

# **MICRO CON**

**A MICRO LEVEL ANALYSIS  
OF VIOLENT CONFLICT**

**What's civil about intergroup violence? Five inadequacies of communal and ethnic constructs of urban riots\***

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# MICRO CON

## WHAT'S CIVIL ABOUT INTERGROUP VIOLENCE? FIVE INADEQUACIES OF COMMUNAL AND ETHNIC CONSTRUCTS OF URBAN RIOTS\*

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### **Abstract**

The term ‘communal violence’ is commonly used in the South Asian context to refer to inter-group or ethnic violence. I contend that understanding intergroup violence purely within an inter-community or inter-ethnic framework is inadequate, in that it does not fully capture the processes of perpetration, impacts or mitigation of such violence. I suggests five areas where the categories of ‘communal’ and ‘ethnic’ fall short: in their historical precision, in their scale, in their partial conceptualization of agency, in their ability to engage with the gendered modalities of violence, and in their ability to explain individuals’ motivations for physically perpetrating intergroup violence. The arguments are based on primary data gathered through in-depth interviews with victims, perpetrators and witnesses of incidents of intergroup violence in India, as well as a review of relevant studies of intergroup violence from across the world. The terminology of ‘civil violence’, which expressly accommodates a micro-perspective and awards agency to *individuals*, is highlighted as a more accurate and appropriate framework to understand violence categorized as ‘communal’ in contemporary India. These arguments also have implications on how we conceptualize the ‘ethnic riot’, and how state and society formulate responses to intergroup violence, elsewhere in the developing world.

*Keywords: violence; ethnicity; riots; mobilization; India*

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## Introduction

On the night of March 1, 2002, in Sardarpur, in Mehsana district, eastern Gujarat, thirty-three Muslims were hoarded into a small room by a mob of just under 100 Hindus. The room was sealed and set alight, killing all those locked inside. This grievous act of violence was said to be retaliatory in that it mimicked the manner in which fifty-nine Hindu pilgrims were locked and burned alive in a train compartment just outside Godhra train station in Gujarat earlier that year. Political scientists have tended to understand such violence under the broad framework of ethnic violence, and in the particular context of South Asia, the violence is referred to as ‘communal violence’.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I present five arguments that demonstrate the inaccuracies in classifying such violence as ‘communal’ or ‘ethnic’, and highlight the implications this has on how state and society respond to persistent intergroup violence. The arguments are based on my reflections while conducting in-depth interviews with victims, perpetrators and witnesses of other incidents of rioting<sup>3</sup> in India, as well as a review of relevant studies of intergroup violence from across the world. I suggest that the terminology of ‘civil violence’, which expressly accommodates a micro-perspective and awards agency to *individuals*, is more accurate and appropriate. These arguments therefore also have implications on how we conceptualise the ‘ethnic riot’, and formulate responses to intergroup violence, elsewhere in the world.

A Special Trial Court recently sentenced the 31 individuals from Sardarpur to life-imprisonment.<sup>4</sup> This is a milestone judgment, as it constitutes the largest number of convictions for a single act of mob violence. At closer inspection, the judgment also has implications on *how* we understand intergroup violence. In the Sardarpur case, while the court took cognizance of crimes which had been committed, and found enough evidence to uphold convictions, it nevertheless deemed that the acts of violence were perpetrated ‘in the spur of the moment’,<sup>5</sup> and did not accept any charges of criminal conspiracy or intent, which could have increased the penalty to the maximum of capital punishment. By awarding agency to the group’s actions over individual intent, the Sardarpur judgment reiterates that the perpetration of violence is distinctly shaped by the motivations and compulsions, or the *mens rea* of criminal intent, leading to the

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<sup>2</sup> Translated as *Sampradayik Himsa* or *Sampradayik Danga* in Hindi.

<sup>3</sup> I consciously use a very broad selection criterion for respondents, roughly broken into three categories – victims and witnesses of violence, perpetrators of violence and those involved in mitigating violence. At no point were these three categories considered to be mutually exclusive; most perpetrators of civil violence had also been, or continue to be, victims of violence, while the perpetration of civil violence against one group could also be construed as vigilante protection by another group. It is also important to point out that the in-depth interviews were not structured differently for the three categories, and any variance in the structure of the interviews was due to the circumstances of individual interviews and not because of the category the respondent was in.

<sup>4</sup> The Hindu 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Katakam 2011.

perpetration. It is however a struggle within legal frameworks to prove criminal intent beyond doubt for individuals arrested for rioting. To achieve this, it must be proved that the violence of the group was perpetrated for a common purpose and that individual perpetrators were aware that their actions might lead to violence. The prosecutor will usually not deem an offence so serious as to incur these additional complications, particularly when a lesser convictions, like of public disorder, are possible. These legal complications are also mirrored in political discourse wherein acts of violence such as the riot in Sardarpur are categorized as ‘communal’ or ‘ethnic’ violence, implying that riots are a manifestation of clashes between ‘communities’ or ‘ethnicities’, and not individuals.

The main question guiding this paper asks how our understanding of intergroup violence is altered when we explicitly engage with the agency to perpetrate violence at the individual level. Most studies of such violence have tended to focus on the social structures governing group behavior in recognition of the powerful social hierarchies, manifest not only in the form of group identity and consciousness, but also seen in the actions of ringleaders applying peer-pressure and shaping the ‘mob mentality’ of intergroup violence. Should however, our models of agent behavior aimed at understanding perpetration, victimization or mitigation of such violence, be limited by an inability to prove criminal intent in courts of law? In other words, should political and other social scientists only include group characteristics (like ethnicity or religion) into explanatory models, or also look for causal relationships between those perpetrating intergroup violence and individual level characteristics (like employment or education) and traits (like past criminal convictions)? These continue to be largely unanswered questions, and yet, as this paper aims to show, are important dimensions of why, how and by whom civil violence is perpetrated and experienced.

