

Civil Society and its Impact on Curbing Communal Violence: A Study on the 2013 Muzaffarnagar Riots

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Abstract

Communal riots are not new to India, but the Muzaffarnagar communal riots in 2013 breached the scholarly wisdom of the past. The riots did not follow any of the precedents of wisdom established by scholars. Comprehending the Muzaffarnagar riots using a theoretical framework is extremely difficult because no single theory can embrace all the variables of the Muzaffarnagar riots. Muzaffarnagar riots are the culmination of all the social, political and economic events that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. This article attempts to understand Muzaffarnagar using three major theoretical frameworks: Pual Brass's Institutional riot system, Varshney's Civil society theory and Wilkinson's Electoral incentive theory. Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013 culminated all the social, political, and economic changes that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. This paper tried to gain insight into the Muzaffarnagar riots using the local sociological context.

Introduction/Background

Social contracts implicitly understand living in harmony with each other. However, India posits a different picture, where heterogeneity and diversity are the norm. Amidst all of this, there arises a possibility of in-group and out-group formation based on ethnicity, and this rigid demarcation leads to fraught relations between communities. Civil societies, i.e., a separate sector that does not fall under the governmental and even the business/market sectors (Petra Ahrweilera, 2019). Often, they are known to act as a curbing mechanism for ethnic unrest or conflicts. The government can only cater to the various communities to a certain extent. With the growing intersectionality, some groups are bound to face a certain level of alienation

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or exclusion. Therefore, the role of civil society is essential to maintain peace and tranquility in society.

Historically, western Uttar Pradesh has been prone to volatile communal conflict; the unique socio-political aspects of the regions where Muzaffarnagar is situated are prone to communal conflict due to unique socio-political factors. Land disputes, economic inequalities, and religious conflicts are significant factors contributing to past riots in the regions (Anwar, 2023) In 2013, Muzaffarnagar city experienced one of the deadliest riots India has experienced after the 2002 Godhra riots, killing more than 62 people and displacing more than 50,000 people. About 30 children froze to death in the refugee camp (Singh, 2016). A fight between two individuals triggered the incident and gave it a communal colour, leading to the death of one Muslim and two Jat farmers. The commonality of the riot can be traced back to other riots that occurred in the past. An alleged incident caused the riot, a minority community was targeted, and the state machinery was a dumb spectator and mute. Despite similarities, this riot is distinct (Singh, 2016). Unlike the past riots, this riot mainly occurred in the rural areas of western Uttar Pradesh. Social media played a vital role in the riot, and most importantly, the post-green revolution and the sociological phenomenon played significant roles in creating a fertile ground for the riots. This riot can be localized using the contextual phenomenon of Muzaffarnagar. Varshney (2013) believes that the Muzaffarnagar riot partly breached scholarly wisdom. A higher level of income and the centrality of minority vote banks are instrumental in reducing communal tension, but the same has departed from the past trends. Muzaffarnagar has increased economically, and the Minority votes were central for the Samajwadi government. The Samajwadi govt, which heavily depended on minority votes, could not protect minorities (Varshney, 2013). These are significant factors that distinguish the Muzaffarnagar riots from the past trends of riots and compel scholars to understand the uniqueness of the riots using the existing theoretical frameworks.

This article attempts to understand the integral link between civil society organizations and communal violence using Paul Brass's (2004) Institutional Riot System and Varshney's (2001, 2002) theory of Civil society. The article demonstrates the relevance of Institutional and Civil society theories in understanding the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots. The nuances of civil society and the instrumental approaches were attempted to realize the Muzaffarnagar riots in its social, political, and economic context. Civil societies create an equilibrium, holding authority figures accountable and demanding a just and all-encompassing nation (Fukuyama, 1999). However, it might only sometimes be accurate. This article will delve deep into civil societies' intricacies, history, relation to ethnic conflicts, and the

Communal Violence in the context of civil society engagement theory

Social scientists have tried to propose theories for collective violence. Paul Brass (2001) explains the riots as an instrumental approach by political forces. However, the uniqueness of the geography is the paramount factor in employing an institutional approach to communal tension. Varshney (2001) starts the theory from the other end of the spectrum and highlights the civil and economic engagement of the community of cities that helped to sustain peace. Only civil and economic engagement does not help sustain peace; instead, it has to be inter-communal. Varshney (2001) explained how relevant civil society has become to studying ethnic contracts. History has showcased many times that places with much diversity still manage to keep ethnic conflict out of the purview and vice versa; there are places where ethnic peace gets disrupted quickly and suddenly. In his paper, Varshney discusses how ethnic conflicts are not widespread. Instead, they can be localized, and upon dissection of the conflicts in the rural and urban setting of India, it indicated that about 82% of the urban population had not been a part of a prone area.

