
**Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life:
Hindus and Muslims in India, Varshney, A. (2002)
New Haven and London: Yale University Press**

The book “Ethnic conflict and civic life” is an important work in the field of social science and which has appeared in recent decades. Ashutosh Varshney in his book which is almost a ten-year work hopes to provide some new insights on ethnic conflict and also a way to peace. Through this book he tries to ask questions such as why Hindus and Muslims had riots in some parts of India but they conducted their lives reasonably peacefully in other parts. Also, what kind of civic ties between different ethnic communities can contain or even prevent ethnic violence. To address these questions, this book draws on new research conducted by the author on the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India.

As the name of the book suggests “Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life, Hindus and Muslims in India” the author here seems to put forward or establish an integral link between civic life i.e. the structure of civil society on one hand and the ethnic or communal (he does not differentiate communal from ethnic) conflict on the other. So, this is a systematic attempt to connect these which have not been done by earlier scholars. It takes into consideration the phenomenon of civic life and ethnic conflict between Hindus and Muslims taken as two different categories. The focus here is on the intercommunal networks between Hindus and Muslims rather than intracommunal engagements. The civic networks are further divided into two parts that are associational form of civic engagements which include business associations, professional organizations, reading clubs, film clubs, sports clubs, festival organizations, trade unions and cadre-based political parties and everyday form of civic engagement which include routine interaction of lives as Hindu and Muslim families visiting each other, eating together jointly participating in festivals and allowing children to play together in their neighborhood etc. Where both these kinds of networks exist, conflicts are articulated and managed but, if they are missing or weak communal identities lead to violence.

The central argument of the book is that communal peace or violence is largely determined by the civic life of the communities involved. This argument is subject to certain conditions such as, first; if civic engagement is interethnic rather than intra ethnic, conflicts may occur, but they are

less likely to build up into widespread violence. Second, cross-community engagement provides a stronger bulwark against riots if it is associational rather than informal everyday engagement, particularly in urban settings. For example, intercommunal Business organizations survive by tying together the business interests of many Hindus and Muslims, thus, promoting peace between the communities. Ashutosh Varshney says that when politicians try to polarize ethnic communities (Hindus and Muslims on communal lines), these associational networks act as a serious constraint on the polarizing strategies adopted by them. Third, if engagement is only intraethnic, not interethnic, small events like unconfirmed rumors and small clashes can quickly transform into riots. A multiethnic society that does not have intercommunal engagement is very vulnerable to ethnic disorders and violence.

Varshney's new riot database or the large analysis of Hindu-Muslim riots is primarily based on a reading of the daily Times of India covering a span of 46 years (1950-95). Also, reports appearing in other journals were also checked and interviews were being conducted. This data provided the basis of selecting six cities for in-depth case studies. The newspaper was read interpretively, not literally as newspaper reports do not always distinguish between communal violence and sectarian violence, at other times, the term "communal" can cover a whole variety of clashes: Christian- Hindu, Christian-Muslim or Hindu Sikh, not simply Hindu-Muslim which the author is looking for. This makes interpretive reading of the reports necessary. This allows the author to systematically exclude all riots not concerning Hindus and Muslims.

Varshney's riot database, provides the basis for selecting six cities- three from the list of eight riot-prone cities and three peaceful and arranged them in three pairs. Each pair had a city where communal violence is endemic and a city where it is not. As according to Ashutosh Varshney until we study ethnic peace, we will not be able to have a good theory of ethnic conflict. Placing variance helps the author to have a better understanding of ethnicity and ethnic conflict. In each pair, the author asked whether similar stimuli led to different outcomes in two different outcomes in the two cities and then identified the mechanisms that transformed the same conditions into divergent outcomes. For this, similarity in demographic proportions i.e. roughly similar Hindu-Muslim percentages in city populations constituted the minimum control in each pair. The three pairs include – first, Aligarh and Calicut which was based on population percentages only. The second pair was Hyderabad and Lucknow which added two controls to population percentages: previous

Muslim rule and cultural similarities. The third pair Ahmedabad and Surat came from the Gujarat state and shared history, language and culture. These three pairs of cities have variance in political outcomes which is peace or violence. This variance depends upon the pre-existing local networks of civic engagements between two communities. For this, the history of each major civic association present in the cities was researched and it is found that the process of such detailed historical inquiry of associations was born between the 1920s and the 1940s. So, India's freedom movement is looked that created a whole range of associations and organizations and how the 1920s constituted a transformative moment – socially, culturally and politically. Pre-1920, civic engagement was basically an everyday and informal engagement. By creating cadre-based political parties, trade unions, new educational institutions, and new cultural and social organizations, the Gandhian shift in politics laid the foundation of India's associational civic order. The case materials that follow show that different parts and cities of India participated differently in the project of national reconstruction which leads to different outcomes whether peace or ethnic conflict prevails.

The striking findings that emerge are the rarity of rural riots and the concentration of Hindu-Muslim violence in certain urban areas. More importantly, he refers to the statistical fact that till date, almost 96 % of all deaths in communal riots in India took place in cities. These findings make the author to take "town or city" as the unit of analysis and to consider Hindu-Muslim riots as an Urban phenomenon. Within Urban India too, some cities are more prone to Hindu-Muslim riots than others. He provides a list of the eight most Riot-prone cities of India which include Bombay, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Meerut, Aligarh, Baroda, Delhi and Calcutta.

This book provides the most comprehensive data on communal riots in India and also through systematic, comparative analysis, Varshney developed an explanation of why Hindu-Muslim violence has occurred in some Indian cities and not in others. This book will decisively shape future scholarly research on this subject and in studies concerning ethnic conflict. However, Ashutosh Varshney's view about intercommunal engagements contradicts Paul R. Brass's view which says that even when there is an existence of interreligious association or interpersonal relations amongst members of different communities, elements of civic engagement cannot repel the power of political movements and forces that seek to produce intercommunal violence. He finds Ashutosh Varshney's view of giving critical importance to civic

engagement of little value and says that from a policy point of view, it is a pure diversion and waste of resources in promoting civic engagement when attention and resources should be addressed towards uncovering the system and process of riot production and the producers thereof. Also, Varshney's argument that Hindu-Muslim violence is an urban phenomenon, can have certain exceptions. For example, the riots in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli district of Uttar Pradesh in 2013 come under the category of rural riots. So, the phenomenon of communal violence is not limited to urban areas only. He also gives less importance to the state and national level politics and relies on town level civic organizations and networks as according to him, these networks do not let politicians having polarizing tendencies to succeed.

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