کر پھر گالیاں دینا شروع کیں، ”باہر نکلو۔۔۔ باہر نکلو۔“ سامنے دالان کے دروازے میں چہرہ اہٹ پیدا ہوئی۔ قاسم نے اپنے سوکھے ہوئے حلق پر زور دے کر گالیاں دیتا رہا۔ دروازہ کھلا۔ ایک لڑکی نمودار ہوئی۔ قاسم کے ہونٹ بھینچ گئے۔ گرج کر اس نے پوچھا، ”کون ہو تم؟“ لڑکی نے خشک ہونٹوں پر زبان پھیری اور جواب دیا، ”ہندو۔“

قاسم تن کر کھڑا ہو گیا۔ شعلہ بار آنکھوں سے اس نے لڑکی کی طرف دیکھا جس کی عمر چودہ یا پندرہ برس کی تھی اور ہاتھ سے گنڈاسا گرا دیا۔ پھر وہ عقاب کی طرح چھٹا اور اس لڑکی کو دھکیل کر اندر دالان میں لے گیا۔ دونوں ہاتھوں سے اس نے دیوانہ وار کپڑے نوچنے شروع کیے، دھجیاں اور چندیاں یوں اڑنے لگیں جیسے کوئی روٹی دھنک رہا ہے۔ تقریباً آدھ گھنٹہ قاسم اپنا انتقام لینے میں مصروف رہا۔ لڑکی نے کوئی مزاحمت نہ کی۔ اس لیے کہ وہ فرش پر گرتے ہی بیہوش ہو گئی تھی۔ جب قاسم نے آنکھیں کھولیں تو اس کے دونوں ہاتھ لڑکی کی گردن میں دھنسے ہوئے تھے۔ ایک جھٹکے کے ساتھ انہیں علیحدہ کر کے وہ اٹھا۔ پسینے میں غرق اس نے ایک نظر اس لڑکی کی طرف دیکھا تاکہ اس کی اور تشفی ہو سکے۔ ایک گز کے فاصلے پر اس جوان لڑکی کی لاش پڑی تھی۔۔۔ نگی۔۔۔ بالکل نگی۔ گورا گورا سڈول جسم، چھت کی طرف اٹھے ہوئے چھوٹے پستان۔۔۔ قاسم کی آنکھیں ایک دم بند ہو گئیں۔ دونوں ہاتھوں سے اس نے اپنا چہرہ ڈھانپ لیا۔ بدن پر گرم گرم پسینہ برف ہو گیا اور اس کی رگوں میں کھولتا ہوا لاوا پتھر کی طرح منجمد ہو گیا۔

[...]

(Manto, 1990)

Once again, in the following translation, I will highlight in bold the context-specific terms, which will be substituted.

When **Qasim** opened the door of this house, he was feeling only the pain of the bullet stuck in his right calf. But when he came inside, he saw the body of his wife, and the blood rose into his eyes. He was close to taking the axe with the broken wooden handle and going outside, and when the desire for death was rising up, his mind went to his daughter **Shareefan**. With a broken voice, he began to cry: “**Shareefan, Shareefan!**”[...].

Not far from him, there was a body of a young girl. Naked...totally naked. The body was white and graceful, with the small breast facing the ceiling. ...**Qasim** almost fainted. He felt inside an otherworldly crack, but his lips were so tight that it could not go out. Even if his eyes closed by themselves, he covered his face with both hands. With a dead whisper, from his mouth emerged a “**Shareefan**”. With his eyes closed, he picked up some clothes with his hand and put them on **Shareefan's** body. However, he went out without even noticing that the clothes did not reach the body. While going out of the room, he did not see the body of his wife. He needed not to see that. His eyes were filled with **Shareefan's** naked body. He took his axe with the broken wooden handle and went outside the house. **Qasim** as a bullet stuck into his high calf, however, since he entered the house, he did not feel anything. His dear, loyal wife was killed. But even that shock was not present in his mind [...].

With the axe in his hand, **Qasim** was boiling lava while he was roaming in the desert markets. Near the square, he had an encounter. A huge guy. But **Qasim** attacked him with the axe. with so much force that the guy hit the ground like a tree when it is eradicated by a strong storm.

In **Qasim's** veins, the blood became hotter, and they started pulsing. Tud, tud, tud, tud... like when a small drop of water falls in the boil oil.

Then he saw a few men coming from the other side of the street. Like an arrow, he advanced towards them, and when they saw him, they started shouting: “**Har har Mahadev!**”. **Qasim** answered, wishing death to their parents, and with the axe in his hand, ran towards them enraged. In just a few minutes, three bodies were lying on the street. Another one tried to escape, but **Qasim's** axe reached him. Actually, his eyes were closed. Swinging the axe, **Qasim** hit a body, and the axe fell down. He started thinking: “Maybe he dropped it”. He was swearing while going away: “Come one, kill me! Kill me!”.

Only when he didn't feel any hand on his neck or any pain in his body, he opened his eyes and saw that on the street, there were only the three bodies and no one else [...].

Annoyed, he continued towards a house with something written in **Hindi** over its door. The door was closed from the inside. Gripped by his madness, **Qasim** started to swing his axe.

After some time, both the shutters were broken. **Qasim** stepped in. It was a small house. **Qasim** cleared his throat and started cursing with a loud voice: “Come out!...Come out!”. He heard a sound from the door of the hallway in front of him. **Qasim** cleared his throat and kept swearing. The door opened, and a girl appeared. **Qasim** shut his lips. With a loud voice, he asked: “What are you?” With dry lips and a frozen tongue, the girl answered: “**Hindu**”. **Qasim** stood up straight. With eyes full of fire, he looked at the girl, who could have been fourteen or fifteen and dropped the axe. Then, like an eagle, he snatched the girls and entered the hallway. Totally mad, with both hands, he started to scratch her clothes. Pieces of fabric started flying like someone was blowing cotton. After more or less half an hour, **Qasim** was busy taking his revenge. The girl did not oppose, and she fell unconscious on the carpet. When **Qasim** opened his eyes, his hands were tight on the girl’s neck. Shocked, he took them off. Drowning in sweat, he looked at the girl as if he could have relief. Not far from him, there was the body of that young girl...naked...totally naked. The body was white and graceful, with the small breast facing the ceiling...³⁷ **Qasim** closed his eyes and covered his face with both hands. The hot sweat on his body became snow and the boiling lava in his veins froze like stone (The translation is mine).

Now, I will change the context-specific words in bold, with other context-specific words, this time underlined.

When Aditya opened the door of this house, he was feeling only the pain of the bullet stuck in his right calf. But when he came inside, he saw the body of his wife, and the blood rose into his eyes. He was close to taking the axe with the broken wooden handle and going outside, and when the desire for death was rising up, his mind went to his daughter Divya. With a broken voice, he began to cry: “Divya, Divya!”[...]. Not far from him, there was a body of a young girl. Naked...totally naked. The body was white and graceful, with the small breast facing the ceiling. ... Aditya almost fainted. He felt inside an otherworldly crack, but his lips were so tight that it could not go out. Even if his eyes closed by themselves, he covered his face with both hands. With a dead whisper, from his mouth emerged a “Divya”. With his eyes closed, he picked up some clothes with his

³⁷ Very interestingly, in the Urdu text, Manto here uses the exact same sentence he used to describe when Qasim saw his daughter’s body. Manto needed this expedient to underline the correspondence between the two episodes and, thus, to reduce the salience given to the indicators of religion.

hand and put them on Divya's body. However, he went out without even noticing that the clothes did not reach the body. While going out of the room, he did not see the body of his wife. He needed not to see that. His eyes were filled with Divya's naked body. He took his axe with the broken wooden handle and went outside the house. Qasim as a bullet stuck into his high calf, however, since he entered the house, he did not feel anything. His dear, loyal wife was killed. But even that shock was not present in his mind [...].

With the axe in his hand, Aditya was boiling lava while he was roaming in the desert markets. Near the square, he had an encounter. A huge guy. But Aditya attacked him with the axe. with so much force that the guy hit the ground like a tree when it is eradicated by a strong storm.

In Aditya's veins, the blood became hotter, and they started pulsing. Tud, tud, tud, tud... like when a small drop of water falls in the boil oil.

Then he saw a few men coming from the other side of the street. Like an arrow, he advanced towards them, and when they saw him, they started shouting: "Allah Akbar!". Aditya answered, wishing death to their parents, and with the axe in his hand, ran towards them enraged. In just a few minutes, three bodies were lying on the street. Another one tried to escape, but Qasim's axe reached him. Actually, his eyes were closed. Swinging the axe, Qasim hit a body, and the axe fell down. He started thinking: "Maybe he dropped it". He was swearing while going away: "Come one, kill me! Kill me!".

Only when he didn't feel any hand on his neck or any pain in his body, he opened his eyes and saw that on the street, there were only the three bodies and no one else [...].

Annoyed, he continued towards a house with something written in Urdu over its door. The door was closed from the inside. Gripped by his madness, Aditya started to swing his axe. After some time, both the shutters were broken. Aditya stepped in. It was a small house. Aditya cleared his throat and started cursing with a loud voice: "Come out!...Come out!". He heard a sound from the door of the hallway in front of him. Aditya cleared his throat and kept swearing. The door opened, and a girl appeared. Aditya shut his lips. With a loud voice, he asked: "What are you?" With dry lips and a frozen tongue, the girl answered: "Muslim". Aditya stood up straight. With eyes full of fire, he looked at the girl, who could have been fourteen or fifteen and dropped the axe. Then, like an eagle, he snatched the girls and entered the hallway. Totally mad, with both hands, he started to scratch her clothes. Pieces of fabric started flying like someone was blowing cotton. After more or less half an hour, Aditya was busy taking his revenge. The girl did not oppose, and she fell unconscious on the

carpet. When Aditya opened his eyes, his hands were tight on the girl's neck. Shocked, he took them off. Drowning in sweat, he looked at the girl as if he could have relief. Not far from him, there was the body of that young girl...naked...totally naked. The body was white and graceful, with the small breast facing the ceiling... Aditya closed his eyes and covered his face with both hands. The hot sweat on his body became snow and the boiling lava in his veins froze like stone (The translation is mine).

Again, as we have seen with Mohan Rakes's text, once the context-specific elements are removed or changed, the meaning of the piece remains the same and plausible. Even this second example confirms the theory that the "narrative of violence" cannot be restricted only to one side of the conflict, but it has to be understood that both sides are recurring to it.

In comparison with Rakesh, Manto "describes how the tragedy of Partition is reflected in people's psyche and mental state" (Jalal 2013, p. 3). In this story, as in others like *Toba Tek Singh*, Manto's characters have been deeply affected by what they have seen and their psychological condition is the result.

In *Shareefan*, Qasim is a totally broken person. As he witnesses his family murdered, he cannot do anything other than become the murderer himself and the cause of someone else's grief.

Without looking for any moralistic lesson, Manto has simply and efficaciously described the whole process of creation and the spreading of violence.

3.3.3 Krishan Chander and the Common Fate

Krishan Chander (d.1977) was a very prolific Hindu/Urdu writer. Friend and colleague with Manto, he wrote "more than eighty volumes, more than thirty collections of short stories and more than twenty novels" (Narang et al. 1990). He touches upon various topics, but he puts a lot of effort into denouncing his contemporary social issues and challenges, with a special eye on describing the condition of the oppressed people (ibid.).

Here, I will present and translate his short story *ایک طوائف کا خط*. (Ek tawaif ka kaht³⁸).

³⁸ Lit. *The letter of a tawaif*. The *tawaif* was a crucial figure in the Subcontinent's elite culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More than simple prostitutes, *tawaiifs* were highly sophisticated girls expected in music and dance. During those centuries and later, it became a central figure in Urdu literature. For more information, please see <https://brownhistory.substack.com/p/the-art-of-tawaif-a-tradition-lost> and <https://shinjinim.com/2021/07/07/tawaifnama-a-brief-history-of-tawaif-culture-in-india/>

پنڈت جواہر لال نہرو اور قائد اعظم جناح کے نام

مجھے امید ہے کہ اس سے پہلے آپ کو کسی طوائف کا خط نہ ملا ہو گا۔ یہ بھی امید کرتی ہوں کہ آج تک آپ نے میری اور اس قماش کی دوسری عورتوں کی صورت بھی نہ دیکھی ہو گی۔ یہ بھی جانتی ہوں کہ آپ کو میرا یہ خط لکھنا کس قدر معیوب ہے اور وہ بھی ایسا کھلا خط مگر کیا کروں حالات کچھ ایسے ہیں اور ان دونوں لڑکیوں کا تقاضا اتنا شدید ہے کہ میں یہ خط لکھے بغیر نہیں رہ سکتی۔ یہ خط میں نہیں لکھ رہی ہوں، یہ خط مجھ سے بیلا اور بتول لکھوا رہی ہیں۔ میں صدق دل سے معافی چاہتی ہوں، اگر میرے خط میں کوئی فقرہ آپ کو ناگوار گزرے۔ اسے میری مجبوری پر محمول کیجئے گا۔

[...]

شاید آپ قیاس کر رہے ہوں کہ بیلا اور بتول میری لڑکیاں ہیں۔ نہیں یہ غلط ہے میری کوئی لڑکی نہیں ہے۔ ان دونوں لڑکیوں کو میں نے بازار سے خریدا ہے۔ جن دنوں ہندو مسلم فساد زوروں پر تھا، اور گرانٹ روڈ، اور فارس روڈ اور مدن پورہ پر انسانی خون پانی کی طرح بہایا جا رہا تھا۔ ان دنوں میں نے بیلا کو ایک مسلمان دلال سے تین سو روپے کے عوض خریدا تھا۔ یہ مسلمان دلال اس لڑکی کو دہلی سے لایا تھا جہاں بیلا کے ماں باپ رہتے تھے۔

بیلا کے ماں باپ راولپنڈی میں راجہ بازار کے عقب میں پونچھ باؤس کے سامنے کی گلی میں رہتے تھے۔ متوسط طبقے کا گھرانہ تھا، شرافت اور سادگی گھٹی میں پڑی تھی۔ بیلا اپنے ماں باپ کی اکلوتی بیٹی تھی اور جب راولپنڈی میں مسلمانوں نے ہندوؤں کو تہ تیغ کرنا شروع کیا اس وقت چوتھی جماعت میں پڑھتی تھی۔ یہ بارہ جولائی کا واقعہ ہے۔ بیلا اپنے اسکول سے پڑھ کر گھر آ رہی تھی کہ اس نے اپنے گھر کے سامنے اور دوسرے ہندوؤں کے گھروں کے سامنے ایک جم غفیر دیکھا۔ یہ لوگ مسلح تھے اور گھروں کو آگ لگا رہے تھے اور لوگوں کو اور ان کے بچوں کو اور ان کی عورتوں کو گھر سے باہر نکال کر انہیں قتل کر رہے تھے۔ ساتھ ساتھ اللہ اکبر کا نعرہ بھی بلند کرتے جاتے تھے۔ بیلا نے اپنی آنکھوں سے اپنے باپ کو قتل ہوتے ہوئے دیکھا۔ پھر اس نے اپنی آنکھوں سے اپنی ماں کو دم توڑتے ہوئے دیکھا۔ وحشی مسلمانوں نے اس کے پستان کاٹ کر پھینک دیئے تھے۔ وہ پستان جن سے ایک ماں کوئی ماں، ہندو ماں یا مسلمان ماں، عیسائی ماں یا یہودی ماں اپنے بچے کو دودھ پلاتی ہے اور انسانوں کی زندگی میں کائنات کی وسعت میں تخلیق کا ایک نیا باب کھولتی ہے۔ وہ دودھ بھرے پستان اللہ اکبر کے نعروں کے ساتھ کاٹ ڈالے گئے۔ کسی نے تخلیق کے ساتھ اتنا ظلم کیا تھا۔ کسی ظالم اندھیرے نے ان کی روحوں میں یہ سیاہی بھر دی تھی۔

میں نے قرآن پڑھا ہے اور میں جانتی ہوں کہ راولپنڈی میں بیلا کے ماں باپ کے ساتھ جو کچھ ہوا وہ اسلام نہیں تھا وہ انسانیت نہ تھی، وہ دشمنی بھی نہ تھی، وہ انتقام بھی نہ تھا، وہ ایک ایسی سعادت، بے رحمی، بزدلی اور شیطنت تھی جو تاریخ کے سینے سے پھوٹی ہے اور نور کی آخری کرن کو بھی داغدار کر جاتی ہے۔ بیلا اب میرے پاس ہے۔ مجھ سے پہلے وہ داڑھی والے مسلمان دلال کے پاس تھی۔ بیلا کی عمر بارہ سال سے زیادہ نہیں تھی جب وہ چوتھی جماعت میں پڑھتی تھی۔ اپنے گھر میں ہوتی تو آج پانچویں جماعت میں داخل ہو رہی ہوتی۔ پھر بڑی ہوتی تو اس کے ماں باپ اس کا بیاہ کسی شریف گھرانے کے غریب سے لڑکے سے کر دیتے، وہ اپنا چھوٹا سا گھر بساتی۔ اپنے خاوند سے، اپنے ننھے ننھے بچوں سے، اپنی گھریلو زندگی کی چھوٹی چھوٹی خوشیوں سے۔

