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**Sparks and Fires:
Reassessing the Role of the State in Communal Riots**

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ABSTRACT

In India, as elsewhere in the developing world, a great deal is always said about how the state is involved, or implicated in, communal riots, as was true during the 2002 violence in the state of Gujarat. However, despite a plethora of literature, we still do not have a good theory of the relationship between the state and communal violence.

A good theory must specify (a) the conditions under which the state develops an *interest* in touching off, or worsening, communal riots, instead of preventing or containing them; and (b) it must also clarify whether the state always has the *ability* to prevent or contain riots, even if it has an interest in doing so. In short, the key question for theory is: What makes the state willing and/or able to enact its constitutionally assigned riot-preventing, or riot-containing, role?

In response, while I do not develop a full-blown theory in this paper, I take some steps towards it. Essentially, I develop some building blocks of a possible theory, and some classification schemes for the types of state involvement in communal tensions. I do so indirectly: by focusing on intercommunal civic ties, and asking what builds or undermines them. The role of the state emerges in the process of understanding, and answering, that question. Three uses of state power are identified: as a source of organized violence; as a source of entrapment; and as a source of regeneration.

Under what conditions are preexisting intercommunal civic ties destroyed? Under what conditions are such ties built? These are the central questions for this paper.¹ My answer is partly based on materials from the early stages of a new multi-country project, and partly on the insights and arguments of my recent book on India.² These materials raise serious issues about the role of the state in communal violence. A great deal is almost always said about how the state is involved, or implicated in, communal riots, as was true during the 2002 violence in Gujarat. However, despite a plethora of literature, we still do not have a good theory of the relationship between the state and communal violence.

A good theory must specify (a) the conditions under which the Indian state develops an *interest* in touching off, or worsening, communal riots, instead of preventing or containing them; and (b) it must also clarify whether the state always has the *ability* to prevent or contain riots, even if it has an interest in doing so. In short, the key question for theory is: What makes the state willing and/or able to enact its constitutionally assigned riot-preventing, or riot-containing, role?

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¹ Logically and analytically, these could be two different questions, but pending further investigation, let me assume that they are two sides of the same coin.

² Ashutosh Varshney, 2002 and 2003, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, New Haven: Yale University Press, and 2002 and 2004, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Why do I focus on interethnic, or intercommunal ties, or what has, following Robert Putnam, come to be called bridging, as opposed to bonding, social capital?³ Much of the conventional theoretical wisdom in the field,⁴ as well as some more recent work,⁵ emphasizes how peaceful interaction between ethnic groups is, paradoxically, founded on the possibility of intense in-group interaction and institutions. A principal message of this literature is: the greater the possibility of in-group cultural life and interaction, the greater the possibility of inter-group accommodation and peace.

In contrast, my own research on communal violence in India showed that *intercommunal* ties between Hindus and Muslims, not *intracommunal* ties among the Hindus or among the Muslims, were a strong bulwark of communal peace. If towns and cities were organized only along inter-Hindu or intra-Muslim lines, the odds of riots (*fires*) breaking out, given a *spark* (tensions, rumors, small clashes), were very high. In Indian cities, bonding social capital was highly correlated with Hindu-Muslim violence, but bridging ties could put out sparks very effectively, not allowing them to disrupt the local equilibria of peace.

Given how important bridging social capital was to communal peace in my research, I now wish to turn a cross-sectional comparison of peaceful and violent towns into an inter-temporal one: how is bridging social capital built or destroyed? That was not the central question of my book on Hindu-Muslim relations. It simply asked what differentiated cities, where Hindus and Muslims lives peacefully, from those cities where endemic violence marked

³ Robert Putnam, 2000, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York : Simon and Schuster.

⁴ Arend Lijphart, 1977, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*, New Haven” Yale University Press.

⁵ James Fearon and David Laitin, 1996, “Explaining Interethnic Cooperation”, *American Political Science Review*, December.

their relations. Now I ask how peaceful cities become violent, and how violent cities turn towards peace. A new analytical candidate – the state – is beginning to emerge in the cities where we can already answer this question well.

I start with a summary of my book's arguments and methods, with brief references to how my new project cumulatively builds upon the previous project. I, then, turn to three Indian cases in some detail: one at the state level, Gujarat 2002, for its obvious relevance to the role of the state in communal riots; and two at the town level, one outlining the destruction of strong intercommunal ties in a relatively peaceful city, and another sketching out the building of such ties after a long period of communal violence and polarization. In the third section, I draw implications of the cases, focusing on the role of the state in building or undermining civic ties. The final section presents conclusions.

I. BRIDGING, BONDING AND COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

Why does ethnic violence take place? Under what conditions might ethnic peace obtain? *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* answered these questions by comparing Hindu-Muslim relations in six cities of India.⁶ Substantively, my main conclusion was that the presence or

⁶ A summary of the book appeared in Ashutosh Varshney, "Ethnic Conflict and Civic Society: India and Beyond", *World Politics*, April 2001. The purpose of new project is two-fold: (a) to extend the comparative terrain and seek a multi-national *and* multi-city empirical template for analysis; and (b) to concentrate on *change over time* and pick cities that used to be violent but have become peaceful, and cities that used to be peaceful but have become violent. Cities have been selected from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Nigeria, Indonesia and India. The emphasis is on change, not on static equilibria, which should allow us to inquire into how enduring peace is established or broken. This is not a problem scholars or activists adequately understand. Inevitably, this process also means that my recent arguments about Hindu-Muslim relations would now have to be viewed as hypotheses to be tested on a very different terrain. It would be unwise to assume that India-based arguments are easily portable, if the underlying and historical conditions for ethnic relations in other countries are dramatically different.

absence of inter-ethnic, or inter-communal, civic organizations⁷ -- business associations, professional organizations, labor unions, political parties, reading clubs, sports clubs, film clubs, cadre-based NGOs -- was critical to explaining why some cities had chronic ethnic violence, while others, despite huge provocations, remained always, or nearly always, peaceful. Vigorous associational life allows strong ties to be formed across communities, acting as a serious constraint over the polarizing strategies of political elites.

How did this argument emerge? First, a large-n analysis of all recorded Hindu-Muslim riots during a 46-year period (1950-95) was carried out.⁸ It led to two important results. First, Hindu-Muslim riots were overwhelming urban. A mere 4 per cent of deaths in Hindu-Muslim riots took place in rural India, where a big majority of the country still lives and a still bigger proportion did in the 1950s. Second, within urban India, riots were highly locally concentrated. Eight cities -- Ahmedabad, Bombay, Hyderabad, Baroda, Aligarh, Meerut, Delhi and Calcutta -- accounted for a hugely disproportionate share of communal violence in the country: 49 per cent of all urban deaths (and about 46 per cent of all deaths, urban plus rural) in Hindu-Muslim violence. As a group, however, these eight cities today represent a mere 18 per cent of India's urban population (and about 6 per cent of the country's total population, both urban and rural). Between 1977/78-2002/3, the worst phase for Hindu-Muslim relations since India's independence, roughly eighty two per cent of urban population was not "riot-prone". Often, a town just 40-50 miles away from a riot-prone city remains calm. For example, an almost entirely peaceful town of Bulandshahar is a mere 50 miles away from the riot-prone Aligarh.

