India low on global homicide and violence scale

Cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, known for his radical theories about the evolution of language and violence in society, has a good word for India: the country is on the right side of the global homicide and crime scale despite the wars it has fought against Pakistan and numerous civil conflicts.

“The last statistics that I had said India had a homicide rate of 5.5. It is in the second lowest range. India has had several wars with Pakistan but they didn’t compare to the Iran or Vietnam war. India has seen a lot of civil wars but on a per capita basis not a large percentage of the Indian population has been killed in these wars,” Pinker told IANS on the sidelines of the Jaipur Literature Festival.

All the wars put together since 1948 have killed around 50,000 people, Pinker said. Pinker said the most violent spot around the globe was probably the sub-Saharan Africa – Congo and Sudan’s Darfur region.

The Canadian-American experimental psychologist, who teaches at Harvard University, is the author of eight books. Two of his works, “The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial Of Human Nature” and “The Better Angels of Nature: Why Violence has Declined” have been acclaimed worldwide for their pathbreaking ideas about cognitive science of the mind and theories about the scaling down of violence.

The scientist said many had “predicted after the second world war that it was the beginning” of many wars but that did not happen. “Korea and Vietnam are not happening anymore,” Pinker said. He said it was too soon to tell whether institutions like democracy, peacekeeping forces were effective in controlling violence.

Pinker said there were greater levels of intellectual awareness in society and new ideas “as opposed to early ideas of tribal purity”. “The ultimate idea is the value of human life,” he said. He said the idea of valuing human life, prevention of violence against minority and women were finding advocates but “there were still pockets where it was not the case”.

“Suppression of free speech, external ideas and violations of human rights tend to be in Islamic countries where there are honor killings. In Iran, Khomeini wanted to restrict the number of students studying humanities because they question values.”

North Korea is another country that has shut itself off from the flow, Pinker said.
Pinker said his last book, “The Better Angels of Nature: Why Violence has Declined”, was based on points he had made in 2007 in a couple of paragraphs – “even if human nature has violence, there has been a decline in European homicide and slowing down of corporal punishment”.

“I had made these points years ago in 2007. My agent said what are you so optimistic about? There was more evidence of declining violence than I knew about (I began to get feedback), decline in war in Europe and worldwide in 1990 and I started to see a pattern,” Pinker said. The scientist has begun to work on his next project – “A Style Manual For 21st Century” that explores the modern linguistics of cognitive science. “The book will be about what makes language change based on how the human brain processes language,” Pinker said (India Current Affairs 24-1-12).