

# Ethnicity as a Source of Conflict in India

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## Ethnicity as a Source of Conflict in India

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### **Critically Assess the Circumstances Under Which Ethnicity Can Become a Source of Conflict.**

Since partition in 1947, the status and treatment of the remaining Muslim citizens in India's new multiethnic nation alongside the majority Hindu citizenry has been a bone of contention. India's nominally secular society, as it was under Nehru's brand of socialism, has come under significant strain, particularly in the latter stages of the twentieth and the turn of the twenty-first century. The arrival of identity politics during the 1980s, whereby people mobilise politically around particularistic identities, be it religion, caste, jati or language, has promoted the political expediency of organisations and political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Guha, 2007: 546). While arguably the BJP is now considered a more centrist and ethnically inclusive party, for many, it will always be tainted with its nascent associations with the particularly violent brand of Hindu nationalism, Hindutva. It was the ideology of Hindutva that was said to have inspired the most notable incidents of Hindu-Muslim violence in recent times, the Mumbai riots (1992, 1993) and the Gujarat riots (2002).

The aim of this paper is to critically examine the circumstances under which ethnicity became a divisive issue in both Mumbai and Gujarat. I will argue that poverty plays a key role as a foundational backdrop that can lead to ethnic violence, but ambiguity that exists between the fate of peaceful and violence parts of the cities' poorer areas can be explained by the methods in which communities access their resources. The ideology of Hindutva therefore only spread to areas where Hindu-nationalist parties controlled the access to community resources. The paper is organised as follows: the first section briefly explains the unique capacity of using India as a unit of study and defines the relevant terms in the Indian context. The second section places my argument within the relevant literature. Thirdly, I will address the subject of poverty and demonstrate the limitations of explaining poverty as a circumstance leading to ethnic conflict. The final section will make the case for expanding our understanding of resources networks in explaining why extremist organisations took hold in some cases and not others.

India, as a unit of analysis, is complimentary to the study of ethnicity's relationship with conflict for three main reasons. Firstly, since India was reorganised into federal states in the 1950s and 1960s along linguistic lines, all states in India are of a multi-ethnic composition (Weiner, 1989: 49). As a result of this particular historical trait, it is possible to draw comparisons between states and cities, as I will do between Gujarat and Mumbai. This ensures a certain amount of social and cultural consistency, that ahistorical links to other parts of world (Yugoslavia, Rwanda) could not provide. Secondly, while India has witnessed pockets of extreme violence, it has also avoided a full-scale civil war. For scholars who are interested in the sources of ethnic peace as well as conflict (Varshney, 2002; Berenschot, 2011a; 2011b; Sharma, 2002; Banerjee, 1996; 2002), India contains examples of peaceful ethnic coexistence that can be used as counter study to the violence. Thirdly, the ideology of Hindutva that gathered pace during the 1980s gives India its own position within the ancient hatreds debate. Mary Kaldor (2001: 7), in her assessment of 'new wars', suggests that identity politics has overtaken earlier identities that formed around the notion of the state interest. Kaldor (2001: 7) argues that to fill this void, traditions or ancient hatreds are reinvented and act as a source of political legitimacy. To a certain extent this is true of India. Hindu-nationalist groups and parties reinvented Hinduism into something modern. The homogenisation of Hinduism that propagated the ancient god Ram unified Hindus and made possible the belief that India was inherently Hindu (Kaufman, 2001: 11).

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However, uniquely to India, Hindu-nationalism does concern itself with a 'forward looking project', something Kaldor (2001: 7) believed these 'new wars' to be devoid of. Institutionalised political parties, once associated with the ideology of Hindutva such as the BJP, now play a prominent role in central government, and therefore they *are* in the state's interest.

The dominant literature on ethnicity's relationship with conflict (based in the Indian context) varies from the wider debates on ethnicity. While I have mentioned some of India's idiosyncrasies above, the most notable regards the definition of ethnicity itself. 'Ethnic violence' when used in the Indian context is used interchangeably with 'communal violence' (Gupte, 2012: 2). The relevance of this is that ethnicity is made synonymous with religion. Given the salience of religion, which is fundamental to the Hindutva project and the Muslim responses to the violence, I will treat ethnicity and religious type as one and the same. I understand that this differs slightly from the definitions used in more globally comparative studies of ethnic conflict. Ethnicity is often seen as a wider category including caste, tribe, race and language, making ethnicity the umbrella term (Horowitz, 1985). Understanding ethnicity as synonymous with religion, however, is not at odds with Thomas Hillyand Eriksen's widely accepted definition of ethnicity: 'an aspect of social relationship between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have the minimum of regular interaction' (Eriksen, 2002: 12). I will stress religion as the 'aspect of social relationship' that has the ability to spill into violence.

