

**THE FUNCTIONAL USE OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY FOR  
THE PRODUCTION OF ETHNIC RIOTS:  
AN ANALYSIS OF SOURCES**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This paper inspects the relationship between Hindu communal discourse and Hindu-Muslim riots. It examines how conflict entrepreneurs employ religious discourse, utilize religious networks, and attack religious symbols in order to condition an ambivalent acceptance of anti-Muslim violence among non-elite Hindu communities. Localities exhibiting endemic outbursts of Hindu-Muslim riots are, most often, pre-planned productions meant to create and reinforce new stigmatisations of Muslims among the majority Hindu population. Designed to generate a *collective Hindu anxiety*, these riots offer the ability to impose the belief that Hindus are under siege by their Muslim neighbours. Thus, Hindu-Muslim riots are opportunities desired by conflict entrepreneurs to maintain their influence in particular localities. This paper also provides an analysis of the various propositions put forth to explain why communal violence occurs in order to clarify misnomers, which, effectually, have obscured the linkages between ethnic violence, identity construction, and Hindu communal discourse.

**Keywords:** Religious minorities; Communal violence; Ethnic riots; Communal discourse; Hindu-Muslim conflict; Conflict entrepreneurs

*To my mother and sister – your patience, guidance, and love reveal your true nature:  
Magicians of Inspiration*

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## INTRODUCTION

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1985, citizens of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, residing in the gated upper-caste Hindu community of *Vadigam*, gathered on their rooftops and began banging upon their Thali dishes. As the sounds grew, so too were the chants that accompanied their nascent orchestra: *‘Muslims should go!’* *‘This is a Hindu raj (reign) come out and bow down!’* (Interview cf. Shani, 2005). A volley of stones and burning clothes accompanied these chants, thrown towards adjacent Muslim households and businesses. After a stone hit a Muslim boy his cries attracted Muslims throughout the neighbourhood, and upon reaching Vadigam’s walled gate Muslims had no time to turn back. The police were already on Vadigam’s rooftop substituting stones with bullets – adding their instruments to the crescendo of clanging metal dishes (Shani, 2005).

India is renowned for its rich history of religious diversity. Beyond simply cohabitating within a given territorial space, the members of its many religious traditions often participate in one another’s ceremonial rites, and celebrate common traditions marked with their own distinctive flare (Shankar & Gerstein, 2007). Yet, despite a proven ability to overcome divergent ideologies and identities, the Hindu-Muslim conflict is a paradigm deeply embedded within the religious-political context of India. The violence rooted in this conflict continues into the present, with atrocities condoned under the guise of religious legitimacy (Kothari, 1998; Reuters: India, 2009).

Uncertainty, brought about by rapid social, political and economic change often exaggerates negative inter-ethnic perceptions, exacerbating ethnic tensions

that often result in violent outbreaks perpetrated against religious minorities. India's history with ethnic riots is significant in that it raises an interesting quandary: *How, and by whom are inter-caste and inter-class tensions among Hindus supplanted in attempts to induce all Hindus into a mutual program of anti-minority violence?* This paper contends that communal riots are pre-planned and coordinated events, concocted by political and apolitical actors alike. Despite popular perception, endemic communal riots are not spontaneous outbreaks of catalyzed historical grievances, but are institutionalized productions intended to generate and maintain ethnic tensions considered advantageous by conflict entrepreneurs.

Citing religious factors (i.e., symbols, narratives, formal and informal organizations) as the driving force behind communal violence does not fully account for why levels of engagement within ethnic riots differ between members from various social groups, nor, on their own, do they sufficiently explain the processes by which communal violence may become endemic to a specific locality. However, the structure of religious associations and the narratives they employ are important pre-determinants for the successful mobilization of affiliated members. In analyzing the influence of religious factors upon Indian communal violence, this paper will illustrate how ethnic riots are used to socially condition antipathy towards particular religious minorities.

Atrocities committed against India's religious minorities, particularly during India's descent into communal riots, from the mid-1980s to 2002, compels the

need to investigate why communal violence is endemic to none but a few cities.<sup>1</sup> Scholars must look beyond the notion that *ancient communal antipathy* underscores contemporary Hindu-Muslim antagonisms. Particularly, since the trajectory of communal violence within the past two decades, conspicuously, has risen alongside the increased presence of Hindu nationalist organizations within quotidian social life. In the main, scholars agree that these organizations have spearheaded many of these communal disturbances (Basu, 1993; Datta, 1991; Jaffrelot, 2005). However, further analysis is required into how non-elites construct and utilize religious identity to mobilize collective violence.<sup>2</sup>

The objective of this paper is two-fold: 1) to offer a discussion on religious violence within India, 2) and to provide an analysis of its sources. Through an examination of the processes by which non-elites are conditioners of, and are subject to influence by, religious discourse – viz. the production of ethnic riots – this paper will advance the line of inquiry concerned with understanding how citizens internalize inter-ethnic riots as a *normal* feature of social life.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the 1980s, recurring communal violence has taken place in the following cities: Ahmedabad, Aligarh, Bhagalpur, Bhiwandi, Coimbatore, Maliana, Meerut, Mumbai, Kanpur and Surat. See Ashutosh Varshney (cf. Barsalou, 2003, p. 7) where he asserts Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Aligarh, Hyderabad, Meerut, Baroda, New Delhi, and Calcutta as cities endemic with large-scale ethnic riots. Between 1950 and 1995, these cities accounted for 46 percent of all riot deaths in India, despite accounting for only 18 percent of India's urban population (which accounted for 96 percent of riot deaths as opposed to rural India's 4 percent) and only 6 percent of India's total population.

<sup>2</sup> See Jui Shankar & Lawrence Gerstein (2007), *The Hindu-Muslim Conflict: A Pilot Study of Peacebuilding in Gujarat, India*; A.P. Chatterji (2004), *Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism*; Dibyesh Anand (2007), *Anxious Sexualities: Masculinity, Nationalism and Violence*.

This paper is divided into six sections: 1) provides a brief history on the nature of communal violence within India; 2) surveys the prevailing scholarship concerning religious violence and inter-ethnic conflict within India; 3) presents the theoretical basis of this paper, elucidating upon the relationship between religion and identity construction; 4) discusses the functional utility of riots to perpetuate ethnic conflict; 5) examines elements of Hindu nationalist discourse and their role in legitimating mob action; 6) presents a series of case studies that illustrate the various extents to which religious organisations, leaders, and narratives are employed to either incite or condition the acceptance of ethnic violence within urban and rural spaces; 7) concludes this paper with a review of the findings.

# 1: COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN INDIA: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

*Communalism* has been an important theme within Indian political discourse since the 1880s. For many scholars, the British Raj (1858-1947) sowed the seeds of distrust and acrimony between Hindus and Muslims, leading to India's partitioning amidst horrendous Hindu-Muslim violence (Hasan, 1997). Upon the departure of the British in 1947, the partition of the Indian subcontinent saw with it large-scale ethnic-religious violence that claimed over one million lives and displaced approximately twelve million people. The creation of two separate nation-states however, did not create homogenous religious homelands as a large number of Muslims continued to reside within India, scattered throughout its regions and provinces. The violence surrounding the Partition also failed to resolve territorial disputes as Pakistan had continued to lay claims to India's majority Muslim provinces (e.g., Kashmir) (Chadda, 2007). Thus, "India's external security concerns became inextricably tied to the project of building a coherent and unified nation-state in which maintaining Hindu-Muslim amity became a key concern" (Chadda, 2007, p. 137).

Pre-1980s, there was little evidence of an enduring, or even a newly developing sense of Hindu-Muslim discord within the Indian state of Gujarat. Notwithstanding a major riot in 1969, the periods of 1970s and early 1980s

displayed insignificant tensions between the two communities within the state.<sup>3</sup>

Distinct from the nationalist fervour that surrounded India's independence however, a new and more belligerent form of Hindu nationalism has emerged, increasingly, within Indian public life and its political institutions (Shani, 2005). Paul Brass (2005) notes, "There exists in India a discourse of Hindu-Muslim communalism that has corrupted history, penetrated memory, and contributes in the present to the production and perpetuation of communal violence" (p. 46). Despite the efforts of secular nationalist leaders and historians, a divisive history of India has "acquired a hegemonic place in the national mythology of the country" (p. 46).

This divisive history has been championed by a Hindu nationalist movement, one, that has aggressively defined itself in opposition to Indian Muslims<sup>4</sup> and other religious minorities. The effect of this divisive history has in no other place expressed itself more frightfully than in Gujarat. Since the mid-1980s, the salience of Hindu-Muslim antagonistic discourse has become increasingly pronounced in Indian social consciousness; particularly, in Gujarat, where in February 2002 a massacre of Muslims left approximately 2,000 people killed and 140,000 homeless (Spodek, 2006, p. 2). Considered vital for the growth of communalism, Gujarat is a state in which communal violence is a

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<sup>3</sup> Post-riot interviews of citizens from Vadodara, Gujarat (site of deadly ethnic violence in 2002) illustrate that both Hindus and Muslims perceived of themselves as living harmoniously. Members of both communities commonly related ideas analogous to being a family, where no differentiations were made between Hindus and Muslims (Shankar & Gerstein, 2007, p. 370).

<sup>4</sup> Hindu nationalists castigate Muslims as "perpetually warlike" and "a foreign body implanted into the heart of Hindu India...who 'believe it is their religious duty to kill infidels'" (Chatterjee cf. Brass, 2005, p. 47).

recurring phenomenon. Commonly referred to as “Hindutva’s laboratory” (Spodek, 2006, p. 26)<sup>5</sup>, Gujarat operates as the “nerve centre” (Shani, 2007, p. 1) for members of the Hindu nationalist establishment.

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<sup>5</sup> *Hindutva* refers to “the quality of being a Hindu” (Shani, 2007, p. 1).

## 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Defining Communalism

Hector Avalos (2005) examines religious violence from various social science perspectives, asserting: (1) Most violence is due to competition over scarce resources – perceived or real; (2) When religion causes violence, it often does so because it has created “*new scarce resources*” (p. 18). His analysis of religious violence, as conducted through economic and socio-biological lenses, thus, should elicit no surprise as it frames quotidian social relations within a framework of resource competition. Avalos contends that religious elites control individuals, or influence groups by manufacturing and making scarce the supply of religious *goods* (religion’s resources). These goods include: eternal life, mystical experience, or communion with a divine entity. Thus, he claims, religions are “prone” (Avalos cf. Wellman, 2007, p. 7) to violence, in which some have a greater capacity for it than other cultural forms.

The creation of ‘*religious goods*’ and their perceived scarcity may aid in generating categories of exclusivity as Avalos (2005) argues. His argument, however, fails to acknowledge the following: (1) ‘secular’ cultural processes and institutions also create highly exclusive groups (e.g., associational clubs of various types, language rights, national holidays, etc.); (2) religious elites do not hold a monopoly on defining religious/ethnic identity or controlling resources viz.

religious tradition<sup>6</sup> – the character and influence of each individual member may dramatically alter the structure and functioning of that community as a whole; (3) it fails to distinguish who among the members of a religious community control, shape, and legitimate the symbols or boundaries considered sacred;<sup>7</sup> (4) in application to ethnic conflict within India, it fails to adequately address why the popular perception of communalism, as a *Hindu-Muslim conflict*, is incongruent with instances in which supposed ethnic riots involve the mutual targeting of lower-caste Hindus and Muslims by middle- and upper-caste Hindus (Brass, 2003; Breman, 2005; King, 2007; Shani, 2007).

