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There is a lot to like about this book. Its attractions include a critique of current theorizing about ethnic conflict, an introduction to the rise of mass politics in India, brief histories of how mass politics played out differently in three pairs of Indian cities, and a far-reaching hypothesis about how civic associations made the difference between peace and violence in each pair. These attractions are multiplied by writing that is easy to read and enlivened with the author’s personal experiences.

I aim in this review first to unpack the logic of the book’s argument, and then to evaluate the evidence and interpretations advanced in it.

The Problem

The theoretical framing is straightforward. Ethnic riots are much less common than ethnic conflict, and much less common in some places than others. In India, Hindu-Muslim riots are much more common, per capita, in urban than in rural areas. Even in cities notorious for Hindu-Muslim violence, riots are relatively rare occurrences with years without violence intervening between days or weeks of violence. Current theories of ethnic conflict are too general to comprehend this kind of variation over space and time. Essentialism says that violence occurs because of a history of conflict between historicized groups. Instrumentalism says that violence occurs because elites instigate conflict for their own benefit. Constructivism says that violence occurs because modern industry, communication, and transportation create mass societies with conflicting identities. Institutionalism says that violence occurs when the form of government does not provide enough safeguards for ethnic identities in a multi-ethnic state. None of these theories offers much purchase when trying to understand a phenomenon that is highly variable over periods and places in which history, elite ambitions, modernization, and political forms are changing only slowly.

The Solution

A new hypothesis flows directly from the critique. To explain variation in Hindu-Muslim rioting, Varshney suggests variation in two kinds of interethnic association that reduce the likelihood of violence. Everyday interethnic contacts in the neighborhood, work, and marketplace create individual-to-individual linkages of communication and trust. Interethnic organizations—any kind of association in the space between family and state—create even stronger linkages and stronger bulwarks against violence. Furthermore, mass-based organizations—unions, political parties, and grassroots educational and trade associations—create stronger linkages than elite organizations such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and businessmen’s clubs. Both everyday and organizational associations contribute to keeping the peace in the face of provocations that might otherwise lead to riots. Integrated civic organizations in particular get in the way by squashing rumors, organizing neighborhood patrols, and inhibiting those who would initiate communal violence.
The Evidence

The first comparison is between rural and urban India. Although three-quarters of Indians live in rural areas, cities had 90 percent of Hindu-Muslim riots (96 percent of riot deaths) between 1950 and 1995. Thus riots are disproportionately an urban phenomenon, and Varshney suggests that rural peacefulness is understandable in light of the greater everyday contacts between Hindus and Muslims in village life. Everyday links of communication and trust between Hindus and Muslims create a barrier to intergroup violence.

The second comparison is between three pairs of cities: Aligarh and Calicut, Hyderabad and Lucknow, and Ahmedabad and Surat. In each pair the first city has had many riots and many deaths between 1950 and 1995, whereas the second city has had no (Calicut, Lucknow) or little (Surat) rioting. Each pair has approximately the same percentage of Muslim population (30–34 percent Muslim, 37–38 percent Muslim, 14 percent Muslim respectively). Ahmedabad and Surat offer perhaps the best-controlled comparison in that both cities are located in the state of Gujarat.

Aligarh (1991 population 0.5 million) is in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh; Calicut (1990 population 0.75 million) is in the southern state of Kerala. Historically, the north of India was dominated by the Muslim elite of the Moghul Empire, whereas the south was ruled by upper-caste Hindus. One result was that caste distinctions were generally stronger and more extensive in the south than in the north.

When mass politics began with British enlargement of the franchise, the Aligarh Muslim elite was challenged by a rising Hindu merchant class, whereas the Calicut Brahmin elite was challenged by the mobilization of lower-caste Hindus for civil rights and economic improvement. When Mahatma Gandhi energized mass politics in the 1920s to contest British rule, these local cleavages were reflected in the growth of civic organizations. In Calicut these organizations often included both Hindus and Muslims, but in Aligarh integration in such organizations was small. The result was that threats and provocations between Hindus and Muslims led to riots in Aligarh, but similar provocations produced little violence in Calicut.

Hyderabad (1990 population 4.0 million) is in the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh; Lucknow (1990 population 1.6 million) is in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. Both were once ruled by Muslim princes.