لیکن اس نازک کلی کو بے وقت خزاں آگئی۔ اب بیلا بارہ برس کی نہیں معلوم ہوتی۔ اس کی عمر تھوڑی ہے لیکن اس کی زندگی بہت بڑی ہے۔ اس کی آنکھوں میں جو ڈر ہے۔ انسانیت کی جو تلخی ہے یا اس کا جو لہو ہے موت کی جو بیاس ہے قائد اعظم صاحب شاید اگر آپ اسے دیکھ سکیں تو اس کا اندازہ کر سکیں۔ ان بے آسرا آنکھوں کی گہرائیوں میں اتر سکیں۔ آپ تو شریف آدمی ہیں۔ آپ نے شریف گھرانے کی معصوم لڑکیوں کو دیکھا ہو گا ہندو لڑکیوں کو، مسلمان لڑکیوں کو، شاید آپ سمجھ جاتے کہ معصومیت کا کوئی مذہب نہیں ہوتا۔ وہ ساری انسانیت کی امانت ہے۔ ساری دنیا کی میراث ہے جو اسے مٹاتا ہے اسے دنیا کے کسی مذہب کا کوئی خدا معاف نہیں کر سکتا۔

بتول اور بیلا دونوں سگی بہنوں کی طرح میرے ہاں رہتی ہیں۔ بتول اور بیلا سگی بہنیں نہیں ہیں۔ بتول مسلمان لڑکی ہے۔ بیلا نے ہندو گھر میں جنم لیا۔ آج دونوں فارس روڈ پر ایک رنڈی کے گھر میں بیٹھی ہیں۔

اگر بیلا راولپنڈی سے آئی ہے تو بتول جالندھر کے ایک گاؤں کھیم کرن کے ایک پٹھان کی بیٹی ہے۔ بتول کے باپ کی سات بیٹیاں تھیں، تین شادی شدہ اور چار کنواریاں، بتول کا باپ کھیم کرن میں ایک معمولی کاشتکار تھا۔ غریب پٹھان لیکن غیور پٹھان جو صدیوں سے کھیم کرن میں آ کے بس گیا تھا۔ جاٹوں کے اس گاؤں میں یہی تین چار گھر پٹھانوں کے تھے۔ یہ لوگ جس حلم و آشتی سے رہتے تھے شاید اس کا اندازہ پنڈت جی آپ کو اس امر سے ہو گا کہ مسلمان ہونے پر بھی ان لوگوں کو اپنے گاؤں میں مسجد بنانے کی اجازت نہ تھی۔ یہ لوگ گھر میں چپ چاپ اپنی نماز ادا کرتے، صدیوں سے جب سے مہاراجہ رنجیت سنگھ نے عنان حکومت سنبھالی تھی کسی مومن نے اس گاؤں میں اذان نہ دی تھی۔ ان کا دل عرفان سے روشن تھا لیکن دنیاوی مجبوریاں اس قدر شدید تھیں اور پھر رواداری کا خیال اس قدر غالب تھا کہ لب واکرنے کی ہمت نہ ہوتی تھی۔

بتول اپنے باپ کی چیمٹی لڑکی تھی۔ ساتوں میں سب سے چھوٹی، سب سے پیاری، سب سے حسین۔ بتول اس قدر حسین ہے کہ ہاتھ لگانے سے میلی ہوتی ہے، پنڈت جی آپ تو خود کشمیری النسل ہیں اور فن کار ہو کر یہ بھی جانتے ہیں کہ خوبصورتی کسے کہتے ہیں۔ یہ خوبصورتی آج میری گندگی کے ڈھیر میں گدھ ہو کر اس طرح پڑی ہے کہ اس کا پرکھ کرنے والا کوئی شریف آدمی اب مشکل سے ملے گا۔ اس گندگی میں گلے سڑے مارواڑی، گھنی مونچھوں والے ٹھیکیدار، ناپاک نگاہوں والے چور بازاری ہی نظر آتے ہیں۔ بتول بالکل ان پڑھ ہے۔ اس نے صرف جناح صاحب کا نام سنا تھا، پاکستان کو ایک اچھا تماشہ سمجھ کر اس کے نعرے لگائے تھے۔ جیسے تین چار برس کے ننھے بچے گھر میں 'انقلاب جندہ باد' کرتے پھرتے ہیں۔ گیارہ برس ہی کی تو وہ ہے۔

ان پڑھ بتول۔ وہ چند دن ہی ہوئے میرے پاس آئی ہے۔ ایک ہندو دلال اسے میرے پاس لایا تھا۔ میں نے اسے پانچ سو روپے میں خرید لیا۔ اس سے پہلے وہ کہاں تھی۔ یہ میں نہیں کہہ سکتی۔ ہاں لیڈی ڈاکٹر نے مجھ سے بہت کچھ کہا ہے کہ اگر آپ اسے سن لیں تو شاید پاگل ہو جائیں۔ بتول بھی اب نیم پاگل ہے۔ اس کے باپ کو جاٹوں نے اس بیدردی سے مارا ہے کہ ہندو تہذیب کے پچھلے چھ ہزار برس کے چھلکے اتر گئے ہیں اور انسانی بربریت اپنے وحشی ننگے روپ میں سب کے سامنے آ گئی ہے۔ پہلے تو جاٹوں نے اس کی آنکھیں نکال لیں۔ پھر اس کے منہ میں پیشاب کیا، پھر اس کے حلق کو چیر کر اس کی یہ آتیں تک نکال ڈالیں۔ پھر اس کی شادی شدہ بیٹیوں سے زبردستی منہ کالا کیا۔ اسی وقت ان کے باپ کی لاش کے سامنے،

ریحانہ، گل درخشاں، مرجانہ، سوہن، بیگم، ایک ایک کر کے وحشی انسان نے اپنے مندر کی عورتوں کو ناپاک کیا۔ جس نے انہیں زندگی عطا کی، جس نے انہیں لوریاں سنائی تھیں، جس نے ان کے سامنے شرم اور عجز سے اور پاکیزگی سے سر جھکا دیا تھا۔ ان تمام بہنوں اور ماؤں کے ساتھ زنا کیا۔ ہندو دھرم نے اپنی عزت کھودی تھی۔ اپنی رواداری تباہ کر دی تھی۔ اپنی عظمت مٹا ڈالی تھی۔ آج رگ وید کا ہر منتر خاموش تھا۔ آج گرتھ صاحب کا ہر دوہا شرمندہ تھا۔ آج گیتا کا ہر شلوک زخمی تھا۔ کون ہے جو میرے سامنے اجنتا کی مصوری کا نام لے سکتا ہے۔ اشوک کے کتبے سنا سکتا ہے، ایلورا کے صنم زادوں کے گن گا سکتا ہے۔ بتول کے بے بس بھنچے ہوئے ہونٹوں، اس کی بانہوں پر وحشی درندوں کے دانتوں کے نشان اور اس کی بھری ہوئی ٹانگوں کی ناہمواری میں تمہاری اجنتا کی موت ہے۔ تمہارے ایلورا کا جنازہ ہے۔ تمہاری تہذیب کا کفن ہے۔ آؤ آؤ میں تمہیں اس خوبصورتی کو دکھاؤں جو کبھی بتول تھی۔ اس متعفن لاش کو دکھاؤں جو آج بتول ہے۔

جنابے کی رو میں بہہ کر میں بہت کچھ کہہ گئی۔ شاید یہ سب مجھے نہ کہنا چاہئے تھا۔ شاید اس میں آپ کی سبکی ہے۔ شاید اس سے زیادہ ناگوار باتیں آپ سے اب تک کسی نے نہ کی ہوں نہ سنائی ہوں گی۔ شاید آپ یہ سب کچھ نہیں کر سکتے۔ شاید تھوڑا بھی نہیں کر سکتے۔ پھر بھی ہمارے ملک میں آزادی آگئی ہے۔ ہندوستان میں اور پاکستان میں اور شاید ایک طوائف کو بھی اپنے رہنماؤں سے پوچھنے کا یہ حق ضرور ہے کہ اب بیلا اور بتول کا کیا ہو گا۔

بیلا اور بتول دو لڑکیاں ہیں۔ دو قومیں ہیں۔ دو تہذیبیں ہیں۔ دو مندر اور مسجد ہیں۔ بیلا اور بتول آج کل فارس روڈ پر ایک رنڈی کے ہاں رہتی ہیں جو چینی حجام کی بغل میں اپنی دکان کا دھندا چلاتی ہے۔ بیلا اور بتول کو یہ دھندا پسند نہیں۔ میں نے انہیں خریدنا ہے۔ میں چاہوں تو ان سے یہ کام لے سکتی ہوں۔ لیکن میں سوچتی ہوں میں یہ کام نہیں کروں گی جو راولپنڈی اور جالندھر نے ان سے کیا ہے۔ میں نے انہیں اب تک فارس روڈ کی دنیا سے الگ تھلگ رکھا ہے۔ پھر بھی جب میرے گاہک پچھلے کمرے میں جا کر اپنا منہ ہاتھ دھونے لگتے ہیں، اس وقت بیلا اور بتول کی نگاہیں مجھ سے کہنے لگتی ہیں مجھے ان نگاہوں کی تاب نہیں۔ میں ٹھیک طرح سے ان کا سندیسہ بھی آپ تک نہیں پہنچا سکتی ہوں۔ آپ کیوں نہ خود ان نگاہوں کا بیگانہ پڑھ لیں۔ پنڈت جی میں چاہتی ہوں کہ آپ بتول کو اپنی بیٹی بنا لیں۔ جناح صاحب میں چاہتی ہوں کہ آپ بیلا کو اپنی دختر نیک اختر سمجھیں۔ ذرا ایک دفعہ انہیں اس فارس روڈ کے چنگل سے چھڑا کے اپنے گھر میں رکھے اور ان لاکھوں روجوں کا نوحہ سنئے۔ یہ نوحہ جو نو اکھالی سے راولپنڈی تک اور بھرت پور سے بمبئی تک گونج رہا ہے۔ کیا صرف گورنمنٹ ہاؤس میں اس کی آواز سنائی نہیں دیتی، یہ آواز سنیں گے آپ؟

آپ کی مخلص

فارس روڈ کی ایک طوائف

(Chander, 2002)

To Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Qaid-e-Azam Jinnah,

I hope that you have never received a letter from a tawaif. I also hope that till today, you have never seen my face or the one of this kind of women. I also know that it will be a great

dishonour for you to answer this letter of mine, but I don't know what to do in a situation as such, and the request of these two girls is so urgent that I could have been dead if I did not write this letter. I am not writing this letter, **Bella** and **Batul** told me to write it. I am really sorry if in this letter you will find any sentence that is not of your liking. Please let me know about that.

[...]

Maybe you are wondering if **Bella** and **Batul** are my daughters. No, it's wrong, I don't have any children. I have bought both of them at the market. In those days, **Hindu-Muslim** riots were raging, and in **Grant Road**, **Fars Road**, and **Madanpura**, human blood was flowing like water. In those days, I bought **Bella** from a **Muslim** pimp for three hundred rupees. That pimp had brought the girl from Delhi, where her parents lived.

Bella's parents lived in the street in front of the **Poonch House** in the back of **Raja Bazar** in **Rawalpindi**³⁹, it was a family from the middle class, with simple and good manners. **Bella** was the only child, and when in **Rawalpindi**, the **Muslims** started to kill the **Hindus**, she was studying in the fourth grade⁴⁰. This happened on the twelfth of July. **Bella** was coming back from school when she saw a huge crowd in front of her house and in front of other **Hindu** houses. Those people had weapons. They were setting those houses on fire and making the women and the children exit the houses, they massacred them. While doing this, they were shouting: "**Allah Akbar!**". **Bella** saw his father being murdered with her eyes. Then, with her eyes saw her mother dead. Those vicious **Muslims** cut her breasts and threw them away. That breast with every mother, either Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Jewish, gives milk to their children and which opens a new chapter in the creation of the life of every human being in the vastness of the universe, that breast full of milk was cut off with the slogan "**Allah Akbar!**". Someone brought such cruelty to the creation. Some cruel darkness has filled their souls with black ink.

I have read the **Quran**, and I know that what happened in **Rawalpindi** with **Bella's** parents was not **Islam**, it was not humanity, it was not enmity, it was not even revenge, it was such a felicity, lack of compassion, cowardice and wickedness that has been spitted out from the chest of history and that cancelled even the last glance of light. Now **Bella** is with me. Before, she was with that bearded **Muslim** pimp; she wasn't more than twelve when she was

³⁹ Rawalpindi is a city in today's Pakistan, in the region of Punjab. It is near the capital Islamabad and it is near to the border with Kashmir.

⁴⁰ In fourth grade, kids are between ten and eleven.

studying in fourth grade. If her home would have been there, she would have been studied in fifth grade. Then, if she had been older, her parents would have organised her marriage to a guy from a poor but respectable family. They would have built their small house and would have lived, with their god and with their small children, the small happiness of the family life.

But for this fragile bud, autumn has suddenly come. Now, **Bella** does not seem twelve. She is young, but her life is heavy. In her eyes, there is such fear, there is humanity's hardship, and her blood is craving death. **Qaid-e-azam Saheb**, if you could only see her, you could understand. You could wane the deepness of those eyes without trust. You are a nobleman. You would have seen the innocent girls of noble families, either **Hindu** or **Muslim**; maybe you understand that innocence does not have any religion. It is the property of the entire humanity. It is the inheritance of the whole world, and no god of any religion in the world can forgive anyone who erases it.

Bella and **Batul** can live with me like sisters. But **Batul** and **Bella** are not sisters. **Batul** is a **Muslim** girl. **Bella** was born into a **Hindu** family. Today both of them are living in the house of a slut.

If **Bella** came from **Rawalpindi**, **Batul** is the daughter of a **Pathan**⁴¹ from the village of **Khemkaran**, near **Jalandhar**⁴². **Batul**'s father had seven daughters; three were married, and four were unmarried. **Batul**'s father was a humble farmer of **Khemkaran**. A poor Pathan but a high-minded **Pathan** whose family settled in **Khemkaran** for centuries. In this village of **Jats**⁴³, three or four houses were **Pathan**'s. These people were living in peace and serenity. Perhaps you can guess this, **Panditji**, from the fact that even though these people were Muslims, they were not allowed to build a mosque in their village. These people prayed in their homes in silence for centuries since when **King Ranajit Singh** was raised to power; no momin recited the **adhan** in this village. Their heart was bright with knowledge, but the worldly compulsions were so intense, and then the idea of harmony was so predominant that they did not have the spirit and the idea to do something. **Batul** was the sixth daughter. Of the seven, she was the tiniest, the sweetest, the most beautiful. **Batul** is so beautiful that only from shaking hands she becomes friendly, **Panditji**, you are also from

⁴¹ Pathans are an ethno-linguistic group of people originally coming from Afghanistan.

⁴² Jalandhar is a city in the North of Indian Punjab, near the borders with Pakistan and with the states of Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh.

⁴³ Jaats are a traditional rural ethnic group in Northern India and Pakistan. For more information, please see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jat>

Kashmir and being an artist, you know what beauty is. Today, this beauty has ended up in my dirty mess, and because of this, she won't easily find a decent man. In this filth, shady **Marwaris**⁴⁴, contractors with greasy moustaches, those with impure eyes and thieves are visible here. **Batul** is not educated. She has heard only the name of **Jinnah Sahab**, and she has understood **Pakistan** as a good joke in which favour slogans are raised, like a child of three or four years who at home sings 'Pakistan zindabad'⁴⁵. But she is eleven.

The uneducated **Batul**. She has come here for a few days. A **Hindu** pimp brought her to me, and I have brought her for five-hundred **rupees**. Where was she before? I really don't know. Yes, the doctor told me so many things that are enough to drive you crazy. Now also, **Batul** is half crazy. The **Jats** killed her father with such brutality that all the **Hindu** culture of the past six thousand years went to hell, and humanity has shown itself in its naked, barbaric and ruthless form. First, the **Jats** took off his eyes. Then they peed in his mouth; then they tore his throat till bringing out his bowels. Then, they did something horrible with his married daughters. At that moment, **Rehana, Gul, Darkhashan, Marjana, Sohan and Begum** were in front of the body of their father, and the brutal men defiled the women of his own temple. Who gave them life, who sang them songs, who in front of them has always bowed down with respect, purity and innocence. He raped all those sisters and mothers. **Hinduism** buried its own respect. It wasted its tolerance. Its greatness was cancelled. That day all mantras of the **RgVeda** were silent. Every couplet of the **Granth Sahib** was ashamed. Every verse of the **Gita** was wounded. Who can even pronounce the pictures of **Ajanta** in front of me? You can recite **Ashoka's pillars** or tell me about the quality of **Ellora's**⁴⁶ idols but in **Batul's** clenched hands, in the sign of those brutal teeth on her sisters, in the unevenness of her heavy legs, there is the death of your **Ajanta**. There is the dead

⁴⁴ Marwaris are an ethno-linguistic group that originates from the Marwar region in Rajasthan.