Religion, politics, and violence are notions that have intersected throughout history and across religious traditions. Although the dynamics of each have largely remained unchanged, the post-9/11 world, nonetheless, has witnessed renewed scholastic interest in exploring the hermeneutical (Gandhi, 2004), operational (Almond, Appleby, & Sivan, 2003), and epistemological dimensions (Hinnells & King, 2007) of religious fundamentalism and religious violence. The notable sociologist of religion David Martin states, “Religion and politics are isomorphic” (Wellman, 2007, p. 1): just as politics compels or constrains groups to act in certain ways (often legitimated by law), so does religion condition one’s action by persuasion<sup>8</sup> – legitimated by tradition, narrative,

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<sup>6</sup> See Patty Froerer (2005), *Challenging Traditional Authority* for an interesting look into how the RSS has raised the bargaining power of village youth and has enabled all villagers to bypass religious leaders and gain access to state services from which they were once cut off.

<sup>7</sup> See Paul Brass (1997), *Theft of an Idol*.

<sup>8</sup> Although news of the use of force is not uncommon.

and practice. Thus, religion and politics are coalesced, with their respective institutions mirroring and reacting with each other during the ongoing process of identity formation. As religion and politics are structurally linked presumptions that posit religion as “always innocent or always evil” (Wellman, 2007, p. 1) are ultimately misleading. Religion aids in forming identities, which have the potential to serve as a rallying tool for both violent and peaceful purposes. The preceding deconstruction of religious-ethnic violence does not intend to deny that there have been individuals who have resorted to violence as a religious imperative.<sup>9</sup> However, in exploring the processes and the extent to which religious markers mobilize ethnic conflicts, this paper emphasizes that contemporary acts of communal violence are the effects of social, political, and economic grievances.<sup>10</sup>

*Communalism* was once a term identified with inter-caste community clashes, rather than with inter-religious strife. Since the 1980s, communalism

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<sup>9</sup> See (Rapoport, 1984), *Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions*, for a description of India’s *Thugs*; an apolitical group that was driven entirely by religious devotion to the Hindu goddess *Kali*, stands out as the best example of an organization compelled by pure ‘religious violence’.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Hoffman (1998, 2006, 1995) distinguishes between secular and religious terrorists, noting that the former consider indiscriminate violence immoral and counterproductive, while the latter view indiscriminate violence as not only morally justified, but also a *necessary* means to achieve their goals. Hoffman, moreover, contends that where secular terrorists aim to draw awareness of their purpose(s) from the public, the constituency of importance for religious terrorists is no one but themselves and their belief in a higher power. Thus, religious extremists, more than their secular counterparts, are more lethal in their violent expressions. The empirical investigation of religion’s influence in violent action, by Matthew B. Capell and Emile Sahliyeh (2007) challenge Hoffman’s assertions. They conclude it is a modern terrorist’s (religious or secular) willingness to use suicide terror, as their *primary modus operandi*, that determines levels of lethality. Furthermore, that suicide terrorism is a tactic equally employed by religious, nationalist, and secular organizations (pp. 267 & 276). Therefore, *religion* is not the sole, critical, variable that explains the lethality for certain violent actions.

has transformed into a term denoting religiously inspired collective violence, and its processes described as measures aimed for the preservation of imagined community boundaries – viz. “a ritual or pact of violence between social groups” (Das and Nandy cf. Kaur, 2005, p. 23). Commonly spoken of in terms of a ‘rivalry’ or ‘mutual hostility’ between Hindu and Muslim communities, communalism is widely considered a unique and indigenous phenomenon to the Indian sub-continent (Brass, 1996).<sup>11</sup>

Presently, communal violence is conceptualized as an “action-reaction phenomenon” (Kaur, 2005, p. 24), in which, Muslims and Hindus are imagined as equal partners in the instigation of communal conflict. This perception, however, erroneously denies the minority status of Muslims in absolute terms, and with respect to their actual territorial distribution (Brass, 2003; Breman, 2005). Furthermore, it obfuscates the inter-caste dynamics that call to question why certain lower-caste Hindus do not to participate in ‘communal’ struggles against Muslims (Puniyani, 2005; Shah, 2002).

Marxist historian Bipan Chandra provided the most popularly disseminated interpretation of communalism. Chandra (1994) identifies three sequential processes in the formation of a communal ideology: (1) the creation of an exclusive religious community based on common political, economic, social and cultural interests; (2) the articulation of irreconcilability between the interests of two exclusive communities; (3) when the interests of the two communities not

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<sup>11</sup> Exceptions certainly apply; see Barsalou (2003), *Lethal Ethnic Riots*, p. 2, for a contemporary list of communal conflicts around the world.

only become exclusive and irreconcilable but also mutually hostile. Chandra (1994) refers to this third stage as “extreme communalism or fascistic communalism” (pp. 148-149). Speciously presuming that all Hindus share the same interests and operate as monolithic whole,<sup>12</sup> this framework fails to acknowledge the dynamic effects of Hindu-caste antagonisms (e.g., economic, political, etc.) upon Hindu attitudes towards Muslims and other religious-minorities (Shani, 2005).

Dipankar Gupta (2005) provides a more robust framework for analysing communal violence by distinguishing between communal and ethnic conflicts. Gupta (2005) points out that many *ascriptive* mobilizations within India do not view their enemy as an outsider to the nation-state, but as a community that disproportionately benefits from existing political privileges. Thus, it is the nature of governance, and not citizenship, which underscores a dispute. Consequently, caste and linguistic conflicts are examples of communal movements, even, if such movements show no concern over issues pertaining to territorial sovereignty. Contrarily, Gupta (2005) proposes that ethnic movements are those that thematize the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, wherein, ‘others’ are castigated as enemies of the nation-state, from whom their allegiances are believed to be directed towards “hostile powers outside the national borders” (Gupta, 2005, p. 80).

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<sup>12</sup> Chandra (1994) conceptualizes communalism as a disease that “has entered even the bones” (p. 150), thus, framing communal violence as an event aberrant and external to a prevailing social order. Solutions for resolving ethnic violence, therefore, reside in political will and not in any redress of hidden social systems (see Galtung, 1969).

## 2.2 Essential Conversations & Instrumental Designs

With respect to the possible social, economic, and political causes of ethnic riots that occur within India, much as already been written.<sup>13</sup> In broad terms, these arguments fit within opposing schools of intellectual inquiry: *essentialism* and *instrumentalism*. The arguments presented by these academic traditions are captured, respectively, in the debate between Francis Robinson and Paul Brass over the formation Muslim identity.<sup>14</sup> Essentialist inquiries assert that contemporary ethnic conflicts reflect 'primordial' antagonisms between

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<sup>13</sup> See (Banerjee, 2001; Brass, 2003; Chatterji, 2004; Das, 1990; A. Engineer, 1984; Hasan, 1997; Jaffrelot, 2007; Kohli, 1990; Varshney, 2002; F. Robinson, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> In debating the formation of Indian-Muslim identity, Paul Brass (Brass, 2003; Breman, 2005; King, 2007; Shani, 2007) argued that objective differences between Hindus and Muslims, and between their respective religious revivalisms, had their part to play in encouraging nineteenth and twentieth century Muslim separatism; however, they were not sufficient to make the idea of a separate Muslim nation inevitable. Brass contended that the essential factor in the push for an independent Pakistan was the Muslim perception that they were in jeopardy of losing power in north India. Moreover, as modern politics developed under a colonial administration, Pakistani nationalists *chose* to utilize divisive symbols as an expedient medium to transmit their ideas. Thus, their actions informed by pragmatic forethought, and not dictated by their religion, culture, or tradition (Brass, 1974, pp. 119 - 181). Robinson (1977) countered that Brass (1974) greatly underestimated the influence of Hindu and Muslim revivalism, and that of the colonial state. Moreover, that Brass overestimated the amount of liberty Muslim elites had to choose one set of political symbols over another: "They were constrained by their relationships with other groups...by the framework for political development of the state...by the society which shaped them and by that society's fears and aspirations" (Robinson cf. Kaur, 2005, p. 9). In his follow up study, *Elite Groups, Symbol Manipulation and Ethnic Identity among the Muslims of South Asia*, Brass (1979) permits that Muslim elites might have been restrained by the cultural constraints of those they wished to represent. However, he maintained the position that elites politicized religious symbols out of political expediency and not because of any instinctive religious affinity (pp. 35-77). Robinson (1979), in *Islam and Muslim Separatism*, maintains that even as the idea of Muslim separatism was gaining traction and organizational strength, many Muslim leaders had still been inhibited by political ideas derived from the Islamic culture, and on occasion, by their own religious belief (pp. 78-112), thus embedding political discourse within culture and religion.

groups. Grounded in primordial academic scholarship,<sup>15</sup> essentialism portrays ethnicity “as a biological and historical given” (Keen, 2008, p. 72), “existing prior to, and independently of, contemporary ethnic conflicts” (Shani, 2007, p. 4). David Keen (2008) contends that essentialist explanations merit consideration, but opposes the idea that identities remain constant during and after episodes of collective violence. Keen (2008) asserts that ethnicities are *constructed* paradigms, most often employed through instrumentalist designs.<sup>16</sup> Ornit Shani (2007), in her study of the relationship between caste-antagonisms and communal violence, agrees:

**On closer examination, these cultural differences [between Hindus and Muslims] appear to be neither consistent nor fixed but often contingent on changing social circumstances.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, divisions and differences among Hindus are**

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<sup>15</sup> Clifford Geertz was among the first scholars to popularize the term “primordialism” in reference to the notion that contemporary ethnic animosities are rooted in historical religious or cultural tensions. See Clifford Geertz (1995), *The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States*; Walker Connor (1994), *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*.

<sup>16</sup> See Ashutosh Varshney (2001), *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 31-39 for a detailed critique of constructivist and postmodernist arguments pertaining to the construction of ethnic identities. In short, postmodernist analyses examine the relationship between knowledge and the distribution of power as a process for constructing ethnic identities. Post-modernists stress the power of a “knowledge elite” who control the discourse/narratives pertaining to local identities. Constructivists assert that knowledge elite may indeed construct influential narratives pertaining to identity but, “modern technologies of imagination” (Varshney, 2001, p. 33) are also available to non-elites, and “can be deployed to construct alternative ethnicities....” (p. 33). Furthermore, that ‘trivial incidents’ (e.g., a private argument between individuals who happen to belong to different communities) feed into larger identity narratives, in turn, leading to violence. In application to ethnic violence, Varshney (2001) asserts that constructivist arguments fail to account for variances across time and space, particularly, as peaceful multi-ethnic cities, who are familiar with such identity narratives, exist throughout India.

<sup>17</sup> Shani (2007) highlights how the Ayodhya Ram Mandir (temple) issue did not appeal to all Hindus throughout space and time, pointing to its conspicuous lack of prominence as a national agenda between 1993 and 2002. Moreover, her description and analysis of caste tensions calls into question the notion of a singular Hindu identity, as she finds middle- and upper-caste Hindus culpable of conflating religious identities with caste grievances.