In the last years before India’s independence, between 1937 and 1948, the last nizam of Hyderabad attempted to save Muslim supremacy in his state by suppressing democracy and supporting a Muslims-first political party and the doctrine of Muslims as a ruling race. Violence against Hindus did not prevent eventual political supremacy by the majority Hindus. In contrast, the historical divide in Lucknow was between Shia and Sunni Muslims. As early as the 1800s, Shia princes cultivated Hindu linkages and rituals in controlling poor Sunni Muslims.

When mass politics began in the 1920s, these local divisions were reflected in civic organizations. Gandhi’s efforts at bridge building between Hindus and Muslims had some success in Hyderabad, but mostly at the level of educated elites. In contrast, Lucknow developed both elite and grassroots civic organizations, especially in the economically important embroidery market. Again the difference in civic organizations registers in the riot statistics: Hyderabad suffered riots in the poorer parts of the city despite the efforts of integrated elites, whereas in Lucknow similar provocations were contained by the power of integration in grassroots civic organizations.
Ahmedabad (1990 population 3.3 million) and Surat (1990 population 1.5 million) are both located in the western state of Gujarat. These two cities offer the best-controlled comparison because language and governmental institutions are the same. In addition, Gandhi lived for many years in Ahmedabad, and both cities were in a position to profit unusually from his efforts to build bridges between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi's energy and inspiration were directed toward building not just an integrated political party but integrated unions and integrated educational and professional organizations. Nevertheless, Ahmedabad became notorious for Hindu-Muslim riots beginning in the 1980s, whereas Surat remained peaceful until the 1990s when it joined Ahmedabad in deadly rioting precipitated by the destruction of the Baburi mosque in Ayodhya. What happened?

Varshney argues that the 1950s success of Gandhi's Congress Party and the other grassroots civic organizations he stimulated in Gujarat led to complacency and bureaucratic self-serving that undermined organizational effectiveness. By the 1980s these organizations were hollow shells of cadre without grassroots or street credibility. In Ahmedabad this decline affected every kind of integrated organization and riots began in the 1980s and continued into the 1990s.

In Surat one form of integrated organization survived: business associations of small weavers that are centered in the old city portion of Surat. Both Muslims and Hindus are weavers and their business has increased to the point that Surat is the center of small-scale textiles in India. The textile associations kept the peace in Surat until the destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya—the greatest challenge to Hindu-Muslim relations in decades—and even under this provocation the associations kept peace in the old quarter of the city. The riots occurred in the shantytowns around the city.

In summary, the evidence seems to show a strong correlation between integrating civic associations and peace. Interpersonal contact between Muslims and Hindus is higher in rural than in urban areas, and riots are fewer and less deadly in rural than in urban areas.

Cities with stronger grassroots civic organizations that integrate Hindus and Muslims have fewer and less deadly riots than comparable cities in which such organizations are weak or nonexistent.

A Closer Look at the Evidence

Some caution must be attached to the fact that the book does not provide much evidence of the nature of Hindu-Muslim association in rural areas of India. A higher level of everyday face-to-face contacts between Muslims and Hindus in rural rather than urban areas is more assumed than assessed. The possibility that many villages are all Muslim or all Hindu—which would reduce everyday intergroup contacts, at least in some rural areas—is not entertained. The possibility that there are rural organizations such as farm cooperatives, educational associations, or political parties—which might integrate Muslims and Hindus at least in some areas—is not recognized.

With regard to the paired comparison of cities, the first issue is how the cities were chosen. The three violent cities were chosen from among the eight cities registering the most riot deaths during 1950–95, but how the three were chosen from the eight is not discussed. Each of the violent cities was matched with a nonviolent city having a similar proportion of Muslims, with one pair similar in previous Muslim rule and one pair similar in state location (Gujarat). The array of peaceful cities from which the three were chosen is not discussed. Thus the generalizability of the
In the post-independence era, cities offered the hope that rival institutions are in place, and both cities were once bridges between the past and integrated future. But both cities became notorious for riots precipitated by the Congress Party and the rss roots or street organization. The Muslim associations of the first two city comparisons, Surat and Calicut, are the center for Hindus and Muslims respectively. These associations kept peace in Hindu-Muslim relations in Surat until the ‘20s and 30s, when Hindu-Muslim riots broke out. Peace also prevailed in Calicut and Aligarh, where peace in rural areas is high, but riots in urban areas are rare. Peace is maintained between Hindus and Muslims in rural areas, where they live side by side and visit each other regularly. However, the correlation between civic association and riots is difficult to judge on the basis of the three pairs of cities described.

