The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India

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 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, which focus on national and universal eruptions of anger between communities divided by deep and incommensurable differences, others view riots as pathological of Indian political life, resulting from the cynical manipulation of religious passions by criminal business people and ill-intentioned politicians. Focused on the short-term electoral gains. These explanations, Brass argues, not only obscure the processes at work, they are complicit in the very regime communities and substantial untouchables make the city special. With its prosperous Hindu bania (trader) and 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 that developed in the course of the riots then, not a single generalized 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 a small group of Muslims who have struggled to maintain their political autonomy and local networks. In this book once again shows the immense value of sustained and localized research.

Riots as routine politics
Brass does his 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 archival story of the ‘other’ which defines logic and reasoned argument. Brass is more interested in whom, 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 not just about the breakdown of political communicative, but lies, rather, at the heart of contemporary Indian politics. 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 Muslims 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 picture of symmetry, of equally appraising 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 head-on ‘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 national 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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Gujarat executive director To Arvind’s influential and integral and routinized aspects of emergent field research. With its prosperous Hindu bania (trader) and 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 that developed in the course of the riots then, not a single generalized 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 a small group of Muslims who have struggled to maintain their political autonomy and local networks. In this book once again shows the immense value of sustained and localized research.

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