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**Structural Violence**  
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**ABSTRACT:**

*“Violence” is not a new phenomenon especially in the present times. We all have experienced some kind of violence in our lives. But have we tried to analyse the relationship between the acts of violence and diverse structures of the society? The concept of “Structural Violence” offers a useful framework to understand this linkage. In a layman’s terminology structural violence is shaped by the different institutions of the society. It affects all sections of the society but predominantly the poor people are its victim. The present paper attempts to offer a comprehensive understanding of the term by analyzing three different case studies, hereby offering a conclusion that an act of violence that an individual undergoes should be situated within the larger social matrix.*

With growing complexities in life and paucity of time the society is witnessing an upward graph in violence and aggression. An individual regardless of his social status, caste, gender experiences some form of violence in his everyday life. Violence is spread across the globe, and the ways it maintains exploitative power structures need to be documented and denounced. Unfortunately, although direct physical violence is easily visible, it is merely the tip of the iceberg. Often this kind of violence distracts our ability to see the less clearly visible forms of co-ercion, fear, and subjectification through which violence deceptively and perniciously morphs over time and through history (Bourgois 2010 : 17). Violence has played a significant and crucial role in affecting all areas of our social life which includes our homes, colleges, school, and offices. As C.Wright Mills has pointed out that “life of an individual and history of a society are interconnected”. One cannot be studied without the other, both are essential in order to gauge a complete understanding of a particular phenomenon in this case –‘violence’.

In order to understand whether structural/everyday violence offers a useful framework for understanding violence and suffering it is very essential to first understand what one means by the notion of “structural violence” and hence it becomes imperative at this stage to define the term. The concept of structural violence comes out of Marxism and liberation theology but was first formally coined by a social democrat in Norway, Johan Galtung, as a critique of

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the United States Cold War understanding of nationalist and socialist revolutionary movements. Despite its invisibility, structural violence is shaped by identifiable institutions, relationships, force fields, and ideologies, such as unequal market-based terms of trade between industrialized and non-industrialized nations, discriminatory laws, gender inequity and racism (Bourgois 2010 : 19). Structural violence occurs in a variety of ways that affect people throughout the social order. It is not to deny the fact that the effects of this kind of violence are more brutal on the poor people but the violent consequences of social power also affect other social groups in ways that are often not so visible because they are not so direct and also are not labeled as “violent acts” or considered as “normalized conditions of existence”. The term structural violence has also been used to designate people who experience violence owing to extreme poverty. Violence which includes the highest rate of disease and death, unemployment, homelessness, lack of education, powerlessness and shared fate of miseries (Klein man 2000:227). The examples of structural violence are myriad.

Hence by examining the said cases, this paper makes an earnest attempt to work on the various avenues by which various social, economic institutions carry out strategies that tend to legitimize acts of violence against individuals and groups.

There has been no dearth of literature depicting various cases of structural violence. One of such important works has been carried out by a physicist and an anthropologist Paul Farmer. In his essay on “Suffering and Structural Violence” Farmer has attempted to explore as to how social processes and events come to be translated into personal distress and disease. He situates this in the context of his research in Haiti, where political and economic forces have structured risks for AIDS, Tuberculosis and most other infectious and parasitic diseases. Social forces at work there have also structured risks for most form of extreme suffering from hunger to torture and rape (Farmer 2003:30). By narrating the stories of Acephie and Chouchou Farmer brings to light the fact that how an act of violence which an individual undergoes can be situated in the larger social matrix. He points out the fact that what these two individuals share is the experience of occupying the bottom rung of social ladder in egalitarian societies. One also comes to see the significance that social factors such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status may play in accentuating the suffering that an individual, group or community undergoes. Hence we see how the term structural violence seems apt because in the cases cited above suffering is structured by historically given processes and forces that conspire to constrain agency.

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Philippe Bourgois is also known for his work on structural violence in Central America. He is best known for his ethnographic work on crack dealers in East Harlem, which addresses the interface between interpersonal delinquent violence, including self-destruction substance abuse and gendered dynamics of brutality in the family and of adolescent gang rape, with the larger structural violence of what he calls US inner-city apartheid.

Another seminal work done in regard to structural violence comes from Arthur Klein man. In his essay titled “The Violence’s of Everyday Life” he seeks to show that social suffering has multiple forms. The ethnography of social violence also implicates the social dynamics of everyday practices as the appropriate site to understand how larger orders of social force come together with micro contexts of local power to shape human problems in ways that are resistant to the standard approaches of policies and intervention programmes (Klein man 2000: 227). He throws light upon the fact that not only the poor but people from other social strata also become victims of violence in their everyday life. He then narrates the story of Jane Huff berg who belongs to a middle class family and is a “victim” of structural violence. Jane is not a victim of domestic violence but according to Klein man she also becomes a victim of the violence of oversubscribed time. She has no time to spare; she experiences loss of time and the pressure of time with exhaustion and anger. The demands of external time usurping the priorities of inner time-this is the violence the social order hold for her (Klein man 2000:230). While expanding the notion of violence of everyday Klein man talks about violence of images by which he means that how the appropriation of images of violence by the media in turn perform social violence- moral , aesthetic and experiential. Another important case which Klein man discusses was of patients of Hemophilia in North America who were given infected blood because the industry responsible for blood products argued that they could not change the contaminated blood due to high economic costs. The experience of suffering of Hemophilia patients is seen as an extreme and systematic social violence done to them by the American political and economic order. The cases cited by Klein man reiterate the fact that all individuals regardless of their position in the social strata are victims of structural violence.

The work by Joao Bielh on Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment provides a means to think of violence in contemporary times. Bielh situates his work in Brazil and through his work he tells us how Brazil’s entrenched network of social inequalities is ramified and magnified by the inefficiencies of the State’s medical and public health system and this in turns affects

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community survival, kinship resilience and individual physical and mental well being. Vita, a zone of social abandonment is where the poor, the mentally and physically ill, the homeless and the unwanted are left to die. As Bielh describes, Vita is a site of social abandonment inhabited by those who were discarded by society and by medical establishments as terminally hopeless cases. From this work it becomes clear that in order to study the life of an individual one has to place the individual in the larger frame of social fabric.

The literature discussed above highlights the fact that various social and economic institutions carry out acts of violence against individuals and groups in turn leading to these acts as being characterized as “legitimate”. But from all these accounts it becomes clear that rather to view violence simply as a set of discrete events one needs to locate acts of violence in a wider socio-economic framework. The notion of structural/everyday violence helps us in gaining a complete understanding of an act of violence. As Klein man, Veena Das have argued that social suffering is the result of the devastating injuries that social forces inflict on human experience. Through violence in social experience, as mediated by cultural representations, social formations are not just replicated, but the ordinary lives of individuals are also shaped, and all –too –often twisted, bent even broken (Klein man 2000:238). Through the works of different authors we come to see how the category of structural violence expands or one could also say that how structural violence incorporates new forms/dimensions in varied socio-economic contexts. One can also raise this question that do we actually know exactly what violence is. Acts of violence cannot be objectified, quantified, and categorized. One cannot clearly make a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate, visible or invisible violence, normal or abnormal violence. But one can certainly say that in order to understand the notion of structural violence we need to look at people as being rooted in specific social, economic and historical context. I would like to end with the famous words by C.Wright Mills “Life of an individual and history of a society are interconnected”.

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