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**Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims
in India by Ashutosh Varshney
Sriparna Chatterjee**

The relationship between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia has been an epicentre of academic and intellectual attention over a long period of time. Varshney in this book gives a descriptive, analytical and comparative picture of the nature, socio-economic and cultural diversities of communal conflicts, which has often culminated in violence and deaths in India. He has critically analysed the local factors limited to particular regions of the vast country which often prevails over explicit issues sweeping across the state and the impacts of cross cutting interests of the Indian polity in which linguistic, or caste empathy surpass religious allegiance.

He has systematically analysed data for a 45 year period from 1950 to 1995; covering a significant period of history of post independence India. He has shown in a nutshell that the vast majority of communal clashes were restricted to 4 out of 28 states of the country having large Muslim minority population, mostly located in northern, western and eastern part of India, whereas southern India remained relatively quiet over the same period, not been perturbed by the periodical but discrete violence ravaged in the other regions. The striking finding revealed by the data is the sub-regional nature of Hindu-Muslim violence. Out of those 4 states in which the conflict between the communities were marked, most of the riots were concentrated into a handful of cities, for example 70% of Hindu-Muslim violence took place in 30 out of 400 Indian cities, of which 8 were responsible for almost 50% of all riot deaths taken together. From other point of view ancient, age old conflicts had little to do with fresh ethnic conflicts in India. Although India remained predominantly rural having predominantly agricultural society, even though violence between Hindus and Muslims were overwhelmingly urban phenomenon. As shown from Varshney's data, urban clashes accounted for 96% of all deaths. The traditional rural community, residing in villages, has largely been unscathed by the communal disturbances.

A subtle finding from the numerical descriptors becomes evident- although the ethnic conflicts were restricted to a limited towns and cities; their destructive potential remained unabated. This is because these cities are the power centres of the country, as they include India's metropolitan and trading hubs, state capitals and industrial centres. Three out of above mentioned 8 riot prone cities are New Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata-the three largest and most cosmopolitan cities of the country, each having population over 12 million, and economic nerve centres of the nation. Moreover all 8 cities topping the list of most riot prone centres are having large middle class population, high literacy rate, and old and established Muslim community. Two of them (Ahmedabad and Surat) are in Gujarat, arguably the most economically vibrant state of the country.

Varshney explains the etiology behind the nature of such distribution of communal conflicts and fatalities, in a judicious, scholarly and logical way. Each of these cities was having a gradual and progressive decline in civic life. For example Ahmedabad was remained almost insulated from the communal clashes that hit other major Indian cities in early twentieth century and during partition year of 1947. Gujarat was the homeland of Mohandas Gandhi and a testing ground for his method of nonviolence resistance against colonial rule. Moreover the state had some of the strongest civil associations of India, built by both the Congress party and Gandhi's followers in both industry and labour. These associations served to integrate and amalgamate Hindus and Muslims which was instrumental in preventing communal violence during the partition of 1947-48. Unfortunately in post-independence India Congress as political party neglected its various programs used to promote social integration, later following the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964, the party began getting fragmented. Different fractions of the party started appeasing specific voting blocks i.e. castes and religious communities, which marked the beginning of the present day's prevalent Indian polity. The ultimate result was Ahmedabad's first Hindu-Muslim communal clash in 1969, started as a consequence of a trivial local dispute over a religious procession. This was followed by numerous violent and vicious episodes over the forthcoming years. Civic decline of Congress was followed by its political decline under the dictatorial attitude of prime-minister Indira Gandhi, who did away with internal democracy of the party, resulting dwindled party apparatus almost a shadow of its former self, which used to bridge the diverse religious creeds and communities.

This was coupled with a parallel decline in Gujarat's largest apolitical organisation, the Textile Labour Association, over the same period of time. This Ahmedabad based Gandhian trade union was a remarkable resource in Hindu-Muslim integration. The vacuum created by its dwindled numbers was filled by Hindu nationalist organisations, which founded new schools, newspapers and started performing a wide range of social services. The BJP remained the direct beneficiary of the Congress party's decline and its voter percentage swelled up in synchrony with waning vote share of the Congress party. Hindu nationalists were able to mobilise hundreds of citizens of the state to nationwide agitation to build a temple of Hindu god Ram, in his assumed and long disputed birth place, in a far off north Indian town Ayodhya located in Uttar Pradesh. The temple site was also home of a seventeenth century so-called mosque, designated as disputed structure by the apex court of India, which was allegedly set up in 1527 by Mir Baki, on the behest of founder Mughal emperor Babur after seizing the Hindu shrine from the local priests. In 1992 this disputed structure was ruined when a political rally culminated into a riot involving 150,000 people, despite a commitment to the Indian Supreme Court by the rally organizers that the mosque would not be harmed. The Hindu nationalists were gathered from all over the country, Gujarat being one of the largest contributors of the volunteers to this mission of demolition. This was followed by Hindu-Muslim riots in which more than 2,000 people were killed in major Indian cities including Mumbai and Delhi, but it was Gujarat that witnessed largest number of casualties.

