

Civic Life or Economic Interdependence?

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Ethnic violence is fast becoming the best studied of subjects within the theoretical literature on ethnic mobilization. Many of the theories of ethnic violence that we have so far have been developed from a small number of paradigmatic cases. Sinhala-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka, for instance, is the paradigmatic case for the theories of ethnic "outbidding" proposed by Rabushka and Shepsle and Donald Horowitz. Serb-Croat violence in the former Yugoslavia is the paradigmatic case for Fearon's model of ethnic war as a commitment problem,¹ Posen's model of ethnic war as a security dilemma,² and Bates and Weingast's spatial model of the process of ethnification preceding violence.³ Hindu-Muslim violence in India is emerging as a third such theory-producing case: Ashutosh Varshney's book *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* joins Paul Brass's 1998 study *Theft of an Idol*,⁴ which identifies "institutionalized riot systems" as a key variable in the production of Hindu-Muslim violence, and, more recently, Steven Wilkinson's work linking Hindu-Muslim violence in India with electoral incentives.⁵ The study of the same question, using the same case materials, by a body of scholars with different points of view, different methods and research designs, and independently collected data, provides an unparalleled opportunity for theoretical advancement through the cumulation of findings. Ashutosh Varshney's book makes three important contributions to this collective body of research.

The first contribution of the book is the identification of localized variations in the pattern of ethnic violence. The book is based upon an original dataset, constructed in collaboration with Steven Wilkinson, which provides the most systematic data that we have so far on Hindu-Muslim violence in post-colonial India. Varshney shows that such violence is highly concentrated in nature: it occurs in towns rather than villages, in some towns rather than others, and in some neighbourhoods within these towns rather than others. Further, he argues that we should expect such localized variation in the incidence of ethnic violence in other countries as well, and correctly points out that much of the theoretical literature on ethnic violence fails to account for such variation. The discovery of these patterns of concentration illuminate a new avenue of research for those interested in ethnic violence in India and elsewhere. The publication of Varshney's book should invite others in the same field to engage in comparable data collection efforts; to construct research designs sensitive to such patterns of concentration; and to theorize about why they exist.

¹ James D. Fearon, "Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict." In David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, eds., *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1998.

² Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," in Michael E. Brown, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 103-124

³ Robert H. Bates, Rui J. P. Figueiredo Jr., and Barry R. Weingast. "The Politics of Interpretation: Rationality, Culture and Transition." *Politics and Society*, 1998, Volume 26, No. 4, 603-642.

⁴ Paul R. Brass, *Theft of an Idol*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

⁵ Steven I. Wilkinson, *The Electoral Incentives for Ethnic Violence: Hindu-Muslim Riots in India*. Paper Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 3-6 1998.

Second, the book constitutes an advance over the instrumentalist approach to Hindu Muslim violence developed by Brass in *Theft of an Idol*.⁶ According to Brass, any one of a number of "exogenous shocks" may become the precipitating event for a riot -- a clash of processions, the rape of a Hindu woman, the poisoning of a cow, a scuffle etc. Given this "exogenous shock" a riot is most likely to take place when two conditions are met: First, politicians must polarize Hindus and Muslims, aided by an "institutionalized riot system" consisting of cultural organizations, criminals, social activists and others. (Brass, 284). Second, local and state governments must fail in checking the polarizing actions of politicians. Brass does not, however, identify the conditions under which politicians choose to polarize or moderate; nor does he specify the conditions under which the state will be more or less effective in checking polarization. Varshney accepts Brass's argument, but takes us beyond it. Working within the same framework as Brass, he pushes us to ask the further question: What are the conditions under which political elites will be more or less likely to play a polarizing strategy? And what are the conditions under which the state will be more or less effective in checking such polarization?

