"Documenting Differences"
By Shivam Vij

Documenting differences

A new book examines the sociology behind communal riots in India, drawing attention to some startling differences – between cities, not people.

Every time major Hindu-Muslim riots like Ayodhya 1992 or Gujarat 2002 take place, they are accompanied, in liberal circles, by a sinking disillusionment with the idea of Indian democracy's capacity to keep the world's most diverse society together. Riots are no doubt not the only infirmity of Indian democracy. But the frequency with which they occur in India, and the magnitude of destruction they wreak, as much in human and material terms as in the long-term damage to the social fabric, call for some kind of an explanatory framework. Since Hindu-Muslim violence is one of the enduring legacies of the public sphere in India, 50 years of recurrent riots have provided scholars the stage to examine the phenomenon in some depth, and to detect possible historical and sociological patterns, if any. Few have chosen to examine the problem with the required diligence, though that has not come in the way of a superfluity of general theories that come nowhere near an intelligible broad spectrum understanding. This is what Ashutosh Varshney now undertakes in his book *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*.

Varshney argues that the various existing perspectives of Hindu-Muslim violence are deficient on two counts. The first is that they fail to distinguish between ethnic conflict and ethnic violence. Wherever there is Hindu-Muslim animosity, it does not follow that a riot is waiting to happen. And second, these theories generalise in excess, as a result of which they are unable to explain differentials across the country. Why is it that some places manage to remain peaceful while others are engulfed in hideous communal violence on the slightest provocation? Why is it that 96 percent of the communal violence takes place in cities, while only four percent happens in villages? How are these variations to be explained?

Research strategies so far have focused on "uncovering commonalities" in cases of violence. But an obsession with the commonalities must by definition exclude the differences. If, for example, two cities in a state regularly witness riots because the state government encourages them, why is it that a third city in the same state manages to remain peaceful? Communal

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violence tends to be concentrated in pockets. The whole country does not erupt all at once and national politics only provides the broad context for violence. To grasp the differences and understand the variations in communal strife Varshney found it important to study communal peace as well.

A thorough survey of Hindu-Muslim violence between 1950 and 1995 led him to identify Bombay, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Meerut, Aligarh, Baroda, Delhi and Calcutta as the most riot-prone of India's cities. These eight cities alone account for 45.5 percent of deaths in Hindu-Muslim violence, although they represent a mere 5 percent of the country's population. His next step was to select six cities – three from the list of the most riot-prone and three peaceful cities – and study them in pairs, namely Aligarh and Calicut (Kozhikode), Lucknow and Hyderabad, Ahmedabad and Surat. The cities in each pair have roughly the same Hindu-Muslim demographic ratios, besides sharing other similarities.

The study of these cities led Varshney to the conclusion that there is a direct link between civic life and ethnic violence. The more closely Hindus and Muslims in a city are integrated, the less chances there are of violent clashes between them. This idea is simple and, perhaps for that reason, convincing: sustained interaction diminishes hatred and distrust. Further, "If the electorate is inter-ethnically engaged, the politicians maybe unwilling or unable to polarize". Not only are the state and the police compelled to behave responsibly, their chances of success in arresting violence are increased because of the co-operation they get from citizens in an ethnically integrated city. In Varshney's view, pre-existing local networks of civic engagement between the two communities, and not state action, is the biggest guarantor of communal peace.

Associational living
Civic integration has two forms: routine, everyday integration and associational forms of integration. Everyday integration promotes communication between members of the two communities and makes neighbourhood-level peace possible. Temporary peace committees are formed in times of tension to police neighbourhoods, counteract rumours and provide information to the local administration. The second form, associational engage-

ment, is more robust and durable. Organisations such as trade unions, associations of businessmen, traders, teachers, doctors, lawyers and cadre-based political parties (apart from communal ones), serve the social, cultural and economic needs of the two communities and solidly express the need for communal peace. Everyday interaction is enough to keep peace in the villages because of their small size, but associational forms of engagement become necessary for cities. Associational civic life in India was stimulated mainly in the 1920s by the Gandhian strategies of mass mobilisation.