**sometimes even greater than those between some Hindus and some Muslims. (p. 4)**

Ravinder Kaur (2005) also opposes the essentialist framework, rejecting the notion that ancient antagonisms are a self-explanatory feature of Indian society. Moreover, that it should account for “any given mass killing, sexual violence, expulsion of people from their homes and destruction of their property” (p. 24). Kaur (2005) argues that essentialism turns attention away from the active mobilization of individuals, and the organization of actual violence. Kaur (2005) proposes that investigations into the role of local and informal socio-religious networks needs to be examined more intensely, in order to fully understand the organisational aspect of violence. This requires, as Kaur (2005) urges, “fragmenting and challenging the prevalent concept of ‘communal violence’ that largely defines the contemporary political discourse on violence in South Asia” (p. 24).

Due to its tendency to discount the role of *agency*, essentialism is giving way to instrumentalist scholarship (Brass, 2003; Arendt, 2004; Chadda, 2007; Jaffrelot, 2007). Instrumentalism holds that economic and social factors drive the appeals to communalism by conflict entrepreneurs who are capable of obtaining benefits from ethnic tensions. Citing the institutional decay of the state (Kohli, 1990) or suggesting that communal violence is primarily the result of political and state machinations (Brass, 1997), instrumentalist inquiries view state and political elites as the prime agents behind the rise of communalism. Ultimately, these explanations ascribe the formation of a Hindu identity to strategies employed by

politicians and political parties for their own purposes.<sup>18</sup> In accordance with Instrumentalism's state-orientated approach, Paul Brass (1997) states:

**The persistence of riots helps local, state, and national leaders of different persuasions in capturing or maintaining institutional and state power by providing convenient scapegoats, and alleged perpetrators of the events, and by providing as well dangers and tensions useful in justifying the exercise of state authority. (pp. 6-7)**

Instrumentalist arguments illustrate how state and political elites play an important role in engineering ethnic conflict, but they are also prone to overstating their ability to manage and control conflicts (Almond et al., 2003, pp. 118-121). Ornit Shani (2007) states: "[State-orientated explanations] are limited by their narrow focus on electoral politics...They explain and understand social events from above...and subsequently deprive social groups of agency" (p. 8). Thus, reliance upon political-elite causations are problematic, in that, they fail to reveal how ethnic identity is formed by, and energizes, non-elites to perpetrate ethnic violence (Brass, 2003; S. Chandra, 1994; Kaur, 2005; Keen, 2008).

### **2.3 Examining Civil Society**

The limitations of essentialism and instrumentalism have encouraged some scholars, such as Ashutosh Varshney (2001) and Steven Wilkinson (2002), to focus on the relationship between communal conflicts and the existence or absence of networks of civic engagement (associational or quotidian). They

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<sup>18</sup> See Rajni Kothari (1998), *Communalism in Indian Politics*; and Steven Wilkinson (2004), *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots*.

claim occurrences of ethnic riots depend upon the strength of inter-ethnic civic associations to withstand potential manipulation and abuse by local elites. Varshney (2001), presuming a relationship between religious violence and the structure of religious life, compared opposing pairs of violence-prone and violence-free cities that expressed similar religious demographics. Varshney (2001) surmised, "...pre-existing local networks of civic engagement between Hindu-Muslim communities are the single most important predictor of whether a community will respond violently to ethnic provocations" (Barsalou, 2003, p. 8). He asserts that the most peaceful inter-religious communities were those that had local associations that made their members aware of the dangers of ethnic violence, and worked to suppress violent and criminal elements interested in exploiting local ethnic tensions (Varshney, 2001).<sup>19</sup> Focusing on the implications of political party competition for minority interests, Steven Wilkinson (2002) maintains that the greater the number of effective parties competing for power within a state the more valuable minority voters become. Thus, political elites will court ethnic minorities instead of engaging in chauvinistic politics that may incite communal antagonisms.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Varshney's (2001) findings are corroborated by the ethnographic work of Jan Bremen (2005) in Ahmadabad, Gujarat. Juxtaposing the role of the Hindutva movement in stoking communal violence viz. Gujarat's changing political economy, he details how the declining membership in the *Majoor Mahajan Sangh* trade union enabled Hindu nationalists to go unchecked before they were able to precipitate large-scale riots.

<sup>20</sup> Examples are: Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which have the lowest levels of Hindu-Muslim violence, presumably due to a high concentration of cross-cutting cleavages created by, "the emergence of middle and lower caste-based parties, strong party competition, and frequent changes of the ruling party" (Chadda, 2007, p. 144); presuming, that minorities benefit from being the swing vote in highly competitive elections.

Varshney's (2002) admission that "ethnic violence [within India] tends to be highly *locally or regionally concentrated*" (p. 23), signals that attempts to ascertain *causes* of ethnic violence would be problematic endeavours due to the multiplicity of uniquely complex societies. Varshney's (2001) and Wilkinson's (2002) analyses perceive caste antagonisms as a potential barrier for the further growth of Hindu nationalism, yet, such analyses do not explain the dynamic processes by which caste conflicts, which are exclusive to Hindus,<sup>21</sup> are translated into tensions between Hindus and Muslims (Shani, 2005). Brass (2003) cautions that their analyses downplay the significance of collective violence in those places where it does occur:

**In Varshney's case, it leads...to a doubtful conclusion that civic engagement between Hindus and Muslims can prevent violence, when it is more likely that the creation of institutionalized riot systems<sup>22</sup> overrides and displaces whatever forms of civic engagement and interethnic cooperation exist at specific sites. (p. 27)**

Their analyses *regionalize* sites of collective violence, diverting attention away from particular localities where riots are manufactured events; obscuring the dynamic processes of riot production as a result. Others, who focus exclusively

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<sup>21</sup> Such conflicts largely centred upon reservation policies designed to increase admission quotas for the *Socially and Educationally Backward Castes/Classes* (SEBC), in educational and governmental institutions, from 10% to 28%. See Ornit Shani (2005), *The Rise of Hindu Nationalism in India: The Case Study of Ahmedabad in the 1980s*.

<sup>22</sup> See Paul Brass (2006), *Forms of Collective Violence* in which he contends that sites believed to be endemic with riots, and commonly affixed with the Hindu-Muslim label, are actually pogroms enacted against Muslims. In such cases, Brass (2006) asserts, "...persons can be identified, who play specific roles in the preparation, enactment, and explanation of riots after the fact" (p. 4); also see Brass (2003), *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, 369.

on the decay of political institutions<sup>23</sup> or on the ethnic composition of bureaucracies (e.g., ethnic representation in the police force, etc.),<sup>24</sup> also fail to clearly identify the social dynamics that contribute to making ethnic riots endemic between particular communities within a given locality. Ultimately, Varshney's (2001) and Wilkinson's (2002) analyses also fail to reveal how non-elites contribute to the perpetuation of ethnic conflicts.

Ornit Shani (2007), avoids Varshney's (2001) and Wilkinson's (2002) pitfall by focusing on class mobility, political enfranchisement, and perceptions of social acceptance in the riot-prone city of Ahmedabad. Shani (2005, 2007), argues that the contemporary Hindu-Muslim conflict is not a sectarian one, but is a product of tensions stemming from changing caste and class dynamics within the Hindu social order. Shani (2005) states, "The construction of a disposition of *all-Hindus* facing Muslims emerged in the context of political attempts to unite Dalits and Muslims and intensifying economic pressures, on the one hand, and growing identity concerns and social frustrations among Hindus, on the other" (p.894). Shani (2007) contends that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Congress-led governments of Gujarat, in their designations of education and government reservation policies, conflated issues of equality – based on caste and class minority rights – with religion, pulling Muslims into a conflict of which they had no formal association. Amidst the breakdown in the necessity for a

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<sup>23</sup> See Atul Kohli (1990), *Democracy and Discontent*.

<sup>24</sup> See Khushwant Singh cf. Omar Khalidi (2002), *Indian Muslims since Independence*.

Dalit-Muslim political alliance, Hindu nationalist organizations, effectively, transformed Hindu class/caste conflicts into 'expressions of communal unrest'.

Brass' (2003) examination of the riot-prone city of Aligarh augments Shani's (2007) findings. Brass (2003), while illustrating the involvement of political elites, relates how non-elites may become active participants in institutionalizing riots within their neighbourhoods. Unlike the studies mentioned above, his ethnographic research illustrates particular sequences by which conflict entrepreneurs (elite and non-elite) manipulate ethnic insecurities, contrive tensions, and spark ethnic violence. Brass (2003) alleges that the blame for the incitement of ethnic riots should not lay solely at the feet of the political elite, but also at those "so-called ordinary people [who] also come out during riots to lead gangs of killers and arsonists and to participate themselves in killing and burning" (p. 379). Brass (2003) provides a thorough description of how ethnic riots became endemic to Aligarh; however, further investigations on how non-elites utilize religious symbols during the process of institutionalizing riots are still needed. Premised on Brass' (2003) study, this paper will examine how common citizens utilize religion to contextualize and legitimize ethnic riots.

## 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 3.1 Constructing Ethnicity

Collective violence occurs in many forms that may often overlap, such as pogroms, riots, genocide, and insurgencies (Brass, 2006). Common to each, is the selective targeting of civilians based primarily on notions of defined ethnicities. *Ethnic groups* may be “some kind of social group bonded together by ties of race, religion, culture or some combination of these” (Keen, 2008, p. 72). The identities to which individuals or communities subscribe may differ<sup>25</sup>, yet, the creation of an ethnic identity is always defined in contrast to ‘others’ (Spodek, 1989; Sherif, 1966). David Turton (1997) contends that emphases placed on the various qualities that constitute an ethnic identity may change in response to conflict – that ‘ethnicity’ is as much a *result* of conflict as it is a cause of it. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the processes by which ethnicity is both generated and maintained before any analysis of religious violence as it occurs in India may be undertaken.

Affixing ethnic labels enables the recruitment of supporters or establishes an individual or community as the ‘*other*’. In the process, the act of labelling fulfils many purposes: from promoting self-esteem to enabling a programme of discrimination, exploitation or displacing blame. Labels are not merely consequences but are also *functions* by which elites, and ordinary citizens, may attempt to gain economic advantage or physical survival. Within India, *ethnicity*

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<sup>25</sup> David Keen (2008) relates, “Individuals may impose several self-definitions at once, and give different emphasis to different identities at different times” (p. 72).

and *communalism* are terms used interchangeably; however, their ascriptive connotations pertain to fundamentally different concepts. Where *ethnicity* may imply a “quiescent adherence to the diacritics of one’s identity” (Gupta, 2005, p. 79), *communalism*, should be understood as the active expression of such sentiments, especially when they are juxtaposed to a despised, or “negativized” ‘*other*’ (p. 79).

### 3.2 Religious Dimensions

Analysis of religion as a marker of personal or collective identity, and its relationship with violence, requires a critical examination of religion as a concept. Many opinions abound that construe religion “as a sort of divine social mirror” (Wellman, 2007, p. 30),<sup>26</sup> but the majority do not offer guidance “as to *who* transforms, designs and orchestrates the beliefs into concrete activities categorised as rituals” (p. 30). Furthermore, they do not relate the process by which sets of rituals become codified, controlled and turned into expressed beliefs nor, do they explain how “[rituals are] shaped into a religion that can be worn as a ‘thing’ that defines a community of its bearers” (Wellman, 2007, p. 30). This paper’s examination of the dynamics between religion and violence will employ the following definition of religion articulated by Wellman (2007):

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<sup>26</sup> Opinions have ranged from: (1) it being a false explanatory system (Tylor, 1958 [1871]); (2) as the term of exchange with the god or gods (Stark & Finke, 2000); or (3) a moral orientation to life (Smith, 2003) among many other proposed definitions (cf. Wellman, 2007, p. 3). Renowned sociologist, Emile Durkheim, provides the most widely accepted definition of religion by constituting it as “collective representations that express collective (social) realities” (Durkheim, 1995, p. 70).