The book pursues the answer through a controlled comparison of three pairs of towns in India, one violent, the other peaceful: Aligarh and Calicut; Hyderabad and Lucknow; and Ahmedabad and Surat. The towns in each pair are described as being comparable in key respects but different in the incidence of riots. Varshney supplements his analysis of these three pairs by looking, less intensively, at temporal variations in patterns of violence in Ahmedabad and Surat before and after the 1940s. HE finds that, within each pair, inter-communal civic engagement between Hindus and Muslims is the key variable influencing both politicians' choice of a polarizing strategy as well as the effectiveness of the state in quelling tensions before they escalate into a riot. Where they exist, such networks assist the state in defusing polarizing strategies when they are adopted. Further, Varshney argues, those politicians who might otherwise have engaged in polarization moderate their strategies pre-emptively, knowing in advance that they will not be effective. The mechanism through which inter-communal associations prevent successful polarization is as follows: Such associations create trust by bringing individuals belonging to different ethnic groups in repeated contact. When local "riot entrepreneurs" initiate an incident intended to "spark" a riot, these associations are able to function as conduits of credible information to members of both communities and the state about the perpetrators, and prevent such a strategy from succeeding. (p. 47). Consequently, towns with vibrant inter-communal associations exhibit low levels of violence. In those towns where such associations do not exist, politicians have a free hand in polarizing the population, and the state is ineffective in checking them. Consequently, such towns are marked by high levels of Hindu-Muslim violence. Based on these paired comparisons of Indian towns, Varshney proposes that a research programme that systematically investigates the links between civil society and ethnic conflict should lead to a better understanding of the local and regional variations in patterns of ethnic violence not only in India but more generally. (p. 369).

However, Varshney's argument linking inter-ethnic civic associations with low levels of inter-ethnic violence is not compelling for two reasons. First, although he does not attribute any role to individual motivations in his theory, peaceful outcomes in each of his cases are driven not

⁶ Brass himself would object to this portrayal of his argument in the vocabulary of traditional social science. His intention in *Theft of an Idol* is not to construct an objective theory explaining ethnic violence, but to demonstrate that such a theory cannot be constructed. However, despite this intention, his argument looks suspiciously like traditional social science.

by the existence of civic associations per se, but by the motivations of the individuals who belong to them. In Ahmedabad, for instance, the members of the Congress party who worked to prevent violence were "committed to the party's ideology of Hindu Muslim unity." (286) In Lucknow in 1924, the locally influential men who intervened to reach a settlement are believed to have been under orders from the Central Congress Committee. (p. 228). In Surat in the 1920s, Muslim businessmen who refused to respond to the political elites' attempt to unify Muslims against Hindus were motivated by considerations of economic self-interest. "Such unity," according to Varshney, "entailed the possibility of a rupture of business links with Hindu businessmen, for which the Muslim business communities were not ready." (p. 287) Similar considerations of economic self-interest reportedly led Hindu businessmen in the *chikan* industry to scotch attempts to foment communal violence in the city of Lucknow. (p. 258). In the old city in Surat in 1992, many of those who worked to preserve the peace are described as being motivated by moral considerations. (p. 318). In all these cases, civic associations were able to prevent violence because individual members, motivated by ideological commitment, or organizational loyalty, or self-interest, or morality, did *not want violence to occur*. Had these individuals had desired violence, or been indifferent to it, then we would have expected the outcome to be different, notwithstanding the fact that they belonged to inter-ethnic civic associations.

Although Varshney's theory predicts that all inter-ethnic civic associations should be equally likely to prevent inter-ethnic violence, his data suggests only those inter-ethnic associations whose members have the "right" motivations are likely to work in the manner predicted. In Bhiwandi town, in fact, the peace committees that reportedly prevented violence were carefully chosen to include only those "with a genuine desire for peace," respected for their "probity and goodwill," and with "a clean record." (p. 364-5). Other, less worthy individuals, were deliberately kept out. A fuller theoretical argument should tell us what impact inter-ethnic civic associations would have if they were staffed with individuals with the "wrong" motivations. Alternatively, a case could be made that membership in inter-ethnic civic associations eliminates the "wrong" motivations. It is imaginable, although by no means obvious, that those who interact frequently with each other might develop, over time, a shared concern for each others' well being. The book, however, does not make this case, or provide any other reasoning that incorporates the role that individual motivations are revealed to play in the data.