### **Five inadequacies of the ‘communal’ construct**

The term ‘communal violence’ (sometimes ‘inter-communal violence’) will be a familiar one to readers of South Asian politics. It refers to intergroup or ethnic violence in the region, which most often takes the form of rioting. Data shows riots in India are persistent and wide-spread, with an average of over 64,000 riots per year over the last decade and 16 out of 28 states experiencing more than 1000 riots in 2010.<sup>8</sup> A significant contribution to understanding the high prevalence of riots in India is Ashutosh Varshney’s study of ‘Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life’.<sup>9</sup> Path-breaking in its detailed analysis of civil society,<sup>10</sup> Varshney’s study treats violence

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<sup>8</sup> GoI various years.

<sup>9</sup> Varshney 2002.

as ever-present and only dampened by institutionalized inter-communal civic engagement. That is, his thesis provides insights into the *causes of peace*, rather than the *origins of violence* per se. Another major scholastic contribution is Brass' characterization of an 'Institutionalized Riot System', also referred to as the Riot Production System,<sup>11</sup> which exposes the mechanisms by which endemic intergroup violence is deliberately provoked and sustained, therefore 'produced', at instrumental points of time, like for example to bias the results in an imminent election. The political machinery is groomed to regard political activism as a constant state of warfare, where violence plays an integral and rational role in consolidating political constituencies. The study implicates the police, criminal elements, members of the business community, as well as leading political actors in the continuous effort to 'produce' violence.<sup>12</sup> Other important contributions to the literature include works by Engineer and Wilkinson.<sup>13</sup> Similar to Brass' thesis on riot production, Engineer and Wilkinson also explore the links between political aspirations, electoral incentives and the incidence of violence.

While the term communal violence has now come to be entrenched in the literature, there still is no consensus on how it can be precisely defined. In the literature referred to above, formulations of 'community' are based on attributes ranging from ethnicity to lingual perimeters, religion to caste groups, and political affiliations to association memberships. This paper contends that the opacity arises because understanding the violence purely within an inter-community, or even inter-ethnic, framework is itself inadequate in five ways:

(a) Imprecise historical usage

*First and foremost, is the issue of an imprecise historical usage* – an argument persuasively put forward by Gyan Pandey.<sup>14</sup> The term communal violence can be traced to its initial (and at times misguided) use during the British Raj. In colonial discourse, 'communalism' was a loosely defined term, referring to any Indian (or 'local') groupings that were seen to be along racial, lingual, regional or even political delineations. The connotations of the term depended heavily on the context of its use. Some have argued that the term was invoked as a positive policy objective in support of the British 'divide-and-rule' strategy.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> While Varshney's study is recognised as one of the principal studies of civic engagement and ethnic conflict, Donald Black's study on "relational distance" and civil violence defines distance between people as the degree to which people participate in one another's lives, that is, not only the number of ties between people, but also the frequency and duration of contact, their age and the nature of the relationship. Varshney's definition of 'institutionalised civic engagement' bares a significant resemblance to Black's earlier understanding of 'relational distance'. See Black 1976.

<sup>11</sup> Brass 1997, Brass 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Brass 2004, 4840.

<sup>13</sup> See Engineer 1991, Engineer 1994, Engineer 2005, Wilkinson 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Pandey 1990.

<sup>15</sup> as summarised in Tambiah 1997b, 23.

Even then, the term was used incorrectly, since for example, most incidences of civil violence in colonial India were understood in terms of a Hindu-Muslim ‘communal’ divide, wholly ignoring inter-caste rivalries and even the involvement of other minority communities.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the term was also viewed by the British in a negative light during the build-up to the independence of India and Pakistan. “Commissions sent out from London to hold hearings and to craft new constitutions...[criticized] religious and other minorities seeking separate electoral rolls, reserved seats, special quotas, and other forms of protection.”<sup>17</sup> It was ironic that communalism was heavily criticized by nationalist politicians in the newly formed independent governments in South Asia, even when both them and the leaving British authority were deeply involved in the creation of new states (Pakistan, East-Pakistan and later Bangladesh) on the basis of religious and regional delineations.

In this sense, an ethnic categorization is also historically imprecise, and particularly so since the 1980s. Though much of the mobilization surrounding the violence often employs ethno-religious themes,<sup>18</sup> like for example around lingual groupings or around particular religious festivals, which generally are seen as qualifying characteristics of ethnic violence,<sup>19</sup> in India the resultant outbursts of violence often do not adhere to ethnic categories. For instance, some of the most fanatical rioters during the breakout of intense violence in 2002 in Gujarat, violence which most categorized as ethnic clashes between Hindus and Muslims, were in fact from *adivasi*<sup>20</sup> communities.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, ethno-religious groupings themselves have historically been blurred, with “Hindu groups often [participating] in *Muharram*, [and] Muslims would perform as musicians at certain Hindu festivals”,<sup>22</sup> and by the late 1970s ethno-religious mobilization efforts have in actuality been vehicles which transcend caste barriers. Importantly, the past three decades have witnessed a distinct shift away from violence resulting from ideological mobilization operating along cultural, religious and ethnic lines, to the extent that “the religious element [has] almost disappeared”,<sup>23</sup> and towards mobilization which panders to sub-regional politics and niche electorates. Hence, while much of the literature on intergroup violence in India describes ‘communities’ in friction, this needs to be distilled into an analysis of ethnic, religious, social and even political groupings.

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<sup>16</sup> Pandey 1990.

<sup>17</sup> Tambiah 1997b, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Jain 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Horowitz 1985, 41-54.

<sup>20</sup> Literally “original inhabitants”, or tribal peoples, comprise a substantial indigenous minority of the population of India. Traditionally they fall outside of the fold of the Hindu Caste system.

<sup>21</sup> See Diwanji 2002. for a descriptive on the changing roles of the *adivasi* community and its links with the BJP and Congress.

<sup>22</sup> Jaffrelot 2011, 346.

<sup>23</sup> Jaffrelot 2011, 353.

