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By Kenneth J. Cooper

TIMELY AND SUBSTANTIVE LOOK AT INDIA'S HINDU-MUSLIM CONFLICT

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India is half a world away, and most Americans carry in their minds two images of an inscrutable land. One is of a nearly naked Mohandas Gandhi, plodding along a dirt road, preaching nonviolence as a means to force British colonials to quit India. The other is of mobs of Hindus and Muslims viciously killing one another after the Brits did partition their prized colony along religious lines, creating Pakistan and independent India in 1947.

Outbreaks of Hindu-Muslim violence have occurred so often in the decades since then that the deadly riots that broke out in March and continued in spurts into May came as no surprise - even though they are the country's worst in at least a decade. The few Americans familiar with India's geography might wonder how more than 1,000 people could be killed in communal violence in the same state where Gandhi was born, lived for two decades, and founded his fabled ashram (in the city struck hardest in the rioting). **Ashutosh Varshney**, a University of Michigan professor who specializes in India's domestic politics, answers that conundrum in a timely, groundbreaking study of Hindu-Muslim conflict in his native country. With statistical research supplemented by surveys and interviews, **Varshney** corrects a popular misconception that such violence has been omnipresent in independent India. He documents that communal violence has afflicted some parts of India but not others, and offers an insightful explanation that just might apply to other nations that have experienced intergroup conflicts, including ours, though he is too careful a scholar to leap to that conclusion. But that possibility makes a book written mostly for Indians possibly of wider interest.

Ignoring unreliable data collected by India's government, **Varshney** relies on accounts published in *The Times of India*, the country's paper of record, to tally and locate Hindu-Muslim riots that resulted in deaths from 1950 to 1995. He is less concerned with overall totals, given the likely imprecision of newspaper stories, than he is with trends. They are quite clear.

The deadly riots erupted mostly in cities, not in rural areas, where most of the population lives. Beyond that, urban rioting was concentrated in a handful of cities. Astonishingly, nearly half the communal deaths occurred in eight cities, one being Ahmedabad, the epicenter of this year's riots. The 1,119 killed through 1995 in a city named for the prophet Mohammed ranked it second to Bombay, which is much bigger. The latest rioting probably makes Ahmedabad the deadliest venue for Hindu-Muslim violence in the world's largest democracy.

Varshney moves beyond statistics to suggest why Ahmedabad, in the northwestern state of Gujarat, has broken with what had been a peaceful past: It experienced no deadly communal riots between 1920 and 1969. He derives his thesis from a detailed examination of six cities: three whose history has been marred by communal violence, three marked by its absence. The comparisons with cities that had no riots are novel in studies of ethnic violence anywhere, he writes, suggesting in a footnote that the 1968 Kerner Commission might have issued a more illuminating report on the American race riots of the 1960s had it done the same.

From his research, **Varshney** concludes that communal peace has been maintained in some Indian cities by civic associations that integrate Hindus and Muslims, creating a sense of familiarity and interdependence. He finds that local associations that bring together masses of the two groups - say, in labor unions or trade groups of small businesses - preserve the peace better than elite chambers of commerce. In rural areas, everyday contacts among neighbors, co-workers, and patrons of the same shops make a peaceful difference, but they are not sufficient in India's massive cities.

As for Ahmedabad, **Varshney** attributes its past communal peace to integrated associations founded by Gandhi, including a textile workers' union, and the upsurge of violence there since 1969 to their decline. Economic change has weakened civic links across the religious divide, he argues, but the ascension to power of Gandhi's Congress Party resulted in members devoting less energy to his integrated associations. Into the vacuum have swept Hindu nationalist groups and their allied political party, which has ruled Ahmedabad in recent years. "The city's Gandhian soul has all but vanished," **Varshney** laments.

Varshney, who once taught at the Kennedy School of Government, has anticipated scholars' looking over his shoulder - perhaps too much. The early chapters disputing other theories of why and where ethnic violence occurs are turgid, and the general reader may want to skip them. Proofreaders failed the author in one important chart that presents his riot data - the labels on the scales are transposed - and on a few misprinted pages.

But **Varshney's** overall thesis that civic associations built around common interests can prevent communal violence in the only democracy larger than ours is something to contemplate as America grows more diverse.

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