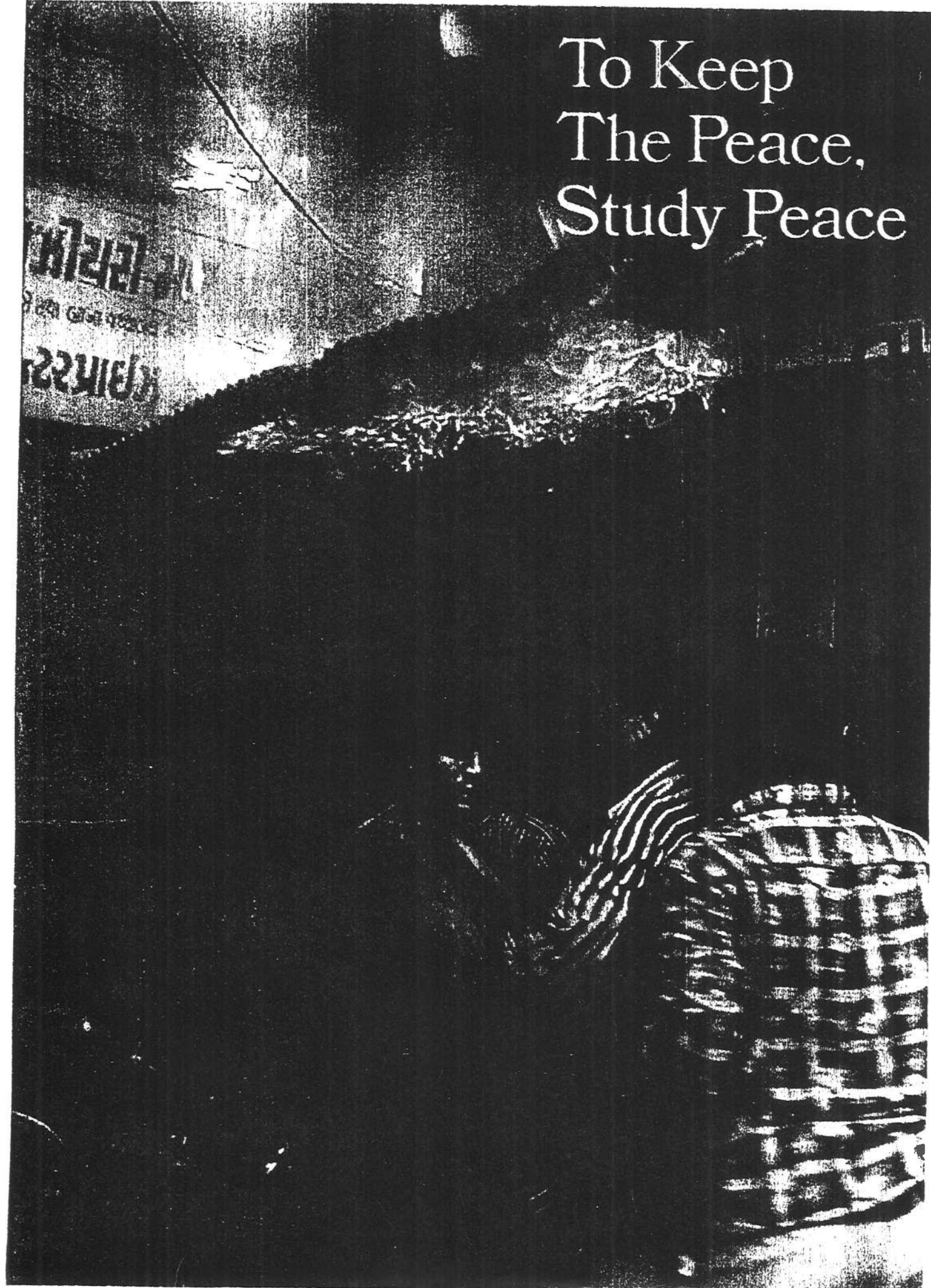


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**“ To Keep Peace, Study Peace ”**

# To Keep The Peace, Study Peace



Rioters looting a store in March in Ahmedabad, India, one of three riot-prone cities compared with three peaceful cities in a study of ethnic violence.

By MAHVISH KHAN

**W**HEN Ashutosh Varshney, a political scientist at the University of Michigan, decided to study ethnic violence, he ended up looking at something that most experts in the field don't: peaceful cities.

Mr. Varshney, who is from New Delhi, wanted to find out why some cities in India managed to avoid bloody Hindu-Muslim clashes while others erupted in horrifying violence.

"For far too long scholars and policy makers have focused on the state for conflict prevention. My main research finding is that we should instead focus on civil society," Mr. Varshney said. "An integrated society is the best bet for ethnic peace."