⁴⁵ Lit. 'Long life to Pakistan', it is the typical nationalist slogan in the Country.

⁴⁶ Here, the authors listed a series of historical 'products that are considered' 'Hindu'. Ashoka's pillars are rock edicts erected throughout the reign by Ashoka (died 238? BCE), the third king of the Mauryan dynasty. Ajanta and Ellora caves (dated between 2000 BCE and 1000 CE with several phases) are a series of rock caves in today's Maharashtra. The Guru Granth Sahib (composed in 1604) is considered the most important 'sacred book' in the Sikh religion. Interestingly, here it is viewed as 'Hindu' according to Savarkar's idea of 'Hinduism'.

The Bhagavad Gita is considered one of the most important books by Hindus. It is part of the Mahabharata and contains the dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa.

For more information about Ashoka's reign, please see Olivelle, P. (2024). *Ashoka Portrait of a philosopher king*. Yale University Press.

For more information about the Bhagavad Gita, please see Malinar, A. (2010). *The Bhagavadgita: Doctrines and contexts*. Cambridge University Press.

For more information about the Guru Granth Sahib, please see Singh, P. (2014). *The Guru Granth Sahib canon, meaning and authority*. Oxford University Press.

For more information about Ajanta and Ellora, please see Tadgell, C. (2024). *Architecture in the Indian subcontinent: From the Mauryas to the Mughals*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

body of your **Ellora**. There is the shroud of your culture. Come, Come! I'll show you the beauty that was **Batul**. I'll show you that rotten body, which **Batul** is today.

I said a lot of things under the flow of emotions. Probably, I should not have said that. Probably, these are insults to you. Probably, no one has ever said or told you anything more unpleasant than this. Probably you cannot do all this, maybe neither a little of this. Anyway, our Country has got Independence. In **Hindustan**, in **Pakistan** and maybe even a tawaif has the right to ask the leaders what is going to happen to **Bella** and **Batul**.

Bella and **Batul** are two girls, two nations, two cultures, two temples and mosques. Today **Bella** and **Batul** live in Fars Road with a slut who has her business near a Chinese barber. **Bella** and **Batul** don't like this business. I have bought them. If I would, I could make them do this job. But I think that I will not do what **Rawalpindi** and **Jalandhar** did to them. Till now, I have kept them far from the world of **Fars Road**. However, when my clients wash their hands in the other room, at that time, the eyes of **Bella** and **Batul** start talking to me, and I cannot bear them. I cannot describe well to you the message of those glances. Why don't you come and understand it by yourself? **Panditji**, I want you to take **Bella** and **Batul** as your daughters. **Jinnah Sahab**, I want you to take **Bella** and **Batul** as your auspicious daughters. Come one, one time take them away from the trap that is **Fars Road**, take them to your homes and listen to the mourning of those million souls. This requiem is resonating from **Noakhali** to **Rawalpindi** and from **Bharatpur**⁴⁷ to **Bombay**. Is it only in Government House that whose voice cannot be heard, will you hear this voice?

Sincerely,

A tawaif of **Fars Road** (The translation is mine).

Differently from the previous excerpts, Krishan Chander's story already shows both sides of the "narrative of violence", describing the exact same fate that has been shared by two girls belonging to the opposite parties of the conflict. This is giving me the chance to further broaden the scope of this enquiry outside India in order to apply the logic of the "narrative of violence" in other geographical and historical contexts. Hence, this time the underlined words won't refer to the Indian context but to another one altogether.

⁴⁷ Noakhali is a city in today's Bangladesh, while Bharatpur is in the Indian state of Rajasthan.

To Benjamin Netanyahu and Yahya Sinwar,

I hope that you have never received a letter from a tawaif. I also hope that till today, you have never seen my face or the one of this kind of women. I also know that it will be a great dishonour for you to answer this letter of mine, but I don't know what to do in a situation as such, and the request of these two girls is so urgent that I could have been dead if I did not write this letter. I am not writing this letter, Avigail and Fatima told me to write it. I am really sorry if in this letter you will find any sentence that is not of your liking. Please let me know about that.

[...]

Maybe you are wondering if Avigail and Fatima are my daughters. No, it's wrong, I don't have any children. I have bought both of them at the market. In those days, Jewish-Muslim riots were raging, and in Al-Faresi Street, Al-Masaj Street, and Sumayah Street, human blood was flowing like water. In those days, I bought Avigail from a Muslim pimp for three hundred rupees. That pimp had brought the girl from Tel Aviv, where her parents lived.

Avigail's parents lived in the street in front of the Clal Center in the back of Machane Yehuda Market in Jerusalem, it was a family from the middle class, with simple and good manners. Avigail was the only child, and when in Jerusalem, the Muslims started to kill the Jews, she was studying in the fourth grade. This happened on the twelfth of July. Avigail was coming back from school when she saw a huge crowd in front of her house and in front of other Jewish houses. Those people had weapons. They were setting those houses on fire and making the women and the children exit the houses, they massacred them. While doing this, they were shouting: "Allah Akbar!". Avigail saw his father being murdered with her eyes. Then, with her eyes saw her mother dead. Those vicious Muslims cut her breasts and threw them away. That breast with every mother, either Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Jewish, gives milk to their children and which opens a new chapter in the creation of the life of every human being in the vastness of the universe, that breast full of milk was cut off with the slogan "Allah Akbar!". Someone brought such cruelty to the creation. Some cruel darkness has filled their souls with black ink.

I have read the Quran, and I know that what happened in Jerusalem with Avigail's parents was not Islam, it was not humanity, it was not enmity, it was not even revenge, it was such a felicity, lack of compassion, cowardice and wickedness that has been spitted out from the chest of history and that cancelled even the last glance of light. Now Avigail is with me. Before, she was with that bearded Muslim pimp; she wasn't more than twelve when she was

studying in fourth grade. If her home would have been there, she would have been studied in fifth grade. Then, if she had been older, her parents would have organised her marriage to a guy from a poor but respectable family. They would have built their small house and would have lived, with their god and with their small children, the small happiness of the family life.

But for this fragile bud, autumn has suddenly come. Now, Avigail does not seem twelve. She is young, but her life is heavy. In her eyes, there is such fear, there is humanity's hardship, and her blood is craving death. Sinwar Saheb, if you could only see her, you could understand. You could wane the deepness of those eyes without trust. You are a nobleman. You would have seen the innocent girls of noble families, either Jewish or Muslim; maybe you understand that innocence does not have any religion. It is the property of the entire humanity. It is the inheritance of the whole world, and no god of any religion in the world can forgive anyone who erases it.

Avigail and Fatima can live with me like sisters. But Fatima and Avigail are not sisters. Fatima is a Muslim girl. Avigail was born into a Jewish family. Today both of them are living in the house of a slut.

If Avigail came from Jerusalem, Fatima is the daughter of a simple man from the village of Rafah in Gaza. Fatima's father had seven daughters; three were married, and four were unmarried. Fatima's father was a humble farmer in Rafah. A poor simple man but a high-minded simple man whose family settled in Rafah for centuries. These people were living in peace and serenity. Perhaps you can guess this, Mr Netanyahu, from the fact that even though these people were Muslims, they were not allowed to build a mosque in their village. These people prayed in their homes in silence for decades since when President Ben Gurion was raised to power; no momin recited the adhan in this area. Their heart was bright with knowledge, but the worldly compulsions were so intense, and then the idea of harmony was so predominant that they did not have the spirit and the idea to do something. Fatima was the sixth daughter. Of the seven, she was the tiniest, the sweetest, the most beautiful. Fatima is so beautiful that only from shaking hands she becomes friendly, Mr Netanyahu, you also have seen the beauty of the Mediterranean you know what beauty is. Today, this beauty has ended up in my dirty mess, and because of this, she won't easily find a decent man. In this filth, shady Sephardim, contractors with greasy moustaches, those with impure eyes and thieves are visible here. Fatima is not educated. She has heard only the name of Sinwar

Saheb, and she has understood Palestine as a good joke in which favour slogans are raised, like a child of three or four years who at home sings 'Long live Palestine'. But she is eleven. The uneducated Fatima. She has come here for a few days. A Jewish pimp brought her to me, and I have brought her for five-hundred shekels. Where was she before? I really don't know. Yes, the doctor told me so many things that are enough to drive you crazy. Now, also, Fatima is half crazy. The IDF soldiers killed her father with such brutality that all the Jewish culture of the past six thousand years went to hell, and humanity has shown itself in its naked, barbaric and ruthless form. First, the IDF soldiers took off his eyes. Then they peed in his mouth; then they tore his throat till bringing out his bowels. Then, they did something horrible with his married daughters. At that moment, Rehana, Gul, Darkhashan, Marjana, Sohan and Begum were in front of the body of their father, and the brutal men defiled the women of his own temple. Who gave them life, who sang them songs, who in front of them has always bowed down with respect, purity and innocence. He raped all those sisters and mothers. Judaism buried its own respect. It wasted its tolerance. Its greatness was cancelled. That day, all chapters of the Torah were silent. Every couplet of the Tehillim was ashamed. Every verse of the Talmud was wounded. Who can even pronounce the greatness of the Temple Mound in front of me? You can recite Moses' Tablets of Stone or tell me about the quality of the City of David's stones, but in Fatima's clenched hands, in the sign of those brutal teeth on her sisters, in the unevenness of her heavy legs, there is the death of your Temple Mound. There is the dead body of your City of David. There is the shroud of your culture. Come, Come! I'll show you the beauty that was Fatima. I'll show you that rotten body, which Fatima is today.

I said a lot of things under the flow of emotions. Probably, I should not have said that. Probably, these are insults to you. Probably, no one has ever said or told you anything more unpleasant than this. Probably you cannot do all this, maybe neither a little of this. Anyway, our Country has got Independence. In Israel, in Palestine and maybe even a tawaif has the right to ask the leaders what is going to happen to Avigail and Fatima.

Avigail and Fatima are two girls, two nations, two cultures, two temples and mosques. Today Avigail and Fatima live in Al-Masaj Street with a slut who has her business near a Chinese barber. Avigail and Fatima don't like this business. I have bought them. If I would, I could make them do this job. But I think that I will not do what Jerusalem and Gaza did to them. Till now, I have kept them far from the world of Al-Masaj Street. However, when my clients wash their hands in the other room, at that time, the eyes of Avigail and Fatima start

talking to me, and I cannot bear them. I cannot describe well to you the message of those glances. Why don't you come and understand it by yourself? Mr. Netanyahu, I want you to take Avigail and Fatima as your daughters. Sinwar Saheb, I want you to take Avigail and Fatima as your auspicious daughters. Come one, one time take them away from the trap that is Al-Masaj Street, take them to your homes and listen to the mourning of those million souls. This requiem is resonating from Haifa to Jerusalem and from Jabaila to Khan Younis. Is it only in Government House that whose voice cannot be heard, will you hear this voice?

Sincerely,

A tawaif of Al-Masaj Street (The translation is mine).

This example, based on the Israel-Palestine conflict, is just one of the thousands that can be told through the short story of Krishan Chander. However, the substitution of terms would also work with other situations of conflict and inter-group hate. All we need to do is simply substitute the names of Bella and Batul with Natalya and Irina, Chen and Gonpo, Châm and Jennifer, Maria and Hannah. The list can go ahead forever.

With these three short stories, I wanted to emphasise the fact that the way in which violence is produced, reproduced, and spread is the same in every context; simply by changing the specific references, mostly names of people and places, the story can apply to the narrative of every conflict. With this approach, I do not mean to imply that all the stories are the same. Each one has its peculiar character and reflects the specific emotions and sensations of the author, and each one must be told. However, the repetition lies in the unfolding of violence, a thing that shows the unitary character of human nature.

3.4 Modi, Yogi and the Owaisis

In the last two sections, I have analysed the “narrative of violence” around Partition and the creation of India and Pakistan. In this section, I will look into the construction of the “narrative of violence” between the Hindu and Muslim communities in contemporary Indian politics, presenting four excerpts taken from interviews or public interventions of politicians. The aim is to further examine the “narrative of violence” and see how it evolved over time.

The following passage is a section of a speech given by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Banswara in the state of Rajasthan during the campaign for the 2024 General Election. The text is the transcript of a video that was uploaded on 22nd April 2024 on Narendra Modi's official YouTube channel.

“मेरी माताओं और बहनों के ज़िंदगी में, सोना उसके स्वाभिमान से जुड़ा है। उसका मंगलसूत्र उसके जीवन के सपनों से जुड़ा हुआ है। तो मुझसे छिनने की बात कर रहे हो मैं अपने मनीफ़ेस्टो में। गोल्ड ले लेंगे। सब को वितरित कर देंगे और पहले जब उन की सरकार थी उन्होंने कहा था कि देश की सम्पत्ति पर पहला अधिकर मुसलमानों का है। इस का मतलब यह सम्पत्ति इकट्ठे करके इसको बंटेंगे इन के ज़्यादा बच्चे हैं, उनको बंटेंगे। घुसपैठियों को बंटेंगे। यह कांग्रेस का मनीफ़ेस्टो कह रहा है कि आप की मेहनत की कमाई का पैसा घुसपैठियों को दिया जाएगा। आपको मंज़ूर है यह। भाइयों और बहनों, यह अर्बन नक्सल की सोच मेरी माताओं और बहनों यह आप का मंगलसूत्र भी बचने नहीं देंगे। यहाँ तक जाएँगे मैं कहना आया हूँ।” (Modi, 2024b).

In the lives of my mothers and sisters, gold is connected with their self-respect. Their mangalsutra is connected with their dreams. You are talking about stealing in your manifesto! They will take your gold. They will distribute it to everyone. When they were at the government, they were saying that Muslims have most rights on the wealth of the Country. This means that they will collect the wealth and give it to those who have more children, they will share it with them. They will share it with the infiltrators. The manifesto of the Congress says that the earnings of your hard work will be given to the infiltrators. Will you accept it? Brothers and sisters, this is the thinking of these urban Naxals. My mothers and sisters, they will not spare even your mangalsutras. I have come here to tell you this (The translation is mine).

The next piece is taken from a public speech which Yogi Adityanath⁴⁸ gave in Hapur, in the state of Uttar Pradesh in January 2022. This speech was given during the campaign for the election of the State's Legislative Assembly, which occurred in February 2022 and which saw Yogi Adityanath and the BJP as winners against Akhilesh Yadav and his Samajwadi Party⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ From 2017 Yogi Adityanath is the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. He is also a member of the *Nath Sampradaay*, a monastic tradition related to the figures of Shiva and Gorakhnath.

⁴⁹ The *Samajwadi Party* (lit. Socialist Party), founded in 1992 in Lucknow, is a socialist-inspired party of Uttar Pradesh (Routray 2024) and it got thirty-seven members in the Lok Sabha during the 2024 General Election. Akhilesh Yadav is its president and Chairman.

“(3:10-3:27) [...] भाइयों और बहनों इनके संवेदना गरीब के लिए नहीं है, किसान के लिए नहीं हैं, नौजवान के लिए भी नहीं है और बेटियों की सुरक्षा के लिए भी नहीं है। इनकी संवेदना तो पैसे वार माफिया और अपराधियों के प्रति है [...]

(4:54-5:15) [...] और फिर एक गर्मी जो अभी कैराना मैं और मुजफ्फरनगर में कुछ जगह दिखाई दे रही ना इस सब शांत हो जाएगी इसके बाद में है क्योंकि गर्मी कैसे शांत होगी यह तो मैं मई और जून कि उसको बहुत शिमला बना देता हूँ मैं [...]

(6:22-6:44) [...] और हम लोग डिफेंस कॉरिडोर दे रहे हैं डिफेंस कॉरिडोर। यहां जो तोप बनेगी और यहां का नौजवान जब तोप पर चढ़ करके पाकिस्तान की सीमा पे इसको डहरेगा तो दुश्मन का काम तमाम हो जाएगा [...]

(7:47-9:00) [...] और उसको लेने के लिए कि जो नेता घुमरा कर रहे हैं थे जिनकी टोपियां रंगी हुई है मुजफ्फरनगर के दंगों के और राम भक्तों पर गोलियों से उन लोगों को जनता के बीच में आने का कोई नैतिक अधिकार होना ही नहीं चाहिए, कोई नैतिक अधिकार नहीं होना चाहिए लेकिन लोकतंत्र है वे अपनी बात बोलें लेकिन भाइयों बहनों गुमराह होने की आवश्यकता नहीं जनता को बताने की आवश्यकता है। एक ही बात बता देने की आवश्यकता है जब इन का अवसर मिला था तब बिजली नहीं दी। आज फ्री की बात करते हैं तब तो दी नई। तब तक दंगा करवाते थे और अंधेरा इसलिए भी करवाते थे जिससे इनके गुंडे दंगा करा करके फिर आग लगा सकते हैं। यही तो करवाते थे मुजफ्फरनगर का दंगा हो कोसी कला का दंगा हो मेरठ का उपद्रव हो, बुलंदशहर का का उपद्रव हो और इनको लगता है कि चुनाव में प्रत्याशी बना देंगे फिर दंगा ही सुरक्षित हो जाएंगे[...]

