

Business Times (Singapore), March 17, 2002

“ Civic Networks can rein in Religious Violence ”
By Karim Raslan

Civic networks can rein in religious violence

THE horrendous cycle of violence and revenge killings in the Indian state of Gujarat has convinced many people that societies with substantial Muslim communities are inherently unstable and dangerous.

Maybe I'm being unnecessarily sensitive, but much of the coverage in the United States has been underscored by a subtle eyebrow-raising, as if to say "See, I told you so. They can't be trusted. They're just impossible."

"They," of course, refers to Muslims.

Perhaps this is understandable. The terrible events in India have exploded into the public eye just as conflict in Palestine appears to be reaching a point of no return. Our television screens are full of images of women and children being killed.

Moreover, it's becoming painfully clear that violence begets violence. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's tactics will not give the Israeli people what they crave so desperately - namely, peace and security.

Living amid the prosperity of Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, it's hard for us to conceive the utter hopelessness of the Palestinian situation - the futility and nihilism that can turn ordinary people into suicide bombers because that's all they have left.

Given the backdrop of events in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, as well as the intensive (and almost uniformly negative) analysis of all things Islamic, it's been a relief to come across an academic, University of Michigan professor Ashutosh Varshney, who has explored the dynamics of race and religion (Hinduism and Islam) in detail and reached a relatively upbeat conclusion - and one that holds important lessons for policy-makers, journalists and, most importantly, politicians across the globe.

Varshney concludes that violence and strife are entirely avoidable. Of course, for us in South-East Asia, such conclusions might appear self-evident.

Sadly, much of the rest of the world needs to have these "truths" writ large - since they're already convinced that Muslims are programmed to strap on bombs and wreak havoc at the drop of a hat.

In his soon-to-be published book (I read an



extract in a journal), *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims*, Varshney essentially outlines the particular conditions under which communitarian bloodshed has been avoided in India.

After extensive research in three pairs of Indian cities - one city in each pair having a history of communal violence, the other with a history of relative communal harmony - he's been able to show a direct correlation between the level of violence and the existence of "networks of civic engagement."

Ahmedabad is one of the cities surveyed, paired with the peaceful city of Cochin in south India.

Varshney explains that eight Indian cities, including Ahmedabad, comprising only 18% of the country's urban population, have accounted for a hugely disproportionate (46%) share of communal violence in the country. Put otherwise, 82% of the urban population has not been "riot-prone."

Focusing on the networks that bring Hindu and Muslim urban communities together, he demonstrates how strong "associational forms" of civic engagement - such as business organisations, trade unions, professional associations, political parties and NGOs, as well as film clubs and sports clubs - are able to control outbreaks of ethnic violence.

Interestingly, Varshney also reveals that many of these clubs (for instance, reading clubs were particularly popular in the south, in Tamil Nadu and Kerala) were started in the 1920s under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

At the time, Gandhi was endeavouring to bridge the religious divide, transform his people and set up a network of groupings that would sup-

port his struggle to free India from the British.

Varshney argues that apart from these associational forms of engagement, there is a second type of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic networks: "everyday forms" of engagement.

These are exemplified by "simple, routine interactions of life, such as whether families from different communities visit each other, eat together regularly, jointly participate in festivals, and allow their children to play together in the neighbourhood."

While both forms of engagement are critical to ensure racial harmony, he argues that the associational forms are more important in times of strife, and are more robust in the face of deliberate provocation.

"The more the associational networks cut across ethnic boundaries, the harder it is for politicians to polarise communities," he says.

Varshney's scholarly and sober treatise provides an important counterweight to those who argue that Islam is inherently violent and that multi-racial, multi-religious societies are doomed to failure.

While the author has perhaps glossed over the role of poverty as a contributing factor to inter-ethnic strife, his central premise is important both in South-East Asia and across the Islamic world.

His firm focus on associational engagement reminds us that aggression - as advocated by Sharon - will never bring peace to communities, which requires two factors: leadership and the associational networks Varshney describes.

Leadership is required in order to put these networks in place. They don't just spring up overnight: they need to be worked at and nurtured. In this respect, leadership by example is crucial.

Gandhi understood that age-old rivalries had to be fenced in by countless networks, clubs and associations, and that, over time, the familiarity and friendships that evolved would help maintain peace even in periods of strife and tension.

This, surely, is worth emulating in troubled times.

□ Karim Raslan is a regionally-syndicated columnist