Second, the book provides sparse evidence that such networks are in fact the key variable preventing violence in each of the peaceful towns. If inter-ethnic civic networks undercut the efforts at polarization by political entrepreneurs, as Varshney's argument predicts, then we should find proof of their efficacy in pre-emptive moderation by such entrepreneurs. Indeed, Varshney spends considerable time in attempting to link the choice of moderate political strategies with the anticipation that such networks constitute a "forbidding obstacle" to polarization (48). However, the evidence does not establish that the obstacles posed by civil society enter the decision-making calculus of politicians. A survey of the case studies produces at least five alternative hypotheses for the choice of moderate strategies, none of which rely upon the existence of inter-communal networks:

Consider, for instance, the discussion of the BJP leader's motives for not polarizing the population in Calicut: "The BJP leader of Calicut accepts that polarization is in the BJP's political interest for otherwise it may continue to be a small player in Calicut (and Kerala) politics. But he is

also convinced that his party would not systematically initiate the polarizing process, for it would not like to be blamed for undermining local peace. However, if the radical Islamic groups launched a violent campaign, it would doubtless benefit the party and the BJP would be happy to respond." (p. 130) The BJP's moderation here appears to stem from a concern for reputation rather than a perception of inability brought about by the existence of inter-communal networks. **(Hypothesis #1)** The BJP leader appears willing to polarize, but simply needs another party to be the first mover and so bear the reputational cost of initiating violence.

In the same study, Varshney notes that a partial reason why "the BJP has not polarized Hindus in Calicut is "that pro-Muslim decisions are seen as part of Kerala's routine patronage politics. Because caste has been the main cleavage of Kerala, the meaning of the League's communalism is not the same as in much of the North and West." (p. 177-8). Here, the BJP's unwillingness to polarize stems in part from a discursive framework which renders religious identities politically invisible, and so a polarizing strategy based on religious identity impotent **(Hypothesis #2)** Inter-ethnic civic networks are superfluous to this second hypothesis.

Further in his discussion of Calicut, Varshney notes that the Muslim League moderates in part because "by acting immoderately, it would make itself unacceptable to alliance partners." (p. 180). Here, the variable that leads the Muslim League to moderate in Calicut is not the expectation of resistance from civil society but the incentives introduced by coalition politics **(Hypothesis #3)**

The case study of Lucknow yields a fourth hypothesis. In Lucknow, according to Varshney, part of the reason that the BJP did not polarize the electorate is that "Hindu nationalists did not need polarization to be a force...A more desperate set of local Hindu nationalists perhaps may have tried to polarize; a BJS or BJP doing quite well could do without." (pp. 256). In this scenario, the relative strength of a political party appears to be the key variable driving strategic choices: a strong party may play a moderate strategy, while a weak party may resort to polarization. **(Hypothesis #4)**

The study of Hyderabad yields a fifth hypothesis. In his study of Hyderabad, Varshney notes that the Muslim League chose to polarize because "Hyderabad is its only focus. Since the Muslim population is concentrated in the old city, the strategy of polarization has many electoral payoffs and few risks. If the MIM develops state-level ambitions, it will have to examine whether polarization in Hyderabad causes losses in constituencies where Muslims are fewer in numbers." (p. 256). This discussion suggests that a party's strategic choices may well be driven by extra-local concerns: state and national level ambitions may weaken local incentives to polarize. **(Hypothesis #5).**

Each of these alternative explanations, as Varshney himself recognizes, appears to be equally plausible explanations for why politicians chose to moderate or polarize. If politicians do not take the expected resistance from inter-communal networks into account in making decisions about whether or not to polarize, then it leads us to question exactly how effective such resistance is.

