

First published 2013  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2013 Atul Kohli and Prerna Singh

The right of the editors to be identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Routledge handbook of Indian politics / edited by Atul Kohli and Prerna Singh  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. India—Politics and government. I. Kohli, Atul. II. Singh, Prerna, 1979–  
JQ231.R685 2012  
320.954—dc23

2012025039

ISBN: 978-0-415-77685-1 (hbk)  
ISBN: 978-0-203-07590-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo  
by Taylor & Francis Books

# 13

## THE STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

### Sparks and fires

*Ashutosh Varshney and Joshua Gubler*

This chapter deals with a classic, but unresolved, analytic puzzle: how should one conceptualize, or theorize, the role of the state in communal violence?<sup>1</sup> Because it is the responsibility of the modern state to maintain law and order, a great deal is nearly always said about how the state is involved, or implicated in, ethnocommunal riots when they do take place. However, despite a plethora of literature, we still do not have a plausible theory of the relationship between the state and ethnocommunal violence.<sup>2</sup>

A good theory must specify, first, the conditions under which the state develops an *interest* in touching off, or worsening, communal riots, instead of preventing or containing them; and second, it must also clarify whether the state always has the *ability* to prevent or contain riots, even if it has an interest in doing so. In short, the key question for theory is: what makes the state unwilling and/or unable to enact its constitutionally assigned riot-preventing or riot-containing role?

In developing our answers, we approach the state indirectly. We first ask: under what conditions are preexisting interethnic or intercommunal *civic* (i.e. non-state) ties destroyed? Under what conditions are such ties built? We then draw some inferences about the role of the state.

Why do we focus on interethnic or intercommunal ties, or what has, following Putnam (2000), come to be called bridging, as opposed to bonding, social capital? Much of the classic theoretical wisdom in the field (Lijphart 1977), as well as some of the more recent work (Fearon and Laitin 1996), emphasizes how peaceful interaction between ethnic groups is, paradoxically, founded on the possibility of intense in-group interaction and institutions. A principal message of this literature is that the greater the *in-group* cultural life and/or interaction, the larger the possibility of *inter-group* accommodation and peace.

In contrast, on the basis of materials gathered on Hindu-Muslim relations in India, Varshney (2002) argued that *intercommunal* ties between Hindus and Muslims, not *intracommunal* ties among Hindus or among Muslims, were a strong bulwark of communal peace. If towns and cities were organized only along intra-Hindu or intra-Muslim lines, the odds of riots (*fires*) breaking out, given a *spark* (tensions, rumors, small clashes), were very high. In Indian cities, bonding social capital was highly correlated with Hindu-Muslim violence, but bridging ties could put out sparks very effectively, not allowing them easily to disrupt the local equilibria of peace.

In this chapter, we wish to turn a cross-sectional comparison into an inter-temporal one: how is bridging social capital built or destroyed? Though Putnam (2000) explains how social capital was undermined in twentieth-century USA, we should note that we have no such studies for India or the developing world. Varshney (2002) simply asked what differentiated cities, where Hindus and Muslims lived peacefully, from those cities where endemic violence marked their relations, thereby comparing equilibria of peace with equilibria of violence. In effect, Varshney's inter-city comparison was cross-sectional. We now ask how peaceful cities become violent, and how violent cities turn towards peace. A new analytical candidate—the state—is beginning to emerge in the sites where we can already answer this question well.

While we are unable to develop a full-blown theory, we propose some building blocks, and a classification scheme for the types of state involvement in times of communal tensions and violence. We start with a summary of Varshney (2002). We then turn to three Indian analytical narratives: one at the state level, and two at the town level. In the third section, we turn our critical attention to those scholars who have proposed a state-based theory of communal violence. Next, we draw implications of our case narratives, focusing on the role of the state in building or undermining civic ties. The final section presents conclusions.

### **Bridging, bonding, and ethnocommunal violence**

Why does communal violence take place? Varshney (2002) sought to answer the question by comparing Hindu-Muslim relations in six cities of India. Substantively, the main conclusion was that the presence or absence of inter-ethnic, or inter-communal, civic organizations—business associations, professional organizations, labor unions, political parties, reading clubs, sports clubs, film clubs, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and political parties—was critical to explaining why some cities had chronic ethnocommunal violence, while others, despite huge provocations, remained always, or nearly always, peaceful. Integrated associational life allows strong ties to be formed across communities, acting as a serious constraint over the polarizing strategies of those groups that would benefit from violence, including political parties and organizations.