## (b) Scalability

*Second, is an issue of scalability.* Violence need not necessarily involve large scale conflict in order to “cause the destruction of livelihoods and markets, increases in the risk of investment, loss of trust between economic agents and the waste of significant human and economic resources”.<sup>24</sup> Small-scale bouts of violence, which are localized within a region, city, or even a neighborhood, have the potential to substantially derail normalcy by creating an environment of continued insecurity and, in the worst instance, even be the precursor to larger outbreaks of violence. This is particularly relevant to the urban contexts where such violence is common. Day-to-day bouts of smaller scale and routine violence create a ripe environment for more severe instances of civil violence, like for example the 1992-93 riots in Mumbai, and distort local perceptions of normality to become intertwined with violence.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, this kind of small scale localized violence is both “pervasive and persuasive...[causing a] reorganization of daily life [which is] asymmetric and often contradictory”,<sup>26</sup> and as Justino finds, “at a fundamental level, violent forms of conflict originate from individual behavior and their interactions with their immediate surroundings, their social groups and institutional norms”.<sup>27</sup> In spite of this, the literature on civil violence has almost exclusively focused on macro-level dynamics of large-scale violence. When studies have looked at regional or city level violence, the main indicators used to measure severity of the violence have been descriptive ones – measuring numbers of violent episodes, deaths, injuries or arrests for example. This macro-level descriptive data on violence is then associated with other more detailed socio-economic data, like for example data on civic engagement<sup>28</sup> or electoral data.<sup>29</sup> Much less importance has been given to micro-level variables which directly engage with “...the causes of urban violence [by asking] who are its perpetrators, what are their purposes, and who or what are their targets”.<sup>30</sup> Branding intergroup violence as communal or ethnic associates it with a wider dynamic, and distances it from the more micro-level (and intimate) violence that occurs for example between individuals, even though such instances are almost always inextricably linked to the wider outpouring of ethnic violence. A more accurate assessment of such violence would need to be readily scalable, from the individual up.

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<sup>24</sup> Justino 2007a, 3.

<sup>25</sup> As was the case during the Mumbai riots, a distorted normality is evidenced when, for example, agencies normally responsible for the provision of security like the “police, army, or other security forces [instead become]...vigorous participants favouring the cause of one side or another...[and when this becomes] a fact of life” Banerjee 1990, 55. Also see Gupte 2011a.

<sup>26</sup> Chatterji and Mehta 2007, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Justino 2007b, 4.

<sup>28</sup> c.f. Varshney 2002.

<sup>29</sup> c.f. Wilkinson 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Gizewski and Homer-Dixon 1995, 2.



(c) Agency

*Third, is an issue of agency.* While rioting is the “deliberate destruction of persons or property by people acting together”,<sup>31</sup> individual motivations and compulsions remain important in explaining local variation. There are numerous documented examples where this can be seen. For instance, in Kolkata, India, riots offered pretexts for personally motivated violence where “in one incident, property sharks took advantage of communal disorder to instigate the destruction of a lower-middle-class Hindu colony so that a shopping complex could be built on the land at a later date”.<sup>32</sup> In another example, the burning down of a Hindu *chawl* in the predominantly Muslim slum of Jogeshwari in Mumbai in January 1993 was met with intense Hindu outrage, and sparked a severe wave of anti-Muslim violence. However, it was only later discovered that “a Hindu builder called Shetty had purchased that property and was interested in getting the tenant families of that chawl evacuated. They happened to be Hindus surrounded mostly by Muslim families. Shetty is supposed to have offered *supari* [a colloquialism for a contract killing] to some miscreants and got the chawl burnt down”.<sup>33</sup> Such violence also obviously bears a distinct individual encumbrance on survivors. Not only do the moments of suffering, pain and anguish of the riots linger on as intimate memories for several years after the episodes, many continue to make their life decisions, such as where to buy property, whom to associate with, or even which restaurants or shops to provide custom to, based on their individual experiences of and lessons learned during the riots.<sup>34</sup> Importantly, being able to associate oneself with specific events of the riots often acts as a mechanism to signal ones belonging to the community, a symbol of shared suffering, and at times therefore, served as a ‘merit-badge’.<sup>35</sup>

That is, episodes of group violence, both large and small, possess the characteristics of involving individuals, and not just groups. Even the large citywide bouts of rioting in 1992-93 in Mumbai for example could be broken down into moments of individuals experiencing or partaking in the violence. In my interviews with victims, witnesses and perpetrators of the civil violence alike, action statements such as ‘I saw this...’, ‘she did that...’, ‘I don’t want to wear a bandage’ or ‘he set the tire on fire’ for example, were not used by the respondents merely in a descriptive manner, to corroborate the larger reality of the riots. Rather, these were operative statements which distinctly shaped how, why and by whom the riots were perpetrated and

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<sup>31</sup> Rule 1988, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Chengappa and Menon 1993, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Kishwar 1995, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Gupte 2011a.

<sup>35</sup> Gupte 2011b, 226.

experienced, thereby awarding a potent agency to *individuals* who actively shaped the reality around them.<sup>36</sup> It might also be that the aggrieved actions of some might be seen as unfounded aggression by others. An interesting incongruence in the reporting of the 1992-1993 riots in Mumbai was in evidence where people described bouts of violence involving their neighbors by using the congealed identities of ‘Hindu’ violence or ‘Muslim’ violence, but “when activities of relief and rehabilitation [during the same riots] were being described respondents referred to specific persons by name and not by their religious identity”.<sup>37</sup> Such evidence is a particularly revealing in that it suggests the modalities of *when* the riot is experienced forms an important qualifier of how it gets reported and classified.

Furthermore, recognizing how the state controls, aids or abets a riot is another issue of increasing importance to how contemporary intergroup violence in India is understood. The notions of the ‘governmentality of the riot’,<sup>38</sup> as opposed to intergroup violence being the outcome of ethnic or communal friction alone, as well as the politics of post-riot relief and rehabilitation, are hidden if the violence is understood as being between clear-cut communities or ethnicities. Recognizing this is of particular importance since intergroup violence can be perpetuated not only due to the inadequacies or absence of the state, but in some instances, the state itself functions upon the illegitimate use of violence. The state also plays an obvious role in the ex-post control of violence, but often, it is their ex-ante efforts in pre-empting intergroup violence that go unrecognized. In the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984, the riots in Delhi in which nearly 4000 Sikhs were killed,<sup>39</sup> showed distinct signs of being aided and abetted by the city police.<sup>40</sup> However, in fully understanding the state’s involvement in the violence, it is equally important to understand why the violence was not as severe other large cities that also had large Sikh populations. In Mumbai (erstwhile Bombay) for example, where the violence was expected to be just as severe, but was largely curtailed by quick pre-emptive arrests of far-right political leaders (like Bal Thackeray, leader of the Shiv Sena).<sup>41</sup> In this instance, it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that violence was dampened due to ‘communal’ or ‘ethnic’ harmony.

