



5-2023

Brass's Model and The Surat Riots of 1992

Melinda Burgin

Illinois Wesleyan University, mburgin@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burgin, Melinda () "Brass's Model and The Surat Riots of 1992," *Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 28

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica/vol28/iss1/11>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by editors of the Res Publica at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Brass's Model and The Surat Riots of 1992

Abstract

Intercommunal violence in India, especially between the Muslim and Hindu communities, has been a constant cause of conflict within the nation since it achieved independence in 1947. Social scientists have attempted to understand what makes certain communities in India more and less vulnerable to this conflict. Paul Brass's theory of an institutionalized riot system which involves every level of society in the construction of politically motivated violence, and Ashutosh Varshney's theory of an integrated civil society being crucial to keeping ethnic conflict at bay are two of the strongest in the field. This paper applies these theories to the 1992 riots in the otherwise peaceful region of Surat, searching for an explanation of why these violent riots erupted and how the region achieved a remarkable recovery. Ultimately, the evidence demonstrates both the existence of an institutionalized riot system that causes the eruption of violence and the importance of civic links in regaining stability post-conflict.

Brass's Model and The Surat Riots of 1992

Melinda Burgin

Abstract

Intercommunal violence in India, especially between the Muslim and Hindu communities, has been a constant cause of conflict within the nation since it achieved independence in 1947. Social scientists have attempted to understand what makes certain communities in India more and less vulnerable to this conflict. Paul Brass's theory of an institutionalized riot system which involves every level of society in the construction of politically motivated violence, and Ashutosh Varshney's theory of an integrated civil society being crucial to keeping ethnic conflict at bay are two of the strongest in the field. This paper applies these theories to the 1992 riots in the otherwise peaceful region of Surat, searching for an explanation of why these violent riots erupted and how the region achieved a remarkable recovery. Ultimately, the evidence demonstrates both the existence of an institutionalized riot system that causes the eruption of violence and the importance of civic links in regaining stability post-conflict.

One of the most crucial elements in any plan to combat violence, such as the inter-communal violence in India, is a clear understanding of how and why it occurs. Social science models attempt to provide a framework for understanding these questions, identifying an independent variable that causes its accompanying dependent variable. Paul Brass utilizes this structure to explain the riots of India, beginning when the country achieved independence from Britain in 1947 and continuing to the present. He describes the institutionalized riot system as an interconnected network of the press, criminal groups, the police, and local leadership that exploits communal divides and polarization for political gain, directly leading to riots and bloodshed. In the case of the 1992 riots in the usually peaceful region of Surat, the growth of the BJP (a right-wing, nationalist movement) and its participation in an institutionalized riot system produced an environment ready to explode with violence at any exogenous shock. Brass's model is key to understanding how and why this environment developed.

Brass's definition of the institutionalized riot system is characterized by three phases: Preparation, activation, and explanation. Preparation or rehearsal is described as a "continuous process" in the presence of an institutionalized riot system, as a corrupt network of political and criminal groups constantly heightens intercommunal divisions to create an environment ripe for conflict (Brass, 12). Understood through Brass's lens, riots are never random but always undertaken deliberately and for a purpose. In activation, this purpose becomes clear, as the riots themselves are usually triggered at a politically advantageous time, often around an election to build support for a political group. The final phase continues to further this purpose. Explanation or interpretation involves controlling the narrative of how and why these riots occurred, including avoiding any blame being assigned to the political group responsible. The BJP is clearly at the helm of an institutionalized riot system in Surat, utilizing all three phases described for political gain. In examining the history of the region, the circumstances leading to

the development of an institutionalized riot system and the rise of the BJP, as well as the deliberately orchestrated nature of the 1992 riots, become clear.

Surat is located in Gujarat, the western region of India and Mahatma Gandhi's home region. Known as the nation's leading business state, the accompanying associations heavily influence civic life and business ties between the Hindu and Muslim communities, contributing to a more unified state. Originally, business life was organized by guilds, which were organizations uniting those of the same profession, traditionally led by a family and following unspoken norms rather than codified rules. These guilds have since developed into modern associations. Surat's specific business life, as the premier port city of western India before Bombay filled that role, historically attracted Muslim trade communities of Mughal descent. Overall, around 12-15% of the population in Surat is Muslim, consisting of local converts, frequent traders, and immigrant groups who came seeking opportunities (Varshney, 219). The Muslim community is divided, as Shia and Sunni groups remain largely separated from one another. These internal divisions have prevented Surat's Muslim population from functioning as one unit socially or politically, and attempts by former Moghuls to unify the community have largely failed. The business-focused nature of Surat's culture has led to Muslims and Hindus forming strong intercommunal ties and interdependence. Through the influential embroidered silk trade, which involved Muslims and Hindus at different points of the production and distribution process, relationships of trust developed between the two communities. Today, much of Surat's labor remains in small and informal businesses, and most laborers are migrant workers who do not have permanent employment.