How did this argument emerge? First, a large-*n* analysis of all recorded Hindu-Muslim riots during a 46-year period (1950–95) was carried out.<sup>3</sup> It led to two important results. First, Hindu-Muslim riots were predominantly urban. A mere 4% of deaths in Hindu-Muslim riots took place in rural India, where roughly 70% of the country's population still lives and a much bigger proportion did in the 1950s. Second, within urban India, riots were highly locally concentrated. Eight cities—Ahmedabad, Bombay, Hyderabad, Baroda, Aligarh, Meerut, Delhi and Calcutta—accounted for a hugely disproportionate share of communal violence in the country: 49% of all urban deaths (and about 46% of all deaths, urban plus rural) in Hindu-Muslim violence. As a group, however, these eight cities today have a mere 18% of India's urban population (and about 6% of the country's total population, both urban and rural).

Hindu-Muslim violence was thus remarkably town or city specific. Often, a town just 40 miles–50 miles away from a riot-prone city remained calm. For example, an almost entirely peaceful town of Bulandshahar is a mere 50 miles away from the riot-prone Aligarh. Other examples are Surat and Baroda in the state of Gujarat, and Hyderabad and Warangal in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

State or national politics certainly played a role, but even the most inflammable periods of national or state politics did not fully undermine the local patterns of Hindu-Muslim relations. These larger political trends at the national or state level could essentially be conceptualized as 'sparks': depending on the local textures, not all of them became 'fires' in different towns.

To probe causal mechanisms, Varshney (2002) selected six cities and arranged them in three pairs. Each pair had a city/town where communal violence was endemic, and a city/town where it was rare, holding Hindu-Muslim percentages in the town population constant.

What causal mechanisms did the three pairs yield? On the whole, two mechanisms were identified. First, prior and sustained contact between members of different communities allowed communication between them to moderate tensions and preempt violence, when new tensions arose in the country, state or nearby towns. In cities of thick interaction between different communities, peace committees at the time of tension emerged *from below* in various neighborhoods. Such highly decentralized tension-managing organizations killed rumors, removed misunderstandings, and often policed neighborhoods.

Second, in cities that had associational integration as well, not just everyday integration, the foundations of peace were stronger. In such settings, even those politicians who would, in theory, benefit from ethnic killings found it hard to instigate violence. Without a nexus between politicians and criminals, big riots and killings were highly improbable.<sup>4</sup> In all violent cities in the India project, a nexus of politicians and criminals was in evidence. Organized gangs could easily undermine neighborhood peace, often causing migration from integrated to segregated neighborhoods. People moved in search of physical safety.

Contrariwise, if labor unions, business associations, middle-class associations of doctors and lawyers, film clubs of poorer classes (as in south India), and at least some political parties were integrated, even an otherwise mighty politician-criminal nexus was unable to rupture existing links. Everyday engagement in the neighborhoods might not be able to stand up to the marauding gangs protected by powerful politicians, but the strength of organizations constituted a forbidding obstacle for politically shielded gangs. A synergy emerged between the local wings of the state and local civic organizations, making it easier to police the emerging situation and preventing it from degenerating into riots and killings. *Local civil society, in and of itself, did not ensure peace. Rather, if communally integrated, it made the functioning of the local wings of the state more effective.*

### **State involvement: some analytical narratives**

In light of the discussion above, how should we conceptualize state involvement in communal violence? We present three analytical narratives below. The narratives are important for they lay out the process through which peace is obtained, or violence erupts.

We begin with Gujarat 2002, one of the most obvious examples of state involvement in Hindu-Muslim riots in post-independence Indian history, where nearly 1,500 people, mostly Muslim, were killed and many thousands made homeless. We ask in what sense was this Gujarat violence consistent with, and/or different from, the theory presented above. We then move to two city-level cases: Ahmedabad and Bhiwandi. In the former, by the late 1960s, a long phase of communal peace turned into a new period of endemic violence. In the latter, the opposite happened: endemic rioting gave way to communal peace. In different ways, the state was an important variable in each change.

