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Excerpt

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## Introduction

India's christening, like that of many nation-states, was violent: 1 million people killed, 13 million uprooted, and property worth millions of rupees destroyed during Partition. India's subsequent relative stability seemed to disprove Alexis de Tocqueville's foreboding that nations seldom outgrow the conditions of their birth. However in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Hindu groups engaged in violent attacks on Muslims in Jabalpur, Bhiwandi, and Ahmedabad. The late 1980s witnessed violent ethnic struggles in Punjab, Kashmir, and several north-eastern states. Following Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, Congress Party members instigated the massacre of more than 2,000 Sikhs. Hindu nationalists organized attacks on Muslims and Christians in several Indian states in the late 1980s, early 1990s, and intermittently, thereafter.<sup>1</sup>

What explains Hindu nationalists' intermittent anti-minority violence?<sup>2</sup> When Hindu nationalists destroyed a sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, many observers anticipated the simultaneous growth of Hindu nationalism and anti-minority violence. Instead, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) adopted a relatively moderate electoral stance to achieve national office (1999–2004), only to be implicated in extensive anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in 2002. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government did not stop the violence. Understanding the conjunctural nature of Hindu nationalism acquires unprecedented significance with the BJP's resounding electoral victory and Narendra Modi's ascent to power in 2014.

<sup>1</sup> Major incidents of organized Hindu violence against Muslims include Meerut (1987), Ahmedabad (1969, 1985), Moradabad (1980), Bhagalpur (1989), Jaipur, Kota, Bhopal, Indore, Khargone, and Delhi (1990–2), Bombay (1992–3), and Gujarat (2002).

<sup>2</sup> I do not analyze in-depth anti-Hindu violence by Muslim organizations. The most serious have been in Jammu and Kashmir. "Terrorist" attacks by Muslims, of which the most notable was in Mumbai in 2008, have also increased in recent years.

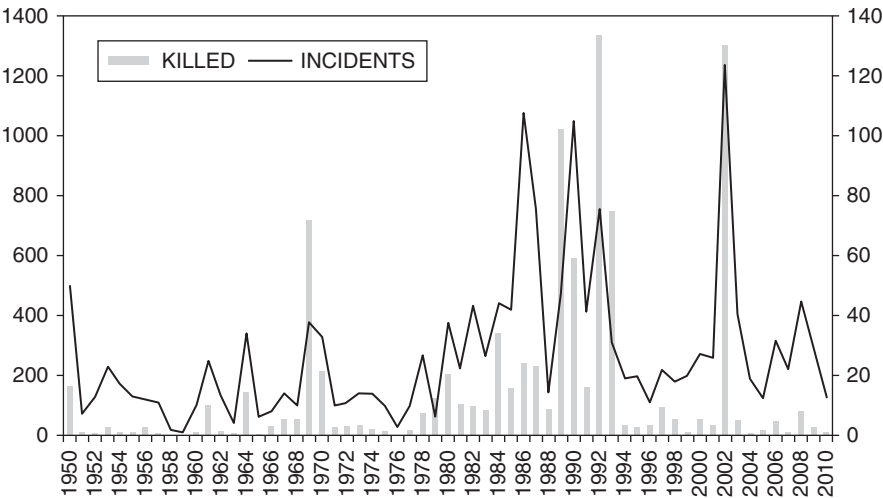


FIGURE 1.1. Trends in Hindu-Muslim Violence in India, 1950–2010.  
Source: Data from Kayser, Nina, Sonia Bhalotra, Irma Clots-Figueras and Lakshmi Iyer (2014). Hindu-Muslim violence in India, 1950–2010: An update of the Varshney-Wilkinson Dataset on Hindu-Muslim violence in India (unpublished).