The literature can be split into two camps that differ in their conceptualisation of why ethnic conflict arises in India. On the one side (Varshney, 2002; Breman, 2002) is a focus on civil society, i.e. that which is categorically non-political, and its relationship with conflict. This means focusing on the networks of associational and everyday life that can lead to peace, inferring that the absence of which can be a condition fueling ethnic violence. On the other side (Brass, 2003; Hansen, 2001; Wilkinson, 2004) is a focus on the role of politics and the state in mediating the link between ethnicity and violence. This includes assessing the production of violence itself, implicating political actors and the electoral incentives of political parties and leaders. I believe that focusing exclusively on one framework is constricting. My argument therefore falls in-between them. In order to explain how poverty translates into ethnic violence, a merging of the two frameworks is necessary. I will demonstrate throughout the course of the essay that examining access to resources via political channels provides the conceptual link between poverty and likelihood of ethnic violence. This, to some extent, borrows from Berenschot's (2011a; 2011b) line of argument, which gives emphasis to the importance of resources in explaining why conflict occurs. However, my outlook differs. It is both comparative (between Gujarat and Mumbai), unlike Berenschot, and is concerned particularly with reconciling poverty with other circumstances that can lead to ethnic conflict.

In Gujarat and Mumbai, there is compelling evidence that implicates relative impoverishment with its social implications in the fostering of ethnic violence. It is widely agreed that the slums in both Mumbai and Eastern Ahmedabad oversaw the worst of the violence including mob killings, rape and looting (Berenschot, 2011a; 2011b; Breman, 2002; Banerjee, 2002). Hindu and Muslims mobs swelled to numbers of around five thousand in the Isanpur (Gujarat) slums (Berenschot, 2011b: 223). Meanwhile, in Mumbai, Dharavi slum saw some of the most prolonged and violent scenes in 1992 and 1993 (Sharma, 2002: 193). The Shrikrishna Commission, a Judicial Inquiry, was set up in 1998 to investigate the circumstances of the violence in Mumbai and found that the 'relative deprivation' of the urban poor is an 'immediate cause...facilitating ethnic violence' (SCR, 1998). The claim however that this became a source of conflict via a 'frustration-aggression syndrome' is a lofty interpretation of the role of poverty in ethnic conflict (SCR, 1998).

A more complex argument is that strong civic links between Hindus and Muslims in these impoverished areas have become weakened through a history of deindustrialisation (Varshney, 2002; Breman, 2002). The capital of Gujarat, Ahmedabad, for example, began the deindustrialisation of its textile mills in the 1980s. This not only forced labour into a dislocated informal sector but also withered away the labour unions (Breman, 2002: 1485-1486). Furthermore, Ex-mill localities such as Isanpur in Eastern Ahmedabad, now without a recognizable working class network, became the most active areas during the violence in 2002 (Berenschot, 2011b: 222). As a state once famed for its longstanding peace (the home of Mahatma Gandhi), these findings concur with the view of Varshney (2002) and Breman (2002) that longstanding civic economic links generate conditions of peace, while their gradual removal forms a vacuum for hotspots of ethnic violence to fill. Similarly in Mumbai, its deindustrialisation saw the reduction of

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900,000 jobs in the textile industry from 1960 to 1980 in Dharavi slum (Banerjee, 1996: 1219). Again there is a correlation between ex-mill localities and episodes of violence in Mumbai. According to Banerjee (1996: 1219), an area of Dharavi, Jogeshwari, was both home to a 'large proportion of ex-mill workers' and witnessed 'the worst violence' in 1993. According to Bremen (2002) and Varshney's (2002) line of argument, we need look no further for the 'proximate cause' of Hindu-Muslim disunity, the removal of pre-existing local, civic networks.