The BJP came to power in Gujarat in 1995 and in the central government in 1998. But unlike Gujarat, where it had overwhelming majority, at the national level it was a part of a wider coalition that included so called secular regional parties. The BJP leadership in New Delhi committed, out of respect for the coalition that they would not put more controversial issues in their agenda, (such as building of the Ram temple, implementation of common civil code), rather those disputable issues would be put on the back burner. The BJP leadership had already begun to restrain the party hard liners after riots ensued following the demolition of the disputed structure at Ayodhya. India remained by and large calm between 1993 and 2002.

Somehow it seems from many similar analysts like Varshney, that India's political parties adhere to the secular centre once they have to govern.

Gujarat riots in the spring of 2002 however made this generalized conclusion appear doubtful. They came swiftly on the heels of party's reelection with a thumping majority under a more hardliner chief minister and ardent supporter of Ram temple movement. An entire train compartment packed with passengers returning from Ayodhya were burnt alive by a Muslim mob at Godhra town- an incident that sparked the most recent and most fierce riots. Reports indicate a total breakdown of law and order in Ahmedabad's mostly Muslim old quarter, as well as in several of the outlying areas of the city along with some other prominent urban centers of Gujarat.

In contrast to western European countries India, however, has not been able to cauterize the destructive potential of its ethnic and religious nationalists. Over the past decade, 4000 Indians have died in battles over the Ram temple campaign, but till date, neither the Hindu nationalists nor the Muslim radicals are agreeing on a mutually acceptable compromise formula that could led to an end of this issue for once and ever. The recent verdict of Allahabad high court (2010) has added to the confusion rather than providing some light towards the direction of the settlement of the dispute.

Varshney contradicted existing theories of communal conflicts methodically in his book. After an initial chapter in which he summarized the book and laid down the methodology of his research, he put forward points chronologically and explained the inadequacy of theories already in place. For example existing theories often confused ethnic conflict with ethnic violence. This is a major distinction for Varshney, he argued that any multiethnic society had undergone periods and issues of ethnic conflict; the key question remained whether these gave rise to violence and deaths or were handled and resolved by the political and social system. His vision of peace therefore lied the absence of the conflict. His book explored why and how some conflict was contained and some were not. He had seen the answer in what he called "civic life", more particularly, whether there were inter-communal associations, such as business organizations, trade unions, political parties, and professional societies. Integrated neighborhood and day-to-day interactions helped but were not as important as associational life, irrespective of formal or informal sectors of the economy.

Inter-communal networks of civic engagement or the lack thereof, Varshney commented, were socially constructed under the impact of master narratives such as secular nationalism, religious nationalism, and regional movements on the basis of caste, class, or sectarian divisions. These interact locally with the economic context and political system.

Though Varshney did provide an extensive attention to economic relations between Muslims and Hindus – he described using his preferred terminology 'civic engagement', however, he did not appear to give sufficient weightage to the discreet possibility that there were strong economic and class related reasons behind flaring-up of communal violence in certain places and not in others. He pointed that in Ahmedabad the devastating effect of the closure of mills had a bearing on ex-workers. He considered the possible correlations between this and the increased participation of unemployed ex-mill workers in communal clashes. Although his book was written in the context of pre Gujarat 2002, but Varshney was right for post February 2002 also. It was noted that many indigent (Hindu) mill- workers were found to be the invaluable mercenaries of those masterminding the so called ethnic cleansing operations, did their filthy work for these political masters.

Varshney did probe the economic and class aspects of the contexts he examined, but sometimes insufficiently: perhaps because his unambiguous theoretical framework emphasized more on 'civil society'. He seemed to project civil society i.e. the non state sphere of life, and especially its variations within the same polity, as the principal site for the study of communal riots, as well as the potential ally in any strategy of inter-communal

peace. Arguably, it was not the overall framework of the polity that determines local behavior, but rather the structure of local civil life. As far as communal riots were concerned, the national did not overpower the local. To be more precise, the key determinant of peace is “inter-communal civic life, not “civic life per se” (pp 282). To the extent that local civic institutions allowed linkages and organizations (inter-communal political parties, trade unions, chambers of business and commerce, professional associations, nongovernmental organizations, reading and film clubs, and festival organizations) to be formed across communities without the interference of the state, towns and cities had greater tenacities in withstanding communal violence. In contrast, towns and cities characterized by weak civic institutions were highly vulnerable to communal provocation, as they had easily fallen prey to polarizing strategies of the political elites.

Interestingly, for the author, riots were always a response to exogenous stimuli. The way in which these stimuli were processed by existing Hindu-Muslim linkages determined the outcome- violence or peace. The processing was further contingent on the types and forms of civic engagement across ethnic groups- associational and everyday. The former included business and professional organizations, reading and film clubs, trade unions, and cadre based political parties, whether the latter connoted the simple routine interactions of life such as visiting each other, eating together often enough, joint participation in festivals, and children playing together in the neighborhood. Both used to promote peace, but the former did so more than latter.