⁷ I use the terms "ethnic" and "communal" interchangeably in the book. Also, *in a multi-party democracy* (not in a single-party system), I view political parties as part of the state as well as civil society. The opposition parties are not part of the state, whereas in single party system systems, political parties simply become appendages of the state. For a more elaborate rationale, see Chapter 1 of my book.

Other examples are Surat and Baroda in the state of Gujarat, and Hyderabad and Warangal in the state of Andhra Pradesh.⁹

India's Hindu-Muslim violence is, thus, remarkably, if not entirely, town- or city-specific.¹⁰ State or national politics certainly play a role, but even the most inflammable periods of national or state politics do not fully undermine the local patterns of Hindu-Muslim relations. These larger political trends at the national or state level can essentially be conceptualized as “sparks”: depending on the local textures, not all of them become “fires”.

In keeping with this large-n finding, the project had selected six cities and arranged them in three pairs. Each pair had a city/town where communal violence is endemic, and a city/town where it is rare. To ensure that we don't compare "apples and oranges", roughly similar Hindu-Muslim percentages in the town populations constituted the minimum control in each pair. The argument about the intercommunal civic organization emerged from this paired comparison.

Why should this be so? On the whole, two links can be specified between civic life and ethnic conflict. First, prior and sustained contact between members of different communities allows communication between them to moderate tensions and preempt violence, when such tensions arise due to: a riot in a nearby city or state; distant violence, or desecration, reported in the press, or shown on television; rumors planted by politicians or groups in the city to arouse

⁸ Constructed jointly by Steven Wilkinson (University of Chicago) and me

⁹ In Indonesia, similar pairs can be found. For instance, Palu, a peaceful town, is only a 100 miles away from Poso, one of the most riot-prone towns. In Nigeria, Zaria and Kaduna have the same character. Muslims and Christians manage their differences peacefully in the former, not in the latter.

¹⁰ Some of the large-n analysis already completed in the new, multi-country project parallels Indian findings. In Indonesia, too, collective violence is highly locally concentrated. A mere 15 districts (*kabupaten*), holding 6.5 per cent of the country's total population, accounted for 85.4 per cent of all deaths in collective violence during 1990-2003. Thus, a concentration on national- or state- level factors, including a “spark” as potentially devastating as an abrupt downfall of the Suharto regime after nearly three decades in power in 1997, has ignored the local factors that kept peace in most of the country, even as 15 districts repeatedly burned. See Ashutosh Varshney, Rizal Panggabean and Mohammed Zulfan Tadjoeidin, 2004, “Patterns of Collective Violence in Indonesia (1990-

communal bitterness and passions; or a provocative act of communal mischief by the police, thugs or youth. In cities of thick interaction between different communities, peace committees at the time of tension emerge *from below* in various neighborhoods; the local administration does not have to impose such committees on the entire city *from above*. Because of mutual consent and involvement, the former is a better protector of peace than the latter. Such highly decentralized tension-managing organizations kill rumors, remove misunderstandings, and often police neighborhoods. If prior communication across communities does not exist, such organizations do not emerge from below. They are typically imposed from above, and the committees from above do not work well because their politician members, though inducted for purposes of peace, may in fact already be committed to polarization and violence for the sake of electoral benefit. Their presence on peace committees is often merely notional.

Second, in cities that have associational integration as well, not just everyday integration, the foundations of peace become stronger. In such settings, even those politicians who would, in theory, benefit from ethnic killings find it hard to instigate violence. Without a nexus between politicians and criminals, big riots and killings are highly improbable. In all violent cities in the project, a nexus of politicians and criminals was in evidence. Organized gangs could easily disturb neighborhood peace, often causing migration from communally heterogeneous to communally homogenous neighborhoods. People moved for the sake of physical safety. Without the involvement of organized gangs, large-scale rioting and tens and hundreds of killings are most unlikely, and without the protection afforded by politicians, such criminals cannot escape the clutches of law.

2003)", *UNSFIR Working Paper -04/03*, Jakarta, Indonesia: United Nations Support Facility for Indonesian Recovery, UNDP, July

Contrariwise, if labor unions, business associations, middle class associations of doctors and lawyers, film clubs of poorer classes (as in South India), and at least some cadre-based parties are integrated, even an otherwise mighty politician-criminal nexus is unable to rupture existing links. Everyday engagement in the neighborhoods may not be able to stand up to the marauding gangs protected by powerful politicians, but the organized strength of unions, associations and the integrated cadres of some political parties -- those, unlike the polarizers, not interested in communal conflict -- constitute a forbidding obstacle for even politically shielded gangs. When associational integration is available, the potential space of destructive and violent action simply shrinks. Local administrations are far more effective in such circumstances. *A synergy emerges between the local wings of the state and local civic organizations*, making it easier to police the emerging situation and preventing it from degenerating into riots and killings. In short, local civil society, if an of itself, does not ensure peace. Rather, if it is integrated, it makes the functioning of the local wings of the state very different from what it is when local segregation is the norm.

Civic links across communities have a remarkable local or regional variation. Depending on how different communities are distributed in local businesses, middle class occupations, parties and labor markets, they tend to differ from place to place. As a result, even when the same organization is able to create tensions and violence in one city or region, it is unable to do so in another city or region where civic engagement crosses communal lines. Local and regional variation in communal violence, its uneven geographical spread, can thus be a function of civic engagement, which tends to vary locally or regionally.

II. STATE INVOLVEMENT: SOME ANALYTICAL NARRATIVES:

In this section, I present three analytical narratives, aimed at sorting out the relationship between the state and communal violence further. Since the most obvious example of state involvement in Hindu-Muslim riots in recent Indian history comes from the 2002 violence in Gujarat, I start with Gujarat 2002, and ask in what sense Gujarat violence was consistent with, and/or different from, the theory presented above. I, then, move on to two cases more germane to the main theme of this paper: a comparison across time in the same city that changed its character, as opposed to a comparison across cities, holding time constant. I will present two cases, Ahmedabad and Bhiwandi. In the former, by the late 1960s, a long phase of communal peace turned into a new period of endemic violence. In the latter, Bhiwandi, the opposite happened: more than a decade of endemic rioting has given way to over a decade and a half of communal peace. The state turned out to be a critical variable in each change.

II A. Gujarat 2002: Pogroms, Not Riots

In 2002, parts of Gujarat violence followed a highly predictable pattern. Based on the 1950-94 time series compiled in my book, Gujarat was clearly the worst state in India for Hindu-Muslim violence, much worse than the states of North India often associated with awful Hindu-Muslim relations in popular perceptions. Moreover, the data had also clearly specified three Gujarat towns -- Ahmedabad, Baroda and Godhra -- as the most violence-prone. These three turned out to be the worst sites of violence in 2002 as well. In contrast to Ahmedabad or Baroda, Surat's old city (not shanty towns) was identified in my book as a town, which had managed to

develop civic mechanisms to insulate itself from the statewide trend, along with several other towns. Yet again in March and April 2002, the violence in Surat was minimal, even as Baroda and Ahmedabad experienced carnage.