The existence of peace and resistance of ethnic conflict within poor deindustrialised areas of Mumbai and Gujarat would suggest that the relative socio-economic circumstance is not a prerequisite of ethnic violence. A slum community in Eastern Gujarat for instance, Raamrahimnagar, suffered from no ethnic violence whatsoever (Berenschott 2011b: 223). Just three kilometers from the violent Isanpur, it was composed of the same socioeconomic makeup of people (a poor, mixed Dalit-Muslim population housing many ex-mill workers). Furthermore, Raamrahimnagar had experienced the same absolute destruction of its economy. Deindustrialisation in Gujarat not only removed working links, but a great deal of civic society, including trade unions and professional associations (Berenschot 2011b: 223). In this circumstance, however, they worked side-by-side to halt the ascendancy of mob violence in their area (Berenschott 2011b: 223). Similarly in Bhiwandi, a town in Mumbai, seemingly against all odds maintained the peace in 1992/1993 (Banerjee, 2002: 61). Its mixed lower-caste community with a history of ethnic violence in the 1970s and 1980s is also a case that challenges simplistic links between poverty and ethnic violence. Also with a history of deindustrialisation of the textile industry leaving a socially dislocated society behind, one would have expected Bhiwandi to have witnessed the same levels of violence as elsewhere (Banerjee, 2002: 61).

The incidents of peace provide pause for thought. They put an argument based around civic ties under the spotlight. The crux of the problem is that the approach to the argument is counterfactual when linked to causes of ethnic violence. While it may be that certain civic ties help generate Hindu-Muslim solidarity, the cases of Raamrahimnagar and Bhiwandi indicate that these ties are not a prerequisite of peace. Furthermore, the absence of these ties is not a prerequisite for ethnic violence. It would be easy to discount areas such as Raamrahimnagar and Bhiwandi as anomalies seeing as the fact remains that the worst violence did occur in the deindustrialised slums of both Gujarat and Mumbai. Certainly, the relative slide into poverty does correlate with the rise of ethnic violence; however, the pockets of peace remind us of the perils of 'attributing causality to correlation' (Kanbur, Rajaram and Varshney, 2009: 156). Given the ambiguity surrounding its actual effect to cause violence, civil society would best be thought of as a foundational circumstance, on top of which other variables can have a positive or negative effect on the outcome of ethnic violence.

In order to build a fuller conceptual picture of the circumstances that lead to ethnic violence, we need to add an understanding of the forces that can actively provoke ethnic hatred in poor areas. Part of this process involves engaging with a framework that allows us to do so. Partha Chatterjee (2004) claims that we cannot make a distinct split between civil society and the political realm in India, just as Varshney (2002) and Bremen (2002) appear to do. In the Indian context, Chatterjee (2004: 135) argues it would be better to use the term 'political society' because it reflects the urban poor's semi-legal state and their reliance on a web of political mediation to access resources. Chatterjee's definition of political society allows us to marry the foundational correlate of relative poverty with the realm of politics by moving the onus of the question away from what communities' lack, to asking what actively encouraged or discouraged communities to perform ethnic violence.

The local Hindu-nationalist party to the state of Maharashtra Shiv Sena has been roundly denounced in their role in inspiring anti-Muslim fervor leading up to and during the riots. Indeed, the Shrikrishna Commission Report implicated the Shiv Sena as being 'pivotal' to the spread to Hindutva and ethnic division (SCR, 1998). While much has been written on the dangerous doctrines of the Hindu-right organisations there is still a conceptual gap between the ideology as a narrative and *why* ordinary people decided to follow it. Horowitz (1985:140) argues therefore that 'attention needs to be paid to developing theory that links elite and mass concerns and answers why the followers follow.' Because of this conceptual gap, rather than focus on the ideology, I will attempt to draw tangible links between the poor and the political realm of Gujarat and Mumbai in order to understand the circumstances of ethnic violence.

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The situation of poverty in the poor urban areas of Gujarat and Mumbai has made ethnically divisive political parties indispensable to poor people's lives in both cities. It has been argued (Banerjee, 1996, 2002; Berenschot, 2011a, 2011b; Hansen, 2001) therefore that this dynamic of dependency, which falls along ethnic lines, creates the circumstance for ethnic violence to take place. The Shiv Sena in Mumbai had a history of social enterprise before it became a major political player, joining allegiance with the BJP in 1988 (Hansen, 2001: 94). Since the 1970s, Shiv Sena provided social services to the poorer areas of Mumbai, including a free ambulance service and health camps for those unable to afford medical aid (Hansen, 2001: 105). The subsequent willingness of the urban poor to support the Hindutva cause in 1992/1993 suggests that there was a mutual understanding that Shiv Sena's resources were to be reciprocated by popular support. Indeed, Shiv Sena through an effective grassroots campaign in slums attracted many poor people to take part in the religious spectacles (*Maha-Artis*) to emphasise their support (Banerjee, 1996: 1220). The site of these spectacles were very often the site of extreme religious fervor and violence as the use of the *Maha-Artis* was set up to deliberately clash with the *namaz* (the Muslim equivalent) (Banerjee 2002: 69). This evidence would suggest that the poor's dependency on Shiv Sena's resources is a circumstance conducive to violence.