**Religion is a system of symbols, composed of beliefs and practices, developed in a communal setting, often institutionally legitimated, which negotiates and interacts with a power or force that is expected as within and beyond the self and group...The symbolic and social boundaries of religion mobilize individual and group identity, and create conflict, and, more rarely, violence within and between groups. (p. 4)**

Wellman's definition performs two important functions: it preserves the notion that ethnic conflict and ethnic violence are distinct analytical categories, and acknowledges *the ability of embedded symbols to construct symbolic and social boundaries*. Ethnic conflicts are experienced in the theatre of violent enterprise, or within the institutions established to provide legislative and juridical representation. Thus, ethnic conflict should be expected in any open democratic polity such as India, and not be fated to be transformed into episodes of sanguinary upheaval<sup>27</sup> (Varshney, 2001, p. 25). Defining symbolic and social boundaries is at the heart of India's troubles with Hindu nationalist organizations. It inspires and enables their ideologues to redefine what it means to be a constituent member of the *Hindu nation (rashtra)*. Hindu nationalists claim that membership within the Hindu rashtra is contingent upon successfully establishing one's lineage to *pitribhumi* (the conceptualized ancestral land of Hindus), and

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<sup>27</sup> In her essay, *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt (2004) relates the importance of establishing conceptual clarity and differentiating violence from other similarly linked concepts such as force, power, strength, and authority. Arendt does this by stressing the instrumental character of violence, arguing that the latter only appears when the maintenance of power appears in jeopardy; adding, "it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the ends it pursues" (p. 241). Thus, violence, power, and authority are not mutually exclusive ideas. This suggests that violence, when enacted, "is never neutral or de-contextualized and any such analysis of violence along that line would, therefore, be futile and misleading" (Kaur, 2005, p. 21). Arendt, thus, situates violence within the matrix of social-political power struggles, far removed from the notion that seemingly violent 'religious' conflicts are *driven by ancient ethnic hatreds*, or by any particularly conceived monolithic ethnic community.

claiming that such territory is *punyabhumi* (the sacred essence of Hindus) (Basu, 1993, p. 8; Sen, Ram, I. Engineer, Mehta, & Saif, 1999; Rambachan, 2003).

Religion creates symbolic and social boundaries that, in turn, may create tensions differentiating one community from another. Nothing is inherently wrong with this tension, however, Hindu nationalists have proven themselves adept at exacerbating conflicts between religious communities and bridging caste cleavages in the process (Kaur, 2005; Puniyani, 2005; Shani, 2007).

Their nation-building project has witnessed the effective conflation of national and religious discourse in order to legitimate their *Hindu-only* ideology; all the while, incorporating lower-caste groups who should otherwise – intuitively speaking – be their staunchest opponents as result of the pervasive political and economic discrimination supported by Hindutva's Brahmin elite (Sundar, 2004; Puniyani, 2005; Shani, 2007).

### **3.3 Deconstructing Collective Violence**

If religion does generate social and symbolic boundaries, will 'religious violence' automatically follow? *If so, how would religious actors within ethnic riots be distinguished from economic or political opportunists?* It would be errant to dismiss such questions on the assumption that the majority of the world's religious practitioners peacefully coexist as they, in actuality, may unknowingly

perpetuate hidden forms of violence.<sup>28</sup> However, just as any attempt to construe a direct link between religious conflict and religious violence is analytically inadmissible, so too is the belief that ethnic identities, by themselves, ultimately lead to communal violence.<sup>29</sup>

Understanding the interaction between ‘top-down’ (i.e., elite) and ‘bottom-up’ (i.e., non-elite) social forces is paramount in order to discern why ethno-religious violence occurs in one locality while peace may flourish only minutes down the road. The 19<sup>th</sup> century view of violent crowds as “disorganized, aimless, and destructive riff-raff” (Kaur, 2005, p. 21), as once articulated by Gustave LeBon, has long been discarded, yet, the prevailing view of collective violence must also be challenged. Grassroots collective violence may be popularly interpreted as a righteous form of protest if done in the pursuit of justice and the redressing of social inequalities. Hence, as ‘top-to-bottom’

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<sup>28</sup> Peace researcher Johan Galtung (1969) purports that violence expresses itself in three manners: (1) *direct violence* (i.e., personal injury); (2) *structural violence* (i.e., the structures of social injustice within a society that violates the right for one to live in dignity, such as discriminatory laws); and (3) *cultural violence* (i.e., the imposition or forceful restriction of any aspect of culture – e.g., language, religion, ideology, cosmology – that can be used to legitimate direct or structural violence). These distinctions are important with respect to communal violence in India, as they assist in framing how the structural and cultural processes enable Hindu nationalists, militants, and other conflict entrepreneurs to operate unimpeded. Moreover, it assists in explaining why the majority of Hindus living in a society endemic with ethnic riots remain silent, condone, or enthusiastically participate in sexual assaults, acts of torture, or the murder of their neighbours to whom they were once congenial.

<sup>29</sup> Accepting such a conclusion does not address why the Indian state, with ethnically mixed societies only experience Hindu-Muslim violence in particular locations and not in others with similar inter-ethnic demographics. See Ashutosh Varshney (2001) in which he compares riot prone cities to peaceful ones with similar ethnic proportions, respectively, Ahmedabad & Surat, Aligarh & Calicut, Hyderabad & Lucknow. Varshney asserts that conflicts premised on religious identity were mitigated by the presence of strong, pre-existing, local networks of civic engagement between Hindu-Muslim communities. Varshney (2001) found that the peaceful communities of Surat, Calicut, and Lucknow had local associations that engaged in countering the attempts of conflict entrepreneurs to exploit ethnic cleavages (cf. Barsalou 2003, pp. 7-8).

violence is often imagined as unjust elite repression, violence inspired by non-elite classes is commonly viewed as an exercise of liberation – *legitimate* in nature and often required (Kaur, 2005; cf. C. Tilly et al. 1975).

This paper does not deny that elites play a pivotal role in fomenting violence, however, in social milieus in which minorities are targeted the following questions deserve further investigation: (1) *How much responsibility should non-elites bear for the outbreak of violence and the perpetuation of conflict?* (2) *What are the processes by which dehumanizing acts of violence are justified, legitimated, and, in many cases, encouraged by non-elites?* Violence must be viewed as a form of social control of which, as Paul Brass (2003) points out, a Hindu-Muslim riot serves as a “key defining factor in the history of struggle for dominance of one community over another” (cf. Kaur, 2005, p. 22). Hindu nationalist organisations, such as the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), have sought to construct Hindus – belonging to numerous diverse sects – as a coherent, monolithic community.

Through propaganda, the purposeful production of communal riots, and the acquired control of state bureaucratic mechanisms, the RSS and other nationalist organizations have conditioned many Hindus to consider violent campaigns against Muslims<sup>30</sup> as a ‘normal’ aspect of common existence

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<sup>30</sup> Other ethnic minorities are also attacked, including, Christians and members of Other Backward Caste (OBC) communities (Kanjamala, 2008; Long, 2008).

(temporal and spatial) in cities throughout India.<sup>31</sup> This has resulted in a *spatial cleansing* of communities, with ethnic minorities driven out of neighbourhoods amidst the vigorous applause, or the reluctant silence of their Hindu neighbours (Biswas, 2009).

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<sup>31</sup> Varshney (2001) contends that between 1950 and 1995, Bombay (Mumbai), Ahmedabad, Aligarh, Hyderabad, Meerut, Baroda, New Delhi, and Calcutta constituted India's eight riot-prone cities. Despite accounting for only 18 percent of India's urban population (which accounted for 96 percent of riot deaths) and only 6 percent of India's total population these cities accounted for 46 percent of all riot deaths within India.

## 4: RIOTS: A DESIRED MEANS FOR OTHER ENDS

*If it is the struggle for power that explains the motivation of those who crafted the genocide, then it is the combined fear of a return to servitude and of reprisals thereafter that energized the foot soldiers...*

*-M. Mamdani, When Victims Become Killers*

### 4.1 The Persistence of Riot Production

Donald Horowitz (2000) noted, “If elites pursue a policy of deflecting mass antagonisms onto other ethnic groups, such a policy must strike roots in mass sentiments, apprehensions and aspirations in order to succeed” (p. 195).

If it may be held that ethnic identities are formed as a result of conflict it must be recognized that “strong ethnic sentiments can predate and help shape a conflict – if only because they have been created by conflicts in the past” (Keen, 2008, p. 82). In keeping with this assertion Brass (2003) states:

**Riots are dramatic productions, creations of specific persons, groups, and parties operating through institutionalized riot networks within a discursive framework of Hindu-Muslim communal opposition and antagonism that in turn produces specific forms of political practice that make riots integral to the political process. (p. 369)**

Riots persist because they are “unacknowledged and illegitimate but well-known and accepted transgressions of routine political behaviour in India” (Brass, 2003, p. 356). Hindu-Muslim riots are one of many forms of collective violence experienced within India.<sup>32</sup> A riot between these two communities, however,

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<sup>32</sup> Other forms of collective violence commonly perpetrated within India are inter-caste riots, intra-communal sectarian violence, the spread of mafia violence and criminality in rural north India, police-public confrontations, inter-gang killings (Brass, 2003, p. 356).

retains its special status in Indian public consciousness due to its association with two other important sites of Hindu-Muslim conflict (i.e., between the national governments of India and Pakistan, and the war between Muslim separatists and the Indian state within Kashmir) (Wallace, 2007). In the minds of Hindu nationalists, local Hindu-Muslim agitations and these other sites of violence constitute a “single grid of Hindu-Muslim confrontation for supremacy in the South Asian subcontinent” (Brass, 2003, p. 356; cf. Ayres, 2007).<sup>33</sup>

Riots are viewed as spontaneous events rather than pre-planned productions, and are commonly viewed as illegitimate – justified only under contexts of *self-defence*. Deadly ethnic riots are a mixture of "hyper-vigilance and circumspection" (Horowitz cf. Barsalou, 2002, p. 3). Rioters often imagine themselves to be engaged in heroic acts of self-defence against impending life-or-death threats. For Hindus caught up in a melee, this heroic imagining is, thus, juxtaposed against the image of a *bloodthirsty Muslim*, against whom all righteous Hindus are called to arms. This mix of lucid calculation and irrational suspicion is corroborated Brass' (2003) ethnographic findings. Brass (2003) argues that endemic Hindu-Muslim riots have “a form, a sequencing, and a dynamic of their own” (p. 357) that are legitimated through the reinforcement of Hindu-nationalist narratives – viz., intentional acts meant to incite or maintain

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<sup>33</sup> Hindu-Muslim confrontations manifest themselves in three different sites of conflict: (1) between the national governments of India and Pakistan; (2) India's conflict with Muslim separatists in Kashmir; and (3) local ethnic riots that occur throughout the Indian Union. Of the latter, confrontations have been concocted by associates of the Sangh Parivar and other Hindu nationalist organizations, such as the *Shiv Sena*, with the specific purpose of pushing religious minorities out of particular localities (Gupta, 2005; Kaur, 2005; Breman, 2005).

communal tensions to a degree that is considered most beneficial for conflict entrepreneurs.