Not everything about Gujarat violence was, however, entirely predictable. In one respect, the violence was shockingly different. Unless later research disconfirms the proposition, the existing knowledge gives us every reason to conclude that the *riots* in Gujarat were the first full-blooded *pogroms* in independent India.

According to dictionaries, a pogrom means:

“An organized, often officially encouraged massacre or persecution of a minority group, especially one conducted against Jews.” (www.dictionary.com/)

“a mob attack, either approved or condoned by authorities, against the persons and property of a religious, racial, or national minority” . (www.britannica.com)

At least in March 2002, if not in April, the state not only made no attempt to stop the killings, but it also condoned them.¹¹ That the government “officially encouraged” anti-Muslim violence – something often believed -- cannot be conclusively proved on the basis of the evidence provided by newspaper reports, though later research and inquiry commissions may well come to that definitive judgment. At this point, what is unquestionable is that the state actively condoned revenge killings, instead of stopping them.

The statements of non-governmental organizations most closely associated with the Gujarat state government are highly indicative. According to the chief of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), Gujarat was “the first positive response of the Hindus to Muslim

¹¹ This is based on a close reading of the following newspapers: *The Times of India*; *The Indian Express*; *The Hindustan Times*.

fundamentalism in 1,000 years”.¹² Organizations like the VHP believe that the BJP government did exactly what was required: namely, allow violent Hindu retaliation against the Muslims, including those who had nothing to do with the mob that originally torched the train in Godhra. From a liberal as well as, more importantly, constitutional perspectives, it is not the job of the government, whatever its ideological persuasion, to stoke public anger, or to allow it to express itself violently, regardless of the provocation. No elected government that has taken an oath to protect lives of its citizens can behave the way criminal gangs do, thirsting for a tit-for-tat.

It is sometimes suggested that the anti-Sikh violence in Delhi, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi on October 30, 1984, was the first pogrom of independent India. This argument is not plausible, for the differences between October-November 1984 and March 2002 are quite critical. To illustrate the major differences, one can do no better than cite from a remarkable column written by a senior Indian journalist, who personally covered the 1984 anti-Sikh riots:

First of all, the ordinary mass of the Hindus in Delhi never got involved in the riots — many of us put on crash helmets, picked up hockey sticks and cricket bats, wickets, anything at night to run vigils in our streets so no “outsiders” could harm our Sikh neighbours. How many such stories have we heard from Gujarat? Second, once the government got its act together (within 72 hours) all rioting stopped, as if someone had blown the whistle and called off a game or a movie show. Third, and this is the most important distinction, there was shame, embarrassment, contrition, even fear on the faces of the top civil servants, police officers, Congressmen. They knew something terrible had happened. Rajiv Gandhi may have made his insensitive “when a tree falls earth shakes...” statement to rationalise the killings, but damage control started immediately.

.....as the riots were dying out on November 3 (Mrs Gandhi had been assassinated on October 30) Delhi’s Lieutenant-Governor, P.G. Gavai, was fired. ... The Station Head Officer (SHO) of Trilokpuri (police station) was removed on November 2. The police commissioner, Subhash Tandon, was replaced on November 12. So were Deputy Commissioner of Police (east), under whose jurisdiction Trilokpuri fell, Additional Police Commissioner (range), and Deputy Commissioner of Police (south). Within a month or so they were all facing departmental inquiries. Contrast this with what happened in Gujarat. Did any policeman get removed or punished for non-performance or complicity? Narendra Modi, on the other hand, moved out mainly those who had been effective, true and loyal to the uniform.....

The Congressmen whose names surfaced or were even popularly mentioned in connection with the killings all paid the price. Political careers of H.K.L Bhagat, Jagdish Tytler and Sajjan Kumar never recovered from the taint of 1984

¹² “Parivar Wars”, *The Times of India*, June 26, 2002.

although nobody was ever convicted... Isn't it a bit different now when leading lights of the BJP go around talking of "Hindu consolidation", of Modi having become a "Hindutva hero" or the likely electoral dividend of the killings?"¹³

The larger point should be clear. Because of their Hindu conception of the nation, the leading Hindu nationalist organizations, such as the VHP and RSS, celebrated Gujarat's anti-Muslim violence as an act of nationalism. Fundamentally, Hindu nationalism sees Muslims as disloyal to India; hence it is ideologically not only pro-Hindu but also anti-Muslim. In contrast, the Congress party never developed an anti-Sikh ideology. This should explain why the Congress ended up developing an attitude of contrition, expressed not simply recently when a minister of the Cabinet had to quit on the charges that he led the anti-Sikh mobs, but articulated as early as the 1998 and 1999 election campaigns. It should also be noted that Sikhs never entirely left the Congress party. Large numbers of them continued to be supporters of the Congress.

In contrast, very few Muslims have ever joined the Hindu nationalist organizations, and there is no contrition yet in the statements of Gujarat state government. The VHP, deeply intertwined with the state government in Gujarat, found hacking and burning Muslims after Godhra ideologically correct, and celebrated "nationalist violence", and it still does. Instead of the civil society resisting the state, or the state resisting marauding civic groups like the VHP, there was a coincidence between the two in March 2002. It is this coincidence that created the ideal conditions for a pogrom. Though reprehensible, the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 was analytically a different beast. Anti-Sikh violence in Delhi was strategic, not ideological; anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat was ideologically charged. Since the days of anti-Jewish pogroms of Tsarist Russia and, later, Eastern Europe, pogroms have always had this character: a social prejudice against a minority allowed a violent expression, as state authorities look the other way,

¹³ Shekhar Gupta, "Pot is Blacker than the Kettle", The Indian Express, April 6, 2002.

or encourage such acts.

Since Gujarat violence was a pogrom, not a riot, my arguments, developed for explaining riots, do not strictly apply. Anticipating this problem, I had written in my book:

“This argument, it should be clarified, is probabilistic, not law-like. It indicates the odds, but should not be taken to mean that no exceptions to the generalization would exist... Upsetting the probabilities, for example, a state bent upon ethnic pogroms and deploying the might of its army may indeed institute veritable ethnic hells. My argument, therefore, would be more applicable to *riots* than to *pogroms* or *civil wars*. A theory of civil wars or pogroms would have to be analytically distinguished from one that deals with the more common form of ethnic violence: riots.”¹⁴

That some towns -- towns like Surat -- still managed to prevent large-scale violence in 2002 indicates how, despite a “hell-bent state”, local civic structures can still matter. That there was considerable *adivasi* participation in anti-Muslim violence, and violence engulfed Gujarati villages, were new developments, and an evidence of how a mighty and determined state can rupture old civic patterns.¹⁵ Some more implications of Gujarat 2002 are analyzed in Section III.