With the increase in ethnic conflicts in recent years, the results of his nine-year project have

## Integrated civic groups are found to forestall ethnic violence in India.

generated enormous excitement. Scholars have hailed his book, "Ethnic Conflict & Civic Life: Hindus & Muslims in India" (Yale University Press), as a major breakthrough, while the United Nations has already adopted his method to study Muslim-Christian violence in Indonesia. The Open Society Institute, part of the Soros Foundations Network, which promotes democratic principles and human rights issues, has distributed 170

copies of the book to staff members around the world. And it has been talking, along with other foundations, with Mr. Varshney about extending his research to other ethnic and religious flashpoints, from Eastern Europe to Nigeria.

"By carefully studying riot-prone and peaceful cities, this new model has a persuasive analysis and explanation of why violence occurs," said Samuel P. Huntington, chairman of the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies. Most researchers tend to avoid studying regions where no violence exists, Mr. Huntington said, so they have no place to compare their findings to, and their conclusions are based on incomplete evidence. Mr. Varshney avoided this research flaw by leading a team of researchers from Harvard, where he taught for nine years, to explore why

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# To Keep the Peace, Study Peace: Integration Is Found to Avert Violence

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some Indian cities were violence-prone, while others with the exact same Hindu-Muslim ratios lived in peace.

What Mr. Varshney found was that ethnically integrated organizations — including business associations, trade unions, professional groups, political parties, sports clubs — stand out as the most effective ways of controlling conflict.

These mixed associations proved far more effective than routine but uncoordinated social interactions, like simply allowing children to play together in the neighborhood. While both kinds of activities were important for ethnic harmony, formal organizations become much more important in times of strife, Mr. Varshney said.

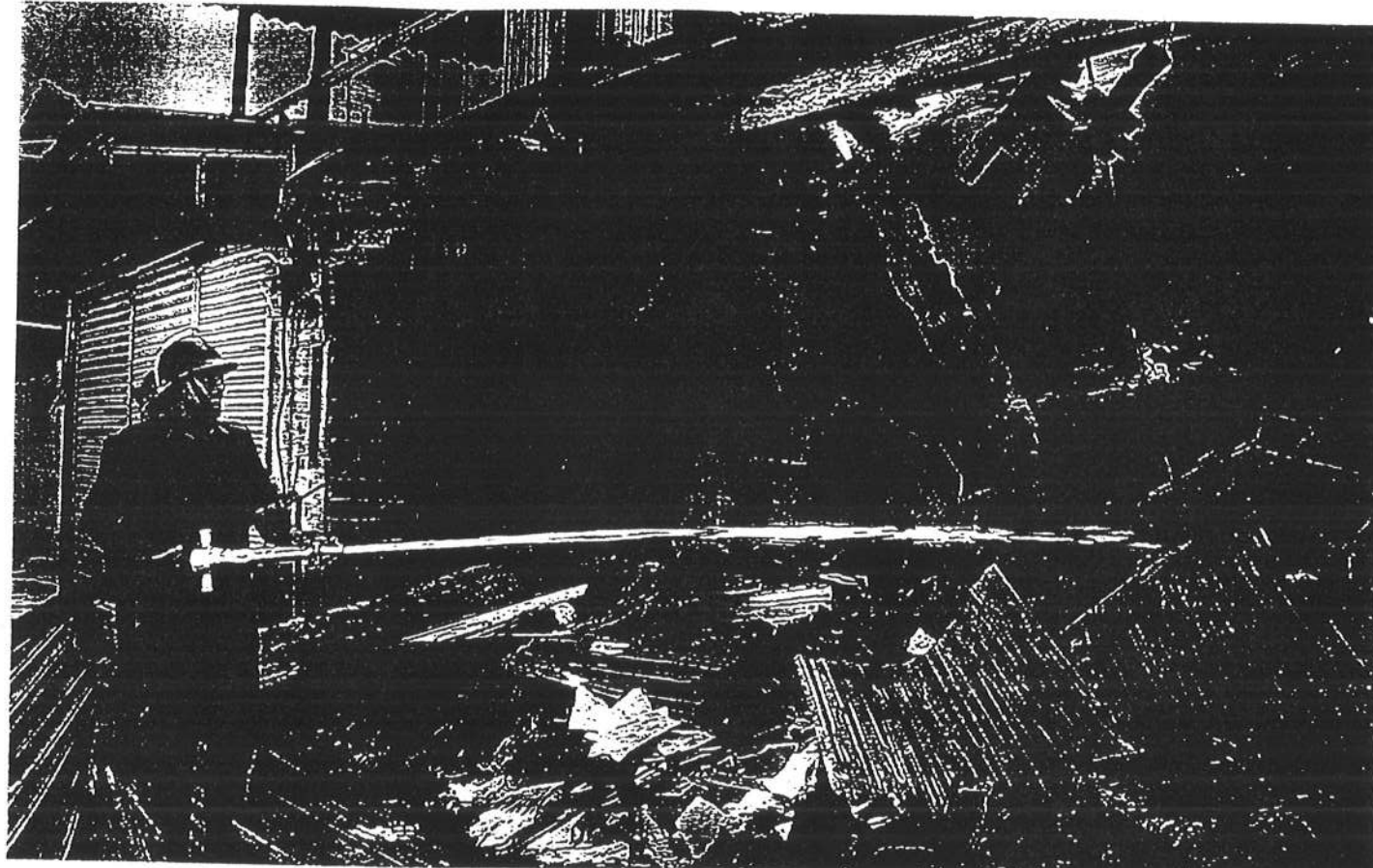
Mr. Varshney's team collected information on Hindu-Muslim rioting from 1950 to 1995 and identified eight riot-prone cities, where there had been repeated clashes. The team then picked three riot-prone cities — Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Aligarh — and compared them with peaceful cities with equal Hindu-Muslim population ratios: Surat, Lucknow and Calicut.