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<sup>36</sup> Gupte 2011b.

<sup>37</sup> Chatterji and Mehta 2007, 28.

<sup>38</sup> Chatterji and Mehta 2007, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Charny 1999, 517.

<sup>40</sup> Grewal 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Mr. K. P. Medhekar, Director General of Maharashtra Police (1982-1985). This type of pre-emptive action is often missed by studies of intergroup violence that fail to pick out relevant ‘non-events’.

(d) Gendered modalities

*Fourth, is an inability to engage fully with the gendered and intimate modalities of intergroup violence.* This is arguably the most critical shortcoming of the communal and ethnic constructs in that they mask the individual and intimate characteristics of riotous behavior. Women and men experience intergroup violence in varied ways, the nuances of which cannot be generalized by associating one gender with ‘the victims’ and the other with ‘the perpetrators’. Women are just as likely to perpetrate violence<sup>42</sup> as they are likely to be involved in its mitigation.<sup>43</sup> Importantly, synergies and parallels between the experiences of women and men *across* ‘communities’ are often far stronger than those *within* communities.<sup>44</sup> During episodes of severe intergroup violence, rape is often instrumentalised as a ‘conflict tool’,<sup>45</sup> and only a micro-level psychological and psychopathological analysis can fully understand its perpetration and victimization. The same is also true for the instances when rape is *not* perpetrated during riots, in that ‘rape avoidance’<sup>46</sup> is a function of an individual’s conscious or subconscious understanding of societal norms, deviance and risk. Again, a communal or ethnic discourse alone cannot fully engage with these micro-level realities of perpetration and victimhood.

(e) Individual motivations

*And fifth, is the inability to explain an individual’s motivations for physically perpetrating intergroup violence.* Ethnic and communal framings of intergroup violence hide individual motivations to perpetrate violence. A significant gap in the literature pertains to why individuals physically perpetrate and/or perpetuate intergroup violence. For instance, while Brass’ riot production system explains *how* a particular socio-economic event can be mutated by the political motivations of key leaders to produce a full scale outbreak of violent rioting, the question asking *what the common person’s motivations and compulsions to participate in such a system of violence might be* still remains to be answered. This question is complementary to but separate from Paul Brass’ description of the specific roles individuals play in the production of civil violence. These “producers” of civil violence,<sup>47</sup> or “riot captains” as Stanley Tambiah characterizes them, are different from those individuals who are not

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<sup>42</sup> Sen 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Gupte 2011a, Nilesh 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Gupte 2011b.

<sup>45</sup> Murthi 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Hayden 2008.

<sup>47</sup> Brass 2003.

directly involved in *triggering* the episode of violence, but who might eventually perpetrate it. These are *not* just criminal elements, but “more extensively regular workers, artisans and members of the lower middle class”.<sup>48</sup>

This question of individual participation in intergroup violence also runs deeper than Donald Horowitz’s assessment of risk-averse behavior.<sup>49</sup> Horowitz suggests that individuals participate in rioting, rather than ‘free-ride’ and let others riot on their behalf, since the rioter judges individual risk to be lower when in a group, and this reduces the rioter’s inhibitions to engage in large scale violence. In some way, this emboldens mobilization efforts and creates the feeling of safety in numbers. As evidence, Horowitz states that such decision making is accurately risk-averse since there are no ethnic riots<sup>50</sup> in which more rioters were killed than those who were targeted by the rioters. Horowitz’s insight into the risk-averse nature of mob behavior, in conjunction with the argument of political-payoffs and the instrumental use of intergroup violence, explains the involvement of those higher up in the Riot Production System who are in a position to directly benefit. This does not however fully explain the physical involvement of the common persons who cannot directly actualize any political payoffs being lower down in the production system, but who constitute the majority physically perpetrating the violence. At this level of participation, there is a “disjuncture between the risk of participation [through arrest, injury or death] and the remoteness and uncertainty of benefits (if any)”.<sup>51</sup> The decision to physically perpetrate violence is all the more poignant since very often what determines the nuanced and varied outcomes of intergroup violence, like losing ones day-wage due to injury and being forced to suddenly draw down savings,<sup>52</sup> is the inability of individuals to protect themselves, “either because they cannot run fast, or lack the physical prowess to ward off attackers, or because they cannot afford to protect their homes, or because it would take them longer than average to recover from material or physical injuries”.<sup>53</sup> The parameters determining the physicality of violence are therefore fundamentally important components of an accurate understanding of intergroup violence.

Taking this into consideration, there are two elements that seem relevant in explaining why individuals physically partake in intergroup violence. Firstly, there appears to be a systematic link between socio-economic circumstance of individuals and involvement in intergroup violence. My interviews with Mumbai Police officers with experience of small and

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<sup>48</sup> Tambiah 2005, 898.

<sup>49</sup> Horowitz 2001.

<sup>50</sup> Horowitz defines an ethnic riot as “an intense, though not necessarily unplanned, lethal attack by members of one ethnic group on civilian members of another ethnic group” (pp. 1), and his study examines 150 episodes of ethnic violence across 50 countries and compares these with 50 control cases where riots might have occurred but did not.

<sup>51</sup> Mehta 1998, 378.