In the political and social spheres, the Congress Party and Gandhi's associated reforms have been highly influential. Beginning in the 1920s, the Congress Party developed the cadre-based structure. Under the organizational leadership of Sardar Patel and ideological

leadership of Gandhi, the party operated democratically but worked to accomplish its goals with militant discipline, and successfully gained the support of the masses. The party's popularity and strength has since shrunk in Surat, and Gujarat overall. The decline began in Uttar Pradesh (the most politically important Indian state) in 1989, when the Congress Party was defeated by a coalition of other parties in an intense national election (Brass, 7). Despite the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in the midst of a campaign, the party was able to make a comeback with Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. However, they have yet to regain their former strength, and in the absence of a strong and unified left, the nationalistic and often militant right has grown in power. The BJP is attempting to fill the power vacuum left by the decline of the Congress party in Surat, and it is fairly effective, with 28% of the population now naming it as their preferred party (Varshney, 243).

Intercommunal tension has plagued India for generations, often boiling over into riots across the country. Even during these especially bloody periods, Surat has remained peaceful. During the riots in Gujarat of 1969 and 1985-86, not a single life was lost (Varshney, 221). The positive pattern broke after the destruction of the Baburi mosque in Ayodhya in December of 1992. The site of the mosque was originally a Hindu sacred site, known as the birthplace of one of their most revered gods, and the mosque was built by Babur, a Mongol conqueror. Under the rule of Rajiv Gandhi in the late 1980s, the site was opened for Hindu pilgrimage and worship in an attempt to appease nationalists. The attempt failed, instead resulting in the "largest demonstration by Muslims seen in Delhi" and eventually devastating riots (Varshney, 81). In 1990, the Hindu nationalist BJP's head L.K. Advani began the movement to "take back" the site and rebuild a Hindu temple, eventually resulting in its destruction by Hindu nationalists. The mosque came to represent the presence of what many Hindus viewed as invaders, and as Brass explains it "stood in the minds of its enemies as the mark of an earlier 'slavery', as they called it,

of Hindu subjection to Muslim rule” (Brass, 8). When sixteen Hindus were murdered in Ayodhya, on the allegedly sacred ground, they became “martyrs” to the cause, and outrage at their death was used to drum up support for the movement to reclaim the area. This support manifested in nationwide barbarity once the destruction of the mosque was complete.

In Surat, this violence lasted for five intense days, with intermittent incidents in the months following, and many were killed or wounded. The exact numbers and locations of the death are near impossible to ever know, as reports vary. However, most agree the total was somewhere around the 200 mark, and the vast majority of the dead and wounded were Muslim (Chandra, 1). Many Muslims were forced to flee their homes and go to relief camps, and some have still been unable to return. The atrocities committed against a minority by the more powerful Hindus qualifies these events as a pogrom rather than an equal fight, demonstrating how deep anti-Muslim sentiment runs amongst Surat’s Hindu nationalists. Where the activity was concentrated is a topic of much debate, but most blame migrant laborers for much of the destruction. In Surat, around 450,000 people (30% of the city) live in 300 slum neighborhoods (Varshney, 16). These neighborhoods are hotbeds of crime and poverty, with insufficient resources and few legal places to gather. The informal nature and lack of permanence of working conditions prevent unionization, allowing inhumane conditions to persist and depriving workers of community. Yet, the masses of Surat were mobilized to conduct a pogrom on a large and organized scale. This was not random but organized through an institutionalized riot system. After news of the destruction of the Baburi mosque reached the BJP in Surat, they began positioning groups across Surat to celebrate “spontaneously”, rallying mass excitement. As the chaos erupted, weapons such as petrol and iron rods were distributed to citizens, and rioters were directed to local gang territory via loudspeakers in trucks. The BJP was also witnessed collecting information on the location of Muslim families by posing as aid agencies

weeks before they were attacked, proving a prior intention to enact harm (Breman, 2). In the chaos, the BJP's influence could be seen as attackers forcing Muslims to shout the battling cry of the Hindutva, the Hindu nationalist precursor to their current party.

Though the BJP focused more on nationalistic than spiritual goals, it used the passions that religious arguments often provoke to increase conflict, often with violent results. As the movement to reclaim the site of the Baburi mosque gained momentum, the political sources of its motivation became increasingly obvious. The movement increased polarization and distrust between Hindus and Muslims, thereby increasing the BJP's political power as a Hindu nationalist party. Their 1991 and 1996 election wins in Uttar Pradesh proved "how valuable Hindu-Muslim opposition, antagonism, and violence have been to the fortunes of the BJP" (Brass, 8). The events in Ayodhya and their political aftermath are strong evidence for Brass's belief that riots are not random, but orchestrated by powerful entities in the institutionalized riot system.