Similarly the VHP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Gujarat played a fundamental role in cementing intra-Hindu solidarity by providing resources for poor slums. The VHP and RSS were very active in the fields of health and education, running mobile doctors and schools services (Jaffrelot 1999: 530). Indeed, Jaffrelot (1999: 530) called this situation, where resources and services were distributed along ethnic grounds, the 'social welfare tactic' of the RSS and VHP. Slums that supported the Hindu-nationalist organisations also corresponded with the areas of worst violence, Isanpur in Ahmedabad for instance. Berenschot (2011a; 2011b) and Jaffrelot (1999) identify a reason being that extreme-right wing Hindu ideology was disseminated during the process of resource allocation. This understanding on its own however is vague, and fails to provide a link beyond conjecture between the resource allocation and the likelihood of ethnic violence.

While there seems ample evidence of Hindu-nationalist parties provoking ethnic violence in resource-reliant areas, in the context of the conflict, the language of resource networks can bring us closer to understanding *why* ethnic violence became the next logical step for poor people. Brass' (2003) in depth study of the inner workings of the Institutionalised Riot System in Indian cities found that within communities with networks made up of ethnically sectarian groups (RSS, VHP, Shiv Sena) it is easier to spread rumours that build and provide ground for a uneasy relationship between Hindu sections of the community and Muslim sections (Brass, 2003: 359). Indeed, Brass' system looks like this chronologically: Tension-Rumours-Provocation-Conflict (Brass, 2003: 355-366). Brass (2003: 367) insists he is not interested in uncovering 'causes' of ethnic riots, just mechanisms; however, rumour was clearly of importance in both Mumbai and Gujarat. The Mumbai riots for instance were sparked by rumours of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (Banerjee 2002: 57). In Gujarat, the rumours of a train coach in Godhra having been burned down by a Muslim group killing more than fifty Hindus inside unleashed a wave of violence in Gujarat between Hindus and Muslims (Berenschot 2011a: 4). If we understand rumours as being manipulated through the *same* channel as resources, this can go some way in bridging the conceptual gap between the existence of poverty, dependency on Hindu-nationalist resource networks and the prevalence of violence. An incident in Dharavi, Mumbai, for instance exemplifies this link. Sharma (2002: 193) describes a rumour that spread in Dharavi along the lines that Muslim inhabitants were, over time, taking the jobs away from the Hindu inhabitants. Knowing, as we do, that Dharavi was the site of many unemployed, the coexistence of both the deindustrialisation of Mumbai and the rumour that jobs were being taken by Muslims had the potential to cause unease. Sharma (2002:193) notes in fact that the rumours translated into (what seems symbolic violence) the burning down of the Muslim-owned leather factories. In other words, the coexistence of resource networks and an institutional rumour mill provide a likely circumstance for ethnic violence. This more complex picture of circumstances leading from poverty to violence gives a structural reason for why, according to the Shrikrishna Commission Report, poor people were 'easily susceptible to be drawn into communal riots' (SCR, 1998).

The mix of poverty and the ethnically-sectarian organisations that promote hatred via resource channels clearly can explain to a great extent the virulence of ethnic violence in the slums of Mumbai and Gujarat. There still remains the question, however, of why certain areas of a similar socio-economic context remained peaceful. It is only until we understand the circumstances of peace that we then really understand the circumstances that promote ethnic

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violence.