<sup>52</sup> Gupte, Justino and Tranchant 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Hale 1995, 195.

large scale Hindu-Muslim rioting reveal that there is always evidence of economic opportunism. Shops are almost always targeted and looted.<sup>54</sup> In one interview, a retired police officer recounted his experience as a young recruit dealing with riots – “...after a severe riot we found all kinds of stolen goods from the houses of the suspected rioters, anything from cloth to hordes of mosquito repellent!”<sup>55</sup> In a recent study of neighborhoods prone to intergroup violence in Maharashtra, we find that levels of victimization are positively associated with assets visible from outside the house (namely air conditioners, cars parked outside the house) and that economic vulnerability heightens the destructive effects of violence at the household level because it hinders the capacity of households to navigate through the uncertainty and disruption caused by violent riots.<sup>56</sup> In a similar vein, the Srikrishna Commission (1998), appointed by the Government of Maharashtra to inquire into the severe 1992-93 riots in Mumbai and related incidents, also found evidence of opportunism at play, as opposed to ethnic divisions in the labor force and businesses.<sup>57</sup>

Second, is that the act of perpetration itself is of significance. The particular modalities of violence on display during episodes of intergroup violence – namely arson, stone throwing, tyre burning – all have a ‘public’ element to them, in that these forms of violence operate to a large extent, and deliberately so, in a publicized arena. Arguably, the reasons why bottle throwing or tire burning, for instance, embody extremely effective, powerful and emotive channels for the unarmed civilian to showcase strength and instill fear in others the world over, is because of their capacity to be visually suggestive. Not only are public displays of bravado and strength seen by all, but they also prove easy for others to associate with. Thus, even though the core grievances may arise out of physical and asset vulnerabilities, showcasing involvement in public displays of violence appears to be a tangible, albeit perverse, route to showcase one’s own social standing. This is of profound significance not only at the group level, but in particular, for disenfranchised individuals. This crucial dynamic of intergroup violence is missed if our focus is on community or ethnic dimensions alone.

### **III. What’s ‘civil’ about violence?**

For these five reasons, framing contemporary intergroup violence in India as ‘communal’ or ‘ethnic’ is a subjective expression of when, and most importantly, by whom and

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<sup>54</sup> This marks a significant diversion from Horowitz’s observation that economic opportunism has no role to play in ethnic rioting. See Horowitz 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Mr. Julio Ribeiro, former Director General of Punjab Police, January 31st 2007, Mumbai, India.

<sup>56</sup> Gupte, Justino and Tranchant 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Srikrishna 1998, 1.25/B/i.

how violence is experienced and perpetrated. In the Indian context, these terms are entrenched in an inaccurate historically trajectory that homogenizes the experience of civil violence as being between monolithic ‘communities’ or ‘ethnicities’, and most poignantly, excludes the state from being an active perpetrator of violence. However, it is “untenable to interpret...the history of communalism [in India] in terms of the development of unified and cohesive community consciousness”.<sup>58</sup> More generally, it needs to be recognized that any violent episode holds varying meanings, and therefore has a varying set of consequences, for the ‘aggressors’ as opposed to the ‘victims’, for the ‘aggrieved’ as opposed to the ‘agitated’, or for the ‘armed’ as opposed to the ‘helpless’. *Who* experiences the riot is an important qualifier for *how* that episode of violence can be understood. Furthermore, the categories of who experiences the riot are themselves not static and often cannot be concretely defined – an aggressor could once have been a victim in an earlier or even the same bout of violence, or those seen as the helpless at one point in a riot, could at another point be armed.

It is for the same reasons, the framework of ‘civil violence’, defined as when violence is connected with or perpetrated collectively by ‘ordinary citizens’ or civilian organizations, is far more appropriate and accurate in the analysis of intergroup violence in contemporary India. Here, the ordinary citizen can be defined as those who are *not* members or a part of the networks and core groups of ‘riot specialists’, and who are mobilized only in short lived spells of violent action. This focus on ordinary citizens, regardless of their ethnic, community or other associations, finds resonance with James Rule’s classic book on the ‘Theories of Civil Violence’. He describes civil violence as fundamentally embodying the disruption of “normal” expectations, and contends that:

“One cannot expect polite behavior from one’s fellow theatre-goers if a fire breaks out in the hall. One cannot count on accustomed ways of dealing with members of another ethnic or racial group in the marketplace or in the community, if mobs representing the two groups are assaulting one another in the streets. One cannot expect to travel to distant territories if the highways en route are the scene of deadly clashes among rival armies. The uncertainties and curtailments imposed by civil strife are pervasive, going far beyond the immediacies of violent action”.<sup>60</sup>

That is, his understanding of civil violence is closely associated with the idea of desperation – ordinary people taking extra-ordinary steps either to attack people or property, or

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<sup>58</sup> Gooptu 1997, 918.

<sup>60</sup> Rule 1988, 2.

to avoid becoming victims of violence; that in times of peace or normality, this would not be so. Another operative idea here is the Weberian notion of the modern state seeking to maintain its monopoly over the legitimate exercise of coercive violence, where the condition of ‘normalcy’ is set by the idea that no functioning modern state would seek to give up this monopoly since doing so would seriously undermine its sovereignty and therefore its ability to uphold its civil obligations. Once again, civil violence therefore becomes the extra-ordinary circumstance which threatens the normalcy of credible government functioning, and encompasses “processes in which people depart from normality to challenge prevailing power relations and other social arrangements”.<sup>61</sup> This allows us to understand civil violence through a multi-dimensional and non-linear frame,<sup>62</sup> and in doing so, it critically allows for the inclusion of all its various forms: “attacks on governments, attacks by governments, and struggles among nongovernmental parties; actions directly tied to the exercise of central power and ones substantially disconnected from it; actions carefully orchestrated in advance, and ones emerging from the immediate flux of events...[including] issues that are overtly political, as well as those rooted in the workplace, the neighborhood, the schools, and the place of worship”.<sup>63</sup>

Civil violence then can be politically motivated violence involving the state as one of the actors (separatist agitation, as well as state enforcement for example), have communal or ethnic undertones, or be borne out of criminality or the anomic segregation of the perpetrators.<sup>64</sup> Given the non-distinct nature of the three categories, where for example, particular bouts of separatist violence might be ethnically motivated, or some of the anomic segregation might be along communal lines, the framework of civil violence which is not limited by group dynamics alone, is a far more accurate representation of the realities of intergroup violence evidenced in contemporary India.