II B. State Power as a Source of Entrapment: Ahmedabad, Gujarat

The pattern of communal relations has dramatically changed in Ahmedabad, located in the state of Gujarat, India.¹⁶ Between 1920-1969, the city was on the whole communally peaceful, but the 1969 carnage in Ahmedabad turned out to be a tragic turning point. About 630 people were killed in five days of mayhem between September 19 and 23. Since then, Ahmedabad has become one of the most riot-prone cities of India. In 2002 alone, an estimated 800-1000 people died during two weeks of rioting.

¹⁴ Varshney, 2002, p. .

¹⁵ Ganesh Devy, 2002, “Tribal Voice and Violence”, in Siddhartha Vardarajan, ed, *Gujarat: The Making of a Tragedy*, Delhi: Penguin India.

¹⁶ This part is abbreviated from Chapters 9-11 of Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*

The historic figure of Mahatma Gandhi gives the decline of Ahmedabad an especially tragic edge. Gujarat was Gandhi's home state, and Ahmedabad his adopted city. After he returned from South Africa in 1915, until he left for the 1930 Salt March against the British, Gandhi made Ahmedabad his home and established his ashram there. According to Gandhian ideology, India's freedom movement had two aims -- political independence from the British, and social transformation of India. As a consequence, two different sets of organizations were created. The Congress party was to be the vehicle of winning independence, but it would be one of several organizations for social transformation. Gandhi and his followers created and nurtured a large array of civic institutions, developing an enormous mass following, and leaving a formidable legacy of voluntary social service and communal harmony that was in many ways unique.

The year 1969 changed all that. The immediate cause of the 1969 Ahmedabad riots was small and no different from the provocations, or triggers, witnessed so often elsewhere in the country, as also in Ahmedabad many times before. On September 18 1969, a large number of Muslims had assembled for an *urs* (celebration) at the tomb of a Muslim saint. The tomb is located near the Jagannath Temple, a place of considerable importance for the local Hindus. At about 3 p.m., the "holymen" (*sadhus*) of the temple were returning with their cows, as they did every single day at that time. When the cows tried to make their way through the crowd, a skirmish ensued. A few cows, some holy men as well as a few Muslims were hurt. By the afternoon of September 19, rioting and killings had begun, primarily in the working class neighborhoods.

What were the civic foundations of Ahmedabad's communal peace? How did, civic

structures of peace break down?

The inter-communal civic life of Ahmedabad rested on four big organizational pillars: a cadre based political party engaged in mass politics; mass-based labor organizations; a long tradition of strong business organizations; and an array of social and economic organizations inspired by Gandhian ideology. All brought Hindus and Muslims together – directly by involving both communities in organizational work, and indirectly by generating an integrationist ideology and vision. All four pillars had been seriously eroded by the 1960s. For the sake of space, I will concentrate on the first two only, far and away the most important given their organizational strength and the large numbers of people involved in them.¹⁷

A Cadre Based Party: After the 1920s, the Congress party was the biggest organization that brought people of all communities together in India. The Congress party took to mass politics in the 1920s under Gandhi's leadership and influence. Both critics and admirers of the Congress party agree that the Congress reached the acme of its strength in what is now the state of Gujarat in the first half of the 20th century. In Ahmedabad, it is further accepted, the most vibrant, disciplined and cadre-based Congress party organizations were created in the 1920s and 1930s. This was partly because Ahmedabad was the home of India's tallest politicians during the freedom struggle, especially Gandhi.¹⁸ By the late 1920s and 1930s, the Congress party went all the way down to the neighborhood level and in times of mass protest, even to the street level. The cadres were well trained in, and committed to, the Congress ideology of Hindu-Muslim

¹⁷ For a discussion of all four pillars, see my *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, Chs. 9-11.

¹⁸ Also important was Mahatma Gandhi's deputy, Sardar Patel, widely viewed as an organizational genius and India's Deputy Prime Minister after independence. Both made Ahmedabad their home. Gandhi formulated the grand ideological design; Patel took care of the earthy organizational details.

unity.

After independence in 1947, the Congress party took control of government from the departing British rulers. *The decline of the party as a civic body accompanied its rise to power.* The more the party ran governments, the more it attracted people interested in sharing the spoils of power, not cadres committed to ideology and grassroots work. Those who joined the Congress, when it was fighting the British against all odds, did not do so because power was readily available. If anything, a jail sentence was more likely than a stint at ruling. An ideological commitment to the goals of the movement was an important motivating factor, and a great deal of social mobilization and work with the masses followed as a corollary. In contrast, those who joined the party after independence could see power within their reach: the Congress party now was running all governments at all levels virtually all over the country.

In 1957, within ten years of independence, a well-known committee of the Congress party noted the civic malaise. “The craze .. for power and position (has) vitiate(d) the atmosphere”; “Congress workers at the base have lost contact with the people, ..their discipline has become loose... .”¹⁹ Arguing presciently, the committee said that “ if this tendency is not checked, it will prove dangerous to the stability and efficiency of the organization”.²⁰ In particular, the committee warned that “to combat the evils of communalism, it is necessary to establish properly functioning village, Ward or mohalla (neighborhood) Congress committees.”²¹

¹⁹ *Report of the Subcommittee Appointed by the Executive Committee of Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee to Enquire into the Working of the Congress Organization in Gujarat (Delhi: All India Congress Committee, 1957), p. 42*

²⁰ *Report, p. 26, parenthesis and italics added.*

A Legendary Trade Union. For much of the 20th century, Ahmedabad was called the Manchester of India. In 1921 and 1941, the textile mills employed 43,515 and 76,357 workers respectively, and the total population of the city for those two years was 274,007 and 591, 267.²² Thus, in the period between the 1920s and 1940s, if we assume a family size of five, anywhere between 65-80 per cent of the population in the city was partially or wholly dependent on the mills; and if we assume a family size of six, the proportions rise to 77-95 per cent. With such dominance, the labor organizations of the textile sector inevitably came to play a major role in the civic life of the city.

A federation of trade unions, the Textile Labor Association (TLA), became a truly formidable mass-based organization of Ahmedabad. The TLA was founded by Gandhi in 1920. It was wedded to the idea of “total transformation”. It was not only concerned with wages and conditions in the work place, but also with goals such as higher worker literacy, better family lives, the upliftment of women and children, better housing and living conditions, and a campaign against alcohol, communalism and untouchability. Between the early 1920s and late 1930s, the TLA developed a whole gamut of institutions to deal with virtually all aspects of a worker’s life. Under what came to be called educational activities, it ran adult literacy schools for workers, primary schools for children, and scholarship schemes for secondary schooling. It created reading rooms and libraries, girl’s dormitories, and women’s welfare centers. Training classes were designed for workers to learn alternative crafts. A large number of housing, credit, and consumer cooperatives were also organized. Finally, social and cultural centers were

²¹ *Report*, p. 5

²² Figures on the number of workers are from Census of India 1961, *Special Report on Ahmedabad City*, Volume 5, Gujarat, p. 10, and the population figures are taken from other census reports.

created to provide meeting places for cultural programs, and neighborhood inspection committees were formed to deal with day-to-day complaints. Several hundred full-time staff members of the TLA were in charge of running these schemes, and tens of thousands of workers and their families were covered.

