
"To Keep Peace, Study Peace"
By MAHVISH KHAN

WHEN 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 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

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

Continued on Page 15
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 became much more important in times of strife, Mr. Varshney said.

Mr. Varshney's team collected information on Hindu-Muslim rioting from 1980 to 1999 and identified eight riot-prone cities, where there had been repeated clashes. The team then picked three riot-prone cities — Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Allagad — and compared them with peaceful cities with equal Hindu-Muslim population ratios: Surat, Lucknow and Calcutta.

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

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

The riots that ripped through 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 clashes, while Surat, which is also in Gujarat, remained peaceful.

"It was with considerable scholarly 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 copy was being made 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 civil participation in American life, described in his book "Bowling Alone," has been cited by 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 to Bosnia, and its book does not tell governments what to do, yet it frames the problem of.<br/>

"Varshney's findings show the crucial mechanism by which societies can manage diversity," he said. "This is not a handbook to pass out to Bosnia, and its book does not tell governments what to do, yet it frames the problem of integration and conflict."

 permitted by the United Nations Support Facility for Indonesian Recovery. "Varshney's findings raise the possibilities of future peace."

Varshney's theory, however, has been criticized by some experts who argue that the problem is perhaps more complex than simply creating integrated associations. David Laitin, a professor of political science at Stanford University, said that Mr. Varshney's model is incomplete because his theory says that groups that lack the ability to form effective partnerships are prone to violence.

"It is possible that other factors, such as economic and political instability, could also explain why certain groups are more vulnerable to violence," Laitin said. "Varshney's model overlooks the importance of economic and political stability in predicting violence."

However, his model intuitively makes sense, he says, as it is based on the idea that social cohesion will prevail. However, his model intuitively makes sense, he says, as it is based on the idea that social cohesion will prevail.

That is precisely what Mr. Varshney would like to do and says he plans to seek $750,000 in funds from the Ford Foundation and others 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 advocate of Indian civil engagement and the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, to reduce violence in his birthplace, India. Their project, financed at this time by the Ford Foundation, is to work with Indian and Pakistani organizations and business partnerships.

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