#### ***Gujarat 2002: pogroms, not riots***<sup>5</sup>

After a train carrying Hindu pilgrims was torched, allegedly by a Muslim mob, on February 28, 2002, the worst carnage of India's independent history took place. Up to 1,500 people lost their lives, mostly Muslims. Based on the 1950–95 time series, Gujarat was clearly the worst state in India for Hindu-Muslim violence (Varshney 2002). Moreover, the data also clearly specified

three Gujarat towns—Ahmedabad, Baroda and Godhra—as the most violence-prone. These three turned out to be the worst sites of violence in 2002 as well.<sup>6</sup>

Not everything about Gujarat violence was, however, predictable. In one respect, the 2002 violence was shockingly different from previous violence. Unless later research disproves the proposition, the existing reports give us every reason to believe that the *riots* in Gujarat were actually full-blooded *pogroms*. Two common reference sources define pogrom as follows:

An organized, often officially encouraged massacre or persecution of a minority group, especially one conducted against Jews.

([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com))

a mob attack, either approved or condoned by authorities, against the persons and property of a religious, racial, or national minority.

([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

After the train was torched, the state made no attempt to prevent, or stop, revenge killings. State police looked the other way, as gangs murdered scores of Muslims with remarkable ease.<sup>7</sup> The statements of NGOs most closely associated with the Gujarat state government, run by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), openly supported anti-Muslim violence. According to the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the BJP government did what was absolutely necessary: namely, allow Hindu retaliation against the Muslims, including those who had nothing to do with the mob that originally torched the train in Godhra.<sup>8</sup> From a constitutional perspective, of course, it is not the duty of the government, whatever its ideological color, to stoke or allow public anger and violence, no matter what the provocation. No elected government that takes an oath to protect the lives of its citizens should behave like criminal gangs, hungry for a tit-for-tat. In 2002 the distinction between the constitutional and the ideological, however, disappeared in Gujarat.

Gujarat violence calls for a conceptual distinction between riots and pogroms. Riots are a clash between civilian groups, in which state neutrality may be in doubt, but state neutrality as a principle is not abandoned. Pogroms are state-approved or state-condoned attacks on a hapless minority, often not in a position to retaliate (Varshney 2007). The state is, thus, integrally linked to violence in pogroms, but its role in riots cannot be derived from an understanding of its role in pogroms. To understand how the state deals with riots, we present two different narratives below.

### ***State power as a source of civic entrapment: Ahmedabad, Gujarat***

The pattern of communal relations has changed dramatically in the city of Ahmedabad, also located in the state of Gujarat, India.<sup>9</sup> During 1920–69 the city was on the whole communally peaceful, but the five-day carnage during September 1969 turned out to be a major turning point. About 630 people were killed. During 1969 and 2002 Ahmedabad became one of the most riot-prone cities of India. In 2002 alone, an estimated 800–1,000 people died during two weeks of rioting. What were the foundations of Ahmedabad's communal peace until 1969? How did the structures of peace break down?

The inter-communal civic life of Ahmedabad rested on four large organizational pillars: a cadre-based political party engaged in mass politics; mass-based labor organizations; a long tradition of strong business organizations; and social and economic organizations inspired by Gandhian ideology. All brought Hindus and Muslims together. Of the four pillars, we will concentrate on the first two only, far and away the most important given their organizational strength and the numbers of people involved in them.

The Congress party, the city's first organizational pillar of peace, took to mass politics in the 1920s under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership and influence. The party reached the acme of its strength in Gujarat, especially Ahmedabad, in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> The cadres were trained in the party's ideology of Hindu-Muslim unity.

After independence in 1947, the Congress party took control of government from the departing British rulers.<sup>11</sup> The decline of the party as a civic organization followed its ascent to state power. The more the party ran governments, the more it attracted people interested in power and its benefits, not cadres committed to ideology and grassroots work. A lot of those who joined the Congress when it fought British rulers, did not do so because they could exercise governmental power. If anything, imprisonment was more likely than a shot at rule. A commitment to the ideology of the movement was a key motivating factor.<sup>12</sup>

### *An intercommunal trade union*

Ahmedabad was a leading center of Indian textiles for much of the twentieth century. Founded by Gandhi, it also developed a major city-wide union, called the Textile Labor Association (TLA). In the 1920s and 1930s the TLA became a formidable mass-based organization. It was not only concerned with wages and conditions in the workplace, but also ran adult literacy schools for workers, schools for children and scholarship schemes. It developed reading rooms and libraries, girls' dormitories, and women's welfare centers; created housing, credit, and consumer cooperatives; managed social and cultural centers to provide meeting places for cultural programs; and formed neighborhood inspection committees to deal with routine complaints of workers. Tens of thousands of workers and their families thus came under its influence.

The TLA was funded primarily by workers' subscriptions. It maintained close contact with the Congress party, though it remained organizationally distinct. When the Congress party came to power at independence in 1947, the TLA was made the only 'representative union' in Ahmedabad textiles by law. Only a representative union had the legal authority to represent workers in courts, and in negotiations with employers and government.