Hindu-Muslim Violence across Time and Place

Numerous investigations have held Hindu nationalists responsible for extensive anti-Muslim violence in postindependence India.<sup>3</sup> A high point was from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, when Hindu nationalists organized a campaign to build a temple in Ayodhya that they claimed sixteenth-century Muslim rulers had destroyed and replaced with a mosque (the *babri masjid*). They orchestrated campaigns that claimed 1,000 lives in Meerut (April–May 1987) and, following other campaigns, another 1,000 lives in Bhagalpur, Bihar (1989). As Figure 1.1 shows, violence escalated from 1986 to 1992 as a result of the Ayodhya campaign. From 1980 to 2008, the largest number of “riots” occurred in 1986, 1990, 1992, and 2002, and the most Muslims were killed in 1990–2 and in 2002.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Accounts of Hindu nationalists’ responsibility for anti-minority violence include Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003); Christophe Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste, and Politics in India* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010); Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India’s Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and numerous investigative reports by the People’s Union for Civil Liberties, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International.

<sup>4</sup> Both the incidence of “riots” and numbers of lives lost dramatically declined in 1993; the death toll spiked although there were fewer “riots” in 2002. I put “riots” in quotes because the term implies that two or more parties engaged in violence and does not accurately depict one-sided attacks by one community against another.

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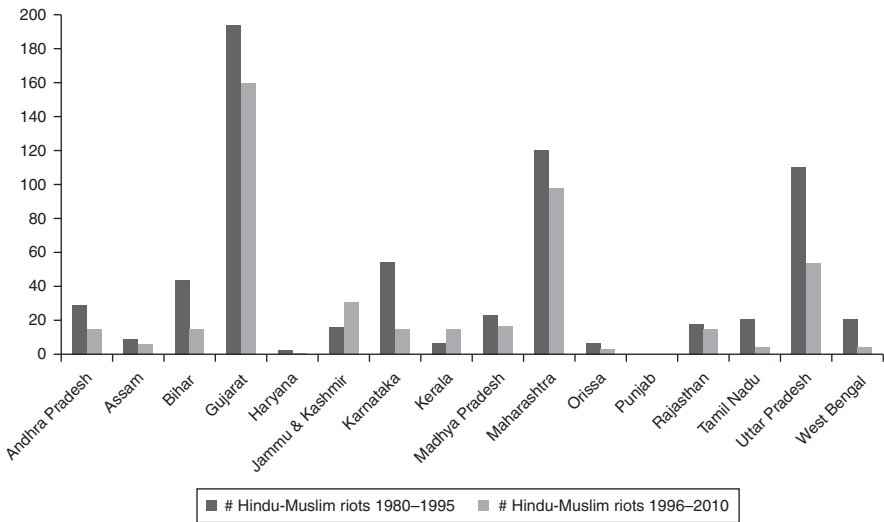


FIGURE 1.2. Hindu-Muslim Violence by State; Varshney and Wilkinson data set, extended to 2010 by Bhalotra, Clots-Figueras and Iyer.  
*Source:* Sonia Bhalotra, Irma Clots-Figueras, and Lakshmi Iyer, “Politician Identity and Religious Conflict in India,” (unpublished work in progress, July 2012). Reproduced with authors’ permission.

However, where and when Hindu nationalists have precipitated violence against minorities remains unexplained. The incidence of anti-Muslim violence was highly uneven across Indian states from 1980 to 2008 (see Figure 1.2). For example, it was limited in Himachal Pradesh (HP) and extensive in Gujarat. Further, the timing of the violence differed across states. Uttar Pradesh (UP) experienced more violence in the early 1990s than in 2002; the reverse was true of Gujarat.

I argue that Hindu nationalist anti-minority violence is likely to be most extensive when an ideologically-driven, well-organized Hindu nationalist political party, the BJP, with close ties to a social movement organization, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), and parent body, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has achieved power in federal states and when the national government (which need not be headed by the BJP) has condoned their actions. The alignment of these forces is uncommon. Relations between the party and movement, party and state, and movement and state are often strained.

The likelihood of violence is also determined by the extent and character of opposition Hindu nationalists encounter from the lower castes and classes. Hindu nationalist forces are apt to be most aligned and most militant in regions where the upper castes and classes are strong and fully support the BJP and lower-caste parties and movements are weak. Conversely, Hindu

nationalism is likely to be weaker and less militant where the upper castes are politically divided, lower castes are unified and organized, and class identities are stronger than caste identities.

