

COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN INDIA: PERSPECTIVES ON

THE CAUSATIVE FACTORS

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Abstract

The communal carnage in Gujarat led many to re-examine the existing explanations of the various causative factors of religious conflagrations. Paul Brass terms these explications as 'unsatisfactory' and 'mystifying' in his work on Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India. Naturalizing accounts of riots have invariably portrayed them as inevitable eruptions of anger and violence between communities divided by deep, incommensurable and often historical differences.

In his huge body of work on the subject, Imtiaz Ahmad categorically dwells on the political and economic factors that lead to communal violence. One of the major assertions that he makes contains the wider perspective that had been advanced in terms of sociological theory. According to Ahmad, Hindu-Muslim violence needs to be viewed as an extension of general social conflict which includes inter as well as intra communal riots, caste violence and other forms of sectional upheavals. The emphasis placed on Hindu-Muslim conflict in case of social and communal violence comes but naturally considering the huge impact the various riots between the two communities have had on the Indian polity and society.

Ahmad, however, views Hindu-Muslim riots as a prismatic manifestation of numerous factors, historical and political. He makes a number of other assertions and warns future sociologists and political scientists against categorizing communities as monolithic blocks. Ashutosh Varshney on the other hand, argues that the conflict between Hindus and Muslims is the terrible outcome of the absence of civic ties across communities. He classifies certain cities as 'riot-prone' after a careful observation of the variance in the frequency of the occurrence of such violence.

The sustained absence of civic ties, in time, leads to the establishment of an 'institutionalized peace system' which ensures the better functioning of the administrative and police forces. Varshney also asserts that Hindu-Muslim conflict is particularly an urban phenomenon and is concentrated in certain states and cities. For instance, the analysis of Ahmedabad as a 'textile' city where violence escalated after the closure of mills which often degenerated into communal violence delineates the factors that have contributed to the city's coming to be known as 'riot-prone'.

Paul Brass identifies 'specialists' and 'a network of specialists' who form a 'riot system'. These men, while engaging in business, politics and cultural-religious organizations, are always willing and able to translate rumors and general discourses into local mobilization. Brass does not discount the broader cultural and psychological explanations of how the history or Hindu-Muslim enmity has, over time, produced a rich archive of mythical knowledge of 'the other'.

While Brass argues that riots are almost always intentional and organized with objectives in mind, Steven Wilkinson analyses the Gujarat incidents as a case of history repeating itself in his article 'Putting Gujarat in Perspective' (EPW, April 27, 2002). The emphasis is on state action or inaction in preventing riots of any kind especially Hindu-Muslim violence. The degree of party competition is examined in detail in this essay.

The paper therefore would attempt to take a broad but detailed account of the four theorists mentioned above. A study of Brass, Varshney, Ahmad and Wilkinson would advance the most varied and differentiated mass of thought and scholarship which would go a long way in putting the issue of communal violence in perspective.

Even before the last cinder could burn out in the badlands of Gujarat, myths were circulated, accusations were leveled explanations and counter-explanations were advanced about the manner in which members of the minority community had 'started' the riot in the first place by sending the train up in flames.¹ The subsequent murder and mayhem was then categorized by the Gujarat government (and the central government as well with their silence on the pogrom) as an 'equal and opposite reaction' to the train-burning incident at Godhra.

Various fears were expressed by the BJP government and its Sangh² affiliates about the 'lesson' that needed to be taught to the Muslims failing which they would have taken over the state, both in numbers as well as power. Further the 'Pakistani agents' who thronged the streets of Ahmedabad and Vadodara had to be shown their place. The politico-religious reasons given by those belonging to the governmental machinery in the state and the countrywide network of the Sangh Parivar failed to convince anyone.

¹ Investigations have still to be completed on why exactly the fire happened and who was responsible for it. Many reports suggest that the fire was started from inside the train. Thus, the complicity of the Muslims standing outside on the platform is suspect any which way.

² The Rashtriya Swyam Sewak Sangh (RSS), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are the principal affiliates of what is commonly known as the *Sangh Parivar* (the Sangh Family).