#### **IV. The policy relevance of moving from communal to civil: insights from international evidence**

It is important to recognize how and why violence is categorized in a particular way as this can have serious implications on how state and society respond. In the above sections, I have suggested that the conceptual framing of “communal violence” used in political science literature to describe intergroup violence in India, is more appropriately and accurately

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<sup>61</sup> Rule 1988, 9.

<sup>62</sup> as previously argued by Tilly 1986.

<sup>63</sup> Rule 1988, 12-3.

<sup>64</sup> Gizewski and Homer-Dixon 1995.

understood as “civil violence”. Doing so informs our understand of the phenomenon in two ways: it allows our conceptual framework to recognize that *collective* acts of violence are nevertheless perpetrated by *individuals*. Second, that these individuals are influenced by a wide range of motivations and compulsions, which may include psychological, economic, social as well as political dimensions.

This concluding section aims to situate the arguments made in this paper within a wider narrative of intergroup violence from around the world. Above all, we are interested in thinking about imprecision in the use of ‘communal’ and ‘ethnic’ constructs for understanding intergroup violence in terms of its scale, the agency and motivation of involved actors (in the more specific sense of the will to commit acts of violence), and its gendered dimensions.

#### (a) Accounting for the complex histories of violence

Notably, examples from the Indian context have pointed to the blurring of lines between Hindus and Muslims in riots typically characterized as ‘communal’. This study has drawn attention to infamous cases: the burning down of a Hindu *chawl* in the predominantly Muslim slum of Jogeshwari, Mumbai, in January 1993, in fact instigated by a Hindu builder who had purchased the property and wished to evict the tenant families, as well as the destruction of a lower-middle-class Hindu colony in Kolkata, prompted by Hindu property sharks interested in building a shopping complex on the land at a later date. Such examples hint at the inadequacy of ‘communal’ or ‘ethnic’ categories with regards to describing violence for reasons of practical actualities. In other words, individuals might act in response to a range of socio-economic or political conditions during incidences of intergroup violence, rather than out of loyalty to a particular community or ethnicity.

However, several studies indicate that such categories are also inadequate for reasons of historical imprecision. The idea that violence arises from intractable differences between long-standing, separate, bounded communities or ethnicities - and indeed, popular notions of violence still tend to be marked by platitudinous reference to ‘ancient hatreds’ – misrepresents the complexities of social and cultural relations in particular societies. Moreover, it has the effect of occluding the political and economic imperatives (such as electoral cycles and class-based vulnerabilities), which might lie behind incidences of violence. Still, while the use of communal or ethnic categorization is shown to be inadequate in a number of examples of intergroup violence across the world, it is not irrelevant altogether; indeed, mobilization often depends on the invocation of religious or other ethnic motifs, usually preying on a sense of disempowerment in relation to ‘other’ communities or ethnicities.



Malkki's study of violence, memory and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania – initially designed to focus more on the socio-political effects of post-conflict refugee camps – draws attention to the construction of an all-explaining 'mythico-history' among refugees.<sup>65</sup> It follows that any essentialized notion of a Hutu 'community' is borne more out of displacement and de-territorialization rather than serving as a solid basis for explaining conflict in Burundi from 1972 between a (minority) Tutsi-dominated army and a (majority) Hutu population. Indeed, while Malkki's fieldwork focused on refugees settled both in a camp (Mishomo) and a township (Kigoma) in Tanzania, it was ultimately found that there was a marked contrast between the 'historical-national thought of camp refugees and the cosmopolitan ways of the town refugees'. The study demonstrates how the genocidal massacres of the 1970s were perceived among camp refugees in terms of a Tutsi-Hutu divide, with testimonies casting the Tutsi as the subject and the Hutu as the object (rather than referring to individual perpetrators) through a series of foundational narratives, descriptions of bodily traits and essential characters, and atrocity accounts. The cause of the massacre was identified as the Tutsi wish to equalize the population of Burundi, with little reference to a Hutu uprising. And yet, there were often nontrivial references to Tutsis as individuals (rather than as part of a Tutsi community), in facilitating escapes for example.

Just as it is specious to describe a history of Burundi based on fixed (and anachronistic) categories of Hutu and Tutsi, it is misleading to depict a history of Sri Lanka based on interactions between self-evidently demarcated communities of Sinhalese and Tamil. Indeed, rather than being objectively describable, such ethnonyms are themselves made out of a complex synergy of peoples and ideas located in both local and wider regional contexts. It naturally follows that attributing violence in such a society to irreconcilable differences between communities fails to convey the complexities of the situation. Sinhalese and Tamil labels are described as 'porous sieves', with the Sinhalese-Tamil tensions that are known today (and manifested in significant riots in 1958, 1971, 1977, 1981 and 1983) being of quite 'recent manufacture'.<sup>66</sup> There is also that issue of practical actualities during incidences of violence. When riots break out, mobs and crowds do appear move as if they are homogeneous entities. Yet most poignantly, it is important to recognize that 'while such formations in specified contexts do temporarily crystallize, the webs of interpersonal relations between persons of different ethnic identity breach the boundaries of ideologically imputed collectivities'.<sup>67</sup>

Still, there is some reason to retain communal or ethnic categories as units of analysis in relation to intergroup violence. Though it may be simplistic to locate violence in a 'clash of

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<sup>65</sup> Malkki 1995.

<sup>66</sup> Tambiah 1986, 6-7.