Scholars have attributed mass violence to parties, states, mobs, gangs, and institutionalized riot systems. However they have accorded little attention to the roles of social movements and their affiliated civil society organizations in promoting and curtailing violence. If India was considered a textbook case of strong political institutions, it furnishes an equally compelling illustration of vibrant social movements. Indian newspapers are filled with accounts of protests on the streets and in the corridors of power. Social movements include a range of activists – rich and poor, men and women, young and old, devout and secular, conservative and liberal – who are committed to every conceivable cause. Indian social movements are performative. They appropriate public spaces by mounting *dharnas* (sit-ins), *gheraos* (encirclement of officials or their offices), *bandhs* (literally stoppages – of shops and businesses), *hartals* (shut down of shops and offices), jail *bharaos* (filling the jails – or courting voluntary arrest), and *rasta rokos* (blockages of traffic). They communicate colorful visual symbols through banners, flags, arm bands, caps, and clothes. Their festive, theatrical modes of protest frequently invite media attention and popular support.

Social movement scholarship largely concerns urban middle-class movements in Europe and North America. It devotes little attention to ethnic (including linguistic and religious) movements in the postcolonial world.<sup>5</sup> There is no theoretical rationale for this neglect. Ethnic struggles in the postcolonial world are neither defined nor delimited by primordial identities. Like other social movements, they deploy repertoires of contention that are both innovative and familiar. They select, interpret, and frame particular facets of ethnic identities in order to create solidarities and organize collective action. They confront and negotiate with the state and other authoritative institutions.

Another selective bias in the scholarship on social movements is its focus on progressive, nonviolent struggles of oppressed groups for rights, justice, and equality.<sup>6</sup> However, groups with divergent ideological orientations and class backgrounds have organized social movements to demand rights, resources, power, and territory. What defines them as social movements are their protest tactics, collective organizing, and targeting of authorities. Conservative social movements – sometimes called countermovements – often seek to

<sup>5</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, “To Map Contentious Politics,” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1996): 17–34.

<sup>6</sup> The relatively small literature on conservative social movements includes Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements and Violence: Participation in Underground Organizations* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1992); Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Jens Rydgren, ed., *Movements of Exclusion: Radical Right Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2005).

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reverse the gains that underprivileged groups have achieved by claiming that dominant majorities are victimized. Because social movements in India are not simply organized by the dispossessed but by class-stratified caste, ethnic, and religious groups that have ties to parties and the state, they include countermovements.

The design of social movements is equally diverse and scholars have not adequately explored their organizational diversity. Social movements can be either loosely or highly structured at different points in their life cycles. Institutionalization need not be antithetical to their strength and success. Contrary to the claim that social movements necessarily become de-radicalized once they become institutionalized, activists may continue to pursue radical goals through institutions.<sup>7</sup>

Nor have scholars sufficiently studied relations between social movements and political parties. The social movement literature primarily focuses on autonomous social movements in North America and Western Europe. In Latin America and many regions of the postcolonial world, the relationship between social movements and political parties is synergistic: parties often emerge from social movements and retain ties to them. Such movement-parties are often less institutionalized, more ideological, and more linked to civil society groups than European and North American parties. Conversely, many social movements morph into or have strong ties to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Parties and movements have different and potentially complementary strengths. Movements are more radical and more cyclical than parties. Movements are strongest in localities and parties, in federal and national states. Temporally, movement activity is episodic whereas party work is more sustained. Social movements can help parties win elections by strengthening collective identities, creating a sense of urgency, and identifying them with seemingly selfless causes. Ties to radical movements can influence factional divisions within parties. Ruling parties can prevent social movements from “burning out” by institutionalizing their gains and placing their activists in state institutions.