(Zee Uttar Pradesh Uttarakhand, 2022).

(3:10-3:27) [...] brothers and sisters, their [the opposition, the Samajwadi Party] compassion is not for the poor, for the farmer, for the youngsters, and it is not even for the security of the daughters. Their compassion is for the rich mafia and for the criminals [the Muslims] [...]

(4:54-5:15) [...] and then the heat that which is being displayed in Kairana and Muzaffarnagar⁵⁰, all of this will be calmed, in May-June I will make it Shimla⁵¹ [...]

(6:22-6:44) [...] And we are giving a defence corridor. When the cannon will be built here and when the soldiers will use and guard it on the border of Pakistan, the enemy will be finished. [...]

(7:47-9:00) [...] And to take it, the leaders who are roaming around, whose caps are painted with the Muzaffarnagar riots and the firing on Ram devotees, they should not have any moral right to come in public, they should not have any moral right, but this is a democracy, they should speak their mind. But brothers and sisters, there is no need to mislead, there is a need to tell the public. Only one thing needs to be said: when they had the opportunity, they did not give electricity. Today, they talk about free electricity, but they do not give it. Till then, they used to instigate riots and also to create darkness so that their goons could

⁵⁰ In 2013, Kairana and Muzaffarnagar, two towns in the state of Uttar Pradesh, have witnessed a wave of communal riots and violences. According to various sources (Anwar 2023; Mogha & Kamran 2023; Press Trust of India 2013) the victims have been sixty-two, 93 people were injured and more than 40.000 displaced.

⁵¹ Means I will make it cold.

instigate riots and then set fire. This is what they used to instigate riots like the Muzaffarnagar riots, Kosi Kala riots, Meerut riots, Bulandshahr riots, and they think that if they make them candidates in the elections, then riots will be safe[...] (The translation is mine).

Next, I will transcribe some excerpts taken from Akbaruddin Owaisi⁵²'s speech, published on YouTube by the channel of BJP Maharashtra on 15 January 2013. For this speech, in November 2021, Owaisi was arrested with the allegations of hate speech. However, he was acquitted in April 2022.

"(2:16-2:30) [...] अगर इस मुल्क में इंसाफ़ है क़ानून है अगर इस मुल्क में सेकुलरिज़म है तो जिस तरीक़े अजमल कसाब को फाँसी पर लटकाए, हिंदुस्तान इस नरेंद्र मोदी को भी फाँसी पे लटका दो, हमारा एतमाद बहाल होगा। [...]

(3:25-3:55) [...] आज मेरी आवाज़ निर्मल में है। अगर यही आवाज़, यही ताक़त, यहीं आप जैसा जज़्बात, यहीं आप जैसा ईमान, यहीं आप जैसा इतिहाद, अगर 25 करोड़ मुसलमानों में आ जाए तो खुदा की क़सम, इस मुल्क के मुस्तक़बिल को लिखने वाले का नाम मुसलमान होगा। [...]

(4:52-6:14) [...] मुसलमान तू कहता है कि बांग्लादेशी हैं जो हिंदुस्तान का हैं जो बरसों से हिंदुस्तान में हैं। अगर तू तो भाग कर भगोड़ा है भाग कर आया था हिंदुस्तान को। अरे यह मुसलमान भाग कर पाकिस्तान नहीं गए। हम यहीं पर रहे हैं, यहीं पर रहेंगे, यहीं पर जी, यहीं पर मारेंगे। यह मुल्क हमारा था, हमारा है, हमारा रहेगा। हम को जाने की बात कहने वालों खुदा-न-ख़्वास्ता, हज़ार मर्तबा खुदा-न-ख़्वास्ता, पहले तो नहीं जाने वाले। हम जाएँ तो ख़ाली हाथ नहीं जाएँगे। ताज को भी ले जाएँगे, लाल क़िले को भी ले जाएँगे, कुतुब मीनार को भी ले जाएँगे। बचेगा क्या? अयोध्या की वह टूटी फूटी राम की मंदिर बचेगी। वह अजंता एलोरा की नंगी नंगी ममूर्तियाँ बचेंगी। और क्या रहेगा? अरे हम मरते भी हैं तो इस ज़मीन में दो गज ज़मीन लेकर दफ़न आते हैं क्योंकि हमको इस मिट्टी से मोहब्बत है। तुम मरते हो तो जलकर फ़िज़ाओं में आवारा की तरह चले जाते हैं। [...]

(6:28-7:35) [...] यह भाजपा संघ परिवार आरएसएस, ये सब क्या हैं? ये सब ज़हरीले साँप हैं, ज़हरीले साँप हैं। साँप कैसे नाचता देखे ना। नाचते हुए साँप ज़हरीले साँप को शेर बब्बर की ज़ख़रत नहीं है भई। एक पतली छड़ी काफ़ी है। एक लाठी उठा लो दिम(?) मारो फिर देखो साँप की दुम एसी तड़पती है। और वह लाठी क्या है? वह लाठी अल्लाह की रजा है, वह लाठी तुम्हारी नमाज़, वह लाठी तुम्हारा कुरान है, वह लाठी तुम्हारी सुन्नत रसूल्लाह है। वह लाठी तुम्हारी अल्लाह की बारगाह में झुकी हुए सरों से व माँगी गयी फ़रियाद है। [...]

(8:05-9:01) [...] राम मंदिर बनाएँगे तो बनाएँगे। बाबरी मस्जिद वहाँ पर थी, है, रोज़ ए क़यामत तक रहेगी। बाबरी मस्जिद हम बनाएँगे, हिन्दोस्तान का 25 करोड़ मुसलमान अपने हज़म के ज़रिए, अपने इरादे के ज़रिए, अपने खुदा की के ज़रिए, अपनी तौबा के ज़रिए, अपने अस्तग़फ़ार के ज़रिए, अपने नमाज़ों के पाबंदी के ज़रिए, अपने कुरान के तिलवात के ज़रिए, सुन्नत रसूल्लाह पर अमल पैरा होकर बाबरी मस्जिद को दोबारा उसी मुक़ाम पर बनाएगा और हायल आल सालह आयल आल फल की सदा को फिर से गुजाएगा।(audio corrupted) [...]

⁵² Akbaruddin Owaisi is a member of the Telangana Legislative Assembly and a leader of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) party (lit. *All India Council for Unity of Muslims*). The AIMIM was founded in 1927 by Nawab Mahmood Nawaz Khan Qiledar. Since 1984 it is the representative party for the Hyderabad Constituency in the Lok Sabah.

(12:26-13:49) [...] एक अजीब ओ गरीब सूतेहाल है सालार बोलते थे हर 10 कदम पे हर 100 किलोमिटर पे ज़बान बदलती है, तहज़ीब बदलती है, जीने का स्लीक बदलता है, रिवाजें बदलती हैं, तहज़ीबें बदलती हैं। हद तो यह हो गयी है कि भगवानों की तस्वीरें भी बदलती हैं। और एक बात मैं कहूँगा। कई यह लोगों के खुदाया(?) है। वह क्या क्या जो पूजा करते हैं? कितने हैं? राम, लक्ष्मण, दुर्गा, लक्ष्मी (audio corrupted) क्या क्या है? कितने हैं भाई? हर हर दिन में एक नया पैदा हो जाता है। अब तो नए आ गए। गणेश थे वह थे महाराज। अब हनुमान जयंती आ गयी, राम नवमी आ गयी, लक्ष्मी मालूम थी?। यह भाग्य लक्ष्मी आज तक नहीं सुने। यह कौन सी नहीं है भाई? दुर्गा सुने, यह सुने बराल (audio corrupted) में क्या बोलूँ? कैसे कैसे नाम है? यह मुबारक महफ़िल में मैं उन नामों को लेके खराब करना नहीं चाहता। [...]

(16:58-18:28) [...] एक बात बोलूँगा बीजेपी, आरएसएस, संघ परिवार वालों। आप लोग तो निर्मल के हैं, बड़े घने जंगल हैं यहां पर, आगे महाराष्ट्र में। हर गर्मियों के सीजन में सरपंच एक परमिट देता है नीलगाय को मार सकते हैं। सही है ना? बच्चे बहुत होशियार हो गए आज। गाय को देते हैं नीलगाय पूरे खेतों को खराब कर दे रही है, चर ले रही है तो सरपंच साहब ठप्पा मार के बोलते हैं कि सर्टिफिकेट ले लो, नीलगाय को मार सकते हैं। तो यह तुम्हारी माता हिंदुस्तान की पूरी हरियाली को चार देगी। एक भी जगह कोई हरा नहीं दिखेगा। सूखा ही सूखा रहेगा। मुसलमानों दो साल तक मत खाना अगर हम, तो खुद ही लोग आकर हमारे दरवाजे पर बोलेंगे कि काट लो, खा लो। काश कि वह भी खा के देखेंगे कितने मजेदार है यह। बदनसीब है नहीं खा रही हम क्या करेंगे? हम तो खाते आए हैं। बड़ा मजा आता है और मजे में कोई कॉम्प्रोमाइज नहीं भाई।” (BJP Maharashtra, 2013).

(2:16-2:30) [...] If in this Country there is justice, there is law, if there is secularism in this Country then, in the same way Ajmal Kasab was hanged to death, hang to death also this Narendra Modi and our self-confidence will be restored. [...]

(3:25-3:55) [...] Today, my voice is here in Nirmal. If this voice, this strength, this emotion of yours, this faith of yours, this unity of yours, if these will come to the 250 million Muslims [of India], then I swear on God, the ones who will write the future of this Country will be Muslims. [...]

(4:52-6:14) [...] You say that muslims are from Bangladesh. Those who are from India have been in India for years. If you are a fugitive, you have run away to India. These Muslims did not go to Pakistan. We are here, we will be here, we are living here and we will die here. This Country was ours, is ours and will be ours. God forbid the ones who tell us to go, we won't go. If we will go, we won't go empty-handed. We will take the Taj Mahal, we will take the Red Fort, we will take the Qutub Minar. What will remain? That broken temple of Ram will remain. Those naked idols of Ajanta and Ellora will remain. What else will remain? Even when we die, we take two meters of this land and go to the tomb because we love this soil. When you die, you burn and go in the air like vagabonds [...]

(6:28-7:35) [...] These BJP, Sangh Parivar, RSS, what is all this? These are only venomous snakes, only venomous snakes. Look how the snake dances [giggles his head]. There is no need for the lion for the dancing snake or for the venomous snake. A thin stick is enough.

Take one stick and hit, and you will see how the snake's tail agonises. And what is that stick? That stick is the will of Allah, that stick is your Quran, that stick is the Sunnah of the Prophet, that stick is the prayer you do with your heads bowed in the court of Allah. [...]

(8:05-9:01) [...] Ram Mandir will be built, it will be built. The Babri Masjid was here, is here and will remain here till the day of the Judgement⁵³. We will build the Babri Masjid. The 25 million Muslims of India, through their perseverance, through their will, through their self-respect, through their renunciation, through Allah's forgiveness in them, through the restriction on their prayers, through the reading of the Quran, and acting according to the Sunnah of the Prophet, will build the Babri Masjid on the same spot again and (audio corrupted) [...]

(12:26-13:49) [...] It is a quite strange situation. The chiefs say that every ten steps, every one hundred kilometres, languages change, cultures change, the ways of living change, and traditions change. We have come to the point that even the pictures of the gods change. And I will say one thing. These people have several gods. What do they pray to? How many are there? Ram, Lakshmi, Durga, Lakshmi (audio corrupted)? How many are there? And every day, a new one comes out. Now there are new ones. There was Ganesh, and that Maharaj was there. Now hanuman Jayanti has come, Ram Navami has come. Do you know Lakshmi? Have you heard about this Bhagya Lakshmi? Who is not in there? I've heard about Durga. What can I say about Baral? (audio corrupted) What kind of name is this? I do not want to spoil this auspicious gathering by mentioning those names. [...]

(16:58-18:28) [...] (talking about how Hindus and Muslims both sell cows at the market) I would like to say one thing to the ones of the BJP, RSS and Sangh Parivar. You are from Nirmal. Here, there is a big jungle, after which there is Maharashtra. Every summer, the sarpanch gives a permit to kill the nilgay. It's right, no? The kids are very smart today. The nilgais are destroying every field, eating all the grass, so the sarpanch, with a pat, says: "Take the certificate, and you can kill them". So let your mother eat the grass of all India so that nowhere will we see even a blade of grass so that everything will be dried. Muslims, if for two years we won't eat [the cows], they will come to our doors saying: "Cut it and eat

⁵³ The same words were pronounced by his brother, Asaduddin Owaisi, during an intervention in the Parliament. In that occasion he declared: "मेरी फ़िक्र में मेरा इमान मीझे कहता है कि इस जगह पर मस्जिद थी, है और रहेगी। बाबरी मस्जिद है और रहेगी, बाबरी मस्जिद ज़िंदाबाद, ज़िंदाबाद, भारत ज़िंदाबाद" (Minutes: 3:05-3:18). The translation is: *In my concern, my faith says that in this place there was, there is and there will be the mosque. The Babri Masjid is here and will be here. Long life to the Babri Masjid. Long life to Bharat.*

This intervention was taken from the channel of Brut India and it was uploaded on 24 February 2024.

it". If only they could eat it and taste how good it is. It's unlucky that they could not it, but what should we do? We have come to eat. It tastes very good, and on the taste, we don't make any compromises. [...] (The translation is mine).

The next excerpt is taken from Akbaruddin's elder brother Asaduddin Owaisi⁵⁴'s intervention, published on his X (former Twitter) account on 24 December 2021.

“कानपुर देहात रसूलाबाद में, रसूलाबाद पोलीस स्टेशन में एक अस्सी साल के बुजुर्ग, मुहम्मद रफ़ीक को, पोलीस स्टेशन में इन की दाढ़ी नोची गयी और उन पर पेशाब किया गया और यह हरकत करने वाले का नाम एस.आइ. गजेंद्र पाल सिंह। बताइए आप, यह आपकी इज़्ज़त है? कि अस्सी साल के बूढ़े को उसकी दाढ़ी नोचा जाता है कानपुर देहात रसूलाबाद पोलीस स्टेशन में। अगर यह बात सच है, तो शर्मिंदगी नहीं बल्कि तकलीफ़ होती है कि तुमने दाढ़ी देखी और कहा कि इस की दाढ़ी को नोचा जाएगा। क्या हमारी दाढ़ी से इतना नफ़रत क्यों है? अस्सी साल के बूढ़े से तुम यह हरकत करते हो। मैं तो उन पोलीस लोगों से कहना चाह रहा हूँ कि याद रखो मेरी इस बात को। हमेशा योगी मुख्य मंत्री नहीं रहेगा। हमेशा मोदी प्रधानमंत्री नहीं रहेगा। और हम मुसलमान वक्त के एतमाद से ख़ामोश ज़रूर मगर याद रखो हम तुम्हारे जुल्म को भूलने वाले नहीं हैं। हम तुम्हारे जुल्म को याद रखेंगे अल्लाह अपनी ताक़त के ज़रिए तुमको निश्चित तो नभूत करेगा इनशल्लाह ता'आला। और हम रखेंगे हालात बदलेंगे। जब कौन बचनी आएगा तुमको? जब योगी अपनी मठ में चले जाएँगे, मोदी पहरो मेन चले जाएँगे, हो सकता है कि यहीं पर जाकर रहेंगे। जब कौन आएगा? हम नहीं भुलेंगे याद रखो।” (Owaisi, 2021).

In the countryside of Kanpur, in the police station of Rasulabad, the beard of an eight-year-old elderly was pulled, and they peed on him. The name of who did this is S.I. Gajendra Pal Singh. Now tell me, is this your respect? The beard of an eight-year-old elderly was pulled in the countryside of Kanpur, in the police station of Rasulabad. If this is true, this is not shame; this is an offence. You have seen a beard, and you ordered to shave it. Why do you hate our beards so much? You have done this to an eight-year-old elderly. I want to say to those police officers to remember my words. Yogi won't be Chief Minister forever. Modi won't be Prime Minister forever. And we Muslims are silent for the time being, but remember, we won't forget your oppression. We will remember your oppression, and Allah will surely destroy you with his power, inshallah. And remember, the situation will change. Then who will come to save you? When Yogi goes to his monastery, and Modi retires in the mountains (it's possible that he will go somewhere and stay there), then who will come? Remember, we won't forget (The translation is mine).

⁵⁴ Asaduddin Owaisi is the president of the AIMIM and for the fifth time in 2024, he was elected as a member of the Lok Sabha.

In the context of this thesis, these four excerpts are useful for understanding the “narrative of violence”, which in this case regards the Hindu-Muslim conflict. It does not seem to stop and it continues repeating itself always with the same pattern.

A striking example of this is Akbaruddin Owaisi’s claim: “We will build the Babri Masjid on the same spot”. This dangerous claim denotes the fact that the memory of the violence which happened after the destruction of the site was —either consciously or unconsciously— deleted and, with it, the idea of the ones which would happen if the mosque was rebuilt.

The same goes for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and for all the supporters of the construction of the Ram Mandir. After the inauguration of the temple, high-predictable communal violence and clashes erupted in Mumbai and other cities of the Country, even if a greater number of police officers were deployed in high-risk areas.