The most important contribution of the book in my view, however, is not the argument about inter-ethnic civic engagement. Rather, it is the more precise and more powerful proposition

linking high levels of inter-ethnic *economic interdependence* with low levels of violence that lies wrapped within the broader argument. The logic underlying this proposition, phrased in my words, but consistent with Varshney's data, might run as follows: Wherever Hindus and Muslims are dependent upon each other in the local economy, local Hindu and Muslim economic actors will cooperate to prevent violence in order not to incur economic losses on both sides. In such towns, if political entrepreneurs choose to play a polarizing strategy, Hindus and Muslims tied to each other in the local economy will resist. Over time, faced with resistance from these interdependent economic actors, political elites should switch to moderate strategies. Consequently, these towns should have a low probability of riots. In those towns where Hindus and Muslims are not economically interdependent, there is no local check on the polarizing strategies of political entrepreneurs. When they play a polarizing strategy, these towns are likely to flare up immediately. Consequently, towns without economic interdependence should have a high probability of riots. I will devote the remainder of this review to uncovering the contours of this argument, and suggesting why it constitutes a more compelling hypothesis for Hindu-Muslim violence in India and for explaining local variations in ethnic violence more generally than the argument about civil society.

The concept of "civic associations" as Varshney uses it is a broad one, encompassing the wide space that exists between the family and the state. In measuring the strength of civic engagement across Indian towns, he employs indicators that capture this entire space: interdependence within industry; trader and business associations; trade or labour unions; cadre-based political parties; social and educational institutions; and everyday engagement. However the only variables which vary systematically across the peaceful and violent towns are those which link individuals in relations of economic interdependence: industry, and trader and business associations. The table below illustrates this point by summarizing Varshney's description of the independent variable across cases.

Table 1: Variation in the Strength of Civic-Networks Across Peaceful and Violent Towns
(S=Strong; W=Weak; --= No Data).

	Calicut Peaceful	Lucknow Peaceful	Ahmedabad (pre 1949) Peaceful	Surat (pre 1940) Peaceful	Surat (Post-1940) Peaceful	Aligarh Violent	Hyderabad Violent	Ahmedabad (post 1940) Violent
Interdependence Within Industry	W	S	S	S	S	W	W	--
Trader/Business Associations	S	--	S	S	S	W	W	W
Trade/Labour Unions	S	W	S	S	W	W	W	W
Social and Educational Institutions	S	--	S	S	W	W	S(Elite) W(Mass)	W

Everyday Engagement	S	--	--	--	--	W	--	--
Cadre-Based Political Parties	S	S	S	S	W	W	W	W

As the table shows, all the peaceful towns differ from all the violent towns in the existence of interdependence within industry, with the exception of Calicut, where the economy is driven by trade rather than industry. Further, all peaceful towns differ from all violent towns in inter-communal membership in trade and business associations, except Lucknow for which data is not available.

No other networks included in the general concept of civil society are common to all peaceful towns. Trade unions are strong in some peaceful towns and weak in others. Inter-communal membership in social and educational institutions also varies across peaceful towns. There is little evidence of thick everyday engagement between Hindus and Muslims in peaceful towns other than Calicut. Finally, cadre-based political parties are described as strong in four of the peaceful towns, but not in the fifth.