Analysis concerning the history of riots in Aligarh since 1956 reveals a routine of provocation structured upon “codified procedures...[involving] the selection of key symbols and the selection of the means by which such symbols may be most effectively desecrated” to generate a targeted level of emotional impact against a rival community (Brass, 2003, p. 113). Violent acts are then committed against these selections (i.e., mosques, temples), which are then followed by the destruction of personal property, and subsequently, the murdering of an individual from the targeted community.

This sequencing of events has not remained consistent throughout Aligarh’s historical experience with riots. In some cases, fights have broken out after members from two different communities, who were already amassed for a particular social event (i.e., witnessing a wrestling match, or a political demonstration), became witnesses to a scuffle between individuals; “after which rumours spread...further provocative action [ensues], and larger mobs are brought into play” (Brass, 2003, p. 113). A second form of provocation sequencing commences with a conflict between two individuals from rival communities, but then requires conscious effort, on the part of particular conflict agitators, to mobilize members of one community towards avenging the harm brought upon its own member. Since social context impacts opportunity costs for conflict entrepreneurs Brass (2003) notes, “sometimes, the second [provocative]

sequence is required to bring into full play the first; the second sequence, however, is the one that is in operation all the time” (p. 113).

## 4.2 Stoking Tensions

Most riots are anticipated events, preceded by a period of *tension* that is discernable to all local inhabitants. Throughout the 1990s, a series of incidences were behind the build up of Aligarh’s ethnic tensions. These incidences included targeted assaults and extra-judicial confinements by the police,<sup>34</sup> accusations of biblioclasm, or the defilement of sacred sites.<sup>35</sup> The creation of tension is part of a process to maintain a prevailing social order conditioned by fear and suspicion: “Incidents are provoked, processions are taken out, [and] mass mobilizations are organized deliberately to offend the sensibilities of the other community’s members” (Brass, 2003, p. 358). Brass (2003) purports:

**Riots do not occur accidentally like fires form a smouldering flame nor are they meticulously planned and coordinated from beginning to end. Rather, they are dramatic productions, street theatre performances that are meant to appear spontaneous, but that involve many people in a variety of roles and actions that include inciting the interest of the audience, the dramatization and enlargement of incidents into a fit subject for a performance, and, finally, the production of the event. (p. 358)**

Citizens of Aligarh, and other inhabitants of cities with endemic riots, are kept in a “state of readiness...[by] bit players who must be kept ready for

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<sup>34</sup> Many Muslims allege they were imprisoned for numerous days without food and water (See Brass, 2005, p. 63).

<sup>35</sup> See Brass, 2003, pp. 112-113.

action...and [a] myriad of walk-on parts” that must be played (Brass, 2003, p. 358).<sup>36</sup> Hooligans and criminals, paid-off by conflict entrepreneurs, agitate communities in such a way as to incite those *already disposed to engage in a fight*. This latter group of excitable malcontents constitute the many ‘walk-on’ roles of which Brass (2003) refers. Although the only benefit they may receive from a riot outbreak may be the emotional satisfaction of reaffirming their community’s ability to defend itself, they are just as responsible for reproducing violence as any who are paid to see a riot ensue.

### 4.3 Functionality of Rumours

Rumours are purposely spread in order to keep tensions alive in areas where riots are endemic, and are an integral component in the build-up of tension before a riot starts. In the midst of a riot rumours are utilized to sustain “the momentum of violence” (Suranjan Das cf. Brass, 2003, p. 359), maintaining mobs in a frenzied state. The conception of rumours as “the ‘fuel’ that sets aflame the combustible material of interethnic or inter-communal hostilities” (p. 359), is critical to the prevailing view of riots as spontaneous outbreaks which merge from communal acrimony. A rumour carries with it the assumption that it and it alone, is sufficient to arouse individual passions and compel people into

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<sup>36</sup> Brass (2006, pp. 4-5) categorizes particular players who are necessary for the production of riots. These are: 1) “Fire Tenders” – maintain intergroup tensions through various inflammatory actions; 2) “Conversion Specialists” – lead and address mobs of potential rioters, they also are responsible for signalling when violence should commence; 3) Criminals and the Poor – are rewarded for successfully initiating violent outbreaks; and 4) Politicians and the Vernacular media – they draw attention away from those responsible by promoting the idea that a riot was an expected outcome of an “inflamed mass public”.

streets; where finally, as a corporate mass, individuals are energized to engage in violent reprisals for which they need not have been a direct witness to the rumoured affront. Brass (2003) explains that rumours function as:

**...a sign, a means of communication, a method mobilizing an action and, sometimes, of stopping an anticipated action by the other side....Rumours are first of all signs of the existence of a serious and potentially violent dispute. Members of opposed sides are attuned to the slightest move attributed to the other side toward a possible change in the status quo. Second, they warn one side of the possibility of an action by the other. Third, they serve to mobilize the side so warned. The function of this mobilization may be to attack or to demonstrate strength so as to prevent the rumoured disruption of the status quo. (p. 362)**

Michael Keith (1993) offers another perspective with respect to a rumour's mobilizing capability. In his examination of the 1981 London riots he argues that fears of local threats, brought on by rumours, will most likely never come to pass even in episodes where a multiplicity of sources report rioting occurring elsewhere but nearby. A rumour's potency is dependent on the social order within which it is situated. Since numerous social orders may exist within cities and towns a rumour's effectiveness may actually be mitigated (Keith, 1993). Although many of London's inhabitants were primed to engage in violence, (Keith cf. Brass, 2003, p. 359) maintains their non-response to rumours is also "one of the most powerful arguments against the classification of collective violence as *irrational*" (p. 359).

#### 4.4 Action Provoked

On October 1978, a successive wave of three Hindu-Muslim riots erupted in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, and lasted until December of that year.<sup>37</sup> The riots initiated with a scuffle between two supporters of rivalling Hindu and Muslim wrestling *akharas* (academies), and knife attacks, lasting several weeks, immediately followed. The body of a Hindu wrestler, who succumbed to injuries acquired from the initial clash, was seized by Hindu activists and paraded past Muslim establishments; shouting their demands for vengeance as they passed. “[R]ioting broke out independently but simultaneously” (Brass, 2005, p. 54) in two areas near Hindu-majority mohallas as a result of the uproar.<sup>38</sup>

Altercations occurred between shopkeepers and Hindu activists when the latter demanded that the former close their shops, violence ensued, and twelve people were subsequently killed. The report issued by the *Minorities Commission of the Government of India* emphasized the deliberate provocation of anti-Muslim sentiments by Hindu activists, and also implicated the *Provincial*

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<sup>37</sup> Ashutosh Varshney (2002) lists a sequence of three riots: (1) October: “clash between a Hindu and a Muslim wrestler”; (2) November: “retribution for previous violence”; and (3) December: “retribution for [November] violence” (p.159).

<sup>38</sup> Rioting broke out in Chauraha Abdul Karim (an important four-way crossing in Aligarh), and in the nearby Hindu majority mohalla of Manik Chauk, each located in the old city (Brass, 2005, p. 54). Moreover, reports by *The Times of India*, 19 October 1978, and that of *Radiance* (a Muslim paper), 22 October 1978, both accuse those involved in the procession of deliberately passing through “the extremely communally sensitive” (p. 54) crossing of Chauraha Abdul Karim, even though it was not on the direct route to the murdered wrestlers house. The 29 October 1978 issue of *Radiance* also referred to the simultaneous occurrence of riots in both areas. Brass asserts, “it is possible, even probable, that these newspapers are feeding off each other’s reports, rather than obtaining information independently, or that they are all feeding from the same pool of information” (p. 54).

*Armed Constabulary* (PAC) for indiscriminately firing upon Muslim crowds, inside their homes, and into their mosques (Brass 2005).

*The report put forth by the People's Union for Civil Liberties* (PUCL) argued that the build-up to this riot involved a series of agitations led by *experienced Hindu rioters*, who sought to use the death of the wrestler as a pretext to instigate a riot for political purposes. Implicated rioters were identified as vociferous supporters of the Aligarh Muslim University Bill,<sup>39</sup> which was passed in June 1972 as a measure that sought to rid Islamic education and theology from the AMU campus (Brass, 2003, p. 86). Moreover, the PUCL report claimed that rich Varshney Hindu businessmen orchestrated the snatching and parading of the body, and led the chants of "blood for blood" and "ten [Muslims] for one [Hindu]" (Brass, 2003, p. 93). The report further claims that RSS affiliates were behind the entire episode, attempting to use the event in order to force Muslims out of approximately fifteen dwellings located within the mohalla of Manik Chauk.

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<sup>39</sup> Aligarh Muslim University was one of the principle sites from which the idea of Muslim independence was conceived, and disseminated, in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) is a symbolic presence to militant Hindus, "the persistence into the present of Muslim separatist, communalist, and anti-Hindu designs, and justifies...violence against Muslims that is enacted in periodic outbursts of large scale rioting"(Brass, 2003, p. 36). In fact, AMU has become one of the principle sites for large-scale Hindu-Muslim violence since Independence up until the recent past. Through AMU (amendment) Bill, Hindu nationalist sought to restructure AMU's internal governance and reorient its mission away from "...Islamic studies and the teaching of Muslim theology" towards "the study of the religions, civilization and culture of India" (*Times of India* cf. Brass, 2003, p. 86).

In *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors*, Veena Das

(Das, 1990, p. 28) offers the following commentary on the nature of ethnic riot participation:

**[T]here is no contradiction between the fact that, on the one hand, mob violence maybe highly organized and crowds provided with such instruments as voters' lists or combustible powers, and on the other that crowds draw upon repositories of unconscious images that crowds use to define themselves and their victims....(p. 28)**

Das' statement obliges the acknowledgement that there is no fixed rule against rumours being sufficiently capable of arousing the passions of individuals. Brass (2003), too, admits that rumours are "most effective when they draw upon images, prejudices, and myths derived from family upbringing, socialization in community schools, or in the school textbooks in government schools that provide a distorted history, and political indoctrination" (p. 363).<sup>40</sup> These elements, however, function within a primordial paradigm, "[obscuring] the maintenance of a set of power relations in Indian society that operates to the advantage of upper caste Hindus and to the disadvantage of Muslims [among others]...." (Brass, 2003, p. 363).

Thus, *how do these power relations effect the mobilization of lower caste Hindus? Will certain identities always take precedent over others, for all people,*

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<sup>40</sup> See N. Sundar (2004), *Teaching Hate*, Economic and Political Weekly; also, cf. Peggy Froerer (2007), *Disciplining the Saffron Way*. Froerer's ethnographic research on student perspectives within Hindu nationalist schools challenges the assumption that their youth are easily indoctrinated with Hindu-right ideology (i.e., Hindutva principles). She argues that many of the children superficially accept what is taught to them primarily on the basis that they recognize doing otherwise would impede their academic progress, not because they have wholeheartedly accepted, without question, the information relayed to them.

*in all circumstances?* The following section will examine relationships between non-elite networks and ethnic riots in order to address the questions posed above. It will assist in understanding why individuals, based on the identity to which they hold the most affinity choose to oppose, actively engage with, or remain silent during bouts of ethnic violence.