Funded primarily by worker's subscriptions, the TLA maintained close contact with the Congress party but it remained organizationally distinct. When the Congress party came to power at independence in 1947, this link provided huge benefits to the TLA, giving it greater power relative to the other trade unions that were trying to win control of workers, but state patronage also turned out to be the a principal reason for the TLA's civic erosion.

The TLA became the only "representative union" in Ahmedabad textiles by law. By law, a representative union was one (a) which had 25 per cent of workers in an industry as its members, (b) which committed itself to conciliation and arbitration as the routine methods of dispute resolution between workers and employers, turning to strikes if and only if the legal recourse had been exhausted, and (c) which agreed that strikes would be called only after a majority of its members in a secret ballot had voted in favor of the extreme measure. Only a representative union had the legal authority to represent workers in courts, and in negotiations with employers and government.

The workers did not have any realistic option, except to join the TLA, for no other unions could easily become representative unions. Typically, a new union would show its strength and popularity by staging a successful strike. That was the best way to attract members, but if it did so, it would lose the chance of becoming a representative union for having encouraged strikes.

So long as the TLA had to compete with other unions, as in the 1930s, it was forced to undertake organizational work for survival. Once state patronage ruled the scene, only an unflinching ideological commitment by its leaders could keep its ethos of work alive. As the first generation of truly committed leadership passed away, the TLA became a victim of its own success. Its new leadership did not have to work as hard, and the bureaucratized top and middle of the organization increasingly lost touch with the base.

By far the biggest evidence of the TLA's failure was the widespread rioting in working class neighborhoods in 1969. Textile workers killed one another on grounds of religion. In the past, tensions and bitterness -- and they occasionally were present -- would never turn into an orgy of violence. Such tensions would be managed by union activists and their vast network; and if violence did ensue, it would be contained. It was because of such civic consciousness and involvement that no riots took place in Ahmedabad at the time of India's partition, when so much of the country had burned. A vigorous union at that time knew what it meant to keep people together. By the late 1960s, it was strong enough to run relief camps after riots and persuade workers to return to work about a week after the riots had ceased, but not vibrant enough to *prevent* riots, even in working class neighborhoods.

To conclude, Ahmedabad shows what can happen to vibrant civic organizations if they seek state patronage. The desire for greater organizational power may be natural, but such moves, if routed through the state, can seriously weaken civil society.

II C. State Power as a Source of Regeneration: Bhiwandi, Maharashtra

Bhiwandi, a town just outside Bombay, was infamous for Hindu-Muslim riots in the 1970s and 1980s.²³ Nearly 200 lives were lost in riots during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The turning point was the arrival in June 1988 of a police chief for three years.²⁴ In those three years, Bhiwandi was transformed from a town, notorious for its capacity for rioting, to one that could meticulously work for, and keep, communal peace, even in the worst of times, as between 1988-1993 and again in 2002. The key was building Hindu-Muslim contacts in an organized way and around common issues of concern. How long would Bhiwandi's communal peace last, we don't yet know. But peace has already prevailed for 17 years since 1988, a remarkable turnaround for a town known for its relentless communal hostility and frequent violence.

The town of Bhiwandi is a rather unlikely site for healthy and robust civic engagement. A center of small textiles most of which exists in the informal sector, Bhiwandi is full of "sprawling hutment colonies, narrow streets, the never-ceasing rattling of powerlooms", and "the town's civic amenities are bursting at the seams under the increasing demands of the shanties mushrooming all round"²⁵. Moreover, Hindus and Muslims tend to live in segregated neighborhoods.

Undeterred by this setting and the town's history of violence, the police chief argued that instead of fighting the fires when they broke out, it was better for the police to bring Hindus and Muslims together to create mutual understanding. The aim was to set up durable structures of

²³ The materials in this part are abbreviated from Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, Chapter 12.

²⁴ Three-year postings are customary for police and administrative officers at the state level in India, unless riots break out, or some other politically significant events take place. Suresh Khopade, a police officer in Maharashtra state, was appointed deputy commissioner of police for Bhiwandi. In his unpublished memoirs, *Bhiwandi Riots and After* (Undated), he has given a detailed account of his initiatives between 1988-91, a particularly violent period in India, during which the mobilization to destroy the Baburi mosque reached new heights. Khopade's achievements were widely hailed in political and journalistic circles, though the larger significance of his experiment --for the kinds of interventions that are possible and desirable in riot-prone towns -- was not drawn. I will cite extensively from his unpublished memoirs, and draw the larger implications.

peace. If the Hindus and Muslims could meet each other often enough and discuss common problems, a reservoir of communication and perhaps trust would be created, which in turn would play a peace-making role at the time of communal tensions. Thinking that “to be forewarned is to be forearmed”,²⁶ the police chief decided to put together neighborhood committees (*mohalla samitis*) for the whole town under his supervision.

Since segregated living was the norm in the town, each committee covered two neighborhoods and consisted of an equal number of Hindus and Muslims, selected on the basis of local knowledge. The committee members were those who “wielded considerable influence in their respective *mohallas* (neighborhoods) and had a clean record “. ²⁷ Special care was taken to ensure that “no communalist or known criminal”, lacking a “genuine desire for peace”, was selected. For every two or three committees, one police officer was appointed to act as liaison officer. Wherever available, the committee members included highly respected professionals, like doctors and advocates. But in the poorest neighborhoods, where no such professionals were present, the committees consisted of “coolies and even housewives”. Whether professionals, coolies, or housewives, the only condition for committee members was that they be respected by their neighbors for probity and goodwill, for which local knowledge was used, and have no criminal records, for which police data was.

Seventy such committees were created to cover the entire town. They would discuss “matters of mutual concern”.²⁸ They would meet as and when necessary, at least once a week normally but daily in times of tension, with a police officer presiding. And as time wore on, they

²⁵ Khopade, preface.

²⁶ Khopade, p. 115.

²⁷ The citations in this paragraph are from Khopade, p. 116.

²⁸ Both citations in this para from Khopade, p. 118

turned out to be so successful that even non-members started attending important meetings, thus broadening “the base of mutual confidence”.