After all, they smacked of a lack of logic and compounded obduracy.

The carnage, however, would lead a number of scholars, both young and old, to re-examine the existing explanations of the various causative factors of religious conflagrations. Paul Brass terms these explications as 'unsatisfactory' and 'mystifying' in his work on Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India.³ Naturalizing accounts of riots have invariably portrayed them as inevitable eruptions of anger and violence between communities divided by deep, incommensurable and often historical differences.

The paper would in the next few pages attempt to take a broad but detailed account of these explanations and the theorists who are credited with having advanced them. A study of the major authoritative work done by Paul Brass, Ashutosh Varshney, Imtiaz Ahmad and Steven Wilkinson would lead to a most varied and differentiated mass of thought and scholarship which could go a long way in putting the issue of Hindu-Muslim violence in perspective.

The veracity with which the Gujarat state government pushed for early elections in the aftermath of the worst communal violence since Independence (notwithstanding the state) startled both scholars as well as media-watchers who had been witness, even though distant and mute to the horrors that unfolded on the streets of Ahmedabad and Vadodara to name only a fraction of the total area of the extent of the

³ Brass, Paul, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, University of Washington Press, 2003

violence.⁴The dissolving of the state assembly only confirmed what purists had feared- the violence was a result of the insecurity of the BJP after weighed down by defeat at the municipal and panchayat elections.

I

Steven Wilkinson, in the seminal ' Putting Gujarat in Perspective' (*EPW*, April 2002)⁵deconstructs the entire debate on state complicity by delineating a wider shift in Indian politics. The state governments delay in calling in the Army established beyond doubt that the anti-minority pogrom was being carried out with the involvement of not only the politicians but the state machinery as well.

As in most riots in the country before and after Independence, minorities suffered disproportionately in Gujarat from February 27, 2002 to the beginning of April, 2002.⁶Minorities Commission figures on the communal riots that took place from 1985-87 stand testimony to the fact that in almost every bout of communal violence, the minorities are taken to the butcher.⁷ Given the fact that the state governments are responsible for law and order in India, the question why some state governments are successful in controlling riot situations and preventing one from occurring and others are not is not only relevant but also vexing.

⁴ The violence in Gujarat was not concentrated in a few areas as had been the case before but spread into the tribal districts of South Gujarat as well.

⁵ Wilkinson, Steven, 'Putting Gujarat in Perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 27, 2002

⁶ Conservative estimates put the total number of people killed at 800. Various independent commissions of inquiry and other sources talk in terms of 'thousands' killed and property worth crores destroyed.

⁷ Minorities Commission Reports, 1986-88 found that between 1985-87, 60% of the 443 people killed were Muslims and that Muslims had suffered 73% of the nine crores in reported property damage.

Wilkinson argues that ethnic riots⁸ are far from being spontaneous eruptions of anger. Instead they are often planned by politicians for a clear electoral purpose. Subsequently, it then follows that these very politicians will also prevent riots if and when it is in their interest to do so. These violent conflagrations are, therefore caused by political elites who play on existing communal tensions to advance a political agenda (Wilkinson, 2003).⁹

Instrumental political explanations for violence have been labeled 'unsatisfactory' not only by Wilkinson but also by other theorists. The Duke University professor lends credence to his criticism of instrumental explanations by invoking the actions of certain state governments. The first point of refutation that he makes is that scholars who look at political elites and their reasons for inciting violence offer little insight into why some politicians tend to do exactly the opposite and use their political capital and control of the state to prevent ethnic conflict.¹⁰ The second major problem identified by Wilkinson, with many political explanations for ethnic violence is that they fail to account for *the variation in patterns of violence* within states.

In order to clear any confusion arising out of the criticism made against the existing theories, Wilkinson

⁸ Wilkinson uses the term 'ethnic' in the broader sense to describe Hindu-Muslim riots in India. Horowitz argues, all conflicts based on *ascriptive* identities- race, language, religion, tribe or caste- can be called 'ethnic'. The term 'ethnic cleansing' has also been used to describe the atrocities in Gujarat.