## 5: ACCOUNTING FOR NON-ELITE PARTICIPATION

*If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.*

*-Alexander Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago*

### 5.1 Antipathy & Mob Rule

Over the past forty years, theories associated with the categories of grievance, relative deprivation, malevolent politicians, or conflict entrepreneurship meant to help explain the causes of inter-ethnic violence have abounded, yet, according to Donald Horowitz (cf. Barsalou, 2003):

**Such theories fall short, however, because they fail to explain the intensity of violence; it is difficult to believe that such violence results from mere manipulation and calculation. The literature on ethnic riots has under-emphasized the fact that, fundamentally, riots are endeavours undertaken by crowds. Understanding riots requires better analysis of the way in which crowds behave and the role of passion. (p.2)**

Carefully targeting their victims, “rioters display a mixture of lucid calculation and irrational passion in their behaviour” (Horowitz cf. Barsalou, 2002, p. 2), providing an emotional release through their act of killing. Horowitz (cf. Barsalou, 2002) considers ethnic riots to be *spectacular attacks*<sup>41</sup> that are intense, sudden, but not, necessarily, entirely unplanned. Individuals participating in riots are indulging in angry, but pleasurable, violence. Horowitz

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<sup>41</sup> Such attacks are not merely killing and maiming, but involve acts meant to degrade and dehumanize a community (e.g., public spectacles of rape, genital mutilation, burning alive, etc.). Furthermore, spectacular acts of violence are recognized for producing large numbers of deaths, numerous refugees and internally displaced, and greater homogeneity in the area within which violence has occurred.

(cf. Barsalou, 2002) claims that experiments and interviews with rioters have shown that “anger can grow over time, be stored, redirected, and then released all at once...[where] there is a connection between today's provocative action by a hated ethnic group to yesterday's” (p. 3). This antipathy contributes to the brutality and magnitude of the violence often recorded in many of India's Hindu-Muslim riots, thus, as long as historical events are seen through the lens of enmity past transgressions will only be magnified and emotional responses intensified. Regarding the power of deep-seeded antipathy Horowitz (cf. Barsalou, 2002) states:

**Antipathy produces a tendency toward generalization – with the anger focused on the whole ethnic group and away from the individuation of targets – so that ethnic antipathy makes possible indiscriminate violence against members of the same ethnic group. In choosing victims, the crowd does not care whether the member of the hated ethnic group is a good person or not, just that he or she is a member of the targeted ethnic group. (p.4)**

According to Horowitz (cf. Barsalou, 2002), there are four elements of ethnic hatred: (1) a growing and even obsessive focus on the hated group to the neglect of others; (2) a belief that the hated group possesses fixed characteristics and is likely to behave in a certain manner; (3) a compression of intra-group differences attributed to members of the hated group; (4) and an active sense of repulsion toward the hated group and its members. Contrary to instrumentalist examinations, to some extent these elements uphold notions of primordial grievances:

**Whether killing is carried out in the name of self-defence or punishment for wrong doing... each killing is not considered singly but as part of an extended transaction in which victims and perpetrators change places...rioters say to themselves, 'They are killing us, therefore we may kill them. The riot didn't start the moment we started to kill them. It started before that.' (Horowitz cf. Barsalou, 2002, p. 5)**

The consequence of such thinking results in the absolving of responsibility for killing by virtue of it being seen as an honourable redressing of past transgressions. For each rioter, the time horizon for which they delve into the past of collective memory might differ, however, such memories (real or imagined) are necessary for spectacular violence to be waged. Thus, killing within ethnic riots is not subject to any moral judgement that does not take into consideration perceived past agitations brought on by some 'unrelenting enemy'. As evidenced by the near universal occurrence of riots being preceded by rumours of an undeserved attack, rioters do not conceive of themselves as attackers, but as heroic defenders of their community (Barsalou, 2003; Brass, 2005).

## **5.2 Hindutva's Ideological Push**

*Hindutva* (Hindu-ness) is the principle expression of the Hindu ethnic movement within India. The *Sangh Parivar* - a 'family' of political and cultural Hindu nationalist organizations, mobilizes the adherents of Hindutva. While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the main political face of Hindutva and the Sangh Parivar, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) is the ideological

fountainhead. Other members of the Sangh include the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), *Bajrang Dal*, *Durga Vahini* and *Rashtriya Sevika Samiti* (Jaffrelot, 2005).

The Hindutva narrative purports that Hinduism is inherently pious, pronouncing Hindus as calm and tolerant: "By nature Hindus are [a] peace loving people. Left to themselves they would not like to harm anyone, even the ants and insects" (Jayaram V., 2005). In stark contrast, it decries Muslims as vile killers, progenitors of the violence to which all Indians have fallen victim. Ram Vilas Vedanti, a prominent Hindu religious figure associated with the Hindu Right, summarized Hindutva's disposition towards Muslims in a few words, "*Gaddar, atankawadi Muslim*" ("*Traitor, terrorist Muslim*") (Vedanti cf. Anand, 2007, p. 259).

*Hindutva* conceptualizes Muslims and Christians<sup>42</sup> as threats to a supposed uniform Hindu identity. Premised on negative representations of Muslims, *Hindutva* nurtures a form of identity politics that conflates fears pertaining to notions of masculinity, nationalism, sexuality and violence. *Hindutva* apologists promote a communal discourse that conceptualizes Indian Muslims as anti-national foreign entities, deceitful in every way. Since the U.S. 'War on Terror', this anti-Muslim discourse has become even more virulent throughout Hindu nationalist consciousness (Anand, 2007). To the loud approval

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<sup>42</sup> Although all foreign religions are considered hostile to the *Hindutva* *rashtra* (nation), Muslims function as the main target of Hindu nationalist persecutions. For details on Christian abuses by Hindu nationalists see R. Puniyani, *The Politics behind Anti Christian Violence* (2006), in which he provides a substantive collection of inquiry reports that detail attacks against Christian communities throughout India; also see A. Kanjamala (2008).

of Hindutva ideologues Vendanti once exclaimed, "Muslims are the root of terrorism in this country, Muslims are the root of terrorism in foreign countries; until Muslims are erased, terrorism will not end' (Vedanti cf. Anand, 2007, p. 259). Hindu nationalists depict Indian Muslim's as the state's *fifth column*, and the *mohallas* (neighbourhoods) in which latter are in the majority, as "mini-Pakistans" (Brass, 2005, p. 49).

Hindu nationalists consider Muslims dangerous, not only because of their alleged links with terrorism, crime and violence, but also due to insidious conjectures pertaining to their sexuality. In a public speech to Hindutva activists, Suresh Das Ji Maharaj, another prominent Hindu religious figure warned, "The day Hindus become a minority, Muslims will plunder our daughters, food, and houses" (Maharaj cf. Anand, 2007, p. 259). Pervasive stereotypes that Muslims 'breed like rabbits' (Anand, 2007, p. 259) underscores the Hindu nationalist belief that the Indian state has allowed, to its detriment, the proliferation of 'mini-Pakistans'. Muslim men are portrayed as "waiting for the opportunity to plunder Hindu women, livelihood and property" (Anand, 2007, p. 259; cf. Verma, 2007). Thus, the spectre that Muslims will overpopulate and dominate Hindu communities is a narrative employed by Hindu nationalists to convince all Hindus that their dominance within India is under serious threat.

Anand (2007) contends, negative representations of Muslim males, as rapists and Pakistani agents, facilitates in legitimating unconscionable forms of violence against Muslims during ethnic riots (e.g., public gang rapes, genital mutilation, infanticide, etc.). Ethnographic research, as conducted in the city of

Surat by Sudhir Chandra (1994), corroborates the notion that negative representations of Muslims aids in fostering an acceptance of anti-Muslim violence among Hindu communities. Chandra's accounts of middle-class Hindu attitudes, irrespective of educational background and frequency of inter-ethnic contact,<sup>43</sup> following Surat's deadly riot of January 1993, illustrates the profundity of anti-Muslim stereotypes.

Christophe Jaffrelot contends that the ideology of Hindutva is a "racism of domination [rather] than a racism of extermination" (cf. Baber, 2004, p. 712). Yet, popular hate slogans: "*Musalman ke do hi sthan – Pakistan ya Qabristan*" (There are only two places where the Muslim belongs, in Pakistan or in the graveyard) (IIJ 2003) or "*Landyabhai ko maro*" (beat/kill the circumcised man) underline that for Hindu nationalists the preferable Muslim is one who either flees or is dead. Anand (2007) recalls the thoughts of a senior VHP intellectual concerning the extermination of Muslims: "Look, most Muslims in India are converts. They converted out of fear or greed. If we [Hindus] are strong, many Muslims might come back out of fear. These people are basically weak" (p. 262).

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<sup>43</sup> Chandra, impressed by the outburst of man, who in a heated conversation accused politicians of "making fools of both Hindus and Muslims were senselessly killing one another", interjected, "Then how does it happen that the very people you live with [Hindus] don't understand this and kill their Muslim neighbours?" With equal conviction the man retorted, "You don't know, sahib. These Muslims are by nature very cruel and violent." In another episode, Chandra encountered a young doctor who was attending to riot victims (mostly Muslim) who had remarked, "Muslims were prone to be violent as they ate non-vegetarian food and practiced professions such as butchers". See Chandra (1994), *Of Communal Consciousness and Communal Violence: Impressions from Post-riot Surat*, p. 56.

The intellectual's remark highlights that the concept of Muslim extermination<sup>44</sup> is very much an expression of designs for cultural violence, one that becomes most visible during ethnic riots.

Ethnic-majority movements leave little, if any, room for compromise and negotiation: “[They] are aimed at arriving at the most effective way of curtailing the influence of these (minority) communities with alleged extra-territorial affiliations” (Gupta, 2005, p. 81). All ethnic-majoritarian movements make a rigid claim to national unity at the expense of others who are within the nation-state but are considered outsiders. For Hindu nationalists, there is a constant nervousness regarding the durability of their perceived nation-state and its territorial possessions. Anand (2007) refers to this nervousness as “anxious masculinity” (p. 258). This anxiousness, lying within the heart of the Hindu nationalist project, becomes lethal when it is combined with the agencies of the state, as its primary objective is to rid India of all Muslims by all possible means.

VHP International General Secretary, Pravin Togadia, with reference to the 2002 Gujarat riots, is on record, stating: “What is happening in Gujarat is not communal riots but people's answer to Islamic Jihad” (The Milli Gazette, 2002). The idea that Muslims are agents of Pakistan, set upon the complete annihilation

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<sup>44</sup> The extermination of all things Islamic occurs at various levels: 1) Epistemically, India is imagined as a Hindu nation purified of all defiling Muslim elements (i.e., RSS bookshops in Delhi and Nagpur do not stock literature written by Muslims or material promoting Islamic contributions to India), see (Basu, 1993, pp. 46-47; Sundar, 2004, pp. 1605-1606; Nussbaum, 2007, pp. 264-301); 2) Corporeal violence during riots (i.e., sadistic acts of violence against pregnant women and Muslim fetuses), see (Banerjee, 2001; Sarkar, 2002, p. 2875); and (3) Iconoclasm, through the physical destruction of symbols associated with Indo-Islamic culture (i.e., Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, or *sufi darghas*, which are shared sites of worship for both Muslims and Hindus), see (Anand, 2007, p. 263; cf. Brass, 2005).

of the Hindu nation-state is pervasive throughout India (Ayres, 2007; Brass, 1979, 2003; Gupta, 2005; Kaur, 2005), and has been a narrative relied upon by Hindu nationalists and Islamic terrorists alike.<sup>45</sup> Principally, this has been so, in order to generate great emotional responses to notions that Muslims are a warlike people (Khan, 2003; Jaffrelot, 2007, pp. 183-184).