Eight cities contribute to 46% of all Hindu-Muslim brutality, although making up just 18% of the urban population. These towns are also the epicentre of urban riots. To ensure comparable Hindu-Muslim demographics, researchers paired three cities that were susceptible to riots with three that were not to understand this better. This was carried out because of the contention made by social scientists, legislators, and both Hindu and Muslim groups that Muslim demography has a significant influence on political behaviour and intergroup conflicts. The study sought to determine the local causes underlying community violence by looking at cities with comparable demographics but varying degrees of violence.

Varshney identifies two ways in which civil society and ethnic conflicts are connected. Firstly, people from various ethnicities, backgrounds, races, castes, etc., communicate with each other to promote peace and harmony. Peace communities have become a very efficient mechanism for maintaining a check-and-balance system. It also creates an equilibrium amongst various ethnic groups. However, this is not possible in a highly segregated and demarcated group. Various associational forms of engagement also become an effective mechanism to foster a good relationship between ethnicity and groups. Welcome and secure, and the propagation of interaction creates a sense of trust within ethnic groups.

Intercommunal civic networks are more effective at withstanding

external communal shocks, such as partitions, civil wars, and desecration of holy sites. Additionally, they help to limit the strategic behaviour of local politicians. Vote bank politics often play a significant role in creating a drift between communities. The effectiveness of civil engagement is proportional to the ineffectiveness of the political forces operating in the region. Brass believes that despite strong civil engagement forces, it is difficult to withstand the power of political forces that employ community violence.

Electoral phenomenon of communal violence

The employment of the IRS system often dismantles the effectiveness of civil forces as the civil society organization ruptures when the electoral process is intense. Wilkinson's (2004) votes and violence locate the collective violence within the context of electoral incentives. The same has also explained that the proportionate competition in electoral elections is directly linked to the protection of minorities by the incumbent government. The theoretical relationship between electoral performance and the incidence of communal conflicts can be seen through the Wilkinson-Varshney data set. That has compiled the data set of communal violence since independence. The above dataset is about the Hindu-Muslim Violence between 1950 and the 1990s, compiled by Varshney and Wilkinson. It was compiled using the Times of India report, one of the leading newspapers in India. The dataset provides information about the number of deaths and the date of the incident of the riots. It also highlights the proximate cause and the spatial variation of riots nationwide.

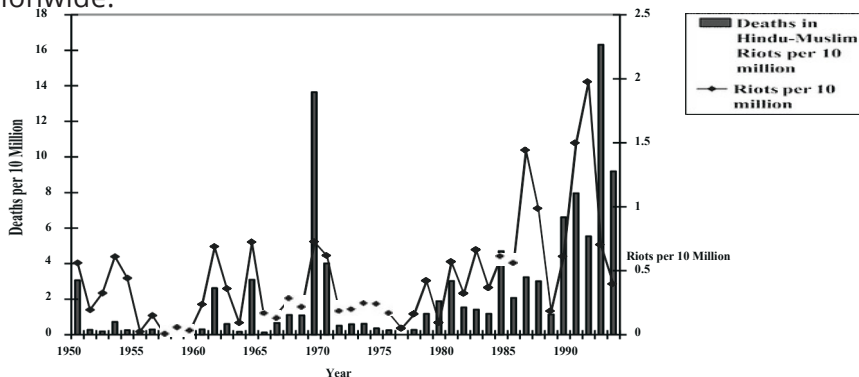


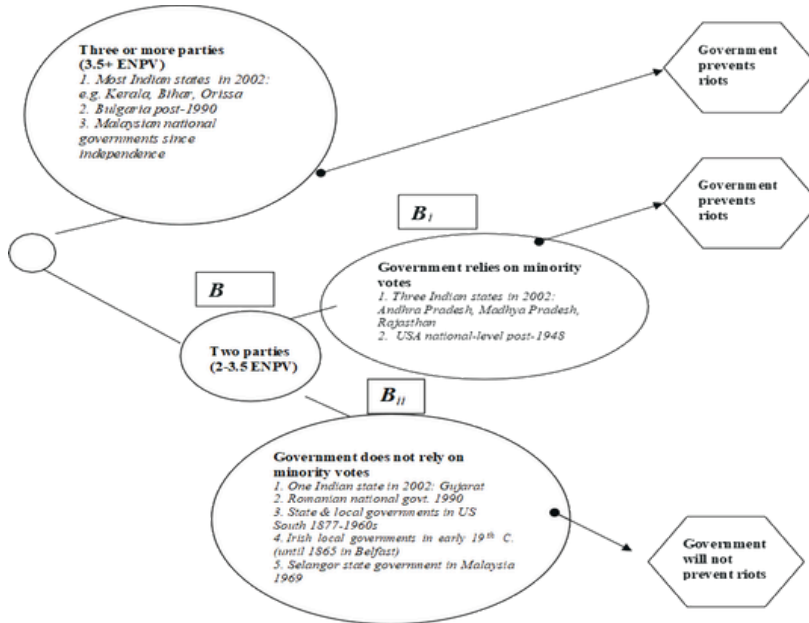
Figure 1.2 Hindu-Muslim riots since independence (data from Varshney and Wilkinson)