Once parties attain power, they face contending pressures – from the movement to sustain their radicalism and from the electorate and coalition partners to demonstrate their moderation. Some parties and movements are sufficiently well-integrated and uncontested by adversaries to sustain their militancy in office. Some retreat from their radical goals because the ruling

<sup>7</sup> The literature on the institutionalization of social movements includes Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, *Faithful and Fearless: Moving Feminist Protest Inside the Church and Military* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); David S. Meyer and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *The Social Movement Society: Contentious Politics for a New Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); and Dieter Rucht and Friedhelm Neidhardt, “Towards a Movement Society? On the Possibility of Institutionalizing Social Movements,” *Social Movement Studies* 1, no. 1 (2002): 7–30.

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party is factionalized, the movement ceases to enjoy societal support, and other social movements and parties challenge their beliefs and capture their constituencies.

As scholars have recognized, social movements are deeply influenced by state structures, policies and actions. The state defines, promotes, and undermines group identities and plays a key role in determining the extent and character of violence. Some movements and opposition parties have grown by challenging and contesting state policies and state-endorsed identities. Ironically, in doing so, they have highlighted the state's power. Movements and parties are especially likely to contest the state when its policies are inconsistent and when the electoral interests of ruling parties determine state policies.

### Why Study the Causes of Violence?

Some scholars claim that examining the causes of Hindu-Muslim violence risks obscuring its human costs and local underpinnings. From this perspective, causal accounts often make inaccurate assumptions about which identities are most salient. Assuming that the axis of conflict involves Hindu and Muslim religious identities ignores the multiple sources of complex lived identities. People's perceptions of what transpired are often refracted through the lenses of outside observers, including journalists, state officials, and scholars.<sup>8</sup> In *Theft of an Idol*, Paul Brass describes the difficulties of establishing the precise causes of a "riot" because of the temporal distance between initial precipitating events and interpretations of these events by local politicians and state authorities.<sup>9</sup> "Riots," in his view, are narratives that the courts, police, witnesses, and scholars construct.

In writing about violence, there is a risk of discursively reproducing the very problems that we seek to explain.<sup>10</sup> The 2006 government-appointed

<sup>8</sup> In an insightful account of a "riot" in Panipur village in Bangladesh in the early 1990s, Beth Roy describes the conflict that ensued when one man's cow strayed onto another man's field and grazed his crops. The conflict was not initially a product of Hindu-Muslim enmity but became seen through a national lens as a full-scale "communal riot." Beth Roy, *Some Trouble with Cows: Making Sense of Social Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). Stanley Tambiah also shows how the depiction of "riots" suits the political interests of the actors involved. Stanley Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> I avoid employing such politically loaded words as appeasement, pseudo-secularism, and terrorism or use them in quotation marks. I prefer to use the more secular term the "Ayodhya movement" and the term "activists" rather than the Hindu nationalist term *kar sevaks* (religious volunteers) to refer to the movement's followers. We also lack a term to describe frequent instances of the state's indirect responsibility for violence. A pogrom, an officially organized persecution of a minority community, provides an apt description of the state's direct role in orchestrating anti-minority violence but does not capture the complicity of people on the ground.

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Sachar Committee Report comments that Muslims “carry a double burden of being labeled anti-national and appeased.” It states that alleged appeasement has failed to improve Muslims’ socioeconomic standing while forcing them to continually disprove that they are anti-national and “terrorists.” The report challenges the common perception that Muslims are averse to banking and secular schools on religious grounds; only 4 percent of Muslim children attend *madrasas* (religious schools).<sup>11</sup>

Excessive attention to context and precipitating events implicitly denigrates both victims’ suffering and resilience. Gyanendra Pandey suggests that compared to social science accounts, testimonies of survivors better illuminate the meaning, significance, and causes of violence.<sup>12</sup> He contrasts the view from below with the view from the center, that is informed by the logic of the state and official archives. The role of the state is best understood, Veena Das argues, from the margins.<sup>13</sup> Reflecting on her experiences working in relief camps for Sikh survivors in 1984, she suggests that national dramas which implicated the state and community were staged in local places.