⁹ Wilkinson, Steven, unpublished manuscript, 2003

¹⁰ Wilkinson, Steven, unpublished manuscript, 2003, chapter 1

posits three 'possible' explanations¹¹ for the differences in state performance, which will be elaborated upon in the course of the paper. First, decades of corruption, criminalization, politicization and a general lack of state capacity have left Indian state governments too weak to prevent riots. Second, Indian state governments are unable or unwilling to protect minorities because they systematically under-represent them within their governments, police forces and local administrations. Lastly and most importantly, the degree of party competition affects the value governments place on attracting 'Muslim swing voters', which effects whether or not the government will order the respective administrations to protect the minorities.

Since Wilkinson's scholarship primarily deals with the actions of the state in fomenting or preventing ethnic violence between Hindus and Muslims in accordance with their electoral incentives, it is imperative to take a detailed account of the arguments that he posits in this regard. He focuses on state and town level electoral incentives which remain important even if we assume various other factors, socio-economic and otherwise, to be constant and controlled.

At the local level, the politicians would try to ensure that the identity that favors their party is the one that is most salient in the minds of a majority of voters.¹² Those parties that represent elites within ethnic groups will invariably use polarizing anti-minority events in

¹¹ Wilkinson, Steven, *Putting Gujarat in Perspective*, EPW, April 2002

¹² Wilkinson, Steven, *Unpublished manuscript*, 2003, chapter I, page 2

order to encourage the members of their ethnic category to identify with their party and the 'majority' identity.

The most effective method, according to Wilkinson, for elite dominated ethnic parties to mobilize those target voters who are at risk of voting for the main rival parties will be to use 'ethnic wedge issues'. This is summarily accomplished by highlighting the 'Muslim threat' especially in urban areas¹³ where the party hopes to win over the pivotal Hindu voters.

The form of anti-minority mobilization taken recourse to depends on both the identity which the party wants to make salient and also the fact that the Indian state, similar to other states, privileges some form of public ritual or procession which culminates in immense mobilization.¹⁴ In fact, C. A. Bayly shows that riots occurred because of, or in the wake of, religious processions in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries. Scholars like Tambiah have also noted that processions often degenerate into rioting as a result of the manipulation by leaders who wish to bring about some form of mobilization in their favour.¹⁵

Defensive counter- mobilization by the minorities is portrayed as 'anti-national' and the myth of the 'foreign hand' is often invoked. When large crowds face each other,

¹³ In India, both upper caste Hindus and Muslims live disproportionately in the urban areas. They thus, constitute the two main voting blocks in bipolar urban races.

¹⁴ A favorite strategy of Hindu nationalist leaders who calculate that they will gain electorally from polarization around a Hindu identity is to organize unusually large religious processions that take new routes through minority neighborhoods, to hoist the national flag over a disputed site, or take out processions to celebrate national anniversaries.

the threat of the situation deteriorating increases which is then construed to be the handiwork of the Muslims alone.

Conditions such as these produces 'community consciousness' that translates into a wave for or against the party which further leads to a swing that either reaps rewards or brickbats. Wilkinson argues that to win an election it is not necessary to appeal to each and every voter but to the pivotal swing voters who generally are those undecided voters who fear the consequences of not taking a defensive stand against the members of the other community.

Statistical evidence suggests that proximity to an election sharply increases the likelihood of a riot.¹⁶ Factors such as economic competition, Muslim population and percentage of refugees from Pakistan are not numerically significant in explaining the occurrence of a Hindu-Muslim riot even though computation shows that as the Hindu-Muslim balance of a town reaches 50-50, the possibility of a riot goes up a few notches.

Three kinds of situations may develop which prove that as electoral competition increases, the level of riots goes down. First, the existence of three or more parties provides a security blanket to the minorities as the importance of swing votes increases provided the majoritarian party is not trying to attract the fringe Hindu votes. A bi-polar state party system creates a potentially dangerous situation for the minorities,

¹⁵ Jaffrelot, Christophe, *The Politics of Processions and Hindu-Muslim Riots*, Atul Kohli and Amrita Basu (ed.) *Community Conflicts in India*, OUP, 2001

¹⁶ Wilkinson, Steven, Unpublished manuscript, 2003

especially when the majoritarian party, which owns the anti-minority issues, tries to foment violence.