According to the Varshney-Wilkinson dataset, close to 1200 communal conflicts were reported by the Times of India between 1950-1995, with more than 7000 people reportedly killed in these 1200 communal conflicts. However, the interesting fact is that between 1950 and 1981, the average

number of killings in communal conflict was around 16 per year, and from 1982 to 1995, the average number of killings increased to 48 per year. In fourteen years, the number of communal violence was about 674 riots, causing around 5000 deaths (Sergenti, 2010). Out of the total number of reported riots, around a maximum number occurred in these 14 years, and the intensity of riots significantly sharpened from 1950-1980 to 1982-1995. The political changes in the late 1980s and the early 1990s contributed to the same. The sudden rise of communal incidents in India in the early 1980s to late 1990s can be seen using economic and political factors that emerged.

The Ram temple movement, Mandal and Kamandal politics, and the emergence of the green revolution are some of the significant social and political changes India experienced from the 1980s to 1990s. Singh (2016) believes that the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013 are the culmination of the political and social changes that happened in the 1980s and 1990s. These changes allowed the political forces to create fertile land for political forces to employ the IRS. The economic and political dimensions of the 1980s contributed to the significant surge in communal tensions. The Ram temple movement and the employment of the IRS by the political forces created a volatile political atmosphere across the nation; this period also experienced a positive relationship between the economic growth rate and communal violence. The pattern for the same is observed by the Varshney and Wilkinson dataset.

Apart from the Instrumental approach and civil society theory. The riots need to be studied using the political context. Wilkinson's central argument is that higher electoral competition safeguards the interests of minorities. Effective electoral competition between a more significant number of political parties reduces the occurrence of riots. Varshney argues otherwise and cites India's electoral history since independence. Until 1967, Congress was the most dominant party, losing a few state elections, and by 1977, Congress lost Delhi due to an emergency. Contrary to Wilkinson, the Maximum riots occurred between the 1980s and the 1995s.



The relationship between party competition and a state's response to minority polarization and violence: Indian and non-Indian examples (ENVP adequate number of parties (Wilkinson S. , 2004) Source: Steven Wilkinson, Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Violence in India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004),

Wilkinson observed five central states, Gujarat, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, in the context of the 2002 riots. The ruling party in Gujarat in 2002 did not depend on the Muslim votes, so less was incentivized to protect the Muslims. Still, the adjective states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh were ruled by a congress party that needed Muslim votes to compete with the rival parties. However, this argument is flawed because Congress in Gujarat failed to protect minorities in 1982, 1984, 1987, and 1991. The BJP only came to power in 1995. (Varshney, An Electoral Theory of Communal Riots?, 2005) The Samajwadi government also failed to protect Muslims in the 1989-1990 riots. The Varshney Wilkinson dataset can be analyzed through three major theoretical frameworks; Wilkinson argues that the higher party competition often compels the incumbent political party to protect minorities. Varshney disagrees with the theory of ENPV (adequate number of parties); Varshney argues that ENPV is ineffective in deciding the effectiveness of riots. The Varshney Wilkinson dataset provides the geographical location of the communal riots between 1950 and 1995. An interesting geographical fact about the communal riots are that they are not uniformly spread nationwide. The number has excellent variation following the state. Nevertheless, Wilkinson's theory,

which states the importance of minority votes and electoral competition as a shield against discrimination, does not seem convincing. Despite several limitations, Wilkinson's theory on the ENVP and the importance of electoral competition in protecting minorities against communal violence is one of the significant milestones in peace studies.

Muzaffarnagar riots did not follow the past trends

Scholars across various disciplines approached Hindu-Muslim riots from different perspectives. Mitra and Ray (2014) used economic phenomena to understand the Hindu-Muslim conflict. The growth rate between the 1950s and 1980s was 1.7 %, and the average growth rate between the 1980s and 2000 was around 3.8 % (Sergenti, 2010). The positive relationship between the surge of communal violence and economic growth is established. This relationship needs to be seen through the spatial analysis. The increase in per capita Muslim expenditures leads to a significant rise in communal conflict in the short and medium run. In contrast to this increase per capita, Hindu well-being is insignificant in religious conflict.