Furthermore, the same mass amnesia can be witnessed in all four speeches. After decades of uncountable deaths and conflicts, even after the numerous casualties and atrocities of the Partition, politicians are still leveraging the communal rhetoric, stressing the two religious identities and thus fostering more violence.

The speeches of the two BJP’s exponents also seem to put forward all the stereotypes about the Muslims like the fact that they are criminals or that they have some bonds with the terroristic organisations or the Pakistani Government.

These allegations are not new to BJP-ruled India, but they are part of the vocabulary with which a certain part of the Hindu right is used to address the Muslim community. An example of this can be found in a speech given in April 1991 in Hyderabad by Sadhvi Rithambara⁵⁵.

“[...] They ask what would happen to the Muslims in a Hindu India. I tell them the Muslims will not be dishonoured in a Hindu state, nor will they be rewarded to get their votes. No umbrella will open in Indian streets because it is raining in Pakistan. If there is war in the Gulf, then slogans of 'Long Live Saddam Hussein' won't be shouted on Indian streets. [...] Whatever the Hindu does, it is the Muslim's religion to do its opposite. I said, "If you want to do everything contrary to the Hindu, then the Hindu eats with his mouth; you should do the opposite in this matter, too!” (Kakar, S. 1995, pp. 199-213).

Here there is a clear example of how, in this case, the “narrative of violence” has retained not only its form but even its content.

⁵⁵ Sadhvi Rithambara is a *sadhvi* (feminine for *sadhu*) and a political figure. She became famous in those years because of her hateful speeches against the Muslim minority. In 1991, she founded the Durga Vahini (lett. Durga’s battalion), the women’s wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP).

This analysis suggests that the “narrative of violence” repeats itself. It can be imagined as an empty jar, that is filled with diverse content, but, like a fluid, the content takes the shape of its container. Thus, the jar determines the thinking, attitudes and behaviour of people.

As I have shown through the examples in this chapter, the content is mostly composed of proper names: Qasim, Aditya, Shareefan, Divya, Muhammed, Ram, Hindu, and Muslim.

All of these are “names” someone else gave us. Someone else told me I am a Christian, and someone else told me that Ahmed is Muslim or Ravi is Hindu.

The problem here is that someone else told us, as I wrote in the first and second chapters, that some of those “names” are “bad” and belong to the antagonist. Thus, it can be said that particular “names” can recall in us some feelings, both good and bad, and incite actions from these feelings.

However, I have also pointed out that this capacity of proper names is extremely contextual and not universal.

However, I have also demonstrated how this capacity of proper names is extremely contextual and not universal. For instance, the average person in a small town in Europe would perhaps be able to recognise and associate something with the names “Hindu” and “Muslim”, but it is less likely that the same would happen with the names “Mohan” and “Rasheed”.

On the other hand, I have also shown that, even in a small town in India, being called Mohan or Rasheed can be the reason for you and your family being murdered. In this sense, Manto’s story *Ghate ka Souda* was explanatory.

Having explained how information is created and conveyed through media, memory and identity, in this chapter, I have pointed out how the information is transformed into the “narrative of violence”, which is one of the consequences of transmitted information.

We have taken as examples different kinds of “narratives” which are part of the long-lasting conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India.

This analysis has generated the following results:

Even if these two communities see themselves and are seen as opposites or enemies, the way in which they communicate is so similar that the terms by which they are represented can be flipped without altering the overall “narrative”.

Even if we tend to think of “others” as different from us, the way in which the “narratives of violence” are produced is so similar among the various geographical and historical settings that the terms by which we refer to a specific context can be changed without altering the overall “narrative”.

The categories through which we understand reality are composed of “proper names”, and hence, they are contextual. This brings us to think about the relation between words and their meaning. In this regard, Alice Orrù, looking at the scripts of Giacomo Leopardi (d.1837) and Paolo Marzolo (d.1868)⁵⁶, gives us a useful insight into this issue. In a chapter published in 2021, Orrù explains how these two thinkers have related education, repetition and habituation in the learning of a language. Therefore, the meaning of the words, far from being innate in the words themselves, is the result of learning through repetition (Orrù 2021). So, in this case, the words “Muslim” and “Hindu”, through the ways media have used them, have gained a nuanced meaning which overpowered their descriptive role. The conclusions Leopardi and Marzolo have drawn will be useful in the next chapter.

Drawing from the studies on memory made by Fredric Bartlett and Milman Parry discussed in the previous chapter, I can propose another way to read the “narrative of violence”. I suggest that the “narrative of violence” is so powerful because it is built on the structures by which people organise their memories, which, according to Parry and Bartlett, follow the structure of an actual tale. In other words, “narratives of violence” are built in such a way that there is a stark definition of who is the “hero” and who is the “villain”. The problem lies in the fact that these characters are described as perfect and static entities which possess all the characteristics typical of “heroes” and “villains”. For example, my community must be the “good one” because it is righteous, it seeks the well-being of the whole community, it believes in progress, it follows the traditions and so on. On the other hand, the other community is the “bad one” because it is dirty and poor, it works against the community, and it also follows the traditions, but its traditions are devilish and so on. This characterisation is proposed in epithets. Much like the Greek cantors used them to remember the epic poems, they are now used to make people remember who they are (or should be) and against whom they are or should be. It goes without saying that this applies not only in India but wherever the language’s forces take place. In this sense, the reasoning can be pushed a little bit further, describing the contemporary media narratives as “new epics”.

In the next chapter, I will seek a way to undermine or at least diminish the chain of violence which results from the interactions of media, information, memory and identity.

⁵⁶ Giacomo Leopardi was one of the most important poets and philosophers of the Italian nineteenth-century’s history of thought. Among his most renowned works, are the *Zibaldone* (1817-1832), a collection of writings, and the collection of poems *I Canti* (1831).

Paolo Marzolo was a physician and philosopher of the language. Mainly, his studies regarded semiology and the evolution of languages in different nations.

4. Narratives of Hope: Forgotten Memories of a Shared Past

“Vede, c’è sempre una soluzione. Un piccolo aumento della prosperità, un po’ di intraprendenza, la volontà, un leggero cambio di prospettiva, tutto ciò contribuisce a migliorare la situazione” (Tanpinar et al., 2014, p. 264).

In the last chapter, I have shown how the framework of information-media-memory and identity was used to produce “narratives of violence” which can be seen as the cause of several casualties and displacements in both the communities of Indian Muslims and Hindus.

In other words, this horrific and very tangible result has been generated and reinforced through the specific and complex interplay of power and language.

The question I want to raise and explore in this chapter is the following: if it was possible to generate and perpetrate so much violence and hate, is it feasible, by acting upon the same process, to promote and spread peace and hope among the Hindu and the Muslim communities in India?

With this, I am not looking for a sort of “universal peace” or fraternity among all the people.

The aim of this paper is to find a way to de-power the violence and hate with which one community views the other, in order to minimise the extent and the outcomes of violent encounters.

Moreover, even if my status as a non-south asian can be seen as paternalistic and imperative, I would like to clarify that the South Asian context is just an example to show a global issue. The results should not be intended as limited to that context but as open to be tested and applied to other situations and geographies.

Following Judith Butler’s essay, to develop a culture of nonviolence, I to first find the basis on which this theorisation has to be built. Butler identifies this basis on the idea of “interdependence” and human “social interactions”.

In her text, Butler talks about interdependence with two interpretations. The first is a practical interdependence that describes the situation in which humans are and have always been dependent on others for the fulfilment of their basic needs like food, water, clothing, energy and so on. If we accept the fact that the present global economic situation has been built upon slavery and exploitation, we cannot deny that all these forms of oppression have been forms of “unbalanced interdependence” where both the actors, the oppressor and the oppressed, need each other to survive. Furthermore, the other interpretation she gives to this term is related to group identity. From a Hegelian perspective of mutual recognition, we need “the other” to confirm and reinforce

our identity, both personal and collective. In this case, the Hindus, in order to underline and reiterate their “Hinduness”, must identify an “other” to create their identity. The same happens on the opposite side.

Hence, the people and communities we consider “other” than us are indeed present in our identities. In other words, we “are” also what we consider different and opposed to us.

This leads Butler to state that to generate “narratives of hope”, we have to first acknowledge the social bond which exists among all humans. This net of relations, Butler argues, could be composed of both destructive relationships or support networks, depending on the behaviour of each knot of the net (Butler, 2020). Ultimately, Butler understands non-violence as a critique of individualism (ivi, p. 21), where the violent potential of human relations is weakened and de-emphasised in favour of the powering and emphasis of the nonviolent and constructive character.

Following the structure of the work, this chapter will be divided into four paragraphs and I will take into consideration each step of this four-folded framework in order to propose a way to generate such narratives whose outcome won’t be ferocious and destructive violence but, instead, a path towards inter-communal constructive co-existence.

In the first section, I will deal with the power of information and media. Starting again from the axiom “We can’t not communicate”, I will try to find possible ways to de-power the propagation of violence through media, aiming at multiplying the occasions for producing “narratives of hope”, which can promote the peaceful co-existence between communities while diminishing the ones for the “narrative of violence”. In doing this, I will take into consideration the notion of imagination given by Giacomo Leopardi as a tool to promote the “narratives of hope”.

In the second section, I will look into the issue of memory. Relying on the findings obtained in the second chapter, I will proceed to describe the process of, again, establishing memory and forgetting as tools for generating co-existence and not violence, proving that the past does not contain only episodes of communal conflict but also episodes where the differences which today we judge as fixed and eternal, were irrelevant. In doing this, I will mainly rely on the ideas of Tzvetan Todorov and his concept of “exemplar memory”.

The third section will deal with the matter of identity. Here, I will try to overcome the issue of violent identities. Many have faced this problem just by proposing the total erasing of identities. However, I argue that it is not a viable option, and I propose a more historical-based approach aimed at stating that the identities are not singular but plural and that their process of construction was and is a process of landing and borrowing, in constant exchange with the “outside”.

Finally, in the fourth section, I will propose some “narrative of hope” for South Asia. The first will regard the Mughal context, specifically the idea of *ṣulḥ-i kull* and the figures of Dārā Šikōh and Aurangzeb. The second will be about the Bengali narrative world of Saya Pīr. Lastly, I will present the protest that happened in Karnal, near Delhi in 1946.

4.1 De-powering Violence Through Media: is it Possible?

To begin this exploration, I have to come back to the very first sentence of this work: “We can’t not communicate”. In order to look for a feasible path to de-power the several “narratives of violence”, we must keep in mind that every way we can elaborate or imagine will be based on communication and the consequences I described in the first chapter. To move towards the creation of “narratives of hope”, we must keep in mind the “generative power of information” and McLuhan’s sentence “media is the message”.

As I wrote in the previous chapter, the “narratives of violence” are mainly constructed upon context-specific words, which have lost their simple descriptive valence and, through repetition and education, become vehicles of meaning imposed and spread by someone else. These meanings associated with the context-specific words evoke emotions —both positive and negative— which are at the basis of violent actions. Moreover, through memory and repetition, those meanings remain stuck in our minds. In this regard, Orrù cites Marzolo:

“I significati dunque che ora [i nomi] rappresentano non sono se non l’effetto delle ricordanze che in noi suscitano, dappoiché ci fanno ricorrere il pensiero a quelle narrazioni dove figurano” (Orrù, 2021, p. 249).

Far from being an artificial and forced “diffusion of meanings”, this process represents the natural way in which people have always communicated. However, this does not exclude interventions and changes that should not be applied at the end of the process, when the meaning is formed and reinforced, but during its unfolding.

Orrù and Butler provide us with a strategy that can be deployed to lessen and de-emphasise the power of the meaning of the context-specific words. Both scholars see in “imagination” the key to solving this conundrum and ‘waking up’ people from the numbness of the habitual meanings.

Orrù writes:

“Leopardi describe la facoltà inventiva come «una delle ordinarie, e principali, e caratteristiche qualità e parti dell’immaginazione»: proprio l’immaginazione diventa, in un’ottica profondamente sensista, «facoltà della combinazione associativa, dotata di memoria, che conclude e amplia le sensazioni»” (ivi, p. 246).

More than amplifying sensations, imagination works to amplify our understanding of reality.

As specified by Butler:

L’immaginazione —e ciò che è immaginabile— risulterà di cruciale importanza per pensare tali questioni perché in questo momento siamo eticamente obbligati e sollecitati a spingere il pensiero al di là di quelli che vengono considerati i limiti realistici del possibile (Butler, 2021, p. 46).

As a medium, language has the power to define what is possible to express. Here, imagination is not conceived as the reconsideration of the associations between words and their habitual meaning. We cannot simply deconstruct the habitual meaning, but we must give it a new, imagined meaning in order to gain the broadest understanding possible of the words we use. Ultimately, the goal is to give the words a new and broader “habitus”, which would be aimed at de-emphasising the biased value of words.

But how can we put into practice these actions so that the new associations would work and be spread usefully?

In the previous chapter, I already proposed the idea of a “collaborative history”. With this expression, I mean the writing of a common historiography by two or more authors representing the interests of their respective communities. Even if this practice seems to highlight the difference, in theory, it will lead to a final version of the history, which will be approved by both parties. Drawing information from the opposite views on the matter should result in an account of the events containing a complete collection of the facts advanced by the parties. I am aware of the many hurdles —both theoretical and practical— that this approach to historiography can face. However, I argue that this represents the only way in which the writing of history won’t be one-sided.

In my case study, a history written by a Muslim of the AIMIM and a right-wing Hindu together and where each part should be approved by the other party would be more than a productive inter-communal practice. It would represent a new and unique point of view on those matters in the history of India which are still flaming the debates and controversies between the communities.

In this regard, operations of “narration-changing” and “prejudice-reverting” have proven to be successful in reducing hate and facilitating positive behaviours towards out-group members. In a recent paper, Janković & Čehajić-Clancy have demonstrated that

“representing former enemy group members as acting morally (in present times) facilitated more positive emotional and behavioural responses toward the entire out-group in comparison to more immoral representations of the same out-group individuals. These results are in line with the recent review by Čehajić-Clancy and Bilewicz (2020) of the impact of learning about moral exemplars. They claim that learning about historical, moral behavior as performed by out-group members can shape our beliefs and behavior toward the social group associated with moral exemplars. These results are also in line with recent theorising on the evaluation dimensions of social groups, indicating the importance of morality and people’s tendency to preserve and reserve such perceptions for the in-group. Exposing people to stories of others’ (out-group members’) moral behavior through the media is important as it might shift those perceptions and consequently affect our behavior for the better” (Janković & Čehajić-Clancy, 2021)

Hence, to reduce the violent outcome of an intergroup conflict, one must act *within* the process of idea formation, with a proactive, constructive and imaginative approach. However, there are many limitations to this approach.

On the one hand, this method requires a long-lasting and collaborative effort, which would have to involve not only two major institutions of our society, namely the mass media industry and the education system, but also the entire population. In every piece of communication, either online or offline, these institutions would have to put this theoretical framework into practice. In other words, to work, this system needs a combined action both from above and from below.

On the other hand, technological advancement has provided us with tools that can apparently solve the problem of the spreading of “narratives of violence” in a more convenient way. Talking about countering violent extremism on social media in Bangladesh, Amit et al. take into consideration several tools for addressing the spreading of online “narratives of violence”. These methods, mainly enhanced with artificial intelligence, work by deleting or hiding the “narratives of violence” from the web in the same way social media algorithms select and cancel determined kinds of content (Amit et al., 2021).

However, there are many drawbacks and limitations to these tools. Besides the many doubts that concern the use and abuse of such algorithms and AI⁵⁷, the main issue with this kind of approach is that it does not address the problem directly, but it works just as sweeping under the rug. By applying censorship to the “*narratives of violence*”, *these will proliferate in non-institutional spaces, continuing to spread and grow far from the censor’s eyes because they would not be understood and then reverted but simply hidden from the public eye.*

Hence, the functioning of information and media must be used both to limit the damage that the existing “narratives of violence” could have upon us and to propose, with the same salience and efficacy, “narratives of hopes” which, I argue, would lead to reducing the number and the ferocity of hate crimes.

In other words, the functioning of information and media cannot be changed. What can be changed and worked upon is the message of the communication. To do that, we don’t have to aim at the dissolution of the identitarian categories —if done, it would be impossible to communicate— but we have to focus on not taking them for granted, not thinking that the associations between the categories and the judgements we find on media —i.e. Muslims are bad or Hindus are violent— are the only way possible of thinking about those categories.

It is precisely in this sense that imagination can help in “opening up” and “extending” the field of meaning of the existent identitarian categories.

4.2 The Exemplar Memory: Preventing Violence from History

Through the text, we have understood how the information we obtain from the media is preserved inside our memories and, from memories and through language, our identities take shape. In other words, memory and memories have a crucial role in letting us articulate our language and thus in defining who we are, both as individuals and as members of one or more communities.