The third situation can be exemplified by Gujarat and the events that unfolded in that state in the year 2002. Disaster awaits the minority community, however, when the anti-minority, majoritarian party is in power. The anti-minority government will prevent violence only when the destruction threatens to wean away the loyal voters. Any potential advantage to the government will not be sacrificed in order to protect the minorities.

The number of elections that are preceded by communal killings has taken an upswing over the years, especially since the Hindu nationalist BJP gained political prominence. If the L.K Advani¹⁷ led *rath yatra* (chariot procession) that traversed most parts of the country left a trail of blood in its wake, the mammoth saffron wave that swept the India in election after election proves beyond doubt the fact that Hindu-Muslim riots increases the likelihood of the BJP improving its electoral performance.

The above argument refutes the claim made by Ashutosh Varshney in his work on ethnic violence¹⁸ in which he almost absolves politicians, the strategic roles played by them in fomenting violence and the Sangh Parivar that has been associated with most post- Independence Hindu-Muslim conflict by stressing on the existence or absence of civic

¹⁷ L.K Advani is a senior BJP politician and the Union Minister of Home Affairs, Government of India at the time of writing this paper.

¹⁸ Varshney, Ashutosh, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Yale University Press, 2002

ties between members of the two communities as the major factor that either leads to violence or to peace.

Electoral incentives are the prime movers of an ethnic riot. Wilkinson, however, further investigates the reaction of a state government and its administrative machinery to communal violence, whether in controlling the conflagration or letting the fires burn. The two major indices that are used for this purpose are- state autonomy¹⁹ and state capacity²⁰.

Wilkinson's central argument is that state weakness does not account for state level differences in the level of Hindu-Muslim violence. He finds that the relationship between state autonomy (the lack of political interference or otherwise) and state capacity is inversely proportional to variations in occurrence of Hindu-Muslim riots. States that are said to be the lowest on the autonomy and capacity barometer have done remarkably well to prevent riots. Even the weakest state governments, like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, still seem to possess the minimal state capacity necessary to prevent Hindu-Muslim riots if this is prioritized by the state's political leaders.

The mere fact that there are sharp state level variations in the occurrence as well as the prevention and control of riots suggest that the problem is not so much state capacity as the instructions given by politicians to state officials telling them whether to protect or not to protect

¹⁹ State autonomy signifies the power of the administration to take independent action.

²⁰ State capacity includes the fiscal disposition, judicial capacity and rate of transfers within the state.

minorities. Certain specific aspects however are linked to state capacity and poor performance in preventing riots.

The financial weakness of some state governments can be a cause for concern. Interestingly enough, the Gujarat state government was hardly cash-strapped when the pogrom took place in the state. Secondly, the police and judicial systems in many states are understaffed and overloaded, which reduces the perceived risk rioters face of arrest, prosecution and conviction.

Punitive transfers also have an independent negative effect on riot preparedness, because frequent transfers reduce officers' knowledge about their districts, the potential trouble spots and the one best way to prevent a riot.

Political interference with state autonomy is alleged to increase Hindu-Muslim violence in different ways. Instructions from the political bosses to either drop or go slow in investigating cases of mob brutality and murder by certain influential members of the citizenry or political retribution that they delay in taking stern action especially against groups that enjoy state protection are the common ways in which state autonomy is eroded and in some cases demolished.

Obviously enough the central thrust of the work done by Steven Wilkinson traces the linkages between party competition and ethnic violence but at the same time he finds that high levels of electoral competition can *reduce* as well as precipitate ethnic violence. Both situations can be reproduced in equation form in the following manner:

Party competition (↑)+ *Muslim swing votes* (↑)= (↓) **Levels of violence**

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II

The existence or otherwise of civic ties between Hindus and Muslims at the town level is the primary cause of conflict or the lack of it between the two is the central assertion made by Ashutosh Varshney²¹ in his recent work on the subject. Where such networks of civic engagement exist, tensions and conflicts are regulated and managed; where they are missing, communal identities lead to endemic and ghastly violence.