Guided by methodological imperative to study peace and ethnic conflict together as a part of his endeavor to singularly focus on variance rather than commonalities across many cases of violence, Varshney presented case studies of communal violence in six cities (3 riot prone, and 3 peaceful cities) arranged in pairs- Aligarh and Calicut, Hyderabad and Lucknow, and Ahmedahad and Surat. The city turned out to be unit of analysis because communal riots, empirically speaking, were primarily an urban phenomenon. Although communal riots had taken place in rural India, the rural share had always been low, owing to rather customary face to face, everyday engagement. Since the scale of Hindu Muslim interface grew in towns and cities, as village like intimacy was impossible, associational engagement become critical. The author had described this as “deep civic engagement dulls the painful edges of historical memories” (pp 131).

When he did this well, he raised the question why Surat, a city that as-a-whole was not been able to maintain communal harmony in its slums, where its migrant labour used to live, although it succeeded in doing so in its better-off old city, the home of the employers and the city elite. He formulated the answer from the evidence, that this was largely because ‘civic networks’ existed between employers and elite, both amongst Muslim and Hindu, but that such civic networks were non-existent in the degraded conditions of the slums for many years, the home of migrant workers. Towards the end of the book, he considered the ‘Bhiwandi experiment’, a place that had been notorious for riots in its slums for many years until an enterprising police deputy commissioner instituted representative peace committees of workers, who met regularly and were actually been able to keep the communal peace even at the time when the Babri mosque was destroyed, in a fairly similar context of indigent workers. However when he described that Lucknow stayed peaceful because Hindus were primarily employers and Muslims- especially Muslim women were primarily their employees in its famous chikan industry, he did stop to ask why it was that the BJP-supporting Hindu chikan employers in Lucknow was at greater pains to ensure communal peace there, while the (equally BJP-supporting) Hindu power-loom employers in Surat were apparently not the least bit bothered about doing so. This was indeed a worthwhile question to be asked. Varshney’s interesting data and the answer did not seem to lie in ‘civic networks’ this time, but rather in the crucial and important fact that the power-loom workers were regarded as

‘flexible’ as they were disposable workers who could be replaced without much difficulty, while women chikan workers were regarded as valuable assets who could not be simply substituted. It was certainly for this reason that Surat’s employers did not really worry too much when migrant slums were burnt to the ground and Muslim workers were killed, as after all, their profits were in no way endangered by this, because they always had an excess of workers seeking employment. So, it might not solely been the reason that because civic networks did not exist between migrant workers that the shanty towns were burnt in Surat –it may also be because ‘flexible labour’ had become the norm there. Thus relations of production which Varshney did not consider in any depth in his book also appeared to play an important notable role in explaining existing communal relations. This observation had made the point that an investigation of the relations of production between workers and employers in all these contexts would reward greater critical examination.

Unfortunately, Varshney did not examine the religious organizations in his analysis; he focus was largely limited within the purview of Hindu-Muslim associations. Yet the greatest puzzle of all might be the role that religious organizations play in sparking or dampening Hindu-Muslim tension. Unlike the Christian or Muslim religious leaders who added to the conflict in Bosnia, or the priests or nuns who were implicated in the genocide in Rwanda, most Hindu religious leaders shun the Ram temple campaign. At one of the Hinduism’s largest and immensely important religious festivals, the Kumbh Mela, Hindu priests expelled the advocates of Ram temple campaign. Even after the Gujarat riots began several of leading priests of the country offered help to find an alternative site, amicable to the disputing parties, for the Ram temple.

It is pity that Varshney did not examine the roles and extent of involvement of government institutions such as judiciary, the National Human Rights Commission, or the National Commission for Minorities. All of these three had displayed a new activism in the wake of Gujarat riots. The Indian Supreme Court is currently holding a land mark hearing on the findings of the human rights commission about the violence.

Varshney was alive to the fact that the associational life in India took off with the rise of mass politics in the 1920s. In other words, variations in the civic life had been founded on a range of structures of mass politics and their local-regional variations. However, the very historical perspective that made one appreciate how the patterns and features of civic life had been politically constructed, also cautious us against treating “Hindus” and “Muslims” as static constants, an unfortunate tendency that come across in Varshney’s otherwise admirable work. Not only had mutual interactions changed historically but so had the very configuration of Hindus and Muslims. As social categories, Hindus and Muslims had been part of the very same ever changing structure that Varshney identified in the inauguration of mass politics. Who could deny that the modern notion of Hinduism itself was a recent development? Also, Varshney’s Hindus and Muslims seemed to be acting more sensibly in places (such as Surat and Lucknow), so as not to disrupt an economic symbiosis, while at other places they seemed to sink deeper and deeper into an inter-communal quagmire interrupt.

These aforementioned limitations apart, Varshney’s work offered refreshing insights about ethnic conflicts and violence in multiethnic societies like India. This important book merits our very careful consideration both for its illuminating comparative methodology and for its numerous insights. There is a great deal we can learn from it, and it is vital and urgent that we do so. This book is definitely a must read for students and research workers on South Asia, as well as for the students of politics, sociology, history, journalism and cultural anthropology.