



The Association for
Asian Studies

Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India by Ashutosh Varshney

Review by: Lelah Dushkin

The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Aug., 2003), pp. 991-993

Published by: [Association for Asian Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3591913>

Accessed: 05/12/2013 09:42

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Association for Asian Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Asian Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The variety of topics on which Matilal touches in his essays is startling. Much of his work reads like a history of modern Indian philosophical studies, and one can credit Matilal for pioneering or at least boosting a serious brand of comparative philosophy within Indian traditions and between classical Indian and modern philosophy.

Furthermore, the later essays (largely correctives to the tendency toward myth making in Indian studies) suggest an intriguing nexus between the existing misconceptions and misperceptions sponsored by the political residues of Orientalism that still color the study of Indian traditions and the more popular appropriations of traditional Indian cultural practices and ideas into modern social, religious, and political movements within and outside modern India. Here, Matilal does not simply come across as a preserver or defender of traditional ideas, nor as a pedant trying to clear up the misconceptions of the uninitiated. He really seems to feel the need to write these essays in order to give voice to a precious traditional outlook that he perceives as seriously threatened by a strange mix of nationalism, pseudo-traditional religious movements, and prevailing Orientalist attitudes. Ganeri correctly locates the spirit that pervades all of these essays: "In Matilal's work, . . . the goal is not merely to compare. It is informed, first and foremost, by a deep humanism, a conviction that the classical thinkers should not be thought of as mysterious, exotic, or tradition-bound creatures, but as rational agents trying to understand their cultures and societies with as little prejudice as possible" (p. xiii).

The book is highly recommended to a wide audience of philosophers from diverse cultural backgrounds, Indianists, or simply those interested in an important scholar's thoughts on traditional Indian cultures, past and present. There are a number of printing mistakes, ranging from the grammatical to the typographical, but not enough to distract or annoy the reader.

DEVEN PATEL

University of California, Berkeley

Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India. By ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002. ix, 382 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).

This is a fine book, which has already received some recognition, partly for its own merits, partly from the timing of its publication in March 2002, shortly after the communal carnage in Gujarat. The author has been widely interviewed in print and broadcast media, and rightly so, because he discusses not only some cities noted for their histories of communal violence but also, more importantly, some of the similar social characteristics that have histories of peace.

After an initial chapter summarizing the book and laying out his research methods and materials, Ashutosh Varshney discusses why four existing theories are inadequate. First, they are at too high a level of aggregation and cannot explain why violence is quite localized within countries containing large areas which are peaceful. In India, Hindu-Muslim violence is almost always urban, while most of the population is rural. Giving data on violent incidents over time (chap. 4), Varshney shows that half of the violence involving deaths is concentrated in eight cities containing 5 percent of the population. Second, existing theories too often confuse ethnic *conflict* with ethnic *violence*. This is a major distinction for Varshney. He argues that any multiethnic

society will have periods and issues of ethnic conflict: the key question is whether these give rise to violence and deaths or are handled and resolved by the political and social system. His vision of peace, therefore, is the absence of violence and death, not the absence of conflict. His book explores why and how some conflict is contained and some is not. He sees the answer in what he calls "civic life," more particularly, whether there are intercommunal associations, such as business organizations, trade unions, political parties, and professional societies. Integrated neighborhoods and day-to-day interaction help but are not as important as associational life, whether in the formal or informal sectors of the economy.

Intercommunal networks of civic engagement or the lack thereof, Varshney says, are socially constructed under the impact of master narratives such as secular nationalism, religious nationalism, and regional movements on the basis of caste, class, or sectarian divisions. These interact locally with the economic context and political system.

Varshney selected six cities for intensive study, all with at least a half million inhabitants, grouped in three pairs. Both Calicut, in the Malabar region of Kerala, and Aligarh, home of a famous Muslim university in Uttar Pradesh, have Muslims as just over a third of their population and have developed a substantial Muslim middle class (chaps. 5–6). With thick intercommunal networks of civic engagement, Calicut has not had a religious riot in a century, even during 1921 and 1989–92, when local religious tensions were high. In Calicut, as in much of the south, the Hindu-Muslim divide has been less important than the Brahmin–non-Brahmin division and movements for caste justice within Hinduism. In Aligarh, by contrast, Hindu-Muslim division emerged as the master narrative. Hindus resented the Muslim university, but it was well guarded, so poorer Muslim workers in the lock industry have borne the brunt of Hindu nationalist mobilization. In 1992 there were no restraints: politicians, the press, and criminal elements deliberately incited communal passions, producing horrible violence.