Further, it must be observed that the book offers quantitative details about only one side of the correlation. Deaths by riot, both totals and per capita, are laid out in tables and broken down by year for cities and states, and urban and rural areas (although the dividing line between rural and urban is not defined and deaths are not broken down as Hindu or Muslim). No parallel tables are provided to enumerate the names and memberships of integrated civic organizations in each city, nor the percentage of Hindus and Muslims in each. Occasional references to the number of integrated organizations of a certain kind (e.g., trade associations, on page 127) are not brought together in the kind of quantitative snapshot offered for riots and riot deaths. An impressionistic treatment of civic organizations is particularly surprising given that larger membership is early advanced (40) as the key to the greater power of mass organizations such as unions and political parties, compared with elite organizations such as businessmen’s clubs and associations of professionals.

Similarly, there are no tables providing evidence of the level of everyday contacts between Hindus and Muslims in each city; relevant indicators might include measures of integration in neighborhoods or schools. A notable instance of quantitative data about everyday contacts is available for one city pair, Calicut and Aligarh. Polling data show that “nearly 83 percent of Hindus and Muslims in Calicut often eat together in social settings; only 54 percent in Aligarh do. About 90 percent of Hindu and Muslim families in Calicut report that their children play together; in Aligarh, a mere 42 percent report doing so. Close to 84 percent of Hindus and Muslims in the Calicut survey visit each other regularly; in Aligarh, only 60 percent do so, and not often” (126-27).

These results are advanced to show that everyday contacts are higher in the more peaceful city of Calicut, but it is possible to be amazed at the high level of everyday contacts in the riot-prone city of Aligarh. If close to half of each group are eating together, visiting regularly, and sending their children out to play together—and the city is nevertheless subject to deadly riots—then the role of everyday contact in preserving the peace may need to be reconsidered. Perhaps there is some kind of threshold such that everyday contact at less than very high levels is ineffective in controlling violence. Perhaps the analysis needs to be at the level of neighborhoods rather than citywide (see below). Or perhaps positive contacts at the interpersonal level have little effect on the perceptions of group threat and reactions of group outrage that Horowitz finds at the bottom of ethnic riots.

**Peace by Conflict**

Varshney recognizes that the first two city comparisons do not offer strong evidence for the importance of civic associations (263). “For, between the 1920s and 1990s, those cities did not change in aspects that would matter. Either riots took place quite frequently both before and after independence (Aligarh and Hyderabad), or peace prevailed in both places (Calicut and Lucknow).” No one doubts that past violence is a strong predictor of future violence, but this observation does not advance any particular theory of intergroup violence. Indeed this observation may be undertheorized to the extent that it comes uncomfortably close to the essentialist view of ethnic conflict as explained by history.
Similarly one might observe about the peaceful cities that their peacefulness in regard to Hindu-Muslim conflict might be explained by the dominance of a competing conflict. In Lucknow, politics was dominated by the conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims, which led Muslims to seek allies among Hindus. In Calicut, it was the conflict between upper- and lower-caste Hindus that dominated. Varshney recognizes these as the “master narratives” of politics in each city, but gives little weight to the possibility that it is these conflicts, themselves occasionally violent (196, 198), that suppress the Hindu-Muslim conflict and make integrated civic organizations possible. In his conclusions, Varshney stops short of encouraging caste or sectarian conflict as a means of encouraging peace between Hindus and Muslims.

It may be worth noting that the master narratives that control the Hindu-Muslim conflict in Lucknow and Calicut are both rooted in ascriptive or essentialized identities. Caste position is determined by birth in a group seen as defined by descent. Shia and Sunni Muslims are defined by descent from factions traced back to the death of Muhammad. The suggestion thus emerges that a descent-based identity conflict—Hindus versus Muslims—can best be suppressed by another descent-based identity conflict. If an ethnic group is understood to be a group perceived as defined by descent, then Lucknow and Calicut show one ethnic conflict suppressed by another ethnic conflict.