⁵⁷ Regarding the limits and the drawbacks of human and AI-based content filtration systems, please refer to: Aral, S. (2020). *The hype machine: How social media disrupts our elections, our economy, and our health* and how we must adapt. Currency; Castillo, C. (2019). Algorithmic bias in rankings. Companion Proceedings of The 2019 World Wide Web Conference, 741–741. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3308560.3316451>; Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press; Köbis, N. C., Starke, C., & Edward-Gill, J. (2022). THE CORRUPTION RISKS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. *Transparency International*; Makanadar, A., Shahane, S., & Patil, U. (2024). Tracing Algorithmic and AI-biased Data. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 59(7).

With this in mind, Orrù cites the words of Marzolo and Leopardi respectively:

“Questa è la prima condizione ideologica delle parole, cioè di destare una reminiscenza [...]. Nessuna parola di alcuna lingua potè mai servire a rappresentanze ideologiche, senza che siavi stata la precedenza d’una sensazione che essa sia capace di ricordare [...] Perché un’idea senza parola o modo di esprimerla, ci sfugge, o ci erra nel pensiero come indefinita e mal nota a noi medesimi che l’abbiamo concepita. Colla parola prende corpo, e quasi forma visibile, e sensibile, e circoscritta” (Orrù, 2021, p. 242).

Rather than being fixed entities, in the second chapter, I pointed out how memory and memories are dynamic processes which reinvent the content of our minds every time we recall them. This way of understanding memory would already guide us towards reconsidering certain memories from which our hate might have stemmed. On this matter, Cimatti writes:

“[...] Il passato (non il futuro, che nessuno sa cosa sia), cioè, è aperto, è riscrivibile anche in altri modi rispetto all’unico modo in cui l’abbiamo sempre pensato, o meglio, rispetto all’unico modo in cui il passato ci ha finora pensati. [...]. In realtà non è il passato che pregiudica il presente, è piuttosto una visione impoverita del presente che ci impedisce di vedere tutti i punti del passato in cui la storia avrebbe potuto prendere una direzione diversa. [...]. Un’altra vita è sempre (stata) possibile” (Cimatti, 2020, pp. 118-9).

The fact that memories are not the exact reflection of the events that happened in the past is useful to my theorisation of the “narratives of hope” because it can open up new ways in which people can look at past events.

For example, if the memories that the Muslim community have regarding the Hindu community are only of hate and antagonism, the “narrative of violence” will only go ahead. However, if the Muslim community were to re-elaborate those memories and their salience as not monolithic and fixed, the outcome, I argue, would be a decrease in communal violence.

I am not suggesting the creation of new and crafted memories but rather reconsidering the prominence given to the already present ones or even the discoveries of those memories which were absent from the archive. In the interviews I have conducted, people remembered the episodes of communal violence more frequently and clearly than the ones of communal collaboration, and this is one of the sources of more violence. However, the open nature of memories allows us to see them from another perspective.

For instance, Partition was a tragedy, the memory of which still haunts the minds of millions of people. But what if, while recollecting Partition, we include episodes of mutual collaboration

between the communities? Researching the families or local histories of people who helped each other in that terrible time, regardless of religion, could help people remember Partition not only as a cruel event “but also” as a moment in which people showed their best in terms of solidarity and acceptance.

From the point of view of the language, grammar elements such as “but also”, “as well as” or “even though” are crucial because they relate to two elements of the discourse without letting one negate the other and without letting one drown out the other. A content analysis could be useful to measure the number of occurrences of these elements in political speeches or mass media articles.

Again, this process of reconsidering the past is complex and full of obstacles. First of all, there should always be a balanced view behind the reading of the past, which has to include “not only” the memories we would like to keep “but also” the ones we do not. Secondly, to produce a positive outcome, the effort should be collective and shared among as many individuals as possible. This plurality would encourage and promote a balanced point of view on the events remembered. Lastly, the biggest issue lies in the fact that memory is also an institutionalised and political tool, with its guardians and custodians. Their identity has changed throughout history, but their use of history as an instrument of power has remained consistent.

Tzvetan Todorov argues that the institutions of power read memory in a “literal” way. For the author, reading and thus reproducing “literal memories” means being stuck to those memories and to the feelings attached and giving those memories a quality of uniqueness and a sort of sacred untouchability. In an article published in 2009, Todorov argues that this kind of memory serves no purpose for reducing or devouring violence because “it builds an impassable wall between communities, reiterating the fictional categories of irreprouchable heroes, maleficent villains and innocent victims” (Todorov, 2009). As the author himself explains:

“Se questo avvenimento - poniamo un segmento doloroso del mio passato o del gruppo cui appartengo è conservato nella sua letteralità (che non vuol dire la sua verità), resta un fatto intransitivo, che non porta al di là di se stesso. Le associazioni che si innestano al riguardo si situano in una diretta contiguità: rilevo le cause e le conseguenze dell'atto, scopro tutte le persone che in qualche modo si possono associare con l'autore iniziale della mia sofferenza e li faccio soffrire a loro volta. Stabilisco così una continuità tra l'essere che sono stato e quello che ora sono, o il passato e il presente del mio popolo ed estendo le conseguenze del trauma iniziale a tutti i momenti dell'esistenza” (Todorov, 2018, p. 47).

In contrast to this approach, Todorov proposes what he calls the “exemplary” reading of memories. Through this expression, the author wants to illustrate a path to reduce the monument-like feature of

memories in order to focus the dialogue more on present events and situations. Todorov argues that while every traumatic memory is necessarily considered unique and the most dramatic by the individuals—a thing that should be accepted and respected—this emotions-led perspective should not be applied to the political use of memory.

Hence, the memories should become open

“all’analogia ed alla generalizzazione, facendone un exemplum e traendone una lezione; il passato diventa dunque principio d’azione per il presente. In questo caso, le associazioni che evoco riguardano la somiglianza e non più la contiguità e io non cerco di assicurarmi la mia identità, quanto di giustificare le mie analogie” (ivi, p. 48).

The idea behind this openness is that to be useful for the community, memories should be compared with others to draw out commonalities and understand how similar events could be avoided in the future. In this regard, Todorov uses the categories of genocide and concentration camps, underlining how these should not be restricted to the Nazi dictatorship but also be used to describe other situations, such as the Armenian genocide, the gulags or the South African apartheid. This sort of approach could lead to potential benefits for both individuals and groups.

On the one hand, opening up and sharing distressful memories collectively would bring some relief to individuals through this “catharsis”. On the other hand, re-interpreting collective memories in an “exemplary” way would lead to the identification of that group not only, for example, with the victims or the heroes, but also with the villains and the perpetrators. This new identification should work as a warning and deterrent against committing violent acts in the future.

However, not every memory can be used as an example, and the division between “literal” and “exemplar” memory is not always clear-cut. Years after theorising this framework, Todorov himself became dismissive of it, saying that such categorical differentiation between a “bad” and a “good” use of memory does not take into account the contingencies of each situation. He claimed that every event should be analysed per se, identifying all the elements at play at that precise moment.

Despite Todorov’s criticism of his own theory, I argue that the “exemplary” approach to memory could be a powerful tool to de-emphasise and de-power the instances of intergroup violence. As I wrote in the previous chapter, the path of “identification with the other” may prove to be successful and, thus, pursued in both the field of information and memory. Again, the hindrances to its application are many and not easy to overcome. Rethinking memories through this perspective, especially if they are traumatising and salient for the construction of identity, represents a grievous

challenge which questions people's emotional and identitarian beliefs, and not everyone is always willing to relive such experiences.

Therefore, the production of "narratives of hope" configures itself as long and complex. However, looking at the past, reprocessing traumas and facing our agonies can represent a strong social and political tool to reduce the scope and the extent of violent encounters with "the other".

Ultimately, Feyles' quest for a "politics of the right memory" can be found only in a collective action, which, in the same way as the use of media, has to be brought forward by the whole society.

Furthermore, another way in which memory can help towards the production of "narratives of hope" is forgetting, is oblivion. Here, a close relationship between forgetting and forgiving can be observed. As I have pointed out through the work, a large part of the violence we witness today is inherited, in the sense that it comes from events happened before those who act violently today were born. Hence, those who act violently today has not been directly involved and thus they don't have any "personal" reason to fight. In this sense, forgetting the violent actions and ideals of the fathers and of the forefathers, may lead to the breaking of the generational chain of violence. Here, the act of "forgetting" is deeply connected with the term "forgiving" without any solution of continuity.

4.3 Escaping the Identity Trap: a Path Towards a Common Future

The sets of "good practices" in the field of media and memory that I laid out in the previous sections share the action of putting oneself in someone else's shoes. The processes of imagination and exemplar memory lead us to look at broadening the scope of our self-understanding to construct "narratives of hope". These shifts, however, are not random. To be effective, they must be directed precisely at those people or groups the "narratives of violence" have always described as "our enemies".

However, this is not simple. I have described how the self-recognition of a single human being entails several "roles" that they play in society. As I have pointed out throughout the text, violence arises when the salience of a specific role is enhanced, stressed and intensified to the detriment of the other ones.

Amartya Sen explains this process as follows:

“A Hutu laborer from Kigali may be pressured to see himself only as a Hutu and incited to kill Tutsis, and yet he is not only a Hutu, but also a Kigalian, a Rwandan, an African, a laborer, and a human being” (Sen, 2007, p. 4).

Interestingly, all these roles imply a potential conflict or violent relations with the other. For example, if the role of “labourer” is stressed, then the enemy will become the factory’s owner, if the role of “Rwandan” is stressed, the enemy will become the Congolese, if the role of “African” is stressed, the enemy will become the Europeans, if the role of “human being” is stressed, the enemy will become the non-human environment.

Leaving aside the issue of the relationships between humans and non-humans, how is it possible to create and promote “narratives of hope” starting from this prominence of violence?

Mouk proposes a path to exit from the violence of univocal self-understanding:

“To escape this danger, we must aspire to surpass the prejudices and enmities that have for so much of human history boxed us into the roles seemingly foreordained by the religion of our ancestors or the colour of our skin. We should keep striving for a society in which categories like race, gender, and sexual orientation matter a lot less than they do now because what each of us can accomplish —and how we all treat each other— no longer depends on the groups into which we are born. We must not let the identity trap lure us into giving up on a future in which what we have in common finally comes to be more important than what divides us” (Mouk, 2023, p. 286).

This practice finds its roots in a specific understanding of individual and collective identities that, as I have written in the second chapter, is not fixed but is always in the process of making and remaking itself. This is precisely what allows us to see “through the eyes of the other” and to stress, from time to time, one identity or the other.

Hence, this change of perspective could weaken the conflictual nature entailed in the mechanisms of identity formation and stabilisation. Thus, once the self or group identifications are formed through a contrastive relationship —I am this because “I am not” that— this change of perspective can hinder the salience and the strength of a univocal identification.

In this regard, Remotti writes:

“Anche se i germi della violenza sono contenuti nei loro processi di formazione, non tutti i noi però sono violenti. La violenza dei noi può essere infatti controllata, mitigata, controbilanciata, gestita e sublimata in vari modi; può inoltre essere impastata con forme di scambio, di comunicazione, di solidarietà e di alleanza. I noi (questa è in definitiva la tesi generale che intendiamo proporre) possono tanto aprirsi quanto chiudersi, proporre rapporti di scambio o di ostilità, perseverare in un atteggiamento miope e autoconservatore, ma

anche trasformarsi, corrompersi, alterarsi, diventare “altri” [...]. Dal momento che i noi non sono sostanze (né di tipo naturale, né di tipo storico), ma soggetti fluttuanti e precari, essi imbarcano in ogni modo e in ogni circostanza —spesso anche senza saperlo e senza volerlo — l’alterità: sono fatti di alterità e di alterazione; spesso bramano l’alterazione. Se c’è un rapporto di identità che davvero può essere affermato, paradossalmente questo non è con se stessi, ma con l’alterità” (Remotti, 2010, pp. 49-50).

This approach works very well for my analysis. In stating or performing their identities, whether they describe themselves as Hindus, Muslims or anything else, people have to take into account that what they see as, for example, a “Hindu tradition” is the result of centuries of evolution and stabilisation in which other communities have also taken part.

In this sense, India represents a fruitful field of study because throughout history its several and diverse parts have been ruled by several institutions which, from time to time, have brought forward the interests of several communities, promoting the multi-layered nature of every instance of identity statement or performance.

In this context, the most logical option seems to be the complete nullification of identities. However, such an approach is not viable. Even if they often carry with them instances of violence and unjust deaths, what we call “identities” are also the results of thousands of years of richness, beauty and intellect. Hence, minimising them would bring more losses than gains.

Conversely, the better solution would be to acknowledge, accept and embrace each of our identities, with the awareness that, built into each one is also what is considered the “enemy”. Thus, we are also what we consider “the other” both in terms of self-identification and group identification.

Once again, according to Sen:

“A person’s citizenship, residence, geographic origin, gender, class, politics, profession, employment, food habits, sports interests, taste in music, social commitments, etc., make us members of a variety of groups. Each of these collectivities, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity. None of them can be taken to be the person’s only identity or singular membership category” (Sen, 2007, pp. 4-5).

However, this goal can be reached only through a collective effort of narratives-changing, which would involve the institutions in charge of narrative creation and diffusion —the governments, the education systems, the mass media industries, the publishing industries— and the people as a whole.

Hence, as I have tried to show in the process of production of “narratives of violence”, even the production of “narratives of hope” entails both collective action and the deployment of our four tools —information, media, memory and identity— in a simultaneous way since their functioning happens at once.

It is, however, self-evident that the shift from “narratives of violence” to “narratives of hope” cannot happen without a strong will by every segment of society, which will have to work together to reduce the amount of violence and hate.

4.4 Some Narratives of Hope for South Asia

When we talk about moments of encounters between what is commonly considered Hindu and what is commonly considered Muslim, the issues related to the categories of “syncretic” and “hybrid”, should taken into consideration. As pointed out by Tony Stewart, these categories can be problematic in several ways. First, they start from the assumption that the starting categories —in this case, Hindu and Muslim— are pure, fixed in time and “exclusive and distinct from each other and which do not ‘naturally’ belong together because they have been defined as such” (Stewart, 2001). From this premise, the entity born from the hybridisation of these pure categories will result as impure and “inherently unstable” (ibid.).

Secondly, describing something as syncretic or hybrid perpetuates the description of these cultural entities as static and close in themselves.

Hence, to escape from these limiting categories, Stewart, talking about the context of Bengali Sufi texts, proposes the “translation theory” where

“We can reconstruct a process by which the premodern Sufi or other Muslim writer, working within the constraints of a Bengali language whose extant technical vocabulary was conditioned largely by Hindu ideational constructs, attempted to imagine an Islamic ideal in a new literary environment.

These texts become, then, historical witnesses to the earliest attempts to think Islamic thoughts in the local language, which is to say, to think new thoughts for Bengali, ideas that had never previously been explicitly expressed, otherwise there probably would have been an explicit vocabulary to support them, as there now is. In order to express their ways of imagining the world, we must assume that these Muslim authors did not “borrow” terms but, in a more intellectually astute process, sought the closest “terms of equivalence” in order to approximate the ideas they wanted to express. Put another way and here the direction of this method should become clear these early Bengali Islamic authors “translated” their concepts

into the closest locally available terminology as a step toward articulating a different kind of religious orientation, but as we shall see, terminology is not just words, but entire conceptual worlds, metaphoric worlds” (ibid.).

I argue that this conceptualisation would prove to be helpful in the deconstruction of all those narratives where these encounters are romanticised and described in a too superficial way.

4.4.1 The Mughals and the Idea of Sulh-i Kull

The Mughal Empire, which ruled from 1526 to 1858 over the territories of today’s Pakistan and North-central India, is one of the most contested “sites of memory” in South Asian history. This expression is taken from Cynthia Talbot, who in turn, refers to the work of Pierre Nora on memory. Thus, by “site of memory”, I intend a “significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the material heritage of any community” (Talbot, 2016, p. 4).

After its decline, the idea of the Mughal Empire and its several emperors was written and rewritten many times in many historiographies and used by the other two power institutions who ruled over the same territories after it, namely the British Empire and the Indian Republic.

Here I will not present the entire development of the idea of the Mughal Empire in colonial and post-colonial historiography since it will take a whole book.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will analyse the idea of the Mughal Empire as a promoter of multiculturalism and inter-religious co-existence. To achieve this, I will focus on the concept of *sulh-i kull* and the figures of Dārā Shikōh (d.1659) and Aurangzeb (d.1707).

The colonial and post-colonial discourse around the Mughal Empire and its emperors gave them some clear-cut characterisations of “good or bad Muslims”, which fomented and further polarised the discourse around these figures.

On the one hand, it can be observed the colonial historiography, which emphasises the greatness of the first emperors, in particular of Akbar (d.1605). It aimed to create a powerful antecedent that served to measure England’s greatness in establishing itself in India. On the other hand, there is the historical narration, largely based on the colonial one, produced by the nationalist fringe and promoted by the BJP⁵⁸, which aims to depict the Mughals, in particular Babur (d.1530) and Aurangzeb, as ferocious Muslims invaders. Not surprisingly, these two emperors are associated

⁵⁸ This issue is only a part of the major project of BJP’s re-writing of Muslim history in India. Since when the party came to power in 2014, major cities and streets have been renamed (Allahabad became Prayag Raj in 2018, Aurangabad became Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar and Ahmednagar became Ahilyanagar both in 2023) there was also a revision of history textbooks.

respectively with the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya—destroyed in 1992 in favour of the new Rām Temple— and with the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi, which is in the middle of the same kind of dispute between the two communities.