So long as the TLA was required to compete with other unions, as in the 1930s, it had no choice but to undertake organizational work for survival and growth. Once government patronage was available, the TLA became a victim of its monopoly status. It did not have to work as hard. The organization increasingly lost touch with the base.

The TLA's civic consciousness and involvement prevented riots in the city's vast workers' quarters at the time of India's partition, when so much of the country witnessed Hindu-Muslim violence. A vibrant union knew what it took to keep working communities together. By the late 1960s, it was strong enough to run relief camps after riots, but not vigorous enough to prevent riots in working-class neighborhoods.

Ahmedabad demonstrates how civic organizations can deteriorate if they get, or seek, state patronage. The desire for greater power via government patronage may be tempting, but such moves can seriously undermine civic and organizational fervor.

### *State power as a source of civic regeneration: Bhiwandi, Maharashtra<sup>13</sup>*

Bhiwandi, a town just outside Bombay, was infamous for Hindu-Muslim riots in the 1970s and 1980s. Nearly 200 lives—large numbers for a small town—were lost in riots during those years. The pattern changed, however, after a new police chief arrived in 1988 and started an organizational experiment.<sup>14</sup> In the following three years, Bhiwandi became a peaceful town. It could keep communal peace even in the worst of times, as between 1988–93, when the Ram Janmabhumi

movement was under way, and again in 2002, when awful riots in the nearby state of Gujarat took place. Building Hindu–Muslim contacts around common issues of concern turned out to be the critical organizational device.

The police chief believed that instead of fighting fires at the time of riots, it was better to prevent riots by bringing Hindus and Muslims together in normal times. If the Hindus and Muslims could meet each other often enough and discuss common problems, an edifice of communication and perhaps trust would be created, which could be used for peace at the time of communal tensions. The police chief decided to put together neighborhood committees (*mohalla samitis*) for the whole town. They would meet once a week in the normal course, but daily in times of tension, with a police officer presiding. Over time, the committees became so successful that even non-members started attending.

How did this structure help? During 1988–91 riots were widespread, as the Hindu nationalist mobilization for the destruction of the Baburi mosque took off. In Bhiwandi:

when passions ran high ... , members on both sides came together and voluntarily undertook the task of patrolling the streets for nights on end. Rumours were suppressed on the spot and rumour-mongers handed over to the police ... [As a result], the evil-doers preferred to lie low ... [and] were totally isolated by the constant vigilance against them by committee members.<sup>15</sup>

In 1991, after the police chief was transferred at the end of his three-year term, his successor kept the committee structure. By December 1992, when the Baburi mosque was torn down, Bhiwandi's Hindus and Muslims had developed such understanding, resolve and confidence that peace was successfully kept. No lives were lost.

In 2002 again, when awful riots broke out in the neighboring state of Gujarat, Bhiwandi remained peaceful. The head of the local Bajran Dal, an extreme Hindu nationalist organization, was murdered. That is normally a big spark in a town, very likely to lead to terrible fires. The suspicion was that some Muslims had killed him to avenge the killings of fellow Muslims by Hindu nationalist mobs in Gujarat. Yet again, no riots broke out in the city. Tensions did emerge, but only to subside. The neighborhood committees have become an abiding feature of the town.<sup>16</sup>

To conclude, with a strong civic structure in place, the state can prevent riots with considerable ease. Some other cities have of late followed the Bhiwandi model of neighborhood committees, reporting considerable success (Barve 2003; Thakkar 2004).

### **Elections, minorities and the state**

Unlike the argument above, there is a strand of scholarship that holds the state responsible for communal violence, and makes the case that if the state wants to prevent riots, it can, and it does. Why, then, would the state target the minorities? Political reasons provide the link between riots and the ruling party in a democracy—and therefore, to the state.