Even where cadre-based parties are coded as “strong” sites of inter-communal engagement, furthermore, little data on the membership and leadership of these parties is presented in support of the proposition. Information from external sources, furthermore, does not corroborate this coding. In Lucknow, for instance, Varshney notes, without presenting any data on party personnel, that “the Congress party in Lucknow has maintained a large cadre-base among both Hindus and Muslims for much of the twentieth century.” (205). No data on party membership, however, is presented. What we know about the Congress party in UP from secondary sources suggests that it was primarily a Hindu organization, indistinguishable in its composition from the Hindu nationalist BJP.⁷ In the absence of data on the profile of the local party unit in Lucknow, we have little reason to believe that this profile might be different in Lucknow. Similarly, Varshney codes the Congress party in pre-independence Surat and Ahmedabad as a “strong” site of Hindu-Muslim engagement, without citing any data for these towns or even for Gujarat state for this period (269-70).⁸ The picture of the Gujarat Congress party that emerges from other studies suggests otherwise. Myron Weiner’s classic 1965 study describes the Gujarat Congress as a “predominantly Hindu” party in composition (although not in ideology).⁹ Weiner’s data on the membership profile of Congress in at least one district (Kaira) district in Gujarat revealed that only 4% of Congress workers whose ethnic identity could be identified were Muslim.¹⁰ Without competing data, it is difficult to make the case that the Congress party integrated Hindus and

⁷ See, for instance, Paul Brass. *Factional Politics in an Indian State*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); Bruce D. Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁸ Table 9.1. Page 270.

⁹ Myron Weiner, *Party Building in a New Nation: The Indian National Congress*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 108.

¹⁰ Calculated from Table 11 in Weiner, 120.

Muslims in its membership in either Lucknow or Ahmedabad, although it may have pursued an integrative ideology. A close look at the data suggests, therefore, that is not inter-ethnic civic engagement, broadly defined, but inter-ethnic economic interdependence which varies systematically with the presence and absence of violence.

The proposition that economic interdependence is the key variable explaining ethnic peace is largely consistent, furthermore, with the data on the background of those individuals who intervene to preserve the peace. Wherever such data is presented, we find that the agents of peace are most often those who have an economic stake in preventing violence. In Surat in the 1920s, it was Muslim businessmen, locked together in business ties with Hindus, resisted attempts at polarization from above. Again, in 1992, the actions of Hindu and Muslim businessmen were sufficient to prevent riots, even though inter-communal links in political parties, social and educational institutions and trade unions were weak. In Lucknow in the 1980s and 1990s, Hindu traders in the *chikan* industry were the principal actors building bridges across communities in order to avoid the violence which might cost them the labour of their Muslim craftsmen. In Ahmedabad, the Textile Labor Association in Ahmedabad prevented Hindu and Muslim workers from participating in communal violence. Even though Varshney himself does not himself describe this intervention as being driven by economic interest, the economic inter-dependence hypothesis provides a plausible reinterpretation. The textile mills in Ahmedabad in this period, according to Varshney, dominated Ahmedabad's economy and business life (276). The millowners were mostly Hindu. The weavers included both Hindus and Muslims (although most Muslims were weavers). The picture of the local economy that emerges in Ahmedabad in this period is not dissimilar to that of Lucknow's. Hindu-Muslim violence in this economy would certainly hurt textile production and therefore the interests of the Hindu millowners, just as it did in Lucknow. We cannot rule out, therefore, a possible role for such interests in preventing violence in Ahmedabad in the 1940s. The principal non-economic actors who are described as agents of peace are Congress party members (for instance, in Ahmedabad in the 1940s (286) and in Lucknow in 1924 (228)). However, as I suggest above, the book does not establish that the Congress party in either case was an *inter-ethnic* association. In other cases, as in Calicut and Bhiwandi, although inter-communal peace committees are described as important in keeping the peace, no data is given on the scope of their activities or on the background of their members.

Further work needs to be done to develop and test this narrower version of Varshney's argument. However, even in its present form, it has several strengths. By stipulating that those who intervene to preserve peace are driven by economic self-interest, it offers a clear specification of motive that is missing from the broader argument about civil society. Second, it is equally well supported by the evidence. Finally, it has the advantage of being more parsimonious, without losing any explanatory power. Other studies of ethnic violence, cross-nationally or in India, will have to address this argument in future efforts to theorize about patterns of concentration in ethnic violence.