The preparation portion of the Surat riots is clear; the BJP worked ahead of time with local gangs to coordinate areas of protest and collect weaponry, and scout out their Muslim targets. The pogrom was also clearly orchestrated for a purpose, another key aspect of Brass's institutionalized riot system. The BJP spent around two years before the riots using the Baburi mosque as a tool to unite Hindu nationalists against the perceived threat posed by the Muslim people. The enactment and activation phase was also clearly present. As Brass defines it, in an institutionalized riot system, riots are activated in a "context of intense political mobilization or electoral competition in which riots are precipitated as a device to consolidate the support of ethnic, religious... groups by emphasizing the need for solidarity in the face of a rival communal group" (Brass 15). The BJP deliberately stirred rivalry and animosity between Hindus and Muslims by leading a fight to control a common holy site, benefitting their party in the elections of 1991 and 1996. The culmination of their efforts to polarize is demonstrated in

the violence experienced in Surat.

The final phase of explanation or interpretation was clearly exhibited in where the blame for the riots was placed after they came to an end. A lack of police force and coordination was one frequent scapegoat. This perspective is not entirely incorrect, as the police notoriously took little action to restore peace and justice in the midst of the violence. The chief of police, P.K. Datta, was even transferred during the height of the violence because of his inability to put an end to it. The unruly individuals of the shantytowns were also blamed, and the riot is still often publicly looked at as a random occurrence caused by an easily riled mob. Taking a different approach from Brass, Ashutosh Varshney views the cause as a lack of civic links between Muslims and Hindus in the shantytowns. Muslims and Hindus usually worked in separate industries, with the Hindu majority occupying positions in family businesses and textiles while Muslims are mainly self-employed and work jobs like rickshaw drivers. Without labor unions and associations to unify, the settlements remained segregated with minimal interreliance, fostering distrust between the communities. Varshney's argument contains the specific flaw of ignoring the involvement of Surat's urban middle class in the riots, as they were seen looting Muslim shops and participating in brutal killings across the area (Chandra, 2). Still, his point that the presence of civic links is directly linked to levels of violence stands.

Though these precipitating causes, and the main immediate cause of the mosque's destruction, were necessary to set off these specific riots, the conditions of the institutionalized riot system would have been present without those factors. Placing responsibility on unlawful individuals and their prejudices or bad police officers at that moment in time ignores the system in place, such as of government and criminals working together and polarization being a political tool, that facilitates repeat riots. The BJP's deliberate orchestration of these events is also overlooked in these explanations. This phenomenon is known as blame displacement, a "process

that does not isolate effectively those most responsible for the production of violence, but diffuses blame widely, blurring responsibility, and therefore contributing to the perpetuation of violent production” (Brass, 15). The blurred lines and gray areas caused by blame displacement contribute to a lack of focus in attacking the institutionalized riot system at the root.

However, each and every factor holds weight in determining how riots begin and end. Surat bounced back from its brush with brutality relatively quickly, and this is undeniably thanks to its integrated civic society. Peacekeeping organizations developed within urban neighborhoods in the weeks following the destruction of the Baburi mosque, comprised of Muslims and Hindus committed to unity and nonviolence, quashing rumors that could escalate conflicts. The integrated economic life and resulting dependence of both Muslims’ and Hindus’ livelihoods on maintaining strong relationships also motivated all concerned to resolve conflicts quickly. Even Hindu businessmen who sympathized with the cause of nationalism were reluctant to act in a way that might negatively impact their bottom line, exemplifying the importance of interethnic links and interdependence. Through these circumstances, peace is strongly incentivized.

Brass’s description of the institutionalized riot system accurately characterizes the environment that surrounded the 1992 riots in Surat. The importance of civic links is also clearly illustrated in the city’s quick recovery. Interethnic conflicts such as those in India, which date back thousands of years and countless transformations of the cultural and political landscape, cannot be expected to be solely explained by one model or theory. Many layers make up how a conflict occurs, and only by diving into this complexity can the problems be understood and solved.

References

Brass, Paul R. *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*. University of Washington Press, 2003.

Chandra, Sudhir. "Of Communal Consciousness and Communal Violence: Impressions from Post-riot Surat." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 17, no. sup001, Jan. 1994, pp. 49–61. *DOI.org (Crossref)*,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00856409408723215>.

Varshney, Ashutosh. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. 2. ed, Yale Univ. Press, 2002.