The Power of Integrated Organizations

Conceptually, it is not clear why organizational association is more powerful than everyday contacts. In considering this issue, Varshney has recourse to the statistics of combinations:

A key argument of this book, already briefly stated, is that associational engagement is a sturdier bulwark of peace than everyday engagement, and although the latter may keep peace in villages, it is rarely enough in the cities. Associations can more easily counter the depredations of politically protected gangs than everyday neighborhood engagement.

Let me give a formal proof for this qualitative argument... [Here Varshney introduces the formula for combinations: \( K = N(N-1)/2 \) pairs or links can be formed from \( N \) things].

This formula essentially means that as we move from villages to towns, and from towns to cities, compared to the absolute increase in the population, we need many more links to connect the people. This obviously means that cities tend naturally to be less interconnected, and some degree of anonymity and unconnectedness is inevitable.

Since each association or organization can represent a lot of people, organizations end up reducing \( N \) in cities and making a lower \( K \) viable. That is why everyday engagement may be effective in villages, with smaller \( N \)'s, but not in cities, with larger \( N \)'s. In order to maintain the same level of civic engagement found in villages, we need associations in cities, not informal and everyday interaction. (50–51)

The premise of this argument is that resistance to violence against an outgroup depends upon the proportion of potential outgroup targets who are personally known to the typically ingroup member. The focus on proportion is worth noting; a popular
and contrary view focuses instead on the quality of contacts. According to the contact hypothesis by Allport, friendly and cooperative contact with even a few members of an outgroup will lead to more positive attitudes toward that outgroup.

A further assumption is that organizations effectively cut the size of a city because one organization can represent many individuals. How this representation occurs is uncertain. Do indirect links through an organization provide the same sense of communication and trust as direct face-to-face contacts? Or do organizations control violence with organizational rewards and sanctions, whereas everyday associations control with sympathy? Do indirect links within an organization function the same as indirect links with individuals in a different organization if two organizations are linked? What does it mean to link two organizations?

In other places Varshney is clear about distinguishing between intracommunal organizations—which he sees as likely to support communal conflict and violence—and intercommunal or integrated organizations, which are bulwarks against intergroup violence. But this distinction is not put in play with regard to the proportions argument. If the power of organization is the power to reduce the effective population of a city as many individuals are represented in one, then an intracommunal organization should reduce the effective size of the city no less than an integrated organization of the same size.

Origins of Riots

No theory about controlling ethnic riots can be innocent of a theory about the origins of riots. In the quotation above about combinational statistics, Varshney refers to "the depredations of politically protected gangs" (see also 47, 124, 158–160, 247). He explicates his gang theory as follows:

In all violent cities in the project, a nexus of politicians and criminals was in evidence. Organized gangs could easily disturb neighborhood peace... Without the involvement of organized gangs, large-scale rioting and tens and hundreds of killings are most unlikely, and without the protection afforded by politicians, such criminals cannot escape the clutches of the law. Brass has rightly called this arrangement an institutionalized riot system. (10–11)

Looting, burning, raping, and killing are indeed crimes, so by definition rioters are criminals. But the implication here is that "ordinary" criminals—gangs operating for profit—are inciting and conducting riots, often at the behest of political elites who stand to profit from conflict and violence. Unfortunately there is not much evidence available as to who starts which riots or carries out which atrocities, so the criminal origins of riots are difficult to test. In his most specific indictments, Varshney points to professional wrestling schools, both Hindu and Muslim, as leading the 1978 riots in Aligarh (160) and numerous riots between 1978 and 1995 in Hyderabad.

Whether the wrestlers are criminals or valiant defenders of their neighborhood is, as Varshney recognizes (208), a matter of perspective. To the extent that the distinction is difficult, an institutionalized riot system may be either politically protected gangs or local violence specialists leading a neighborhood-sanctioned reprisal against another neighborhood as supposed by Horowitz. Indeed the reader may wonder why criminally protected gangs do not exist or are not noted in more peaceful cities.
Perhaps such gangs are not exogenous to ethnic violence. That is, perhaps such gangs are less an explanation of how riots begin than an expression of the same communal separation and conflict that is expressed in segregated organizations and riots.