Brass (1997, 2003) has repeatedly made this argument. Consider his standard formulation:

What we can say with assurance is that the state government and the district administration have the knowledge and the power to contain and control riots when they develop and probably to prevent them before they happen. The Indian state and most of its state governments are not 'weak', lacking the authority or the power to act decisively when they choose to do so. When riots start, it is often because of intense political competition at either or both the district and state levels, that is, because at least one

strong party or other political force is willing to pursue the game of brinkmanship. When the authorities do not act decisively to contain and control riots, it is not because they do not have the means to do so, but because, for political reasons, they choose not to do so.<sup>17</sup>

There are two points to be made here. First, Brass leaves it unclear what the 'political reasons' are. If by 'political' Brass means 'votes,' then one can interpret his reasoning in two ways: either targeting Muslims is a way to garner votes for the party ruling the state, presumably votes of the Hindu majority; or it is advantageous for the ruling party to create a political situation, whereby providing protection to the Muslim minority during violence is a means of getting Muslim votes. The latter, too, would require violence to go on, for only if violence takes place can the ruling party blame it on the opposition and show that it can protect the Muslims. It is hard to imagine how the latter political game can repeatedly be played without the Muslim minority figuring out the intention of the ruling party. Muslims have to be under a thick and long-lasting veil of ignorance for this political strategy to work. There are, thus, missing links in the theory. We need evidence based on Muslim attitudes towards the riots, not simply inferences based on how the state behaved during times of violence; we also need evidence that the ruling party, regardless of its ideology or social base, would like to target Muslims. Hindu nationalists might well behave that way. Why would the Congress party? The fact that a lot of riots in India have taken place under Congress rule only thickens the explanatory puzzle. It does not establish that the Congress desired riots and wanted Muslims to be killed.

Second, the research of Brass is essentially case-based, confined as it is to some towns and villages of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Indeed, his case materials rely heavily on the state's three riot-prone towns: Meerut, Kanpur and Aligarh. He neither studies cases from outside Uttar Pradesh, nor does he study variations in outcome within the state. Close to each of the riot-prone cities he has analyzed towns that have never, or rarely, had communal riots, even though they have substantial Muslim populations. Bulandshahar is next to Aligarh, Saharanpur next to Meerut, and Lucknow very close to Kanpur. Bulandshahar, Saharanpur and Lucknow have not had Hindu-Muslim riots, at least since independence.

Current methodological arguments in political science make it clear that while theories can be formulated on the basis of commonalities in cases (Gerring 2006), those based on variations in outcome have greater causal potential (King *et al.* 1994). One cannot really be sure that the factors identified as causal in the analysis of similar cases are indeed causal, unless these factors can be shown to be absent in cases radically dissimilar (Varshney 2002, 2007).

This is not a problem in the second, and a more recent, state-based theory. Wilkinson (2004) not only covers cases that look dissimilar, but he covers the entire gamut of variation by using large-*n* regression analysis covering all riots during 1950 and 1995. Echoing Brass, Wilkinson argues, 'Whether violence is bloody or ends quickly depends ... primarily on the will and capacity of the government that controls the forces of law and order' (*ibid.*: 5). What, then, will determine whether the state will use force to protect ethnic minorities from violence? '... [G]overnment will increase the supply of protection to minorities when ... minorities are an important part of their party's current support base ... Or when the overall electoral system in a state is so competitive—in terms of the effective number of parties—that the governing party will have to negotiate or form coalitions with minority supported parties' (*ibid.*: 6–7). In sum, the level of competitiveness at the state level and requirement of minority support for political survival decreases, or eliminates, riots.<sup>18</sup>

It needs, first, to be asked why one must have such faith in the capacity of India's state governments, which control law and order. A cross-country comparison should make the skepticism clearer. Are not state capacity in the USA, Britain and France much higher than in



India? Yet the USA could not prevent the so-called Rodney King riots in 1992 (as well as the riots of the 1960s), while Britain witnessed racial rioting in the 1980s, and Arab migrants in France rioted in 2005. Los Angeles, Brixton and Paris burned, while the police wielded their batons and even shot to discipline the crowds. If Western states can have such problems, what can be the basis for the belief that prevention of riots depends 'on the will and capacity of the government that controls the forces of law and order'?<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, Wilkinson uses the idea of an effective number of parties to measure electoral competition at the state level. Using that measure, Wilkinson argues that the clearest support for his theory comes from how Indian states handled the 2002 riots. Having a *bipolar* electoral arena split between the BJP and the Congress party, Gujarat in 2002 was among the states with the lowest number of effective parties. It also contained a party in power, the BJP, which had *no need for Muslim votes*. In the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the electoral arena had been *multipolar* for over a decade and a half. Both states have among the highest number of effective parties in India. Moreover, the ruling parties in both states were *dependent on Muslim support* in 2002. The states of Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Rajasthan—adjacent to Gujarat and like Gujarat having a bipolar electoral arena split mainly between the BJP and Congress—might have had a low number of effective parties, but the political party in power, the Congress, unlike the BJP in Gujarat, needed Muslim votes.