After analyzing the data, Mr. Varshney found a clear pattern: cities with developed social, political and economic integration were far less vulnerable to conflict.

Calicut's network of associations and peace committees, for example, helped defuse tension during the widespread rioting that broke out after Hindu militants destroyed the Babri mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992. While unfounded rumors that Hindus were desecrating mosques by throwing pigs into them were spurring violence in other cities, Calicut's organizations helped city officials quash the specious reports.

The riots that whipped across the western Gujarat State in March and April of this year and claimed more than 1,000 lives seemed to provide further evidence for Mr. Varshney's conclusions. The three riot-prone cities he identified were the sources of some of the worst violence, while Surat, which is also in Gujarat, remained peaceful.

"It was with considerable schol-



A fireman douses a fire set by rioters in April in Ahmedabad, India. Surat, also in Gujarat State with a similar Muslim-Hindu ratio, escaped violence.



Andrew Sacks for The New York Times

Ashutosh Varshney, author of "Ethnic Conflict & Civic Life."

Aryeh Neier, the president of the Open Society Institute who distributed Mr. Varshney's book to his overseas staff, said: "I am not certain that the same pattern will prevail. However, his model intuitively makes enough sense that it is worth thinking of implementing elsewhere."

That is precisely what Mr. Varshney would like to do and says he plans to seek \$750,000 in funds from the Soros Foundations, the Ford Foundation and others in order to test his model in Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and possibly Eastern Europe within the next three years.

Mr. Varshney is already working with Rajmohan Gandhi, a leading activist of Indian civic engagement and the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, to reduce violence in his birthplace. Their project, primarily financed at this time by the Foundation for Human and Economic Development, a nonprofit organization based in Orlando, Fla., will try to create Hindu-Muslim ties in the eight riot-prone cities that Mr. Varshney identified, by forming a range of nongovernmental organizations and business partnerships.

"Intuitively, his model makes sense — it is fresh, it is different and it is promising," Mr. Gandhi said in a telephone interview from his home in New Delhi. "Varshney's research shows that work of integration and partnership does help to safeguard against violence. Once people read his book and comprehend the model, it will trigger a lot of constructive thought and action."

arly satisfaction, but also with great emotional and political dismay that I observed the patterns of violence and peace during the recent Gujarat riots," Mr. Varshney said. "As copies of my book were coming into circulation, its predictions and analysis were coming true."

Whether it is India, Indonesia or Palestine, "this is an important breakthrough in understanding the problem of ethnic conflict globally," said Robert Putnam, a Harvard professor whose work on civic participation in American life, detailed in his book "Bowling Alone," has been cited by both President Bill Clinton and President Bush. "Varshney's findings show the crucial mechanism by which societies can manage

diversity," he said. "This is not a handbook to pass out in Bosnia, and his book does not tell governments what to do, yet it frames the problem."

United Nations officials began to talk to Mr. Varshney about his ideas last summer, before his book was published. "We thought his method could also apply to the dynamics of Indonesia," where strained Muslim-Christian relations often break out into violence, said Satish Mishra, head of the United Nations Support Facility for Indonesian Recovery. "Varshney's findings raise the possibilities of future peace."

In April the United Nations office in Jakarta hired Mr. Varshney to oversee the creation of a database

that would track incidents of ethnic violence. Mr. Mishra said this would give Indonesian policymakers a map of violent locations, a sense of their duration, intensity and reported causes. This should lead to better ideas of how to combat these conflicts, he said.

"If policymakers formulate their responses only on the basis of guesses and intuitions, they can go horribly wrong," Mr. Varshney said from his home in Ann Arbor. "A reliable database on violence is critical for policymaking."

Not everyone is sold on Mr. Varshney's theory, however. Some critics argue the problem is perhaps more complex than simply creating integrated associations. David Laitin, a

professor of political science at Stanford University, said Mr. Varshney lacked the evidence to show that association members are doing what his theory says they do. Mr. Laitin argued that Mr. Varshney placed too much emphasis on trust among organization members. It may just be that in the cities where there is economic interdependence, both sides have an interest in refraining from riots. Levels of trust would then be unnecessary, Mr. Laitin said.

Mr. Varshney counters that trust is not central to his work. Pitting trust against self-interest is too narrow, he said. There is evidence, he says, of many motivations, which cannot be reduced to mere trust or self-interest.