These networks can be broken down into: *associational forms*²² of engagement and *everyday forms*²³ of engagement. Both forms of civic engagement if intercommunal promote peace. The capacity, however, of the associational forms to withstand national level exogenous shocks is substantially higher.

Varshney argues that associational forms turn out to be sturdier in the face of politicians trying to foment communal trouble. Vigorous associational life acts as a serious constraint on the polarizing strategies of political elites. The mechanisms that connect civil society

²¹ Civic engagement leads to lower levels of ethnic violence. Varshney, Ashutosh, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Yale University Press, 2002, Page 9

²² Some examples are: Business associations, professional organizations, film clubs, sports clubs, trade unions etc.

(non-state domain) and ethnic conflict can be broadly classified into two categories.²⁴

By promoting communication between members of different religious communities, civic networks often make neighborhood peace possible. People come together routinely to form temporary organizations in the face of tensions. These can be highly effective, and are known as 'peace committees'. Such organized bodies are difficult in those urban concentrations where civic engagement between Hindus and Muslims does not exist.

The second mechanism describes why associational forms of engagement are sturdier than everyday forms in dealing with ethnic and communal tensions. Vibrant organizations serving the economic, cultural and social needs of the two communities can promote communal peace, which can be solidly expressed. Varshney, however, presents a profound paradox.

Everyday engagement is so complete in the village level in India that associational forms of engagement are few and far between. Yet rural India has experienced fewer riots since independence. In contrast, even though associational life flourishes in the cities, even petty rumors can cause deadly bouts of communal violence.

The argument fails to stand its ground once the 'anonymity' argument is put forward. Cities tend to be less

²³ Some examples are: Hindu and Muslim families visiting each other, eating together, joint participation in festivals etc.

interconnected and more anonymous. Size, can reduce the extent and effectiveness of everyday interaction. This explanation leads us to the two other major findings that makes its appearance in the work done by Varshney. First, the share of villages in communal rioting is remarkably small. According to Varshney, Hindu-Muslim violence is primarily an urban phenomenon.

The violence in Gujarat can be termed unique in several ways including the occurrence of large-scale communal violence in the rural areas. The tribal infested Dangs and Sabarkantha district saw the largest number of killings in the rural belt, however, much lesser than those killed in urban centers like Ahmedabad and Vadodara.

The second argument that the political scientist makes as far as town-level variation is concerned is a little more problematic than the first one. He differentiates between 'riot-prone cities' and others where he identifies eight cities-Ahmedabad, Bombay, Aligarh, Hyderabad, Meerut, Baroda, Calcutta and Delhi- to be particularly high on the riot scale.²⁵ Eighty two percent of the urban population therefore, is not riot-prone.

India's Hindu-Muslim violence therefore, is city specific. State and national level politics provides the context within which the local mechanisms linked with violence are activated. Cities are also the sites for large-scale civic engagement, which constrains local politicians in their

²⁴ Varshney, Ashutosh, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Yale University Press, 2002, page 9

strategic behavior. These riot prone cities lack such forms of engagement that leads to the political elites taking advantage of the volatility of the situation.

In peaceful cities, an institutionalized peace system exists, where organizations are communally integrated. These civic organizations, for all practical purposes become the ears and arms of the local administration. It then follows that, if the civic edifice is interethnic and associational, it can take 'ethnic earthquakes' such as a partition and desecration of a holy place. If the form of civic engagement is intraethnic in everyday life, earthquakes of smaller intensity can bring the edifice down.²⁶

Varshney, thus states that a multiethnic society with few interconnections across ethnic boundaries is very vulnerable to ethnic disorders and violence. In Hyderabad city, for instance, most Hindus and Muslims do not meet in a civic setting where mutual relations can be formed. Lacking these networks, even competent police officers and administrators, watch a riot unfolding helplessly.

The emphasis on civic engagement as the mechanism that either foments or controls communal violence tends to displace focus from the role played by the Hindu nationalist Sangh Parivar in engineering riots and pogroms

²⁵ These eight cities represent a mere 18 per cent of India's urban population even though they account for 49 percent of all urban riot deaths.