### 5.3 Hindutva: Pursuing an Irrational Discursive?

Indian politics is witness to three “master narratives” (Varshney, 2002, pp. 55-64). These narratives operate as the “organizing devices for *mass politics*, or the leading political idioms that mobilize large numbers of people” (p. 55). Narratives enable critical issues to be intelligible to the masses, and are methods of bringing people together to form social coalitions meant to alter the prevailing political order and attain its power. Two of the three master narratives of Indian politics – *secular nationalism* and *religious nationalism* – speak unequivocally about the nation; the third, focusing on caste, does so only indirectly, as its aim is to reconfigure political priorities without explicitly articulating its own conception of an Indian *rashtra*. Although secular and religious narratives have overtaken both political and scholastic discourses,<sup>46</sup> the *caste narrative* maintains a very important place within public discourse due to its serious affect upon the contest waged by the proponents of the other master narratives.

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<sup>45</sup> As seen with the Mumbai terror attack from November 26<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup>, 2008. See BBC News (2008), *Mumbai rocked by deadly attacks*.

<sup>46</sup> For reflections of anti-secular discourse see Needham & Rajan (2007); also Baber (2006).

Secular nationalism is India's official ideology. It posits that the Indian state is a country within which all religions<sup>47</sup> share an equal place within "the national family, and, in which none will dominate the functioning of the state" (Varshney, 2002, p. 56). Unlike the western notion, the term *secular* does not denote a radical separation between the state and religion, but that the former will be *neutral between religions* – treating each equally by not affording one a foremost place through its legitimating power. Indian notions of secularism, therefore, have come to mean "religious equidistance" (Varshney, 2002, p. 56), and not 'non-involvement'. Under this national ethos attaining Indian citizenship is not contingent upon a person's professed religion, but upon native birth or completing the process of naturalization and acceptance of Indian culture. Although most political parties subscribe to this view, historically, the Congress Party has been associated as the promoter of this narrative.

Both Hindus and Muslims espouse *religious nationalism*, the second master narrative. Muslim nationalism emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, and saw with it the birth of Pakistan in 1947. The Muslim argument for the creation of Pakistan stemmed from the premise that Hindus and Muslims constituted more than simply two distinct religions, that they were, indeed, two separate nations. Known for his lack of religiosity, a speech given by Pakistan's founder Mohammed Ali Jinnah best reflects this attitude. Jinnah remarked that one did not have to be religious to appreciate the cultural differences between

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<sup>47</sup> Including other language groups, and other identifiable minorities.

Hinduism and Islam, and that these cultural differences were enough to warrant the rationale for the independent nation-state of Pakistan (Jinnah cf. Varshney, 2002, p. 71):

**Islam and Hinduism... are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are in fact different and distinct social orders.... [T]hey belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions.... They have different epics, [and] their heroes are different.... Very often, the hero of one is the foe of the other and likewise their victories and defeats overlap.**

According to the Hindu nationalist narrative, Hinduism is not only the religion of India's majority Hindu community but expands over the very soil of India's territorial heritage. Hindu nationalists conceive of three historical periods coded in ethno-religious terms. Considered the apex of advancement in politics and culture, the Hindu Golden Age marks the first historical period. Viewed by Hindu nationalists as a period of conquest and the decay of Hindu civilization, the Dark Age of Muslim rule defines India's second historical period – despite the contrary findings of historians and archaeologists (Brass, 2005). Conspicuously, Hindu nationalists only acknowledge the third period, that of British colonial rule, to the extent that it is considered the period of release from Muslim tyranny and an opportunity to reassert Hindu identity.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Tapan Basu (1993) observes that Hindu & Muslim nationalists had begun to split away from the mainstream nationalist enterprise, which targeted British rule as its primary enemy, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. V.D. Savarkar, founder of the Hindutva movement and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), "had remained consistently aloof from all movements against foreign rule" (p.4) beginning in the mid-1920s, and instead focused his efforts in competing with the perceived national ambitions of the Muslim community.

Hindu nationalists contend that the Partition of 1947 was one of the most destructive 'Muslim attacks' upon the Hindu rashtra (Brass, 2005; Hasan, 1997; Shani, 2007). Dipankar Gupta (2005) states: "There is no doubt that Nehru and Gandhi were extraordinarily charismatic, but the durability of the Indian nation-state is based on a common grief, and that grief was the Partition" (p. 87). It is upon this grief that Hindu nationalist organizations base their unending opposition to the presence of Muslims and their institutions (Jaffrelot, 2007; Brass, 2003) within territorial India.

Horowitz (cf. Barsalou, 2002, p. 3) noted that ethnic riots are likely to occur when the following four elements are present: (1) ethnic antagonism; (2) an emotional response to a precipitating event, (3) a sense on the part of rioters that killing is justifiable; (4) belief amongst rioters that the risk of response from police is low. His analysis however, does not adequately address why certain members of the Hindu community have shown themselves to be more *susceptible* to mob passions than others, particularly, when they reside within the same urban/rural space (S. Chandra, 1994). The following case studies will provide some insights respecting this contention, examining the extent to which affiliations with particular Hindu religious networks, religious leaders, and the state construct ethnic identities viz. the production of ethnic riots.

## 6: CASE STUDIES

### 6.1 The Eight-Armed Goddess & 1984 Delhi Riot

The role of formal networks, such as the Sangh Parivar, in mobilizing members to incite or sustain riots is well documented (Gupta, 2005; Brass, 2005; Basu, 1993; Anand, 2007; Chatterji, 2004; Jaffrelot, 2007; Juergensmeyer, 1996), however, much examination remains as to the extent informal networks contribute to the perpetration of anti-minority violence. Located in New Delhi, the local cult of the eight-armed goddess, *Sheran Wali Mata*, is an informal religious network primarily comprised of migrant descendants who fled the violence in West Punjab and the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan during Partition. Virtually unknown or popularly practiced in pre-Partition India the cult became popular among Punjabi Hindus who were introduced to this religious practice by the women's wing of the RSS, the *Rashtriya Sevika Samiti* (Kaur, 2005).

Celebrations around the goddess have served as an important rallying point for Punjabi Hindus, as it has helped forge an identity that also overcomes political differences. Established within middle class neighbourhoods, *Sheran Wali Mata* is an informal religious network that serves as a crucial source of strength and support for more organized groups (i.e., political parties, organizations affiliated with the Sangh Parivar) (Kaur, 2005). The *Ram Janmabhoomi* (Birthplace of Ram) movement<sup>49</sup>, which sought to destroy the Babri Masjid in the city Ayodhya in December 1992, was animated through this

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<sup>49</sup> Spearheaded by the VHP.

religious network.<sup>50</sup> Kaur (2005) argues: “Thus, a national movement like Ayodhya found a readymade audience in Delhi who were more receptive to its message in the late 1980s than in other parts of India where a Hindu community was not yet mobilized” (p. 31). This, of course, does not suggest that the *Sheran Wali Mata* is a religious network made up of members easily induced to commit violent actions. However, it does allow for the suggestion that their ties with the Hindutva movement had already inculcated, at minimum, a reluctant acceptance of the anti-minority violence that occurred throughout the past two decades.

The 1984 Delhi riot is an example of how middle-class Hindus failed, en masse, to exhibit solidarity in “organizing [a] joint Hindu-Sikh defence of their neighbourhoods – with local Sikhs” (Kaur, 2005, p. 34). The assassination of Indira Gandhi (1917-1984) by her two Sikh bodyguards, initiated a week of mass collective violence within Delhi that claimed the lives of about 3,500 Sikhs, and left more than 50,000 sheltered in relief camps (Tatla, 2006). Kaur (2005) claims, “The belief that Sikhs had *gone too far*, and therefore needed a firm reprimand, was widely shared among Punjabi Hindus” (p. 34). Thus, silence and indifference towards Sikhs (and Muslims) during that period may be said to have epitomized Hindu middle-class dispositions towards religious minorities.

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<sup>50</sup> This religious organization organized the 1989 *shinlanyas* movement that urged Hindus to donate one brick for the reconstruction of the Ram temple over the Babri Mosque. Kaur (2005) notes, that the Hindus in Delhi organized some of the biggest processions carrying the sacred bricks.

## 6.2 Gujarat 2002: State Sanctioning & Rural Participation

On February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2002, a Gujarat-bound train carrying VHP *kar sevaks* (religious volunteers) from Ayodhya made a scheduled stop at Godhra station. An altercation between a Muslim tea-vendor and kar sevaks ensued, leading to an attack on the train by a Muslim arsonist. After news circulated that fifty-nine passengers died in the fire, the VHP called for a statewide *bandh* (shutdown of private business and government operations) for a period of mourning. The complete shutdown of state-run agencies (i.e., police force, fire brigades, etc.) enabled conflict entrepreneurs to exploit the opportunity to target and kill Muslim men, women and children, without fear of recourse from state authorities.

The scale of anti-Muslim violence that followed has been well documented and illustrates that the deaths of approximately 2,000 people could not have occurred without the organizational capabilities of the state and affiliated members of the Sangh Parivar (Human Rights Watch, 2002; IIJ 2003; Setalvad, 2005). The police were either conspicuously absent from riot plagued areas or actively participated in the violence, often, exposing their penises to their victims in order to humiliate and show that they were "real men" (IIJ, 2003).<sup>51</sup> Former Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee (1998-2004, 1996),<sup>52</sup> exhibited much ambivalence towards the situation by switching between pronouncements of sorrow and shame to statements expressing the belief that Muslims fail to live

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<sup>51</sup> Anand (2007) deems this an "exercise in the masculinisation of the Hindus" (p. 265). Witness reports include testimonials in which police officers exposed their genitalia to Muslim victims in order to humiliate them further.

<sup>52</sup> Former leader of the BJP party.

peacefully everywhere in the world: "In Indonesia, Malaysia, wherever Muslims are living they don't want to live in harmony" (Bhatt, 2002). Gujarat's Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, justified the post-Godhra massacre as an expected and natural Hindu response to a history of Muslim agitations,<sup>53</sup> disavowing any reported implication of his government's involvement in the massacre.<sup>54</sup> Official estimates have put the death toll at 850 people while non-governmental organizations estimate the total number of deaths at around 2,000, most of whom being Muslims.<sup>55</sup> With no attempt to ascribe blame by agents of the state, effectively, provides cover for accepting individual responsibility and perpetuates the false assumption that anti-Muslim violence is a spontaneous outburst of a harassed Hindu society. Consequently, the absolving of state and rioter culpability further embeds ethnic riots as a normal and legitimate practice of Hindu collective response. Thus, resulting in institutionalized riot systems premised upon Hindu nationalist discourse.

As the riots within Gujarat were traditionally an urban phenomenon, the participation of *adivasis* (India's indigenous people) suggests that the ethno-nationalist message of Hindutva has begun to take hold in the rural areas in

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<sup>53</sup> When asked to explain the allowance of complete mayhem in his state Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, quoted Newton's third law of thermodynamics: "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction" (Suraiya, 2002).

<sup>54</sup> At that time, the RSS and the VHP controlled key government postings within the state. The Chief Minister, Narendra Modi maintains his status as an RSS *pracharak* (full time cadre), while his Home Minister, Gordhan *Zadaphiya*, was a VHP. See Setalvad (2005), *Godhra: Crime Against Humanity* (pp. 127-128).