On the other hand, Wilkinson (2004) explored the integral link between the impact of Minority vote in the containment of Hindu-Muslim communal violence. Varshney (2003) examined the effect of social capital and civil engagement in the containment of communal violence. Paul Brass has taken a different perspective and explored the relationship between political process and communal violence. Brass maintains that the other actors preplanned the riots for electoral gains. However, the riots in Muzaffarnagar are unique and have not changed the trends that have happened in the past. Any theoretical framework is highly problematic in understanding the riots. It is essential to understand the Muzaffarnagar riots using different theoretical frameworks because no theoretical framework can comprehend the Muzaffarnagar riots. Varshney (2013) argues that the Muzaffarnagar riots departed from the past trends of riots studied by scholars. Muzaffarnagar riots were rural riots, and conventionally, civil war tends to be rural, and the riots tend to be urban. Secondly, Indian villagers majorly experienced caste-based violence, and urban India experienced the Hindu Muslims riots. Thirdly, the Minority voting power did not incentivize the Samajwadi party to protect minorities in Muzaffarnagar. Singh (2016) argues that the culmination of social, political, and economic events of the 1980s eventually contributed to the Muzaffarnagar riots.

The social dimension of western Uttar Pradesh changed after the Green Revolution, and the economic interdependency between JATs and Muslims was reduced. This eventually weakened the inter-communal engagement. The new class emerged in the post-green revolution society and changed the civil relationship in the villages. The Muslims who were earlier dependent

on the JAT economically migrated to the cities for employment. This employment search reduced their dependency on the JAT. The reduction of interdependency was due to the rapid expansion of urbanization and industrialization in Muzaffarnagar post-green revolution. The lack of interdependence challenged the political dominance of the Jat in western UP, especially in Muzaffarnagar. (MAJMA, 2015, p. 6-7; Rao, Mishra, Singh, & Bajpai, 2013, p. 35-37; TISS, 2013, p. 12-13). The JATs are economically powerful and hold a maximum amount of land. However, the inter-communal associational relationship between Jat and Muslims was affected due to the reduction of economic interdependence between

these communities—politicians often exploit this lack of inter-communal association. The Muzaffarnagar riot resulted from the socio-economic changes that occurred in the mid-1980s. The changing economic and social

relationship allowed the Political forces to employ the IRS as the village's economic and social profile changed post-green revolution agrarian industry. H Zeynep Bulutgil and Neeraj Prasad (2022) argue that the IRS system comprises two Villages in Muzaffarnagar, Hussainpur and Mohammadpur Raisingh. These two villages are adjacent to each other, and these two villages have sizable Muslim Populations and were vulnerable during the 2013 Muzafarnagaar riots. Still, Mohammadpur Raisingh experienced severe riots, and Hussainpur was peaceful. H Zeynep Bulutgil and Neeraj Prasad (2022) believe that employing the IRS was politically fruitful in Mohammadpur because it has a sizable JAT population, which is not valid for Hussainpur Villages. However, Hussainpur did not experience riots primarily because of the solid civil engagement between the communities. Hussainpur remained peaceful during the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition. This example shows that the political forces tend to employ the IRS where they have a great Structure to support. Civil engagement can be instrumental in countering the IRS, as demonstrated by the Villagers of Hussainpur. Like Gyan (2013), in his article "Why Meerut has not gone the Muzaffarnagar way" he explains why Meerut has not seen a significant outbreak of communal conflict since 1987. Gyan (2013) supports the civil association theory proposed by Varshney and explains that the civil solid association of Meerut diffuses most communal clashes. The Western Uttar Pradesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, based in Meerut, is a solid inter-communal association that significantly controls communal riots in the region. (Varma, 2013) A similar kind of solid association is absent in Muzaffarnagar and the green revolution in Muzaffarnagar, and the emergence of a new social group broke the inter-communal association that existed before due to the economic interdependence between the Muslims and the JAT. The lack of communal association allowed the riot specialist to employ the IRS. (H Zeynep Bulutgil, 2023)

Conclusion

Varshney's (2001) theory of civil society, Wilkinson's (2004) theory of electoral incentives, and Paul Brass's theory of the IRS system are the major theories used to explain the Muzaffarnagar communal riots. This paper also tried to look into the socio-economic changes in Muzaffarnagar and their effect on the peace and tranquillity of the city. This study examines the structure of civil society and the absence and presence of the same in communal riots. Varshney believes that the stronger the civil association, the better the peace. The stronger the inter-communal engagement, the better the capabilities to stand the IRS system. To sum up, civic societies are vital players in reducing ethnic tensions in India. They contribute significantly to peacebuilding initiatives by promoting inclusive policies, encouraging communication, and creating a trusting environment. The research points to a high association between sturdy civil society networks and decreased ethnic tensions, notwithstanding the complexity of the relationship between ethnic identities, the state, and civil societies. Nevertheless, civil societies have enormous potential to heal rifts and foster social harmony despite ongoing difficulties. Developing successful ways to foster ethnic peace and cohabitation requires a consciousness of their temporal history, significance in solving disputes, and the unique setting of India.

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