²⁶ Varshney, Ashutosh, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Yale University Press, 2002, Page 11

since independence. Paul Brass²⁷ is critical of Varshney's 'blame displacing' theorization and the fact that he identifies the Gujarat violence as the first of its kind in India.

III

"Most of his work gives a clean chit to the Sangh Parivar," commented Prof. Brass in the course of his lecture. Varshney, according to the celebrated theorist, refuses to recognize that many riots in the post-independence period have been outright pogroms. He indulges in a kind of 'apologetics' to the Sangh Parivar.

The phrase 'ethnic earthquake' is, in the words of Prof. Brass, a myth about spontaneous outbreaks of communal violence. What is not a myth however is that communal riots are 'organized' and 'produced' by a network of known persons in the city or town. Most of these known persons are members of the Sangh Parivar who are devoted to the cult of violence for the protection of Hinduism.²⁸

Despite the fact that there are 'waves' or 'chains' in the occurrence patterns of communal rioting, there has been no notable period when such violence has been absent. Paul Brass, in the many enlightening pages that follow his introduction, develops and demonstrates the argument as to why communal tensions are maintained, accompanied from time to time by lethal rioting, and how it is essential for the

²⁷ In a recent interaction with students and members of the faculty at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India dated 12 January 2004

²⁸ Recent interaction with students and members of the faculty at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India dated 12 January 2004

development of militant Hindu nationalism and for other organizations and individuals.²⁹

Communal riots, according to the renowned scholar are endemic in India. The phenomenon of certain sites that are prone to violence or otherwise, entering and disappearing from the list of riot-hit cities is therefore, somewhat flummoxing. While investigating the spatial variation in the incidence of Hindu-Muslim riots, he tries to classify the various issues that continue to surprise in categories of persistence, differential incidence/timing, classification/meaning and power.

The struggle over meaning, explanations and power relations requires attention to a communal discourse that has entrenched itself rather deep in the body politic of the country. Brass uses the term 'hegemonic' to explain the communal discourse that pervades Indian politics. This discourse, fiercely Hindu nationalistic, has been successful in corrupting history as well as memory.³⁰

He identifies three elements inherent in the spread of this hegemonic communal discourse. Historization leads to the distortion of history³¹ and the division of history into periods where Muslims are seen as conquerors. The fundamental antagonism is over-emphasized. The aspect of memorialization includes greater attention given to the

²⁹ Brass, Paul, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, University of Washington Press, 2003, Introduction, Page 9

³⁰ Recent interaction with students and members of the faculty at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India dated 12 January 2004

³¹ Includes the revision of history text books used as school curricula where attempts are made to interpret history according to the political convenience of that time.

dead heroes of one particular faith. The dramatizing and exaggerating nuances used to glorify what the Sangh Parivar calls 'the struggle for the birthplace of Lord Rama', is essential to memorialization.

Evidence exists to show that memorialization leads to demonization of the 'other'. The Muslims, the 'others' in the Indian case, are portrayed in literature, cinema and other forms of human expression as 'racially different inferior beings who invaded our country and cultural space'. Myths, lending credence to this process of demonization, are taken recourse to in the form of the spoken word as well as the written letter. Muslims are seen as violent and a danger to Hindu women.

Some utterly preposterous myths that have made their presence felt in the last two decades or so are the invariably higher rates of population growth among the Muslims through which they are trying to take over power both at the local and the national level and the fact that most of them are 'Pakistani agents'.

Another feature of the communal discourse is 'body symbolism'. Muslim rule is portrayed as 'slavery' of the Hindus. The politics of body symbolism depicts the partition in visceral terms i.e. tearing apart of the Hindu body. The Muslims thus are dangerous to the Hindu body and need to be removed before the danger can actually present itself. This explains why most post-independence riots have been outright pogroms against the Muslims.

Prof. Brass delineates three phases in the production process of riots. He compares a riot to a 'staged drama'. Dipankar Gupta uses the term 'picnic rioting' to describe the manner in which Hindu mobs actually celebrate the killing of Muslims. The Gujarat riots exemplified the herding of saffron clad mobs into trucks and the subsequent journey into specially marked colonies of Muslim concentration.