During 1988-91, the nationwide mobilization, sponsored by the Hindu nationalists, for the destruction of the Baburi mosque was at its peak. As a consequence, communal tensions in much of India were high, and there were many moments of tension and bitterness in Bhiwandi as well. But

“when passions ran high..., members on both sides came together and voluntarily undertook the task of patrolling the streets for nights on end. Rumours were suppressed on the spot and rumour-mongers handed over to the police..... . (As a result), the evil-doers preferred to lie low, ..(and) were totally isolated by the constant vigilance against them by committee members. “²⁹

In 1991, as the police chief left Bhiwandi for his next posting, his successor did not dislodge the committees. He sought instead to continue the arrangement. The utility of continuation was soon brilliantly illustrated. By the time the Baburi mosque was torn down in December 1992, Bhiwandi’s citizens, both Hindus and Muslims, had developed such mutual understanding, confidence and resolve that they successfully kept the peace of their neighborhoods and town. Not a single life was lost.

Bhiwandi’s peace in the aftermath of the mosque-demolition was a remarkable development -- because it was the period of India’s worst post-partition violence and rioting came as close to Bhiwandi as the neighboring city of Bombay. In December 1992 and January 1993, Bombay witnessed massive riots. Given the proximity of Bombay, rumors of the worst kind floated in and out of Bhiwandi, but they failed to trigger riots. A fierce communal storm thus passed Bhiwandi by, without shaking its new civic edifice.

²⁹ Khopade, p. 119.

In 2002 again, the neighboring state of Gujarat saw brutal anti-Muslim riots. As the Gujarat riots raged, the head of a rather extreme Hindu nationalist organizations, Bajrang Dal, was murdered in the town of Bhiwandi. The suspicion was that Muslims had killed him to avenge the killings of Muslims by Hindu nationalist mobs in Gujarat. Again, tensions emerged, but only to subside. No riots broke out in Bhiwandi.

What should one conclude from this example? The Bhiwandi experiment, in particular, questions the conventional wisdom that there is an adversarial relationship between the state and civil society. Civil society is a *non*-state, not an *anti*-state, space of our life, whose vigor can be, though is not necessarily, promoted by the state. Civil society is typically anti-state when the state, by design or unintended consequence, begins to undermine civic life, not if it does not. Because civic linkages were forged on the initiative of the local organ of the state, the Bhiwandi experiment suggests fruitful possibilities of a state-civil society synergy for stemming endemic violence. With a strong civic edifice in place, the state can prevent riots with considerable ease. Some other towns have of late followed the Bhiwandi model of neighborhood committees, reporting considerable success.³⁰

III. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Thinking about how the state might erode or build bridging social capital was not the central point of my research so long as the crux of the analytic matter was: how does one explain city-level variation in Hindu-Muslim relations? And why is it that in the same state, cities and towns, often separated by a mere 50-80 miles, have such dramatically different outcomes?

Moving from a cross-sectional analysis to an inter-temporal one -- why cities change over time -- has begun to reveal the important role played by the state. Why should this move begin to bring a new factor into analytical gaze?

In India, local police forces function under the instructions of state governments, not of central or local governments. Indian federalism has left the law and order function of governance to the state level, allowing the central government to intervene only during an emergency, which is typically defined as a breakdown of order at the state level. Local breakdowns, as in riots, are normally viewed as matters for the state government to handle.

Logically, then, given such a radical city-level variation under India's constitutional arrangements, there are two ways of bringing the state in. Either (a) one can say that the state governments in India instruct the local police and civil administrations of some towns to allow or foment riots, while giving strict orders to the police and local administrations of other towns to not let riots take place under any circumstances and the central government, which can stop this through the use of Article 356, ignores this law-breaking role of state government, *and* this pattern obtains over and over again for the first set of towns to become riot-prone and the second set to stay nearly always peaceful. Or (b) one can say that the police and administration in peaceful and riot-prone towns are radically different – in riot-prone towns they are systematically communal, and in peaceful ones, they are not. And that is why peaceful towns have no riots, whereas the riot-prone ones do.

As a researcher, I really don't think I can prove (a), nor do I believe that anyone else has proved (a). As for (b), radical differences between the ground-level state organs in different

³⁰ Usha Thakkar, 2004, "Mohalla Committees of Bombay: Candles in Ominous Darkness", *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 7. Also Sushobha Barve, 2003, *Healing Streams: Bringing Back Hope in the Aftermath*

places were indeed one of the two initial hypotheses in the previous project. In the first two years of the project, it became clear that this hypothesis was sustainable. I wrote:

In India, the police and civil administrations are under the state, not local, government. Right through their professional lives, civil and police officers in a state are transferred from one town to another. As a consequence, no town is permanently under one set of officers. And while the lower rungs of the civil and police administrations can be kept in one place for longer periods of time, it will be extremely hard, perhaps impossible, to prove that on a matter as critical as law and order during mass disturbances, given India's hierarchical structure of police and civil administration, the lower staff, whose promotion depends on the positive recommendation of the bosses, can repeatedly defy those bosses and continue to express their communal biases during period of communal tension -- which means very often, given the frequency of such tensions in riot-prone cities. With so much flux at the level of personnel in any given town, the biases and quality of administration and policing do not stay the same for long periods of time. Moreover, riot-prone cities often get some of the most competent police and administrative officers, and the peaceful ones some of the least able from the state cadre. *If neither staff abilities nor the quality of administration and policing systematically vary between peaceful and riot-prone cities, it is not possible to link the difference between peaceful and violent towns to policing or administrative factors.*" (pp. 288-9)

In short, while the state police and local administration did have communal biases, it is not true that such biases marked only the riot-prone towns. Somehow, the communal biases of the police and administration in peaceful towns, despite their existence, did not produce riots. Something more had to happen to turn these biases into factors that are riot-producing, riot-promoting, or riot-worsening.

Given the evidence from both peaceful and violent towns, the most logically consistent and empirically supportable position I could take was as follows:

"The fundamental reason for riots lies elsewhere. It is the environment of a peaceful city that makes the police and administration perform its law-and-order functions better, irrespective of the biases or the level of professionalism. As far as riots are concerned, a communally integrated place is simply better policed and administered. The local organs of the state function better, when there are robust links between Hindus and Muslims in civic life, associational in the cities and quotidian in the villages." (p. 289)

Variation between cities located within a single state means that the search for causal factors cannot be confined to who controls the state, or whether the state is just and responsible in its conduct. Any such control, or public policies, must have been subjected to locally varying

factors for a given state to contain both peaceful and violent cities. *By definition, a state-level constant – who controls the state at a given point, or unjust state conduct -- cannot explain intra-state variations.*

If so, the puzzle is: Can an argument about the importance of civil society really mean that the state is irrelevant? Does it matter whether a state is ruled by Hindu nationalists, whose anti-Muslim ideological proclivities are well known, or by the Communists whose ideological opposition to communalism is beyond doubt? Is it simply incidental that riots took place in Gujarat in 2002, but on the whole did not spread beyond that state?

III A. Are Elections and State Involvement in Riots Tied up?

In his recent book, in which Gujarat violence of 2002 figures prominently, Steven Wilkinson has proposed a state-centric theory of riots, which goes towards answering the problem posed above.³¹ His central argument is that “democratic states protect minorities when it is in their government’s electoral interest to do so”.³² But when, one might ask, is it in the government’s interest to protect minorities?