Thus, Gujarat in 2002 had the worst of both worlds; UP and Bihar (and Kerala) the best of both; and MP and Rajasthan were in between. In consequence, Wilkinson argues, Gujarat had gruesome violence, but UP, Bihar, MP and Rajasthan escaped it altogether.

Ironically, the Varshney-Wilkinson dataset (Varshney and Wilkinson 2006), on which much of Wilkinson's argument is based, also provides many counter-examples, which we ought to consider. If Gujarat state was ruled by the BJP in 2002, the Congress party, *which is known to be dependent on the Muslim vote in most states of India and has often systematically courted Muslims since the first Indian election in 1952*, ruled Gujarat on the following occasions when riots broke out: January 1982; March 1984; March–July 1985; January, March and July 1986; January, February and November 1987; April, October, November and December 1990; January, March and April 1991; and January and July 1992. The BJP, opposed to Muslims, came to power in Gujarat state only in 1995. Riots were endemic in the state of Gujarat for a much longer time.

Counter-examples from other Indian states, not simply from Gujarat, can also be cited. During Bombay riots in January 1993, the Congress party was in charge of the state government. During the awful 1980s riots in the state of UP, the Congress party ran state governments; moreover, at that time Indira Gandhi, who appealed for Muslim votes for most of her political life, ruled in New Delhi. Finally, and most remarkably of all, the riots of 1961 occurred when Nehru was India's prime minister. As is widely known, Nehru had an unquestionable commitment to India's Muslims. Moreover, almost all states of the country were Congress-ruled during his tenure (1947–64).

It is well known that large-*n* regression analysis is basically about the central tendency of a scatter plot of data points, something which a couple of outliers do not significantly alter. However, counter-examples undermining Wilkinson's theory are simply too many to be brushed aside as outliers, or occasional deviations from the trend line. Wilkinson's argument can at best explain why the BJP-led state governments might not want to protect Muslims, but why did Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Congress-led state governments repeatedly fail to stem riots?

### **Towards a different formulation**

To our mind, the best explanation, which also looks at the role of the state, can be conceptualized as below. We have already used the metaphor of 'sparks' (small clashes, tensions, rumors) and

'fires' (riots and pogroms); we return to it to explain how, as a result of the state's role, change occurs.

State behavior can constitute a spark. Or a spark, wherever and however it emerged, may be fanned by the state, even though it is the constitutional responsibility of the state to put disturbances down by any legal means necessary. It follows that to the extent that a state is controlled by a communal party, the sparks confronting local mechanisms will be that much bigger. Depending on the strength of the local bridging capital, however, the peaceful towns may still not witness the outbreak of communal fires. Under increasing assault, some of them may well come apart. We diagrammatically represent this process in Figure 13.1.

In an inter-temporal sense, then, the bigger the spark, the greater will be the possibility of a change to the prevailing distribution of peace and violence. Once allowed to grow by the state's ruling political party, police or bureaucracy, the provocation may well be such that it overwhelms local structures that had made it possible for some towns, during earlier periods of violence, to remain peaceful. This would then lead to a greater dispersion of communal violence in a state than had been observed historically—by breaking the civic barriers that towns had constructed and by making the riot-prone towns even worse.

In light of this, let us now reinterpret the cases discussed in the second section of this chapter. First, when the state plays a role directly detrimental to peace, the state enters the process outlined above through sparks. Its behavior, actions and ideology could generate tensions, to which different towns with their varying civic texture react. Communal violence thus becomes a product of the intensity of the spark on one hand, and the strength of the bridging civic texture of the town on the other. The state may not put out the sparks, as mandated by the constitution, instead allowing them to become fires. Gujarat in 2002 is an example of such a role.

In contrast, when the state plays a positive role towards peace, it can enter the process in two ways: first, it can seek to ensure through its control over local police and administration that when communal tensions arise, they are nipped in the bud by administrative action; or second,