Ethnographic studies have explored the meaning and significance of inter-community violence in localities, rather than simply viewing violence as the product of political ideologies, party strategies, and state actions. Using violence can empower groups that otherwise feel powerless. Violence that denigrates and humiliates members of another community can forge subjectivities among its perpetrators. Describing mass violence, Terrence Des Pres’ words are haunting:

Killing was ad hoc, inventive, and in its dependence on imagination, peculiarly expressive. ... This was murder uncanny in its anonymous intimacy, a hostility so personally focused on human flesh that the abstract fact of death was not enough.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The report documents the underrepresentation of Muslims in professional, managerial, and administrative positions. Muslims constitute 14 percent of India’s population but only 3 percent of the Indian Administrative Service, 1.8 percent of the Indian Foreign Service, and 4 percent of the Indian Police Service. Muslim literacy rates (59 percent) are significantly lower than the national average (65 percent). Villages with large Muslim populations are underserved with respect to educational infrastructure, medical, post, and telegraph facilities, paved roads, and bus stops. Poverty levels are higher in urban areas and slightly lower nationwide among Muslims than among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Although Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes had lower literacy levels than Muslims from 1953 to 2001, the trend reversed thereafter because Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have been greater beneficiaries than Muslims of government programs to ameliorate inequalities. Rajinder Sachar et al., *Sachar Committee Report on Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India* (New Delhi: Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat – Government of India, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence, Nations, Fragments, Histories* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Terrence Des Pres, “The Struggle of Memory,” *The Nation*, April 10, 1982, 433.



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Those who enact violence may increasingly fear being marginalized by the state and international forces as a result of the hopes and fears that globalization generates.<sup>15</sup>

These powerful analyses of lived, local violence sound an important cautionary note about social scientific approaches.<sup>16</sup> The identification of broad causes of violence can displace responsibility onto external actors. Depicting the state as a monolithic entity ignores the complex webs that link state and civil society actors. Studies of extreme, organized violence can also ignore extensive quotidian violence.

I seek to identify, for both normative and analytical reasons, some broad probable explanations for violence. Asking “Why did it happen?” and “Was it inevitable?” implies that people are capable of both causing and preventing violence. Without suggesting that violence is ever completely absent, I try to understand when and why it is more or less pervasive and its effects are more or less lasting. Why, for example, does it leave greater scars years after its occurrence in some places than in others? I also give due to the quotidian violence that precedes and follows large-scale violence. While most narrative accounts of violence focus on localities, I explore the forces that bind localities to the nation. A close-up photo brings into sharp relief images that are blurry from a distance while the panoramic view reveals what close-ups cannot. I provide both sets of images and establish connections between the violence itself and precipitating events.

I also hope to demonstrate that both local and national forces are often responsible for local violence. Hindu nationalists have at times been notably successful at bridging the local-national divide by harnessing local grievances to their national campaigns. Many activists harbor resentments toward large national forces, such as the Congress government’s “appeasement” policies and the Congress Party’s vote bank politics. Through local violence, Hindu nationalists can seek to symbolically right the wrongs they believe they have suffered, demonstrate their strength, and redeem their honor. Similarly, the notion that the state has discriminated against Hindus and favored Muslims underlines Hindu nationalists’ sense that Hindus are victims and Muslims are pampered minorities. Far from being an external entity, the state has influenced people’s understandings of their own identities.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Oskar Verkaaik, *Migrants and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> On local violence, see Veena Das, “Introduction: Communities, Riots, Survivors – the South Asian Experience,” in Veena Das, ed., *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 12–13; and “Privileging the Local: The 1984 Riots,” in Steven Wilkinson, ed., *Religious Politics and Communal Violence* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Arjun Appadurai brilliantly describes the psychology of majority violence amid globalization in *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).



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In the end, some questions about violence can never be answered, particularly the deepest, most existential questions about why certain groups engage in violence against others. While seeking answers, I recognize the impossibility of definitive explanations. I linger on stories of violence to give due to its horrors while highlighting the opportunities it creates for refashioning institutions and identities.