Wilkinson points to two principal possibilities: (a) “when minorities are an important part of their party’s current support base, or the support base of one of their coalition partners in a coalition government”;³³ or (b) “.. when the overall electoral system in a state is so *competitive*

³¹ Steven Wilkinson, 2004, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

³² Wilkinson, 2004, p. 6.

³³ Ibid.

...that there is therefore a high probability that the governing party will have to negotiate or form a coalition with minority supported parties in the future, despite its own preferences”.³⁴

Of the two parts of the argument, thus, the first concentrates on the support base of the governing party or coalition; and the second focuses on the level of electoral competition. The higher the competition between political parties, says Wilkinson, the lower will be the incidence of riots.³⁵ In highly competitive electoral contexts, Muslims would be protected by ruling parties, even when targeted by mobs in riots, because small groups could be critical in swinging closely contested elections.

To support his theory, Wilkinson has undertaken multivariate regression analysis, as well as marshaled qualitative empirical materials primarily from five states: Gujarat, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The results of the multivariate regression analysis need not detain us here; I have extensively commented elsewhere.³⁶ The state-level materials are more pertinent to our discussion here.

Wilkinson argues that the clearest support for his theory comes from how Indian states handled the 2002 riots. Having a bipolar electoral arena split between the BJP and the Congress, Gujarat in 2002 was among the states having the lowest number of effective parties, as also a party in power, the BJP, which had no need for Muslim votes. In the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the electoral arena has been multipolar for over a decade. Both states have among the highest number of effective parties in India at the state level (along with Kerala and Tamil

³⁴ Wilkinson, 2004, p. 7, emphasis added.

³⁵ “Politicians in government will restrict the supply of security to minorities if ... overall levels of party competition in a state are so low that the likelihood of having to seek the support of minority-supported parties in the future is very low.” Wilkinson, 2004, p. 7

Nadu); moreover, the ruling parties in both states were dependent on Muslim support in 2002. The states of MP and Rajasthan -- adjacent to Gujarat and like Gujarat, having a bipolar electoral arena split mainly between the BJP and Congress -- might have had a low number of effective parties, but the political party in power, the Congress, unlike the BJP in Gujarat, needed Muslim votes.

Given the two parts of the argument, thus, Gujarat in 2002 had the worst of both worlds; U.P. and Bihar (and Kerala) the best of both; and M.P. and Rajasthan were in between. In consequence, Gujarat had gruesome violence, but U.P., Bihar, M.P and Rajasthan escaped it altogether.

Wilkinson's argument is implausible. First of all, it is worth asking if the Gujarat riots in 2002 had something to do with the fact that the central government in Delhi, in which the BJP was a primary partner, did not suspend the BJP government in the state, using Article 356 of India's constitution. Several political parties in the BJP-led NDA coalition -- especially the Samata Party and the TDP -- have always cultivated Muslim vote, even if the BJP has not. Second, more critically, one can think of *not one or two, but many* instances when the ruling party was not the anti-Muslim BJP, or its analytic equivalent, the Shiv Sena, but deadly Hindu-Muslim riots nonetheless took place.

If Gujarat in 2002 was ruled by the BJP, the Congress party ruled Gujarat on the following occasions when riots broke out: January 1982; March 1984; March-July 1985; January, March and July 1986; January, February and November 1987; April, October, November and December 1990; January, March and April 1991; and January and July 1992.¹

³⁶ Ashutosh Varshney, 2005, "An Electoral Theory of Riots?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 24.; and Ashutosh Varshney and Joshua Gubler, "Votes and Violence: Maps, Proxies and Measurements", a paper

The BJP came to power in Gujarat state only in 1995. Moreover, in the early to mid 1980s, the Congress in Gujarat also unveiled the so-called KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi and Muslim) strategy, aimed at putting together an alliance of these groups as a basis for power. The Congress aggressively courted Muslim vote; it was in power; yet Hindu-Muslim riots were endemic.

Consider now the period of Ayodhya agitation, 1990-92. During 1989-90, Uttar Pradesh was ruled by Mulayam Singh Yadav, whose commitment to Muslims and cultivation of Muslim vote is well known. He did order the police under his command to shoot on the masses mobilized by Hindu nationalists, earning the famous epithet “Maulana Mulayam”. Yet, awful riots took place in Uttar Pradesh in 1989-90. In supporting his theory, Wilkinson notes how Mulayam Singh Yadav in 1994-5 succeeded in preventing riots³⁷, but surprisingly omits his failure to do so in 1989-90.

To make sure that these illustrations are not simply viewed as a few exceptions, only proving the rule, let me give some more critical examples. During the infamous Bombay riots in January 1993, the Congress ruled the state of Maharashtra. During the 1980s riots in the Moradabad, Aligarh and Meerut towns of UP, the Congress ran state governments in UP. Between 1978 and 1983, riots repeatedly rocked the city of Hyderabad, even as the state of Andhra Pradesh had Congress governments. And most remarkably of all, the riots of 1961, the worst year for riots in the first decade and a half of independent India, occurred when Nehru was India’s Prime Minister, with an unquestionable commitment to India’s Muslims, and almost all

presented at the annual meetings of the Midwestern Political Science Association, Chicago, April 2007.

³⁷ Wilkinson, 2004, p. 93

states then were Congress ruled. Counterexamples undermining Wilkinson's theory are simply too many to be brushed aside as occasional deviations from the rule.

Why should the Congress, even under Nehru and Mrs. Gandhi, have failed to prevent riots? Why was Mulayam Singh Yadav successful in 1994-5 but failed in 1989-90? Why did Gujarat government fail to prevent riots in the early to mid 1980s? Can we prove that the Congress governments (and Mulayam Singh Yadav in 1989-90) were not cultivating, or did not need, Muslim vote? Not having used the many counter-examples above, Wilkinson does not formulate the question this way.

Fundamentally, Wilkinson's understanding of the state is at issue here, especially the relationship between the ruling party on the one hand and the permanent bureaucracy and police in a parliamentary system on the other. The theory that riots would not take place if only the government could order the police or armed forces "to use deadly force to stop them" (p. 20) betrays a monolithic and omnipotent view of the state. The state is not a monolith, nor is it omnipotent or omniscient. Ruling politicians are indeed the bosses of bureaucrats and police officials, but that does not mean that ruling parties will always get what they want.

Quite often, if not always, the relationship between ruling parties and the bureaucratic-police establishment is one consisting of serious principal-agent problems. If peasants can subvert the landlords through "weapons of the weak" without frontally defying them (Scott, 1985), police officers and bureaucrats, with much greater power than the peasants, can also subvert the ruling parties through subterfuge, dissimulation and feigned compliance, even when one can demonstrate that the ruling party would not benefit from having riots and would like to prevent or control them.