Whether described as “totally good” (Akbar and Dārā Shikōh) or “totally bad” (Babur and Aurangzeb), these historical narratives, still encapsulated in an “emotional” perspective, fail to reach the requirements and the aim of the historical research. Moreover, this polarised view of the past further exacerbates the contemporary fractures in Indian society.

In contrast, I argue that these historiographies should be overcome not by considering the literary categories of the hero and the antagonist, but rather the simpler idea of the “human being” as the site of both light and darkness, both good deeds and ferocious acts in the same body.

The idea of *ṣulḥ-i kull*

First, I would like to analyse the meaning and significance of the expression *ṣulḥ-i kull*. It is often used to describe the liberal, open and pluralistic attitude towards other faiths adopted by the Mughal rulers, in particular by Akbar and Dārā Shikōh.

Ṣulḥ-i kull is often translated as “universal peace” and “mutual toleration” between Muslims and Hindus, but these translations are somewhat misleading and there is the risk of simplifying and trivialising how it was used at the time of the Empire, especially if we apply contemporary linguistic categories to it.

As pointed out by Rajeev Kinra, the term *ṣulḥ* had a long history before the Mughals, and the words “peace” and “toleration” do not cover all the meanings the word was invested with.

The term finds extensive usage in the context of Islamic jurisprudence and social and political thought, where it signified “the idea of peace and reconciliation in Islamic law and practice”, the purpose of which, notably, was “to end conflict and hostility among believers” (Kinra, 2020). Interestingly, the term also referred to a more practical activity of conflict resolution, which did not end with a winner or a loser of the legal dispute but would lead to a compromise accepted by both parties and thus to a reconciliation. “It was—and remains—a way of encouraging civility, of resolving conflict through “amicable settlement” rather than the assignment of blame and the exaction of retribution through formal law” (ibid.).

On the other hand, the term *kull* can also profoundly help to understand the deep meaning of the construct. In Persian *kull* means “all”, “but to whom does that “all” actually refer?” (ibid.).

Leaving aside the figure of Akbar as the “promoter of Hindu-Muslim peace” and following Kinra’s reasoning, it can be said that the idea of *ṣulḥ-i kull* went beyond Hindu-Muslim relations. Rather, it

was first and foremost a tool to maintain control and unity over a vast empire. Abu al-Fazl —central figure at the court of Akbar and author of the *Akbarnama*, the official chronicle of the reign of Akbar— talks about *ṣulḥ-i kull* as “an acceptance of religious variety in general, including within Islam itself, as a way to reach the general principle of fairness, impartiality, objectivity, and lack of favouritism in governance” (ibid.)

Finally, another way in which the expression was used, refers to a “state of being”, as a “philosophical principle underwriting a spirit of rational non-sectarianism” (ibid.). Although more research about the intellectual history of the expression *ṣulḥ-i kull* is needed, Kinra offers an important contribution in de-constructing the exceptionalism of the *ṣulḥ-i kull* as an idea relegated to a certain figure in a certain place and time.

This process brings a two-fold advantage: first, it historicises Akbar, a figure that has been perceived as the “good and perfect” sovereign until now. Second, it gives the expression *ṣulḥ-i kull* the possibility of being applied in several geographical and historical contexts, which is extremely important for my purpose.

We argue that the idea of *ṣulḥ-i kull* as a sort of “third way” to solve disputes and as a mode of being would prove itself to be a powerful political and personal tool to contrast the contemporary dominance of the “narratives of violence”.

Besides all the interpretations behind the world *ṣulḥ-i kull*, the Mughal Emperors certainly found great advantages in advertising themselves as “multicultural” and “welcoming” towards all kinds of people. This emerges from the texts which were commissioned by the court but aimed at an external audience. Among these, apart from the already cited *Akbarnama*, we find the work of the *munshī* Chander Bhan Brahman (d. 1666-1670), the *Chahār Chaman* (Four Gardens) and the *Tāriīkhi Rajahā-i Dihlī* (History of the kings of Delhi). As pointed out, again, by Rajeev Kinra, both these texts were aimed at constructing and

“advertising the image of the Mughal court’s justice and generosity to readers in Anatolia, the Iranian plateau, Central Asia, and even the Deccan, and in so doing perhaps to lure away artists, intellectuals, mystics, traders, and other talented individuals from those rival locales who might be in search of patronage” (Kinra, 2015, p. 106).

If we compare how the Mughal power wanted to be portrayed and how the power wants to be portrayed now, there is an immense gap. Although it might seem a hazardous comparison, I would like to analyse the aforementioned forms of Mughal power’s self-representation alongside

contemporary forms of power self-representation, such as institutional speeches or social media posts. Although these two media are separated by centuries of history and technological development, they both answer the same question: “How do I (institutional power) want the others (my subjects and other institutional powers) to perceive me?”.

Hence, if we compare the image that the Mughals wanted to give about themselves and the speeches of the politicians analysed in the third chapter, it can be observed a vast difference in what the power perceived as a rightful and successful way to write themselves and, thus, to be perceived by others. From the speeches mentioned in the previous chapter, it can be seen how the power—in this case Modi, Owaisi and their parties—wants to describe itself and be remembered not so much in a “multicultural” and “tolerant” way but rather in a violent way. As I have pointed out, during the Mughal Empire, the power described itself as a centripetal force, attracting the “diverse”. Meanwhile, today power describes itself as a centrifugal force which aims to create distance, not acceptance, and who hates rather than mediates. A recent example of this could be the picture of the immigrant deportation wanted by the newly-elected American President Donald Trump.

I argue that this reflection can open up the field for further research into the several self-representations of power in a determinate context in order to compare them and observe the changes and the similarities. This kind of research could be helpful in understanding the contemporary process of power self-writing

Dārā Shikōh and the ‘Majma-ul-Bahrain’

In this example, I would like to describe the prince Dārā Shikōh and his Persian text *Majma-ul-Bahrain*⁵⁹. Dārā Shikōh was the first son of Shah Jahan, the fifth emperor of the Mughal Empire.

During his education, the Mughal prince got in touch with several representatives of Indian Sufism, who introduced him to such practices far from what was considered “purely Islamic”.

“Come Akbar, Dārā Šikōh promosse la collaborazione tra dotti e mistici di diverse fedi religiose, fu protettore e punto di riferimento di una cerchia di brillanti studiosi e poeti e seppe utilizzare le ingenti risorse a sua disposizione per progetti culturali di grande rilievo” (D’Onofrio & Speziale, 2011, p. 41).

The knowledge gained during his education and from meeting with those scholars made the prince write the *Majma-ul-Bahrain* in the fifties of the seventeenth century, relying on the Quran, the Ḥadīth and the doctrine of Shankaracharya’s Vedanta.

⁵⁹ Lit. *The confluence of the two Oceans*.

While a long tradition of translation from Sanskrit to Persian was active and fruitful in seventeenth-century India, Dārā Šikōh's text stands out for its effort to explain the Indian lexicon and doctrines through terms and concepts familiar to Muslim thought. Hence,

“l'intento di Dārā Šikōh va ben oltre e vuole altre mostrare —anche a rischio di forzare talvolta le analogie— la sostanziale corrispondenza fra i principi delle due tradizioni” (ivi, p. 20).

As pointed out also by Audrey Truschke, “emphasizing Hindu-Muslim similarities marked a shift from the overarching arc of earlier Mughal cross-cultural activities, which tended to be more concerned with political power, historical questions, and literary innovations” (Truschke, 2016, p. 225).

However, the military life of the Mughal Prince was not as successful as his literary one. In 1653, he failed the siege to the Safavid city of Kandahar. After this, in 1657, Dārā Šikōh fought against Aurangzeb for the throne. The latter prevailed and made Dārā Šikōh sentenced to death for apostasy.

He spent most of his life looking to produce a synthesis of the Hindu and Muslim philosophical systems and his biggest effort is contained in the *Majma-dl-Bahrain*

Below I will quote some translated excerpts from work. Since I don't have any knowledge of the Persian language, I will present the introduction of the work from the 1929 English translation of Mahfuz-ul-Haq.

“One, who has manifested on His beautiful, unparalleled and matchless face the two parallel locks of Faith and Infidelity, and by neither of them has He covered His beautiful face.

Faith and Infidelity, both are galloping on the way towards

Him,

And are exclaiming (together): He is One and none shares His

kingship.

[...]

Now, thus sayeth this unafflicted, unsorrowing fakhir, Muhammad Dārā Šikōh, that, after knowing the Truth of truths and ascertaining the secrets and subtleties of the true religion of the Sufis and having been endowed with this great gift (i.e., Sufistic inspiration), he thirsted to know the tenets of the religion of the Indian monotheists; and, having had repeated intercourse and (continuous) discussion with the doctors and perfect divines of this (i.e. Indian) religion who had attained the highest pitch of perfection in religious exercises, comprehension (of God), intelligence and (religious) insight, he did not find any difference, except verbal, in the way in which they sought and comprehended Truth. Consequently, having collected the views of the two parties and having brought together the points — a knowledge of which is absolutely essential and useful for the

seekers of Truth — he (i.e. the author) has compiled a tract and entitled it Majma-ul-Bahrain as it is a collection of the truth and wisdom of two Truth knowing groups” (Dārā Šikōh & Mahfuz-ul-Haq, 1929)

Even if Dārā Šikōh is always presented as a champion of peace and tolerance, compared with Akbar for his great patronage of literature and arts, the court chronicles show us another picture of the prince. For example, as reported by Rajeev Kinra, an Italian explorer at the Mughal court Niccolò Manucci depicts a negative portrait of the prince:

“The first-born son of King Shahjahan was the prince Dara, a man of dignified manners, [...], but over-confident in his opinion of himself, considering himself competent in all things and having no need of advisers. He despised those who gave him counsel. Thus it was that his dearest friends never ventured to inform him of the most essential things. . . . He assumed that fortune would invariably favour him, and imagined that everybody loved him. . . . [But] the haughty Dara scorned the nobles, both in word and deed, making no account of them. . . . [He] depreciated all the nobles at the court, above all the generals and commanders . . . [who] showed themselves aggrieved and disgusted. All these things united were the chief causes of Dara’s ruin and death. He might have been King of Hindustan if he had known how to control himself” (Kinra, 2015, p. 146).

A man of immense knowledge but with an equal ego, it seems. What Manucci wants to say is that even if Dārā was the first son of Shah Jahan, he was not looked at favourably by the Mughal nobility and this cost him a lack of support in the conflict with Aurangzeb.

I wanted to include this passage from Manucci’s reporting not to give a judgment on the figure of the Prince, but to remove him from the golden pedestal where a certain kind of historiography placed him.

The process of presenting the “positive” and “negative” sides of these figures, I argue, could be a useful tool to de-power their identification with this or that cause and thus the violent outcomes that these identifications might have. In Dārā Šikōh’s case, presenting his image not as a “perfect but unlucky” ruler but as a normal human being, giving equal importance to both his strengths and shortcomings, can reduce the emotional attachment people feel towards him and, thus, reduce his salience in the narrative of violence against its detractors.

Aurangzeb

The same reasoning can be applied to Aurangzeb. The sixth Mughal emperor has always been described as a totally negative figure, the one responsible for the empire's fall and the decline of the court’s multiethnic and multicultural environment.

Many books of Indian history describe him as a “bigot”, “zealot”, “strict Muslim”, “destructor of temples”, and “hater of Hindus” (Behr, 1987; Torri, 2007; Kruijtzter, 2009; Ludden et al., 2011; Wolpert et al., 2022).

This narrative of “Aurangzeb the villain” positions itself in the biggest *violent narrative* about the Indian Muslims as strangers, invaders and careless about the Hindu customs and temples. Interestingly, the same process of “villainisation” occurred also to Babur, the ruler who established the Mughal empire in 1526. It can be observed that the “narrative of violence” around these historical characters revolves around certain “literary characters” of the good rulers, Akbar and Dārā, and the bad ones, Babur and Aurangzeb. I will talk about this at the end of this section.

Aurangzeb is a clear example of the functioning of the “narrative of violence” in the memory and the practice of common people. As pointed out by Audrey Truschke, the effects of this narrative are present even today. In 2015

“a local Sikh group that raised the idea, was that Aurangzeb was “one of the most tyrannical tormentor perpetrator of Intolerant Inhuman Barbaric crimes in India”. A few Members of Parliament affiliated with the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) jumped on this bandwagon and issued their own calls to tear what they viewed as a painful page out of Delhi’s history, or at least erase the offending ruler’s name from the city’s road signs. In late August of 2015 New Delhi officials capitulated and rechristened the street A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Road, after India’s eleventh president. A week later, city employees crept out in the dead of night and chiseled Aurangzeb’s name off the street signs” (Truschke, 2017, p. 16).

This shows how, more than three hundred years after the death of the emperor, the violence generated by his name still ignites the public debate.

In 2017 Audrey Truschke published *Aurangzeb: the life and Legacy of India’s Most Controversial King* by which she aimed to show the public the human nature of the much hated emperor. Apart from reporting his life and military deeds in a non-sectarian light, Truschke shows many letters that the Emperor wrote to his dearest ones.

For example,

“in a post-1691 letter to his grandson Bidar Bakht, the eldest son of Azam Shah, Aurangzeb proffered advice about how to best live and rule. He opened by recommending morning prayer and Quranic recitation over water, which should then be drunk, to counter disease and danger. He next advised Bidar Bakht to adopt the old Mughal ritual, dating back to Akbar’s reign, of weighing oneself against various items and distributing the goods to the needy. Aurangzeb recognized the Hindu roots of this custom.

In his letter the king reported to his grandson that Shah Jahan had weighed himself twice a year but counseled Bidar Bakht to execute the ceremony fourteen times annually. As we have seen, Aurangzeb performed the weighing rites himself for the first decade of his rule but then retired the practice (he may have revived it in later years, according to a report by the chaplain John Ovington). Aurangzeb recognized the Hindu-based weighing ritual as part of the Indian Mughal tradition, even if he had personally shied away from it. ” (Truschke, 2017, pp. 89-90).

Again, in a letter written to his son Azan Shah,

“Aurangzeb endorsed Shah Jahan’s enjoyment of music, something Aurangzeb had given up decades ago, as a proper kingly activity. There were many ways to be a Mughal king. In his late letters Aurangzeb endorsed the syncretism that was a part of his bloodline as a great strength that might enable the empire to survive in the face of formidable opposition” (Truschke, 2017, pp. 89-90).

Although Truschke’s work makes a step towards the reconsideration of the figure of Aurangzeb, it does not accomplish this. The figure of the emperor that emerges from the book turns out to be too lenient, and certain facts that led Aurangzeb to be described as a “bigot”, “zealot”, or “strict Muslim” are not explained. For example, Truschke does not provide any explanation for the fact that after 1669 the emperor changed his attitude about music and public celebrations. Another reason why Truschke’s text fails to achieve a total and impartial deconstruction of Aurangzeb’s image is that she spends the whole book narrating his life but neglects to address how Aurangzeb gained his bad reputation during the centuries after his death.

In contrast, a very poignant book in this sense is *The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200-2000* written by Cynthia Talbot. In this book, Talbot traces back the documents which contributed to the creation of Prithviraj Chauhan as a “champion of Hinduness” against the Muslim invader. Rather than being biographical, this work focuses on how a certain narrative, which ultimately is a “narrative of violence” took shape during history. I argue that a work like Talbot’s, but on the figures of Dārā Śikōh and Aurangzeb, is more than necessary to free them from the categories of “good” versus “bad” Muslim.

As mentioned earlier, these categories are not restricted to these two rulers. Akbar and Dārā Śikōh, as well as Babur and Aurangzeb, also fall within this framework.

While ideological motivations have contributed to the way these rulers are portrayed, it is not only about ideology.

As I discussed in the second chapter, memory works better when reinforced through “repetition” and “epithets”. However, this process tends to create rigid narratives which, over time, become “narratives of violence” because they ignore alternative perspectives and the origins of those narratives. A potential solution to this issue could be to produce more and more works like Talbot’s. In this way, the narratives, deprived of their supposed legitimacy and power, would be revealed for what they truly are: the result of a textual history written by someone for a specific aim.

4.4.2 *The Figure of Satya Pīr in the Bengali Imaginary*

Another salient example of a narrative of hope can be found in the literary world of Satya Pīr, which is a central topic in the research work of Tony Stewart. This literature, which “constitutes one of the largest blocks of literary productivity in Bangla” (Stewart 2019, p. xiv), talks about the marvellous adventures of Sufi saints, *pīrs*, *fakhīrs* and *bibīs* who, representing the ideal of the *gāji* or warrior-saint, engage in battles and encounters to

“to persuade people to recognize the validity of Muhāmmad and the place of Āllā (Bangla for Allāh) as the sole and supreme God, but, more often, they win over people by providing them with wealth, with protection from the vagaries of existence in the miasmatic mangrove swamps, by helping the childless gain sons and daughters, and by brokering peace, usually through the fixing of kinship relations in which all parties have a vested interest” (ivi, p. xii).