<sup>67</sup> Tambiah 1997a, 1188.

civilizations’,<sup>68</sup> it is clear that the invocation of community- or ethnicity-based identities can be central to the violent assertion of political or economic power. While the Sinhala-Muslim riots of 1915 can be attributed to colonial politics, post-1983 instances of Sinhala-Tamil riots are traced to post-independence nation-state making in a plural society driven by majoritarian democratic electoral politics. In other words, while it might be untenable to see age-old and irreconcilable social and cultural differences between communities as the cause of intergroup violence, the ongoing political and economic entrenchment of community- or ethnicity-based interests might well be a significant factor in prompting feelings of vulnerability. Tambiah talks of ‘political Buddhism’, and raises the question of why violence takes the form it does, being associated with a Sinhalese-Tamil divide rather than ‘class’ warfare within Sinhalese society.<sup>69</sup> It is proposed that Buddhist revivalism from the late nineteenth century became interwoven with the changing politics of the island, with the effect that the very meaning of Buddhism ‘as a lived reality’ has changed.<sup>70</sup> Kearney draws attention to ‘the difficulty of maintaining a participatory democratic political system’, in what he calls ‘a society marked by deep ethnic divisions’.<sup>71</sup> His focus is on (Sri Lankan, as opposed to Indian) Tamil separatism in the island and he traces violence to the battle between communities in the political arena ‘to preserve and foster the ethnic symbols and traditions by which it was delimited’. Still, the emphasis is not on social or cultural divisions. Kearney stresses the factor of ‘political alienation’, as evinced in election results and a possible drift towards a preference for armed violence over persuasion and negotiation. Furthermore, he notes a pattern of intra-party (ie. within Sinhalese parties) contestation mitigating any achievements of inter-party (ie. Sinhalese-Tamil) dialogue.

In Indonesia, a focus on ‘extremist’ Muslims or ‘fundamentalist’ Islam as a belief system has obscured the role of Christianity, secularism, and even ecumenism in sustaining religious violence.<sup>72</sup> Though the violence varies in its modalities, ranging from anti-Chinese, class-based riots in provincial towns and cities, anti-witchcraft campaigns in Java, inter-religious pogroms in Central Sulawesi and Maluku, and paramilitary mobilization and terrorist bombings under the sign of Jihad, across the 1990s and 2000s, the category of ‘religious violence’ cannot fully be rejected. Indeed, ‘Religious violence in Indonesia has thus been revealed to be “about” religion in some sense – not in the conventional sense of religious belief or interreligious intolerance but in the broader sense of religious authority, identity, and boundaries’.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the changing modalities of violence in riots in Borneo or Kalimantan

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<sup>68</sup> Huntington 1998.

<sup>69</sup> Tambiah 1986, 13, 57-64.

<sup>70</sup> Tambiah 1992, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Kearney 1985.

<sup>72</sup> Sidel 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Sidel 2006, 222.

between 1967 and 2001 – involving Muslim Malay, Muslim Madurese, Dayak and Chinese communities – did not display any ‘natural link between violence and ethnic heterogeneity’, but instead showed tangible closeness to the political processes.<sup>74</sup> And yet, the politicization of ethnicity was critical. Particular attention can be drawn to New Order anti-communism, centralization and state-building in West Kalimantan, which, through its co-opting of violent force among local communities, incited cycles of conflict that are characteristically different from the separatism evinced elsewhere in the archipelago.<sup>75</sup>

The *Maitatsine* (a Cameroonian religious leader and self-appointed Prophet) risings in Nigeria between 1980 and 1985, suggest that militant Islam in northern Nigeria has been the cause of subsequent conflicts.<sup>76</sup> The Nigerian press referred to those involved as ‘fanatics’, while the government pointed to the presence of non-Nigerian militants in ascribing violence to a foreign conspiracy.<sup>77</sup> However, it has been noted that most followers were poor, attracted to the leader’s attacks on affluence and materialism. Again, there is more the idea of religion as a source of mobilization, linked to class-based vulnerability, rather than a manifestation of deep-seated antagonism. In the case of South Africa, urban violence in Inanda, outside Durban, in 1985, was associated with racial confrontation between Africans and Indians. However, there was a sense that this association was a result of government propaganda. After the event, ‘none was able to go beyond “African-Indian” relations, to examine instead relation of wealth and poverty and how race had been hitched to vested interest over many years in a place such as Inanda’.<sup>78</sup>

Intergroup violence in Indonesia in the 1990s was related to the transition to democratic governance, a market economy and a decentralized system, with the financial crisis and end of Suharto’s New Order in 1998 being a watershed.<sup>79</sup> It is notable that Tadjoeeddin’s study of this violence talks of ‘social violence’, where ‘communal’ violence is but one type of social violence, with the other categories used being ‘separatist’, ‘state-community’ and ‘industrial relations’ violence.<sup>80</sup> Still, using media accounts, it is found that communal violence was responsible for the most number of deaths, and therefore the most severe form of social violence. Somewhat confusingly, the category is further split into ‘ethnic, religion and migration-related violence’ (all recognized as intertwined), ‘May 1998 riots’, ‘food riots’, ‘differences in political views’, ‘competing for resources’, ‘the issue of *dukun santet* (witchcraft)’ and ‘civil commotion’.

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<sup>74</sup> Davidson 2009, 201.

<sup>75</sup> Davidson 2009, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Isichei 1987.

<sup>77</sup> Isichei 1987, 197, 205.

<sup>78</sup> Hughes 1987, 353.

<sup>79</sup> Tadjoeeddin 2002.

<sup>80</sup> Tadjoeeddin 2002.

(b) How large is large?

With many examples of intergroup violence in fact being characterized by small-scale conflict, there is further reason to cast doubt on the adequacy of ethnic or communal descriptors that rather hint at large-scale social and cultural cleavages being the fundamental cause of unrest. With a number of studies drawing attention to macro-level dynamics in intergroup violence, adducing statistics regarding violent episodes, deaths, injuries and arrests, and even electoral data, there is the question of how relatively smaller incidences of violence can be evaluated. Harsch's study of urban protest in Burkina Faso focuses on around 200 challenges to local municipalities and mayors between 1995 and 2007; grievances ranged from police violence to management of marketplaces, municipal corruption and urban modernization schemes, with the study based on a compiled catalogue of 'municipal contestation' as evinced in media accounts.<sup>81</sup> It is pointed out that this local contestation is often obscured in official accounts of decentralization, with both the government and international donors keen to stress the positive nature of 'good governance' initiatives. Moreover, it is stated that appeals to ethnicity or opposition to perceived ethnic favoritism was a significant factor in just 3 out of the 207 cases, with only some evidence of ethnic alignment in inter- and intra-party conflicts.<sup>82</sup>

For Wiseman, studying urban riots in West Africa, relatively minor disturbances (including those in rural areas) are ignored, with a riot involving 'considerable violence and destruction' and being a typically urban phenomenon.<sup>83</sup> However, he acknowledges that such a judgment related to scale is debatable. Tadjoeeddin's study on Indonesia notably distinguishes between 'extreme', 'medium' and 'low' levels of violence, with the main indicator again being numbers of deaths.<sup>84</sup> In subsequent studies, with the confirmation that group violence in Indonesia is highly locally concentrated, with just fifteen districts accounting for 85.5% of all deaths,<sup>85</sup> the aim is to disaggregate violence and focus on local variations in collective violence.