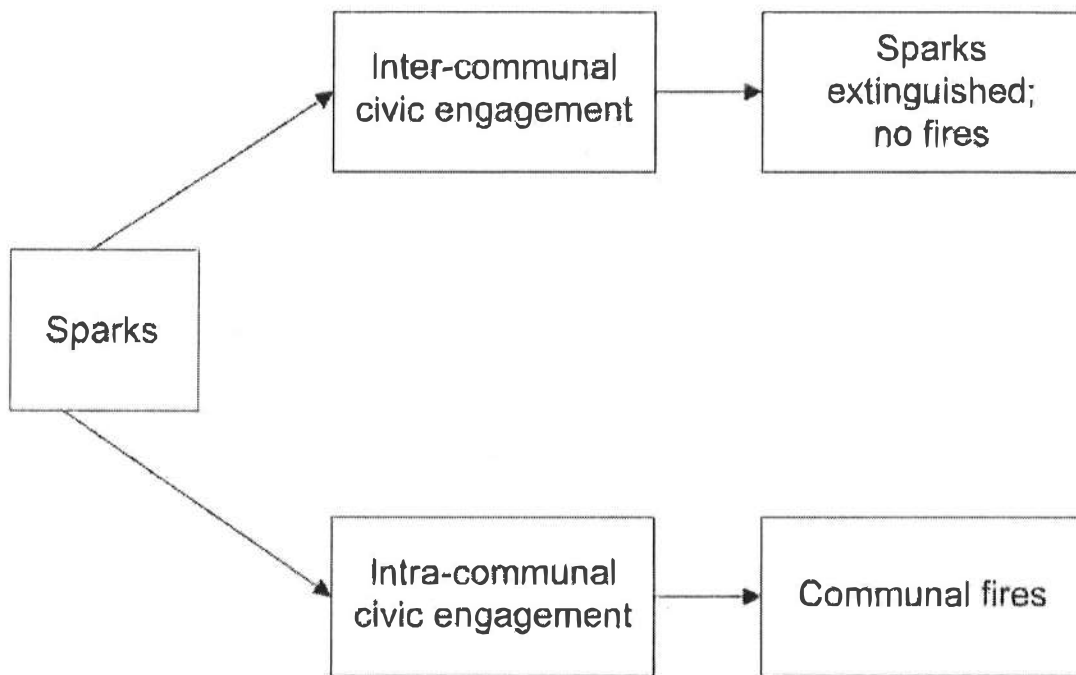


Figure 13.1 The state, civil society and communal violence

it can also do that through civic mechanisms—by building and nurturing bridging social capital and making the law-and-order function of the local police and administration easier, as lasting environmental support for police functions during riots is created. The Bhiwandi case is an illustration of this second option. The local state organs sought to build defenses against a future disruption of peace by establishing bridging institutions. That is why it has successfully contained tensions over the last two decades, even as nearby towns have burned.

A third possibility, exemplified by Ahmedabad in the 1960s, concerns the indirect role of the state. In this scenario, the state does not seek to destroy the bridging social capital. Rather, the organizations that embodied such capital seek state patronage and develop a special relationship with the state. While this gives them power, it also tends to reduce incentives to mobilize and engage in organizational work, thereby eroding their civic capacity. They develop feet of clay, and their capacity to generate intercommunal civic engagement declines. Under such circumstances, a small spark—for example, a clash over cows, as happened in Ahmedabad in September 1969, something not otherwise uncommon in India—becomes hard to contain. Brutal and gruesome violence can result.

### Conclusion

It is certainly true that the *empirical* state, as opposed to the *juridical* state, is not abidingly committed to its constitutional role of keeping peace. The state can, indeed, side with the majority community and violently target minorities, or allow the majority community to do so. However, it is also highly imprecise to conceptualize the state as an actor *always* interested in, or capable of, violence for the sake of electoral ends on behalf of the ruling party. Pogroms and riots are two different conceptual categories. State-condoned or state-sponsored riots are pogroms; violent clashes between groups that the state is unable to stop are riots. Not all riots in India have been pogroms; only some have been. The state in India has played a variety of roles at the time of communal tensions, including those that are systematically peaceful. Understanding how the state behaves, and the outcomes of its actions, also requires an understanding of how civil society might be organized.

### Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this chapter have been presented at Cornell, Indiana and Yale Universities and at MIT and the Centre for Policy Research, Delhi. We would like to thank Arun Agrawal, Kaushik Basu, John Jackson, Atul Kohli, Chris Wendt, Yogendra Yadav and Adam Ziegfeld for comments and discussion.