The populations of the next pair, Lucknow and Hyderabad, also have roughly one-third Muslims (chaps. 7–8). They both have a past history of Muslim rule, and both today are state capitals. Lucknow, whose Muslim rule ended in the mid-nineteenth century, has had a history of peace, partly because of intercommunal civic engagement and partly because of the salience of the Sunni-Shi'a division within the Muslim community. In Hyderabad, Hindu and Muslim elites tend to live in integrated neighborhoods, form joint organizations, and maintain cordial relations, but pronounced communal divisions exist at the mass level. An industrialized metropolis, Hyderabad is one of the most riot-prone cities in the country. This goes back to the politics of the 1930s, when the freedom movement and other forms of mass mobilization were suppressed by the Nizam, which favored the Muslim Majlis party. Since independence, the Muslim masses have been concentrated in the old city and have voted for the Majlis. Although there are class differences in Lucknow between Muslim workers and Hindu entrepreneurs in *chikan* embroidery, the leading industry, Varshney does not see this as a source of communal division. The industry has always been informally organized, with great interdependence and need for trust. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is important in the city but, aware of this symbiosis, does not try to create or exploit Hindu-Muslim divisions, unlike its role elsewhere.

Varshney sees much of the social construction of Hindu-Muslim antagonism and amity as deriving from the mass mobilizations of the freedom movement in the 1920s through the 1940s and particularly from Gandhi's insistence on organizing for social activism. Nowhere was this more true than in Gujarat, his home state, where the last

pair of cities is located, Ahmedabad and Surat. Under Gandhi's inspiration and with Sardar Patel's organizing genius, Gujarat built a strong National Congress; a modern Millowners Association with a tradition of conciliation and arbitration; a vital, powerful Textile Labor Association (TLA); and numerous educational and social welfare institutions. These were based in Ahmedabad, which is much larger than Surat, with modern textile mills. Surat's silk embroidery industry was informally organized, like chikan embroidery in Lucknow.

Both cities had decades of communal peace, yet what Varshney finds himself having to explain is how and why the impressive achievements in civic engagement decayed and declined after 1947 to the point that Gujarat in recent years has become the most riot-prone region of the country. When the Congress took power, it had the government take over *khadi* and the other Gandhian social institutions, which lost their vitality. Changing patterns of ownership and technology in Ahmedabad led to the marked decline of both business associations and the TLA. More power-minded people took part in politics, often forming links with criminal interests and corrupt practices. After Indira Gandhi's fight with the party bosses in 1969, she was able to get votes, but she destroyed the party organization. A decade after her death in 1984, the BJP took power, having replaced the Congress. In Surat, the business networks flourished for a while, benefiting from the decline of the organized sector and other changes. Ahmedabad remained peaceful until some riots broke out in 1969 and has been riot prone ever since. Varshney argues that the reasons go back well before the party split: the incident which set off the riot was just the sort that would have been handled peacefully in the past. Surat, which became a boomtown that attracted workers from all over India, remained peaceful until some very bloody riots in 1992, occurring only in the new shantytowns, not the old city.

Readers may not all be persuaded by Varshney's analysis of these declines, and certainly his treatment of class as a form of symbiosis in two of the cities needs further examination. But, his overall explanation of the differences between the peaceful and riot-prone cities is a powerful one, well laid out and testable by what one hopes will be many other researchers in other places. Much seems testable outside India as well, as the main principles are not unique to that country. Varshney himself asks whether his ideas could be applied to bring peace to divided cities (chap. 12). He finds one such case, Bhiwandi, near Bombay, which had bad riots in the 1970s and 1980s. The police chief organized intercommunal committees outside government to handle local issues, and the town has had no riots since 1991. The key, Varshney feels, is cooperation between the state and nongovernmental organizations. This, too, needs to be tested, and one hopes that NGO activists and civic officials will do so.

LELAH DUSHKIN
Kansas State University

Walls Within Walls: Life Histories of Working Women in the Old City of Lahore.

By ANITA M. WEISS. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 226 pp.
 \$14.95/Rs 525 (paper).

In an intriguing story about the lives of women in the walled city of Lahore, Anita M. Weiss makes an important contribution to South Asian literature in general and to studies on women and work in particular. Through the streets of Shah Alam Bazaar, Roshni Gate, Masti Gate, and Delhi Gate, women in Weiss's ethnography