On the face of it, it seems difficult to reconcile the causes for the peace in Raamrahimnagar (Gujarat) on the one hand and Bhiwandi (Mumbai) on the other. It was the case in Bhiwandi that the strong police presence in the area meant that preventative arrests were made and channels were set up to instigate a dialogue with the public (Banerjee 2002: 61; Varshney 2002: 293). Furthermore, it was because of a concerted police effort that Hindus and Muslims joined an interethnic neighborhood committee to keep the antisocial forces at bay (Banerjee 2002: 61; Varshney 2002: 293). Immediately one gleans that a strong police presence could be an important variable here. The fact that in other areas of both Mumbai and Gujarat, police played, as Berenschot (2011b: 224) argues a 'dubious role' performing their duty to quell ethnic violence, would further suggest that a lack of an applied police presence is conducive to ethnic violence. For Atul Kohli (1991: 19), the case of Bhiwandi would fit into the explanation that peace derived from a strong state holding firm against the mobilisation of new groups for electoral participation, while the cases of violence in Dharvavi in Mumbai or Isanpur in Gujarat are the outcome of 'weak and ineffective' state measures. We should however question Kohli's framework for understanding peace and violence in this case. Raamrahimnagar (Gujarat) in 2002, for instance, lacked a police presence yet applied force to keep out ethnic violence, and so serves another reminder not to fall into the trap of counterfactual argumentation. The force generated to counteract the antisocial groups such as the VHP was done, in this case, entirely off the back of the prominent neighborhood committee, the Raamrahimnagar Dhupadavasi Mandal (RDM) (Berenschott 2011b: 226). After hearing of the initial killings in Godhra, which were said to have sparked the wave of Hindu-Muslim violence, RDM actively promoted peace in the neighbourhood by stopping the spread of rumour and staying up all night guarding the locality and quelling any disturbance (Berenschott 2011b: 226).

The communities' particular access to resources can provide a framework to explain their joint, relative peace, and it also delineates the instances of peace from those of violence in other slums. Ironically, it was because of a history of virulent interethnic violence in the area (1970 and 1984) that Bhiwandi now had a resourceful, strong police force via a state-led initiative (Banerjee, 2002: 61). Because the police were subject to a state initiative and not affiliated to Hindu-nationalist political networks it was a more neutral means to acquire resources. Indeed, the resource of the police themselves was provided quickly and easily to the area so the community did not have to rely on other political networks (Banerjee, 2002: 61). Furthermore, in the absence of a sectarian resource network, Bhiwandi was not subjected to the malign effects of rumour via the same channel. On the contrary, the Deputy Commissioner in Bhiwandi not only quashed rumour, but also set up intra-communal dialogue between Hindus and Muslims in order to dispel further rumour making (Banerjee, 2002: 61). This relationship with the state meant the existence of a sectarian resource network simply did not exist. Furthermore, resources in other areas, such as Dharavi, were almost exclusively only available via sectarian groups such as the Shiv Sena in Mumbai, who caused ethnic divide through the channels of resource allocation and the spread of rumour.

Raamrahimnagar's particular relationship with the Congress party can explain its ability to access resources via a more neutral network, interested in keeping the peace. Berenschot (2011b: 226) demonstrates that due to a long history of Congress partisanship, the community has come to enjoy quicker and easier access to resources such as 'community taps, electricity and drainage'. While the resources in themselves of course are important in keeping peaceful co-existence, it is the fact that the resources are not part of a network connected to sectarian parties that makes the community much less likely to engage in ethnic violence. The circumstance of having no dependency on an ethnically-divisive organisation for resources meant, like in Bhiwandi, that ethnic rumours were also less likely to spread. Indeed, as Berenschot (2011b: 226) notes in passing, the RDM paid particular attention to stopping the rumours of the Godhra train burning in the community, which would suggest they understood the importance of rumour and the effect it could have on its community's ethnic peace.

I have demonstrated that the circumstances that led to violence in the both the poor slums of Mumbai and Gujarat is one best explained in terms of resource allocation. The reason that impoverished slums played such a major part of the ethnic violence is that the areas that were violent relied on resource networks that had become divided along ethnic lines. The works of Shiv Sena in Mumbai, for instance, or the VHP in Gujarat provide substantive evidence of reasons *why* areas took part in ethnic violence. Indeed, two such reasons that I have emphasised are both the dependency on resources and the ease in which rumours carry along resource networks. Furthermore, I have also

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demonstrated that the ambiguity between poverty as a condition and violence as an outcome can be best explained by looking deeper into resource networks. Communities that have suffered from impoverishment, in this case via deindustrialisation, do not automatically provide a circumstance for ethnic unrest. On the contrary, when the resource network is not alienated by ethnically sectarian groups, as was the case in both Bhiwandi and Raamrahimnagar, the outcome can be ethnic peace.

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