**Why Violence?**

Political scientists have extensively explored relations between ethnic violence and core political institutions. A number of studies examine the implications of different institutional arrangements – parties, electoral systems, and federalism – for ethnic violence. Some studies compare the salience of a single institutional factor in places where violence occurs and is absent. In studies of this kind, variations in the timing and location of violence are essential to determining its causes. Three bodies of political science scholarship are especially germane to explaining ethnic violence in India.

The first approach accords political parties a central role in shaping political life and precipitating violence. Steven Wilkinson's *Votes and Violence* argues that the more numerous parties are in an Indian state, the more valuable minority voters become and the more political parties will compete with one another for their votes and, consequently, attempt to prevent the spread of Hindu-Muslim violence.<sup>18</sup> He suggests that most Indian state governments can but do not prevent ethnic violence. Wilkinson believes that with increasing party competition, northern states will come to resemble southern states, and ethnic violence will diminish.

Pradeep Chhibber's *Democracy without Associations* argues that parties responded strategically to the weakness of associational life by creating a cleavage-based party system that magnifies social cleavages.<sup>19</sup> He attributes the growth in collective violence – or the increased incidence of “riots” in the fifteen largest states from 1967 to 1993 – to closer alignment between social cleavages and the party system. He argues:

Political parties are the key link between society and the state. As the party system comes to be rooted in social cleavages, political conflict between parties translates into conflict among groups and vice versa. Second, political parties are central to governance in India, especially with the politicization of the bureaucracy and the judiciary. In times of cabinet instability and elections, it is not clear, then, who carries the authority of the state. This enables the mobilization of “gangs” by political parties and local political aspirants, and violent conflict ensues.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Steven Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Pradeep K. Chhibber, *Democracy without Associations: Transformation of the Party System and Social Cleavages in India* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 192.

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A second approach attributes variations in the extent of Hindu-Muslim violence to the character of civil society organizations. Ashutosh Varshney argues that cities and towns are more likely to resist severe ethnic conflict when they possess local, preferably mass-based interethnic institutions of civic engagement, such as clubs, political parties, festival groups, business associations, trade unions, professional organizations, and NGOs.<sup>21</sup> Where such networks exist and engage both Hindus and Muslims, they defuse tensions and conflicts; where they are absent, violence is endemic and serious.

A third approach explores state-society interactions and particularly the state's role in preventing or controlling violence. Atul Kohli's "Can Democracies Accommodate Ethnic Nationalism?" argues that state policies determine the rise and decline of self-determination movements and their proclivity to engage in violence.<sup>22</sup> Kohli's *Democracy and Discontent* seeks to explain "the crisis of governability and its correlate, the growth of political violence, in India."<sup>23</sup> Kohli attributes what he describes as the growing crisis of governability to the changing role of the political elite, weak and ineffective political organizations, the mobilization of previously passive groups into electoral politics, and growing conflict between contending social groups.

These scholars differ in the significance they accord to different political domains. Wilkinson and Chhibber suggest that local governments play subordinate and secondary roles to state governments. Wilkinson states:

[W]hile local precipitants are important, state level politics does much more than simply provide the context for local mechanisms to work. Because states control the police and the local deployment of force, state-level politics in fact largely determines whether violence will break out, even in the most riot-prone towns.<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, Varshney argues "local (or regional) variations can best be explained with local (or regional) variables, not with national or global factors which are, by definition, constant across local settings."<sup>25</sup> In *Democracy and Discontent*, Kohli explores the sources of violence in districts, states, and nationally.

My project builds on these important contributions and shares their interest in analyzing both places where large-scale violence occurs and is absent. But my focus is distinctive in several ways. First, I seek not only to

<sup>21</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Atul Kohli, "Can Democracies Accommodate Ethnic Nationalism? The Rise and Decline of Ethnic Self-Determination Movements in India," in Amrita Basu and Atul Kohli, eds., *Community Conflicts and the State in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>24</sup> Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 28.