The first phase therefore, is one of preparation (*rehearsal*) in which tensions are kept alive. Killing of a cow and the kidnap of a Hindu girl are the common methods. The following phase is one of activation (*enactment*). The political circumstance must be right for a riot to be precipitated. An election could be such an occasion.

The last phase of riot production is explanation or interpretation where blame displacement comes into play. Prof. Brass further argues that there exists a division of labour in the production of riots. Riot systems are institutionalized. Specific roles are assigned to persons like that of scouts or informants, rumormongers and propagandists.

Vernacular journalists enact their parts admirably by coming out with wild and inciting stories. The recruiters are those who collect people to form mobs. The roles of the politicians has already been documented earlier in the paper. Special duties are assigned to, whom Prof. Brass calls, 'fire tenders' who go around scouting for rumours that could help in fomenting a riot. These men invariably are members of either the VHP or the Bajrang Dal.

'Conversion specialists' ultimately decide whether to begin a riot or not.

Causal questions about the spatial spread of riots are of utmost importance. Why exactly are they produced in certain cities or towns and why not in others? Steven Wilkinson's answer to this question has already been looked at. Brass asserts that the contexts are primarily political as mass mobilizations usually precede elections.

A sizeable number of Muslims in a particular town or city is essential for the production of riots. The demise of the Congress system has created a space that is normally filled by the other political formation, which also benefits from riots and their production. The BJP has emerged as such a formation that benefits disproportionately through riots. The Gujarat situation is self-evident in this regard.

Brass in his new book takes Aligarh as his case for study and periodises the history of riot production in that city. The early period belonged to the Congress, which dominated till the late 1950s. This domination began to be contested between the 1960s and the 1980s. The last period, which is also the current phase is a contest between the BJP and the Janta Dal- Samajwadi Party combine.

He is critical of Varshney for ignoring the 1990-91 communal pogrom, which was solely the handiwork of the Sangh Parivar. Such scholarship, he further clarifies, distorts all analytical social studies.

Brass and Wilkinson agree therefore that, riots and electoral politics are closely connected to each other. They proclaim in their respective works that there exists an absence of political will to control riots and this cuts across political parties. Both further argue that the Sangh Parivar are the primary sources of most communal conflict in the country since independence.

Sociologists have a penchant for examining social conflict and Imtiaz Ahmad is no different in his approach. He, being one of the first scholars to propound the socio-economic theories for communal conflict, views Hindu-Muslim conflict as an extension of the wider social conflict that includes inter as well as intra communal riots, caste violence and other forms of sectional upheavals.

The emphasis placed on Hindu-Muslim conflict in case of social and communal violence comes but naturally considering the huge impact the various riots between the two communities have had on the Indian polity and society.³²

Ahmad argues that economic prosperity of the Muslims is a factor that precipitates endemic anger on the part of the Hindus who fear being swamped, both socially and economically by the *nouveau riche* Muslims. This antagonism results in riots, which spreads to other parts of the state. An argument that has been advanced by numerous scholars following Imtiaz Ahmad, the above brings to the fore the social contradictions that have given rise to many

³² Excerpts from Imtiaz Ahmad's original manuscripts.

communal conflagrations in the past and are likely to do so in future.

The ghosts of Gujarat cannot be invoked here as the violence there was 'produced' by the government of the day. The tensions that prevail, in the rural plains of the north-western state, are somewhat akin to the argument made by Prof.Ahmad. Frequent riots in the diamond city of Surat prove his point beyond any doubt.

The democratic process therefore, is responsible for communal conflict and the lack of it. The scholars discussed above have advanced conclusive arguments about the role of democracy and the electoral system. The kind of electoral system that gets institutionalized over time determines the frequency of communal riots. Further, the arguments made above prove that riots are produced by specialists who could be politicians or members of the majoritarian formation.

The paper, thus puts the whole issue of 'causal factors' of communal riots into perspective and provides us with a number of theories, most of them interconnected to explain a riot, especially when a Gujarat occurs in the history of mankind!

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