

Politics By Other Means

The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India

Review >
South Asia

Paul Brass' latest book *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* is an extraordinary work that sums up almost 40 years of research on politics, religious identities, and violence in northern India. Focusing on the politics of Hindu-Muslim relations in one city in Uttar Pradesh – Aligarh – over the entire post-Independence era, Brass argues that riots are permanent features of Indian politics, produced and staged by 'institutionalized riot systems'. Condemning and bemoaning riots and casualties have become part of India's modern political culture, as much as the riots themselves.

By Thomas Blom Hansen

Brass' introductory chapter takes aim at what he sees as the unsatisfactory and, ultimately, mystifying explanations that have been advanced in explaining riots. 'Naturalizing' accounts portray riots as inevitable eruptions of anger between communities divided by deep and incommensurable differences. Others view riots as pathologies of Indian political life, resulting from the cynical manipulation of religious passions by criminal business people and ill-intentioned politicians focused on short-term electoral gains. These explanations, Brass argues, not only obscure the processes at work; they are complicit in the very regime of interpretation that perpetuates riots. Portraying them as either 'justified' or as short lived 'aberrations', these explanations fail to recognize the integral, normalized roles riots play in political competition and communal organization in large parts of India.

With its prosperous Hindu bania (trader) communities and substantial Muslim artisan population, Aligarh is a typical north Indian city. At the same time the presence of India's premier Muslim institution, Aligarh Muslim University, the deep and enduring communal polarization, and the early alliances between Muslims and untouchables make the city special. Unlike Ashutosh Varshney in his recent work (Varshney 2002), Brass rejects the official classification of certain cities as 'riot-prone'. *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* emerges as a welcome rejoinder to Varshney's influential and overly schematic analysis where communal riots result from the absence of civic ties across communities. In explaining specific riots, Brass' obviously finds analytical distinctions between 'politics', 'civil society', and 'the state' less plausible than the detailed stories of individual careers and socio-political networks in the city's neighbourhoods.

Riots are best understood as the results of actions by identifiable specialists and networks of specialists in 'riot-production': the systematic rehearsal, staging and interpretation of collective violence as spontaneous acts of self-defence or retaliation against unjust and murderous threats from the other community. Understood in this way, riots can more effectively be policed and prevented. How does Brass reach this sensible conclusion? How does his conception of riots as complex localized productions compare to other explanations of riots in South Asia?

The evidence presented in the book is comprehensive and represents, thus

far, the most systematic exploration of 'riot production' in India (and possibly anywhere).

Brass presents the context and development of a sequence of riots in Aligarh since 1925 and explores the changing roles of Aligarh Muslim University, national political campaigns, local rivalries over space and livelihoods, and policing strategies. He presents data on the changing spatial and demographic features of Aligarh, testing the popular thesis of Hindu-Muslim economic competition as the source of rioting. In subsequent sections Brass analyses the nature of political competition and local electoral arithmetic with cogency and precision, while the role of the police and the media are treated in separate chapters.

The sheer volume and complexity of this unique longitudinal study comprising interviews, official reports, statistical evidence, and biographies of key figures prevents strong conclusions. Brass reminds us that riots do not happen in most places most of the time, not even in times of generalized *tanav* (tension) between communities. His material convincingly demonstrates that over the decades, riots have repeatedly occurred in only four or five specific localities in Aligarh. These localities are all characterized by the presence of seasoned riot specialists, men whose activities span business, politics, and cultural-religious organizations, men who are willing and able to translate rumours and general discourses into local mobilization.

Riots as routine politics

Does Brass' explanation of the persistence of riots in India stand up to scrutiny? The book is the work of a mature mind and does not discount the broader cultural and psychological explanations of how the history of Hindu-Muslim enmity has, over time, produced a rich archive of mythical knowledge of 'the other' which defies logic and reasoned argument. Brass is more interested in when, where and how, and by whom, this archive is activated and transformed into arguments for action and violence. His insistence on 'demystification' is refreshing and this book once again shows the immense value of sustained and localized field research.

The most suggestive conclusion to emerge from this book is that riots are integral and routinized aspects of India's modern political culture, and that condemning and bemoaning riots and their casualties have become as much a part of this political culture as the riots themselves. Recent studies of lower-caste movements and other forms of political mobilization in India

suggest that activists are groomed to regard politics as a permanent state of warfare. Violence no longer represents the breakdown of political communication, but lies, rather, at the heart of contemporary Indian political practice.

For all its merits, the book leaves a range of questions unanswered. We hear a great deal about the 'riot systems' constructed over decades by various Hindu nationalist figures in Aligarh. The riot systems on the other side, among Muslims, appear less documented – almost non-existent – despite stories of links between Muslim criminals and academics at Aligarh Muslim University. Is this due to the difficulties involved in gathering information from marginalized communities? Or is it because their networks are differently organized? Or absent? Or is the whole idea of symmetry, of equally apportioning blame and culpability to Hindus and Muslims a myth; a part of an interpretative regime that absolves Hindu nationalists of their prime responsibility for what are, increasingly, anti-Muslim pogroms?

Another question left open is why riots occur in localities without established 'riot systems'. Brass' answer would undoubtedly be that 'new' riots signify initial and necessary steps by local operators in organizing more permanent 'systems' that will ensure both their influence over a constituency and the political effectiveness of future riots. Yet, this seems to come close to a tautology. Can one, for instance, assume that a riot always represents more of the same logic? The evidence on the effects of the Babri Masjid controversy in Aligarh indicates that the national scale and systematic nature of Hindu nationalist campaigns in recent years constantly transform new areas into loci of communal conflict and violence and thus can be said to reduce the significance of local factors.

The arithmetic of hatred

Although Brass has qualified his earlier, more hard-headed 'instrumentalist' position on how and why ethnic-communal identities are created and maintained, assumptions of underlying political rationalities reverberate through the book. Riots are ultimately rational mechanisms organized and orchestrated in order to consolidate political constituencies and to reproduce paranoia and mistrust. The problem with this 'on/off' theory of riot production is that it assumes that behind-the-scenes key operators keep their eyes on the larger, supra-local picture. Brass' own evidence, however, provides several examples of how this was not always the case. His interviews with key figures also make it plain that

they are deeply immersed in what he brands irrational and 'fantastical' ideas about the threat posed to the Hindu majority in India. In this sense riots are political actions, i.e. tentative, chaotic, and complex occurrences, immersed in dominant social and political ideological formations and unpredictable in their effects. We cannot extrapolate causes from effects, but we can, Brass reminds us, always be sure that riots are intentional and organized with objectives in mind.

The postscript on the pogroms in Gujarat in 2002 provides additional support for Brass' thesis of riot systems being systemic features of India's political culture. Aligarh has experienced almost a decade without violence: during this time political alignments have shifted and the Muslim population has grown in strength, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP – Indian People's Party) in Uttar Pradesh remains paralysed. As a consequence, a non-communal candidate was elected by both Muslim and Hindu voters in 2002. Simultaneously, in the neighbouring state of Gujarat, the 'riots systems' painstakingly constructed by the Hindu nationalist movement organized a gruesome pogrom against Muslims, in complicity with the police and parts of the government. While the riot systems

were dormant in Aligarh, they flourished in Gujarat because the BJP and aligned forces seized the opportunity to use public violence to consolidate 'Hindu sentiments' and their political constituency.

If Brass is right, the same can happen again in Aligarh when the combination of national political discourse, electoral arithmetic and local grievances make it possible and expedient for the seasoned riot specialists of that city to resume their deadly game. <

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