The bulk of Varshney's book (chapters 5 through 11) is taken up by the empirical and theoretical study of the three pairs of cities, studied not in isolation but contrast.

The "master narrative" of politics in Kerala has been Hindu caste injustices rather than communal oppression, making it easier to forge Hindu-Muslim links. Despite the Mappilla Rebellion of the 1920s in the Malabar area of the Madras Presidency, in which Muslim tenants of Hindu landlords revolted against oppressive tenancy conditions, Calicut, the main city of the region, has maintained an impressive record of communal peace. Hindu nationalists have at various points tried to polarise Calicut along Hindu-Muslim lines but failed. Calicut is remarkably integrated, ensuring that electoral politics remains free of divisive communal issues. On the other hand, to the north, the west Uttar Pradesh town of Aligarh has minimal Hindu-Muslim civic engagement. The Aligarh Muslim University has traditionally been a Muslim bastion and has a past association with the Pakistan movement. To 'counter' the AMU, Aligarh has several educational institutions dominated by Hindus. This segregation is seen even in primary and secondary schools. Aligarh's trade associations have broken along religious lines and the Congress Party, whose umbrella character brought together members from different communities, has been gradually falling apart.

Lucknow, unlike Aligarh, has held its peace. This is because the master narrative here has been the Shia-Sunni conflict, which is internal to Islam, and further, the local *chikan* and *zardozi* industries ensure that Hindu traders are locked in a relation of interdependence with masses of Muslim workers. Though electorally Lucknow has been a stronghold of Hindu nationalism, the civic pattern has ensured communal peace. On the other hand, Hyderabad's Hindus and Muslims have not been drawn together partly because the Nizam, who governed the Telengana region of Andhra before its post-independence integration into the Indian union, prevented the Congress Party from mobilising on an inclusive, cross-communal basis. The Nizam had banned all intercommunal organisations, which came in the way of organised interaction between the masses of the two communities. The elites of both Lucknow and Hyderabad are socially integrated in many ways, but in Lucknow it is because of mass interaction that communal violence does not occur.

In Varshney's analysis, these are the reasons that Aligarh and Hyderabad have experienced frequent bloody riots, though Calicut and Lucknow have remained peaceful even during the partition of British India in 1947 and the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. This is not to say that Hindus and Muslims in the latter two cities live in perfect harmony; indeed, it is significant that Varshney makes a distinction between ethnic 'conflict' and 'violence'. Conflict is bound to be present in an ethnically plural society, though violence need not follow in its wake.

The study of Ahmedabad and Surat presents some interesting differences. These are cities which remained peaceful for a long time because of Mahatma Gandhi's influence, but exploded because of the decline of civic institutions.

Ahmedabad erupted in 1969, Surat in 1992. Varshney successfully demonstrates how "institutional peace systems" were politically constructed in the 1920s and how their decline directly led to communal violence. The greatest loss, perhaps, was when the cadre-based Congress, which became aligned with the state, ceased to function as a social institution. In Surat, it is only the shantytowns that are highly riot-prone; business links save old Surat. The arguments about a link between ethnic conflict and civic life are convincing.

Bombay, for many, represents a curious and seeming paradox. Until the riots of 1993, Bombay was believed to be very modern and cosmopolitan. So why did the 1993 riots take place? Varshney argues (page 106) that the perception of Bombay not being riot-prone before 1993 "is simply not true". This needs to be elaborated further, if only because Bombay's conversion to Mumbai is still a matter of great interest.

Although the incredible amount of empirical data collected over 10 years of painstaking research make his arguments all too convincing, there is nevertheless the occasional unease while reading *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, that Varshney underestimates the role of the state. In the preface to the Indian edition of the book, Varshney explains how the Gujarat riots this year confirmed his findings and asks, "Even if Narendra Modi were to fall tomorrow, can we be sure that the next government would do any better?" There are many who would disagree with Varshney. A non-BJP government very likely would have a dealt with the situation differently.

But this apart, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* is a remarkable achievement. Varshney's contribution to the study of Hindu-Muslim relations is that it has shifted the focus from the state to civil society. His model needs to be paid greater heed by policymakers not just in India but wherever two communities are in conflict with one another.