Why did so many riots take place under Nehru and Indira Gandhi's Congress party rule, despite their pro-Muslim political ideologies and their control over state governments, especially of Mrs Gandhi's? Because some police officers and bureaucrats had very different ideological persuasions; or because officers at the top levels shared the ideological proclivities of the rulers but officers at the district level did not; or because police officers were heavily compromised in that the criminals who led the mobs in riots had developed an extensive network of relationships with them and with important local politicians; or because the police officers and bureaucrats, despite political orders and their desire to control riots, were simply unable to do so, either due to the fact that information flows on the ground were defective, or the ruling politicians were divided on what to do, or opposition politicians, especially the Hindu nationalists, were strong enough to ignite riots and had enough links in local society to incite mobs. *Other than ruling parties, opposition parties in a democracy also matter, and even while not ruling, can wield a lot of power.* The argument that the state can stop riots at will can only be premised upon an assumption that there are either no principal-agent problems at the level of state institutions and/or the state is all-powerful and opposition parties of no consequence. Both assumptions are flawed.

This view of the state, of course, does not mean that the state is never interested in riots. It may be, but that, as the examples above show, is not always the case. State involvement of the kind Wilkinson talks about is linked conceptually to pogroms, not riots. Gujarat comes closest to Wilkinson's theory because it was perhaps the only full-blooded pogrom in independent India. Riots have often taken place in India; but few of them can be called pogroms beyond Gujarat.

This view of the state also does not mean that one should stop critiquing the state for failing to protect the lives of its citizens. In terms of action, citizens should of course exercise pressure on the state to behave better, while seeking to build better links between Hindus and Muslims at the local levels. But in terms of analysis, one needs to draw a distinction between empirical and normative theories of the state. The state quite often does not, or is unable to, do what it should.

III B. Towards the Building Blocks of a Theory

Instead of relying so heavily on Gujarat, let us turn to the more local examples to formulate our theoretical positions. As we have seen, in each of the city-level transformations noted in Section II, the state played an important part. How should we understand the change that came about?

The best explanation, to my mind, can be presented metaphorically. I have used the metaphor of ‘sparks’ (small clashes, tensions, rumors) and ‘fires’ (riots and pogroms) above; I return to it to explain how, as a result of the state’s role, change occurs.³⁸

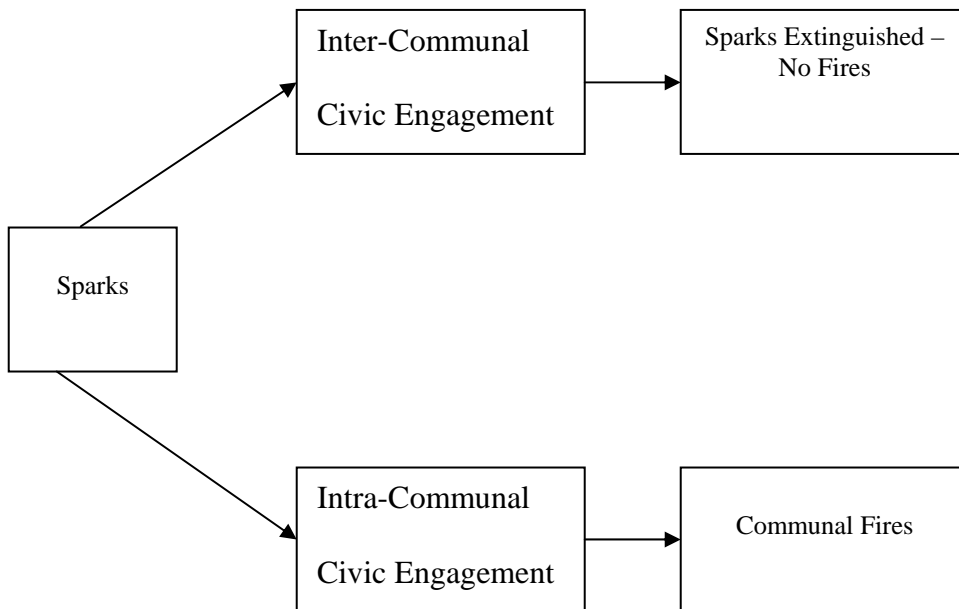
State behavior can constitute a spark; or what is analytically equivalent, the spark, wherever and however it emerged, may be fanned by the state, even though it is the constitutional responsibility of the state to put out, by any legal means that are necessary, the sparks that can produce big disturbances. It follows that to the extent that a state is controlled by communal forces, the sparks confronting local mechanisms will be that much more flammable. Depending on the strength of the local bridging capital, of course, the peaceful

³⁸ The explanation below relies heavily on my, “States or Cities? Studying Hindu-Muslim Riots”, in Rob Jenkins, ed, *Regional Reflections: Comparing Politics Across India’s States*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

towns may still not have communal fires, but assaulted much more vigorously, some of them may well come apart. This amounts to what may be called an action-reaction model, diagrammatically presented below (Figure 1).

In an inter-temporal sense, then, the higher the intensity of the spark, the higher will be the possibility of a change to the prevailing distribution of peace and violence. Once fanned by the state's ruling political party, police or bureaucracy, the spark may well be such that it overwhelms local structures that had allowed some towns, during earlier periods of violence, to remain peaceful. This would, then, lead to a greater dispersion of communal violence in a state than had been historically observed – by breaking the civil barriers that towns had constructed for themselves for preserving peace, and by making the riot-prone towns even worse.

Figure 1: The State, Civil Society and Communal Violence



IV. CONCLUSIONS

In light of the discussion above, let me now re-interpret the cases discussed in Section II and present three conclusions about the role of the state. First, when the state plays a role directly detrimental to peace, the state enters the process outlined above through sparks. Its behavior, actions and ideology could generate tensions, to which different towns with their varying civic texture react, communal violence thus becoming a product of how big the spark is, and how strong the bridging civic texture of the town is. Alternatively, the state may not put out the sparks, as mandated by the constitution, instead fanning them further and allowing them to become fires. Gujarat 2002 is an example of such a role.

In contrast, when the state plays a positive role towards peace, it can enter the process in two ways: (a) it can seek to ensure through its control over local police and administration that when communal tensions arise, they are nipped in the bud by administrative action; or (b) it can also do that through civic mechanisms – by building and nurturing bridging social capital and making the law-and-order function of the local police and administration easier, as lasting environmental support for police functions during riots is created. The Bhiwandi case is an illustration of (b). The local state organs sought to build defenses against a future disruption of peace by establishing bridging institutions. That is why it has successfully contained sparks over the last decade and a half, even as nearby towns have burned.

A third possibility, exemplified by Ahmedabad in the 1960s, concerns the indirect role of the state. In this scenario, the state does not seek to destroy the bridging social capital. Rather, the organizations that embodied such capital seek state patronage and develop a special

relationship with the state. While this gives them power, it also tends to reduce incentives to mobilize and engage in organizational work, thereby eroding their civic capacity. They develop feet of clay, and their capacity to generate intercommunal civic engagement declines. Under such circumstances, a small spark – a clash over cows – becomes hard to contain. Brutal and gruesome rioting can result.