<sup>55</sup> Another set of statistics indicate that armed bands particularly focused on Muslim property, destroying 1,679 houses, 1,965 shops, 21 warehouses and 76 Muslim shrines in the Ahmadabad area alone. Muslim survivors, forced to seek shelter in relief camps, numbered approximately 98,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

which they reside (Jaffrelot, 2007, pp. 177-179). Depinka Gupta (2005) attributes adivasi participation to the influence of rural urbanization. Referencing the shrinking economic prospects in the rural areas, the Indian state's failure to nurture a more secularized citizenry, and the measure of status a person gains in affiliating themselves with Hindutva organizations Gupta (2005, p. 104) relates:

**The village today has become even less self-sustaining than what it used to be...Villagers [have] to look to cities and towns as real alternatives to their dead-end lives in the rural regions. This brings the country dweller to a much more intimate appreciation of urban ideologies, such as those of Hindutva. Hindutva creates an alternative community and a project of belonging that uprooted and alienated villagers find extremely attractive.**<sup>56</sup>

Jaffrelot (2007) upholds this contention by stating, "...the *spontaneous* involvement of the *adivasis* in the rioting reflects the *Hinduization* of their culture under the influence of a campaign led by the RSS, VHP, BJP and especially the *Vanavasi Seva Sangh* (Vanavasis' Service Association)"<sup>57</sup> (p.187). With respect to the ability of the *Vanavasi Seva Sangh* (VSS) (including other RSS/VHP- run schools) to produce cadres for the Hindutva movement, Peggy Froerer (2007) poses a challenge to the assertions made by Jaffrelot (2007) and Gupta (2005). Notwithstanding the daily nationalist rhetoric the students encountered, Froerer (2007) was struck by how students articulated their understanding of the Hindutva project. She discovered that students ascribed a lack of importance in

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<sup>56</sup> See Patty Froerer (2005), *Challenging Traditional Authority*.

<sup>57</sup> See B. Mathew & V. Prashad (2000), *The Protean Forms of Yankee Hindutva*, for a detailed account of the relationship between the Hindu diaspora and *Vanavasi Seva Sangh* (VSS) operations in rural areas. The VSS is an organization that promotes Hindu education for India's indigenous people known as Adivasis.

associating with the discipline, moral education and the wider aims of Hindutva (i.e., perceiving all non-Hindus as threats to all Hindu people).

Froerer (2007) contends that students within VSS-schools are more concerned with the relationship that studying and discipline have for their academic advancement, than with nurturing ideological principles of Hindu superiority. While RSS-affiliated schools have wider ideological aims (i.e., transforming students into disciplined soldiers for the Hindu rashtra), it is the offer of future academic advancement that attracts students from a variety of social classes (Froerer 2007). These schools fill the educational gap created by expensive private schools on one hand, and infamously poor education provided by government-run schools on the other (Sundar, 2004). Viewing degrees and certificates as a necessary means to overcome economic disadvantages (Sundar, 2004), enrolment and re-enrolment into these schools may be due to the opportunity these schools provide for potential economic liberation, more so than the apparent attractiveness of Hindutva ideological lesson plans.

### **6.3 Surat's Lucid Madness**

In January 1993, a month following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Surat became a site in which ethnic violence was marked by "a ferocity and traits that even areas traditionally prone to communal disturbance could scarcely match" (Chandra, 1994). Until then, while other cities in Gujarat had succumbed to endemic communal violence, for decades Surat was a city that had taken pride in the peaceful coexistence of its religious communities. Not since the riots of 1927 was the city shaken by acts of arson, looting, physical

assaults, murders, rape, and the desecration of religious emblems. The Muslim community suffered ninety to ninety-five percent of the attacks, victims of rape were exclusively Muslim women, and mosques were the only religious edifices destroyed and defiled. More than 19,000 people – almost all Muslim – had fled their homes to forty-three relief camps, with many never to return (Biswas, 2009; Chandra, 1994).

A sharp distinction must be made between ordinary acts of criminality and ethnic violence (which does not cease to be criminal). Unlike the former, Chandra (1994) notes, ethnic violence is "converted into a spectacle...valorised by larger or smaller sections of the concerned communities" (p. 50). Unlike hit-and-run assaults, of which one would expect during a riot, the violence was distinctly organized and followed particular patterns. Arsons resembled community bonfires usually practiced during the spring celebration of Holi. They bore "bizarre resemblances" (p. 50) to *yajna rituals*,<sup>58</sup> but with the savage twist of throwing human beings – Muslims – into the flames.

Muslims were coerced into denying or renouncing their faith by publicly crying out the Hindutva slogan, "*Jai Shri Ram*" (Victory to Lord Ram), only, to then be mutilated until death or burned alive. Muslim women had to endure the torture of being publicly gang-raped and sexually abused with foreign objects

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<sup>58</sup> *Yajna rituals* are sacrificial rites in which offerings are poured or tossed into divine fire as oblations.

before thrown into the yajna-like bonfires (Sarkar, 2002).<sup>59</sup> Sudhir Chandra (1994) related that the rioters' actions had a striking correspondence "with the abstractions of the high priests of a certain kind of Hinduism" (p. 50). Such abstractions befitted the public sermons of one Swami Chinmayananda, whose popular lectures, at that time, were laden with allusions pertaining to the necessity of sacrifice. Respecting the death of Muslims at Ayodhya, Chinmayananda once remarked, "Sacrifice is unavoidable to create anything" (Chinmayananda cf. S. Chandra, 1994, p. 50).

Considered, even, one of the less rabid ideologues of Hinduism of his time, Swami Chinmayananda's lectures reflected the breaking of a crucial psychological barrier that, up to that point, had separated the physical perpetrators of ethnic violence from those who verbally justified or abetted it. The Hindu middle-class reaction to the violence, which at first was one of "reluctant approbation" (S. Chandra, 1994, p. 51), would transform to justify the violence as an unfortunate but necessary lesson, of which, "having been harassed and harried in their own land, the Hindus felt compelled to teach the 'other'"(p. 51). Two assumptions from Sudhir Chandra's (1994) account of the Surat riot may be derived: (1) popular leaders, heralded for their 'temperance' (i.e., Swami Chinmayananda), enabled rioters to proceed with their violence viz. the legitimating effect of a spiritual leader's sanctioning; and (2) the reproduction of violent acts, particularly, those that resembled culturally embedded religious

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<sup>59</sup> Muslim men also suffered sexual assaults. For examples, see Anand (2007), *Anxious sexualities: Masculinity, nationalism and violence*; also see Human Rights Watch (2002), *We have no orders to save you*.

symbols of worship, conditioned a collective ambivalence towards the atrocities committed against Muslims.

Although charismatic leaders are important agents for stoking ethnic discord, they must rely upon symbols already embedded within a community's consciousness in order to promote desired reactions (Almond et al., 2003).

Chandra (1994) articulates this position best by remarking:

**For, before anti-social or cynically single-minded political elements can step in to exploit communal antipathies for their own ends, they must feel assured of the gullible readiness of the potential antagonists to be driven into limitless cruelty. Ethnic violence would not otherwise degenerate into a bizarre spectacle. (p. 52)**

Once violence takes on patterns of collective ritual, the culturally embedded symbols, consequently, will tend to mute oppositional voices, since those symbols also serve as one's marker of identity. Hannah Arendt (2004) relates that the production of violence has the tendency to reinforce assumptions and legitimate its very own use. The case of Surat makes this clear, as the actions of its rioters were legitimated viz. the fusion of culturally embedded religious symbols.

Once violence begets reprisals, civilians are may be drawn into fighting by a need to become *defenders* of their community. In turn, this leaves them emotionally and psychologically susceptible to rumours, dramatic productions of physical violence initiated by conflict entrepreneurs, and pressures brought upon by their peers through taunting or accusations of assisting individuals belonging

to the rival group.<sup>60</sup> The religious symbols relied upon in the build-up of tension, and during ethnic riots, are the very same through which a community makes sense of the world, and their place within it. This offers an explanation as to why middle-class *Suratis*, rural adivasis, affiliates of *Sheran Wali Mata*, citizens of Aligarh, and others residing in sites deemed riot-prone do not condemn anti-minority violence, or chooses to actively participate in perpetuating processes designed to incite and sustain ethnic conflict.

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<sup>60</sup> During the 2002 Gujarat riots women's attire and ornaments were distributed to male Hindus who did not participate in violence (Sarkar, 2002).

## 7: CONCLUSION

This paper sought to explain how the narrative of Hindu religious nationalism conditions many Hindus to become ambivalent participants in ethnic riots, reinforcing inter-ethnic antipathy in the process. Conflict entrepreneurs, whether they are political agents, Hindutva ideologues, local businessmen, or those who are poverty-stricken instigate riots as a means of acquiring benefits from inter-ethnic discord. This paper contends communal riots are a product of pre-planned, coordinated events, produced by political and apolitical actors alike. India's cases of endemic ethnic riots are not spontaneous outbreaks, but are *institutionalized riot systems* – the skilled production of ethnic conflict on part of conflict entrepreneurs to inculcate feelings of mistrust and ethnic rivalries. Their ability to conflate ethnic tensions through the skilled use of rumour mongering, the desecration of sacred sites, and initiation of 'scuffles' enables them to incite riots for the purposes of maintaining social orders seen as beneficial for their duplicitous ends.

Essentialist arguments, which stress the role of primordial ethnic hatreds, do not offer sufficient explanations as to how ethno-religious identity mobilizes collective violence. An analysis of ethnic conflict through, solely, a primordial framework will tend to discount the role of agency, obfuscating how conflict entrepreneurs – of elite and non-elite status – are able to manipulate prevailing social orders to attain personal benefits. Instrumentalist arguments stress the need for conflict entrepreneurs to rely upon appeals to ethnic identifiers (i.e., religion) in order to mobilize a community (Keen, 2008), but such

explanations are also prone to overstating their ability to generate ethnic tensions.

The case studies reflect the various extents to which anti-minority attitudes were prevalent among non-elites, and how they came to be so within particular riot scenarios. Implicitly, and common to each, one should recognize the involvement of the state viz. its ability to legitimate the actions of rioters through its own acts of omission or commission. The normalization of violence within public and political discourse will prevail as long as narratives which castigate Indian Muslims as a fanatical fifth pillar continue to be promulgated by a belligerent Hindu nationalist movement; a movement, which casts itself as the sole vindicator, and rightful heir, of a once glorious Hindu Golden Age.

This paper does not seek to deny that offending religious boundaries may incite ethnic conflict or violence, but argues that religion is no more but an accent marker on continuously fluctuating identities. The Indian state has witnessed riots that have been both ethnic and communal, each cementing adversarial identities that permeate across caste and religious cleavages. Therefore, attempts to address the cause(s) of Hindu-Muslim acrimony are of no short order, as they involve identifying the multiple identities of the Indian people (e.g., class, political, sectarian, civic-associational, etc.), in order, to determine the proper incentives that will counter the manoeuvrings of those wishing to exploit community cleavages and prevailing social structures.

Ethnic riots within India are often pre-planned productions meant to reinforce and sustain negative stereotypes of Muslims among Hindus. Ultimately,

it is the destructive interplay of Hindutva-inspired discourse (ethno-religious nationalism), negative minority representation (stereotyping), and dehumanizing violence (rationalized as an inevitable passionate reaction) that acquires greater lethality when the state has shown itself to be a complicit proponent of the Hindutva narrative.

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