

*Seminar, May 2002*

**A Review**

*By Jairam Ramesh*

**ETHNIC CONFLICT AND CIVIC LIFE: Hindus and Muslims in India** by Ashutosh Varshney. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2002.

Ashutosh Varshney is one of the leading political scientists in the United States and is presently a professor at the University of Michigan after having studied at MIT and taught at Harvard. His tenure at MIT grounded him in solid empiricism, in detailed field work, in rigorous methodology and in quantitative analysis – all rare in the social sciences in general barring economics. He is the author of many well-known works in diverse areas like food policy, nationalism and industrial growth. For the past decade he has been researching communal riots and violence in India.

When he started this endeavour, even he would not have imagined that his work would culminate in a book that would not only have deep scholarship but also real-world significance. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* was released by Yale University Press just two weeks before the Godhra carnage and the subsequent Narendra Modi-sponsored genocide in Gujarat.

The book has therefore received more than its fair share of attention and Varshney himself has been interviewed by newspapers and magazines, thereby bringing this book to a wider audience. This is the second time in recent months that the prestigious but relatively low-key Yale University Press has hit the headlines: a few years back, it published Ahmed Rashid's authoritative book on the Taliban. At that time, this book did not make waves. But after 11 September, it became a bestseller and deservedly so. Varshney's book too should see a similar trend.

Communal violence has been studied extensively. Various theories have been expounded as to why Hindu-Muslim riots take place. One school believes that economic factors play a key role, while another holds political parties and religious fundamentalists responsible for fomenting discord. Others believe that the Hindu-Muslim relationship is inherently prone to periodic outbursts of violence and killings. Varshney's contribution is to juxtapose the question – what causes communal riots – with the question – what accounts for communal peace – in different urban settings.

To understand the presence of communal violence, Varshney believes it is important to understand its absence simultaneously.

Thus, he takes three pairs of cities: Calicut and Aligarh, Lucknow and Hyderabad and Surat and Ahmedabad. Calicut, Lucknow and Surat have been traditionally riot-free cities, while Aligarh, Hyderabad and Ahmedabad have been very riot-prone. The research then is a detailed investigation into why the three cities have been relatively peaceful and why the other three have been rocked every once in a while by riots. The importance of the research design lies in studying the cities not individually but in pairs. It is this that gives Varshney's work a distinctive flavour.

His main conclusion is simply stated. Cities are peaceful where there are civic institutions, alliances and networks that foster communal peace. Cities are peaceful when there is associational, as opposed to merely everyday engagement between communities. Cities see violence where such institutions, alliances and networks are either absent or have atrophied as in Ahmedabad. On Ahmedabad, particularly since it is very much in the news these days, Varshney points out that the decline of integrative institutions like the Textile Labour Association and the ascendancy of a political role over its civic role in the Congress Party is what has made Ahmedabad a hotspot for sectarian strife.

Of course, this is much too simplistic an explanation for the recent pogroms in the Hindutva laboratory. Varshney has not, for example, dealt with the consequences of the way in which the VHP has spread itself in the state leading to rural riots for the first time, something that Varshney's basic theory denies since he starts from the presumption that riots are an urban phenomena. Just as Varshney has not dealt with the VHP in connection with Ahmedabad, he does not include, in any meaningful way, the nefarious role of the MIM in polarising Hyderabad or of a land mafia that has made Aligarh a tinderbox. Indeed, if riots are seen as predominantly an urban happening, then they cannot be studied without reference to the nature and pattern of urban growth in its various manifestations.

No doubt, as Varshney says, civic engagement is crucial but to give associations a larger-than-life role as he does is to overlook the larger economic and political context in which these networks flourish (or perish). Varshney deals with this fleetingly when he talks about Bihar, a state that saw the horrendous Bhagalpur riots in 1989 but that has been peaceful since then entirely because of Laloo Prasad Yadav's political stance. Lower caste parties or subaltern secularists are clearly transforming social life and in Bihar this has resulted in over a decade of communal peace. Whether the BSP will play a similar role in UP remains to be seen.

Are civic networks a historical legacy or can they be built? Varshney draws attention to three examples where civic engagement has been deliberately fostered. Two of these are through NGOs – Disha in Saharanpur and the famous SEWA in

Ahmedabad and a third is through a sensitive police officer in the textile town of Bhiwandi. Bhiwandi is an example of a town that has passed from violence to peace unlike Surat that has moved from peace to violence. Whether Bhiwandi is replicable or not, Varshney leaves to 'future research'.

Varshney places great faith in intercommunal engagement and rightly so. But he discounts the importance of intracommunal and intraethnic associations saying that they were not found useful for purposes of ethnic or communal peace. This is too sweeping a generalisation since our own experience shows that while interethnic associations can nurture peace, intraethnic associations can certainly vitiate the atmosphere and create conditions conducive to communal riots.

Varshney's book deservedly carries encomiums from such luminaries like Samuel Huntington, David Laiten, Susanne Rudolph and Alfred Stephan. It is a work of formidable scholarship that is only to be expected from someone trained at MIT and Harvard. It is innovative and enhances our understanding of Hindu-Muslim strife in recent decades. Why aren't such books coming out of our intellectual establishment that are enjoying huge subsidies and are wallowing in the 'leisure of the theory class'.

**Jairam Ramesh**