### Notes

- 1 In this chapter, we shall use the terms 'ethnic,' 'communal,' and 'ethnocommunal' interchangeably. For a rationale, see Horowitz 1985: chapter 1. For a plea that the term 'ethnic' should not be used widely, see Chandra 2006.
- 2 The most recent accounts of state involvement in riots are Brass (1997, 2003), and Wilkinson (2004). We discuss them in the third section of the chapter.
- 3 Constructed jointly by Steven Wilkinson (Yale University) and Varshney. This dataset is now publicly available with ICPSR. See Varshney and Wilkinson 2006.
- 4 However, see Petersen (2002) for a very different account from East Central Europe.
- 5 For a fuller analysis, see Varshney (2003).
- 6 In contrast to Ahmedabad or Baroda, Varshney (2002) identified Surat as a town that had managed to develop civic mechanisms to insulate itself from the state-wide trend. Yet again in March and April

- 2002 the violence in Surat was minimal, even as Baroda and Ahmedabad, not too far away, experienced carnage.
- 7 This narrative is based on a reading of the following newspapers: *The Times of India*, *The Indian Express*, and *The Hindustan Times*.
  - 8 'Parivar Wars,' *The Times of India*, June 26, 2002.
  - 9 This section is heavily abbreviated from chapters 9–11 of Varshney (2002).
  - 10 Mahatma Gandhi's deputy, Sardar Patel, is widely viewed as the organizational genius behind the success of Gujarat's Congress party.
  - 11 The party had ruled earlier sporadically at the city and provincial level, but not with much power, as it was under British sovereignty.
  - 12 In 1957, within 10 years of independence, a well-known committee of the Congress party noted the civic malaise. 'Congress workers at the base have lost contact with the people ... their discipline has become loose ...' (All-India Congress Committee 1957: 42). The committee warned that 'to combat the evils of communalism, it is necessary to establish properly functioning village, Ward or mohalla [neighborhood] Congress committees' (ibid.: 5).
  - 13 For more details, see Varshney (2002: 293–97).
  - 14 Suresh Khopade, a police officer in Maharashtra state, was appointed deputy commissioner of police for Bhiwandi. In his unpublished memoirs, *Bhiwandi Riots and After* (Khopade n.d.), he has given a detailed account of his initiatives. Varshney independently confirmed the account through interviews.
  - 15 Khopade n.d.: 119.
  - 16 Indeed, by 2008–09, the local power company was using the neighborhood committees to develop a better power distribution network and prevent electricity thefts. Based on interviews in April 2009.
  - 17 Brass 1997: 287–88.
  - 18 Wilkinson also argues that the level of electoral competitiveness at the local level, as opposed to the state level, produces the opposite result: namely, increase in riots. In the interest of space, we do not concentrate on this argument here. We do have a critique elsewhere (Varshney and Gubler 2012).
  - 19 For implications of this analysis for a recent debate in India, see Varshney 2011.

## References

- All-India Congress Committee, *Report of the Subcommittee Appointed by the Executive Committee of Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee to Enquire into the Working of the Congress Organization in Gujarat (Delhi)*, 1957.
- Barve, Sushobha, *Healing Streams: Bringing Back Hope in the Aftermath of Violence*, Delhi: Penguin, 2003.
- Brass, Paul, *Theft of an Idol*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- , *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.
- Chandra, Kanchan, 'What is Ethnic Identity and Does it Matter?' *Annual Review of Political Science* Vol.9 (2006): 397–424.
- Fearon, James and David Laitin, 'Explaining Interethnic Cooperation,' *American Political Science Review* (December 1996).
- Gerring, John, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Horowitz, Donald, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, chapter 1.
- Khopade, Suresh, *Bhiwandi Riots and After*, unpublished manuscript, n.d.
- King, Gary, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Lijphart, Arend, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.
- Petersen, Roger, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.
- Ramachandran, R., *Urbanization and Urban Systems in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Thakkar, Usha, 'Mohalla Committees of Bombay: Candles in Ominous Darkness,' *Economic and Political Weekly* (February 7, 2004).
- Varshney, Ashutosh, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
- , 'Understanding Gujarat Violence,' *Items and Issues* (Social Science Research Council, New York) (Spring 2003).

- 'Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict,' in Carles Boix and Susan Stokes, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- 'Rethink the Communal Violence Bill,' *The Indian Express* (July 16, 2011).
- Varshney, Ashutosh and Joshua Gubler, 'Does the State Promote Violence for Electoral Reasons?' *India Review* 11(3) (2012): 191–99.
- Varshney, Ashutosh, Mohammed Zulfan Tadjoeeddin, and Rizal Panggabean, 'Creating Datasets in Information-Poor Environments: Patterns of Collective Violence in Indonesia (1990–2003),' *Journal of East Asian Studies* (October 2008).
- Varshney, Ashutosh and Steven I. Wilkinson, *Dataset on Hindu-Muslim Violence in India, Version 2*, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), 2006, [www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/4342](http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/4342).
- Wilkinson, Steven I., *Votes and Violence: Ethnic Riots in India*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.