Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life:
Hindus and Muslims in India

Ashutosh Varshney
New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. 382 pages.

While Ashutosh Varshney's book, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, cannot be judged by its cover, it can be judged by its index. His exhaustive and erudite study of riots in India only includes a paltry three references to the Rashtriya Swayemsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), two Hindu nationalist organizations that play a central role in such riots. He also fails to mention the Bajrang Dal, the militant Hindu organization responsible for many of the attacks during the violence in Gujarat in 2002. This seems to summarize the problem with his book: It is intriguing yet incomplete.

The reason for this omission becomes clear from his central thesis: Riots seldom occur where integrated networks of civic engagement exist; riots are a common feature where interdependency is absent. Varshney, a professor of political science at the University of Michigan, surveys six cities in India: three riot-prone (Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Aligarh) and three riot-free (Lucknow, Calicut, Surat).

His focus on India's urban centers is not without reason. Only 4% of communal violence-related deaths have occurred in rural areas, where 67% of the Indian population lives. Eight cities (whose total population is only 5% of the country's total population) account for 45% of deaths in communal violence. Varshney seems overly eager to correct the notion that Hindu-Muslim violence is a pan-Indian experience.

His book highlights some important divisions that contribute to inter-religious discord. In chapter 5, for example, he notes that Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), once an educational center for both Muslims and Hindus, is now largely a university exclusively attended by Muslims. Such divisions at the higher academic levels lead to inevitable cleavages in society. Varshney concludes that "local patterns of violence underline how important associational ties across communities are for peace in multi-ethnic societies" (p. 11).

It is tempting to agree with Varshney. His book suggests the basic premise that if Muslims and Hindus work together, they will not resort to communal violence. One can understand why his ideas have gained support from government officials, apologetic Indian scholars, and funda-

mentalist Hindu and Muslim groups. However, he does not indicate how intolerant swamis or mullahs have preached division, nor does he speak of how religious schools (both Hindu and Muslim) have displaced secular education in many parts of India.

In the example cited above about AMU, Varshney implies that the university itself has contributed to the ghettoization in Aligarh – an argument that mirrors that of the Hindu nationalist parties. He ignores how the rising view among Hindus of Aligarh as a center of support for Pakistan contributes to the university's drop in Hindu enrollment.

Despite his impressive research and statistical analysis, Varshney's book is flawed for four reasons. First, it is overly schematic. While he states in the introduction that riots are localized, Varshney applies the same methodology to survey the six cities analyzed, each of which has a distinct history and socioeconomic condition. Applying the central thesis to analyze ethnic conflict in South Asia suggests Varshney's cookie-cutter approach to understanding communal violence.

Second, he assumes that rioters become irrational when participating in communal violence. When a Muslim attacks a Hindu temple, Varshney argues, he acts in a sudden burst of rage and without any premeditated logical reason. This ignores the frightening narrative of communal violence in India. In Bombay, for example, Muslim-owned leather shoe stores were burned during the 1992 violence. Given that Muslims have traditionally dominated the leather industry in India, the destruction of these shops must be seen as a mechanism to gain a competitive advantage.

Third, Varshney ignores the communalization of Indian society led by fundamentalist groups. In a schoolbook used in the western state of Maharasthra, for example, there is a section called "Problems of the Country." The first subheading is "Minorities," in which Muslims, Christians, and Parsees are called "foreigners" in India. While Varshney alludes to these factors in his book, he fails to examine how the communalization of Indian society – led particularly by the Sangh Parivar – has contributed to a charged mindset that is all-too-conducive to violence.

Fourth, simplifying communal conflict to Hindu and Muslim tension is as erroneous and simplistic as referring to the Middle East conflict as just a Jewish-Muslim problem. In the southern state of Tamil Nadu, for example, new laws have been passed preventing conversion to Christianity. In Kerala, a priest from Pennsylvania was recently attacked. Varshney does his readers a disservice by focusing only on one aspect of religious discord in India.

Over the past 2 years, I have conducted extensive surveys of communal violence in India. I arrived in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, on February 15, 2002, to work on a micro-finance project in a Hindu slum. Twelve days after my arrival, communal violence erupted and I shifted my work to rehabilitating the 85,000 Muslims displaced during the violence. Contrary to Varshney's thesis, violence in Ahmedabad occurred only in the mixed locales – where Muslims and Hindus either worked or lived together. In areas where Muslims ghettoized themselves, violence did not occur. The primary reason for this is because Muslims living in Hindu locales found themselves vulnerable to attacks from neighboring Hindus.

If civic interaction is the panacea for communal discord, then why did such networks not prevent the violence in Gujarat? How has the Hindu boycott of Muslim goods ghettoized the Muslims both economically and emotionally? Why do some Hindus and Muslims feel that their only safety lies in creating physical and emotional barriers? Why do some feel that riots are a form of economic empowerment?

Two years after the violence, the injustices and the questions linger. Muslims I interview wonder why and how their neighbors, bosses, teachers, and colleagues could turn on them and afflict so much harm. This is a question Ashutosh Varshney fails to answer.

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