Still, if criminally protected gangs are supposed to be crucial for the occurrence of Hindu-Muslim riots, the relative weakness of such gangs in rural areas may alone account for the lower levels of such riots in these areas. Varshney argues that rural peacefulness is a result of the efficacy of everyday contacts between Hindus and Muslims in small communities. But perhaps relative rural peacefulness is attributable instead to the relative weakness of institutionalized riot systems in rural compared with urban areas. This possibility is not addressed in the book.

Of course riots require more than instigation and initiation; they require local support and participation. How this occurs has been theorized by Horowitz in terms of a social construction of moral outrage at the insults and injuries the target group has inflicted on the ingroup. Varshney's story is less elaborated; he refers more generally to masses who cannot keep their emotions under control (134).

Varshney uses two metaphors to express the importance of interethnic association. Provocations are sparks to be extinguished by the everyday or organizational association of Hindus and Muslims. Or provocations are shocks to be contained by bulwarks formed from these two kinds of association. These metaphors signal a kind of release theory of riots: provocations naturally release riots as sparks light fires or earthquakes tumble buildings—unless something gets in the way.

The Role of Police

Attention to a political-criminal nexus as the origin of riots leads immediately to the issue of the role of police in encouraging or suppressing Hindu-Muslim riots. Lower-level police officers may stay at a single post for extended periods of time, but higher-level officers are rotated from place to place at intervals of years. Varshney argues from this that it is unlikely that police bias or connivance plays a significant role in riots (288). Rather he argues that it is the presence or absence of integrated civic organizations working with police that makes the difference between more and fewer riots.

Perhaps the strongest example in support of this model of civic and police interaction is the history of a city that was not part of the three paired comparisons featured in the book. Bhiwandi, a town near Bombay, suffered numerous Hindu-Muslim riots in the 1970s and 80s. In June 1988 a new police chief arrived for a three-year term. He divided the town into neighborhoods and created seventy peace committees for two-neighborhood areas. “Since segregated living was the norm in the town, each committee covered two adjacent neighborhoods and consisted of an equal number of Hindus and Muslims, selected on the basis of local knowledge” (294). A police officer was assigned to each committee and presided over meetings that were weekly or more often. The destruction of the Ayodhya mosque produced tension and bitterness in Bhiwandi, but no riots. The peace committees quashed rumors, handed rumor-mongers over to the police, and patrolled their neighborhoods night after night.

Bhiwandi has been free of riots since 1988. Its example suggests that the power of an integrated civic organization to suppress riots is not so much a matter of linkages of personal trust between Hindus and Muslims as linkages between the organization and the police. When local people are organized to hand over instigators and perpetrators of violence of the police. These individuals are inhibited from
The Importance of Neighborhoods

The Bhiwandi experiment highlights the importance of understanding riots at the level of neighborhoods, particularly when (as in the more riot-prone cities) neighborhoods are predominantly segregated as Hindu or Muslim. Varshney's theorizing is at the level of cities; the correlation of rioting with weakness of integrated civic organizations is a correlation across cities. Nevertheless, he recognizes that riot-prone cities are not homogenously violent. Surat's violence is limited to the shantytowns; the old city with its integrated civic life did not see deadly violence (239). Ahmedabad's 1969 rioting was "primarily in the working-class neighborhoods" (264). Aligarh's riots were concentrated in segregated neighborhoods (127). Hyderabad's elite lives in integrated neighborhoods; riots are concentrated in the segregated old city (185). In every case it seems that rioting is concentrated in poorer neighborhoods, and that deaths are mostly Hindus killing Muslims. It is hard to avoid the impression that inside this book about variation across cities, there is book about variation across neighborhoods struggling to emerge. Such a book would be entirely consistent with the plea for disaggregation with which Varshney begins his analysis or riots.

In Conclusion

India is a great place for the study of ethnic relations in general and ethnic riots in particular. Its billion people, its many languages and cultures, its crosscutting identities of religion, ethnicity, and caste—all these contribute to a unique potential for learning about ethno-political conflict. Varshney's book is as important for bringing attention to India as a social science laboratory as for advancing civic association as the explanation of what makes cities more and less prone to riots. This explanation remains a hypothesis, powerfully advanced but far from substantiated.

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