What interests us in these tales is the fact that the elements which can be considered Hindu and those deemed Muslim are not distinguished or distinguishable. Instead, they shape narrations which are far from being communal in any sense but which express the imaginary and the collective imagination of Bengal. This body of texts was absent from the records of academia for a long time, and thus, it was largely unknown outside the circles of practice, that is, the few people who keep telling and listening to these tales.

This absence was due to several factors. First of all, during the Orientalist academic experience, the scholars did not take these tales (*kathā*) seriously and “the presence of the fantastic seems to have clouded all judgments and deflected analyses away from the religious and cultural work these tales have done and still do” (ivi, p. 35). This literature was indeed recognised as “folk literature, mythology, popular legend, and so forth” (ivi, p. 36) and in a logic of categorising to eliminating, these tales fell in the category of “popular credence” and were never considered with a serious academic eye. This exclusion from the archive has caused great damage to Bengali and Indian

literature and culture in general, both because of the richness of the texts and because of the great societal advantages that the right reading of such stories can bring.

Not having the space and time to analyse every aspect of this literature, I will focus only on the ones which are crucial for my discourse. These are the domain of literary imagination and religious identities.

Literary Imagination, Religious Identities and the common threat

These stories are full of what today I would call “fantastic” elements like talking tigers, magical transformations or flying trees. However, I would not like to talk about the realm of the fantastic but about the use of the imagination to re-interpret the boundaries of pre-existing religious identities and how the same use can be successful now in de-powering the inter-communal conflict. After that, I will talk about the de-powering of conflicting identities under the risk of a common threat.

Leopardi described imagination as

“facoltà della combinazione associativa, dotata di memoria, che conclude e amplia le sensazioni” (Orrù, 2021, p. 246).

It seems that the authors of the *Pīr Katās* employed it in that way. The absence of religious identities that emerge from these stories is in part rendered by the use of unexpected associations between terms originating from the two traditions. One example of this practice can be identified in the fact that Satya Pīr, a Muslim character, is considered the *yugavatār* and thus is placed at the same level as Matsya, Rama and Krishna. Another example lies in the fact that *Āllā* (Bengali for Allah) is often described as *Satya Nārāyaṇ*, a title usually given to Viṣṇu.

Aside from these single episodes, the context in which these histories take place seems not to enter either the categories of Hindu or Muslim. Moreover, the terms, which normally would indicate the strict belonging to one of the two realms, are used carelessly, without any limitations, inside the geographical and cultural context of Bengal, finding a way to “accommodate a Bengali *purāṇik* world within a generic *Korānic* framework” (Stewart, 2019, p. 194). The category imagination is also employed to generate narratives that are unexposed and different from the winner-loser logic. Many of the *katās* do not end with a clear winner but with “a symbolic maneuvering of characters and the repositioning of social relationships that point to a resolution of the conflicts” (ivi, p. 191).

I argue that the narrative repertoire of Satya Pīr can be considered a “narrative of hope” in the sense that it generates a context and an imaginary where the violent identities of Hindu and Muslim are so

blended together that it is impossible to recognise their borders and differences. That is why Tony Stewart argues that the Pīr kathās have power

“[...] to bring together people of different ethnicities, of different social classes, and of course different religious orientations, in provocatively new configurations, disrupting the status quo, their activity redirected to new (reformulations of the old) regimes” (ivi, p. 258).

It is exactly this imagination, this flexibility which is missing today, allowing the violence and the hate to spread so fast and so widely.

However, if we come back to Leopardi’s definition of imagination, we read that imagination can both restrict (*conclude*) and expand (*amplia*) our sensations and ways of interpreting reality, revealing the quality of a *vox media*.

Thus, in practising imagination —or the free association of worlds and concepts— we should bear in mind the double face of the practice and the fact that imagination can, at the same time, bring us to think by fixed and rigid categories, like Hindus and Muslims, or by open combinations, which allow us to exit from the categorical and violent way of thinking.

Ultimately, it is interesting to see how these “narratives of hope” are generated under the risk of a common threat. In the case of the stories of Satya Pīr, the danger is represented by the harsh climate and natural conditions of the Sundarbans⁶⁰ that threatened the life of the dwellers, Hindus and Muslims alike. As pointed out by Stewart

“This riparian landscape was laden with natural perils to a degree seldom encountered in the rest of greater India, and one of the most profound affective responses was to seek some kind of supernatural help in coping” (ivi, pp. xvii-xviii).

Hence, the de-powering of close and violent identities occurs because of a greater menace, which makes the life of the people already difficult and thus does not leave any space for further conflicts or bloodshed. Stewart reiterates this idea also in his latest book, *Needle at the Bottom of the Sea: Bengali Tales from the Land of the Eighteen Tides*:

60 The Sundarbans are a vast tract of forest and saltwater swamp forming the lower part of the Padma-Brahmaputra River delta in southeastern West Bengal State, northeastern India, and southern Bangladesh (Pletcher, 2025). The area is rich in flora and fauna diversity, including animals dangerous to humans, such as tigers or snakes. Much of the Sundarbans constitute a tiger reserve and a UNESCO Heritage site. However, in the last decades, climate change has severely hit the area, jeopardising its environmental richness. This is a major topic in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, who has profusely described the impact of climate change on this area.

“Over the past few centuries, the local communities that call the Sundarbans home have pragmatically turned to whatever works to protect them. Just how this current state of inter- and intra-sectarian cooperation and collaboration eventually came about is part of the cultural work of the stories in this anthology; it is a celebration made possible by the rejection of sectarian exclusion and the promotion of common kinship ties. Differences among communities are recognized, but given the precariousness of life in the littoral, antagonisms weaken the population as a whole and cannot be tolerated” (Stewart et al., 2023, p. 12).

Stewart further extends these observations on the nature of Sufi literature in Bengal, asserting that:

“They [the sufis] are literature, adventure stories of survival that underscore the need for people of all social and religious ranks to work together in hostile environments” (ivi, p. 4).

And again:

“What they are first and foremost is narrative literature about the necessity of having a helping hand to survive in a hostile environment, whether the trader’s precarious oceangoing voyages to lands unknown, the plundering of the wilds of the jungle, or simply the unpredictability of encountering powerful individuals adamant about the importance of their different social and religious backgrounds” (ivi, p. 12).

I find myself in complete agreement with Stewart. The presence of a common and greater threat forces people to set aside their differences to find a way to collaborate to save their lives. In this sense, the once-violent identities are not eliminated. As Stewart writes, the differences are still recognised, but their violent coefficient is necessarily reduced.

Here, I would like to start a brief consideration. In the last years, the globe has witnessed several threats that put the lives of many at severe risk: the COVID pandemic, the worsening of climate events such as fires, floods and droughts, two major conflicts and a widespread rising of prices for the basic necessities. Still, what is perceived is not a climate of collaboration or mutual help, but it seems that the violent factor of the group and singular identities rose, creating a climate of suspicion and reciprocal hate between the various groups.

In this sense, the Bengali stories described above, along with the example presented in the next subsection, became extremely important in a historical moment in the way that Todorov describes as “exemplar”. In other words, these “narratives of hope” should be spread and remembered not just

for their literary and historical importance but as tools that can be helpful in our contemporary situation.

4.4.3 The Protest in Karnal of 1946

My last example of a “narrative of hope” regards a protest that happened in Karnal, a city in the state of Haryana in 1946 following a decision of the Punjab Government to ration the food.

Before getting into my argument, I would like to thank Professor Benjamin Siegel for having sent me his notes about this event, since it seems to be absent from the main textbooks of Indian history.

The protest in Karnal is particularly salient to this thesis since it describes how different communities can join forces against a common threat, in the same way I wrote above.

In September 1939, England, still holding its power in South Asia, entered the Second World War as an ally of France. To support the war effort, the British Crown had to start a politics of food stockpiling and export from its colonies to several fronts where the soldiers were fighting.

During the conflict, India was affected by two main events, namely the Japanese attack on the American base of Pearl Harbour in December 1941 and the Japanese invasion of Burma (now Myanmar), between December 1941 and May 1942. These events made the Indian people understand that the war was also at their doorstep.

The war hit the economic sector hard. From the start of 1943, there was a generalised rise of prices (Spear, 1970, p. 508), which determined a shortage of common goods. The situation was also worsened by three factors. The first was the rapid increase in the number of soldiers in the Indian army. This increment in the troops, “which went from 175.000 units in the pre-war period to two million in 1943” (Wolpert et al., 2022, p. 452), caused a spike in the need for already scarce food. The second reason was the Japanese invasion of Burma. Burma represented India, one of the major rice importers. With the capture of that country, India lost “circa 5% of its rice requirement” (Spear, 1970, p. 511). The third reason which contributed to the food crisis was the major pressure on the transport system. Again, since the start of 1943, the war caused a huge shift in railway traffic. The situation on the oriental front imposed considerable import of goods and munitions from Bombay, and this caused several hurdles in the overall functioning of the railways system (ibid.).

Along with a huge hoarding of food imposed by the British Government for their troops, these three factors were the major causes of the great Bengal famine of 1943. This was

“la peggiore delle storia indiana recente e fece da uno a tre milioni di vittime; ossia da dieci a trenta volte il numero totale dei soldati indiani morti durante la guerra” (Wolpert et al., 2022, p. 453).

The consequences of the famine had an impact also in the next years and regions far from Bengal, and the protest in Karnal must be understood as one of them.

Since the scarcity of food hit the rest of India, the British Government had to find a way to contain the damages, and it was found in the practice of rationing food for the population. “By July [1943] the project of controlling food in India’s towns and cities had begun in earnest” (Siegel, 2018, p. 122). Even though “the India office disingenuously tried to shift the responsibility onto Indian shoulders” (Sharma, 1980, p. 330), the people recognised the clear English responsibility and this triggered a wave of dissent and protests in the Subcontinent.

In Karnal, in 1946, a huge part of the population —6000 out of 25000 (Siegel, 2018, p. 124)— rose against those responsible for starvation. As we can read from the chronicles of the time:

“All persons young and old, irrespective of caste colour or creed - Hindus and Mohamadans alike, agriculturalists and non-agriculturalists with one voice have strongly protested against it [the food rationing] in huge public meeting held on 25th August '46 where representatives of all mohallas⁶¹ and castes were present and passed resolutions against it. [...] That for the first time in the history of Karnal, Karnal women of all creeds and classes determined to stake their all and to undergo any amount of suffering against wheat rationing” (Deputation of Residents of Karnal to the Food Minister, 1946).

I consider this document very precious for my argument. It clearly states that men and women, regardless of their religion, profession, caste, class or status, have come together to fight a common enemy, namely the British and the hunger they caused.

While this document can be regarded as a precious and valuable “narrative of hope” regarding the relationship between the Hindu and the Muslim communities and thus useful for the purpose of this thesis, it is a “narrative of violence” if seen under the lens of the relationship colonisers-colonised.

With this statement, it seems that I have reached a sort of impasse.

However, I argue that it is precisely here that lies the hope.

This last example shows us the proof of my argument, which is that there are no absolute enemies or friends and that these two categories, precisely as the categories of “narrative of violence” and “narrative of hope”, can both be present in an object at the same time. What changes is the meaning

⁶¹ Neighbourhoods

we attribute to them, and, as I have described, this attribution comes, for a large part, from the functioning of information, media, memory and identity.

In the last case analysed, highlighting the existence of that document would contribute to de-powering the identities and the violent relationship between Hindus and Muslims. However, the same document would highlight the identities of the colonised and the colonisers, increasing the violent coefficient of these two identities.

This allows me to conclude my reasoning and leave the reader with some questions.

When we find ourselves amidst a conflict, whether it is personal or collective, we always have two choices. The first is to find refuge in the violence and hit the other party the hardest we can. The second is to enter the path of hope, even if this direction implies a conflict with another enemy, as I pointed out in the Karnal example.

Is, then, the conflict a really necessary entity?

If it is, how we can determine what is worth fighting for?

I hope that such studies and research will proliferate in the future, not only regarding the South Asian context but also regarding all of those geographical realities where communal conflicts have generated, throughout history, many thousands of deaths, suffering and displacements.

Promoting this approach —or, in general, any other approach which aims at advocating peace— to history and to the other “social sciences”, I argue, should be one of the priorities of the academia.

Universities and other academic institutions are largely and rightfully seen as ivory towers where knowledge is stored and locked away from the outside.

In contrast, I argue that the academic world should divest itself of its vanity and pride and cooperate with people to deal with the deadly issues which are affecting our world, today more than ever.

5. Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to set a framework to understand the formation of violent feelings and actions among individuals and groups. This framework is composed of four steps: information, media, memory and identity.

Hence, according to the framework, information, having its generative power, is transported by media. Then, the information is repeated several times, and this repetition causes the formation of memories, which are at the base of the creation of identities, either individual or communal. Ultimately, our identities determine our behaviours.

As I showed in the third and fourth paragraphs, information can be either negative —leading towards hate and conflict— or positive —leading towards mutual understanding and co-existence.

This framework has two purposes. The first was to seek the reasons and the processes by which people feel and act violently against other individuals or particular groups. The second purpose, deeply tied to the first one, was to create a glimpse of hope towards the de-powering and the decrease of these acts of violence.

The example I chose to illustrate this process is taken from the complex relationship between the Hindu and the Muslim communities in India. Their ties, which can be traced back to the eighth century CE and which are in a tense and difficult phase, still represent a crucial part of the social and political life of the most populous nation in the world.

On the one hand, I am aware that this approach entails several limitations.

The first is the difficult application of this framework in the contemporary social reality. As I underlined many times, the application of this framework towards a common good needs the effort of every sector of society. In order to work properly towards a reduction of violence, educational institutes, governments and people as a whole must collaborate, and this situation is quite unprovable and logistically difficult.

The second difficulty I have encountered is conducting the survey. I wish to have done many more interviews, but I have encountered some difficulties in both reaching the elderly members of the families and in making families talk about political topics. The chance to have more interviews would have allowed me to further prove my point on the fact that the Hindu-Muslim relationship has been mostly constructed by “narratives of violence”, meaning that people remember more easily the episodes of conflict in the history of these communities.

The third and last limitation of this research was the difficulty of finding what I called “narratives of hope”. Unfortunately, regarding the ties between the Hindu and the Muslim communities in India, the archives are full of “narratives of violence”, leaving very little space for all those documents and histories which tell about a peaceful co-existence between those groups.

On the other hand, however, these limitations must not be seen as unsurpassable obstacles, but as starting points.

Firstly, the application of this framework is an enhancer and a catalyst to make people work together towards a common goal. I regard this as a crucial step for producing “narratives of hope”. Even if we are not used to being open towards the ones we consider our “enemies”, without a mutual effort, the power of the “narrative of violence” will continue to claim victims in every party since we are all involved.

Secondly, the shortcomings in the survey reveal important realities inside Indian families. What I witnessed was a general reluctance and evasiveness regarding certain topics in the family environment. However, I argue that it is precisely from the families and from the younger generations that the transition from violence to hope has to take place. In this sense, the sons were not present when their fathers started to fight, and they must not engage in those fights. In this sense, as I have posted before, when violence is inherited—as we have seen in most of cases—the strength and the hope lie precisely in forgiveness through forgetting and in forgetting through forgiving.

Lastly, the gap in the archives of the “narratives of hope” must not be seen as a shortcoming but as a drive to further research. The lack of documentation and examples, both in India and outside, can be transformed into an occasion to produce those narratives and to spread them. This production, which must necessarily be realised by a common effort, can represent a new start towards a future of hope.

Even here, I argue, a volume containing several historical episodes or figures which highlight the collaboration and the peaceful existence between these communities.

With these hopes in mind, the framework I have tried to put in motion with this text also entails several strengths.

One of these is its multi-operability, which means the fact that even though it was designed to analyse the Hindu-Muslim conflict in contemporary India, it can be used to study any kind of “narrative of violence” in any place and at any time, from the current issues over genders to the

ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in the nineties to long-lasting struggle between China and Tibet.

In this sense, I hope that more research will try this framework applied to different geographical and historical contexts. If it proves to be successful, it will represent not only a step towards a universal understating of human behaviour but also a tool for a diffused mutual understanding among individuals and groups, hopefully reducing the severity of violent encounters.

In this sense, the future scope of this research can be further developed in two main trajectories. The first is the proceeding of the studies on South Asian history, researching the “narratives of violence” not only in the context of the Hindu-Muslim conflict but also concerning several fractures in the Indian society determined by castes and economic classes.

The second trajectory is represented by the application of my four-folded framework into different geo-temporal contexts. This research, I imagine, can also give birth to a volume in which the process of the formation of “narratives of violence” is shown throughout different contexts to highlight the sameness with which these narratives are generated.

The other strength which can be given to this work is found in one word I have often used: hope. In this age full of violence, where everything and everyone talks the language of hate, hope seems to be the only way out.

Even though my work does not represent the definitive solution —whether it exists or not— I have tried to carry forward a path, which maybe will prove to be unsuccessful, but I think it is worth trying.

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