What complicates the picture is that the disruption to daily life caused by small-scale violence can lead to the perception that large-scale social and cultural differences are endemic. It follows that small-scale conflict can serve as a precursor to larger-scale violence. The intensity and scope of Dayak-Madurese violence in 1997 was on a much greater scale than

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<sup>81</sup> Harsch 2009, 271.

<sup>82</sup> Harsch 2009, 264-9.

<sup>83</sup> Wiseman 1986, 510.

<sup>84</sup> Tadjoeeddin 2002, 14.

<sup>85</sup> Varshney, Panggabean and Tadjoeeddin 2004, 2.

anything before, due to the politicization of the countryside and the growth of Dayak-oriented NGOs. This prompted the sudden involvement of Malays in Sambas in 1999 and the extension of the conflict to the provincial capital of Pontianak after 2000-01, with Malay elites having been placed on the defensive and forced to turn on the Madurese to assert parity with the Dayaks, in a context of post-Soeharto decentralization.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, in comparing Sri Lanka and Malaysia, Horowitz contends that ‘relative moderate’ – that is, chronic, low-level – conflict can become serious ethnic conflict if left unattended; he suggests that severe conflict can be reduced with deliberate action. Horowitz cites historical and demographic factors in suggesting that at the time of independence, it would have been Malaya – with its Malay and Chinese populations – rather than Ceylon, which would have expected to suffer the greatest ethnic strife. However, while Malaysia suffered its last serious episode of ethnic violence in 1969, Sri Lanka became embroiled in a civil war from 1983.<sup>87</sup> It is notable that the category of ethnicity is seen as significant. Indeed, Horowitz’s contention is that better efforts at inter-ethnic accommodation – such as through heterogeneous political constituencies, even though parties could still be aligned along ethnic lines, and in the form of a permanent multi-ethnic coalition - in Malaysia had the effect of reducing the threat of violence.<sup>88</sup>

(c) Varying motivations - individuals, groups, and the state

While it has been pointed out that riots are by definition a group activity, there is the question of authorship and agency in violence; that is, who orchestrates violence and who participates in it. Civil violence can provide an opportunity for various parties to express their aims, and in these instances, macroscopic analysis of communal or ethnic factors can fall short of elucidating the microscopic complexities of individual agency; and yet, such categories are not without use. The focus of Sidel’s study on Indonesia is on the manner in which violence emanated from religious hierarchies and their efforts to maintain power. A self-avowed shortcoming is its ‘tendency to skirt complex questions surrounding the lived experience - whether of perpetrators, victims, spectators, or other interested parties – within individual episodes of religious violence’.<sup>89</sup> But nevertheless, it usefully draws attention to the notion that perpetrators of religious violence are not best understood as having stable religious identities; religious communities are by their very nature characterized by uncertainties and anxieties that give rise to violent action, reasserting boundaries and claims to authority.

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<sup>86</sup> Davidson 2009, 19-21.

<sup>87</sup> Horowitz 1989, 18-21.

<sup>88</sup> Horowitz 1989, 24-30.

<sup>89</sup> Sidel 2006, xii.

Violence can also be understood as inherent to the functioning (or dysfunction) of the state. In Burkina Faso, the changing national context was an important factor in urban violence, with the increasing number of protests after 1998 being linked to rising anti-government feeling; while violence peaked around electoral cycles, the initial crisis in 1998 was prompted by the assassination of a prominent newspaper editor. Those with experience of national protest were able to adapt their methods to other targets and issues, with the population in general also learning that public manifestations could be an effective means of drawing attention to grievances.<sup>90</sup> This notion of the ‘governmentality of the riot’ is echoed by Tambiah when he draws attention to the active participation and passive encouragement of the police and army in the breakdown of law and order, while also noting the gradual erosion of democratic institutions.<sup>91</sup>

While grassroots actors might be encouraged to engage in violence that supports the aims of hegemonic authors, often responding to rumor and spectacle, few studies consider why those actors ultimately choose to express their agency through violence. Several questions tend to remain unanswered, not least regarding the relationship between rational calculation and emotional impulse. With regards to those who actually commit violent acts, the focus tends to be on the social and cultural backgrounds of ‘criminal elements’, though scholars seek to look beyond popular prejudice shaping notions such as ‘mindless criminality’. This study has drawn attention to Horowitz’s explanation of rioting in terms of risk-averse behavior, with the fact of risk being lower in a group supposedly encouraging active participation rather than passive free-riding. And yet, I have also suggested that Horowitz’s theory does not fully explain individual motivation, given that neither the ‘criminal elements’ nor the ‘ordinary citizens’ are the ones to whom the political benefits of riots production will accrue. It might, then, be more a case of reacting to exclusion rather than seeking inclusion. In the case of Nigeria, ‘sect members made war on a society from the rewards of which they were excluded’.<sup>92</sup> Wiseman describes the urban riots across West Africa as a form of political participation (albeit an ineffective one), suggesting that in the face of widespread authoritarianism in the region, ‘there are few, if any, other ways in which the mass of the population can participate in the political process and seek to bring some influence to bear upon governments’.<sup>93</sup> The focus of his study is on 46 ‘significant’ riots between 1977 and 1985 (with the most being in Nigeria, much larger in terms of population than its neighbors), and he considers riots as a form of ‘turmoil’ (rather

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<sup>90</sup> Harsch 2009, 273-6.

<sup>91</sup> Tambiah 1986, 21, 4, 38-47.

<sup>92</sup> Isichei 1987, 201.

<sup>93</sup> Wiseman 1986, 509, 18.

than ‘conspiracy’ or ‘internal war’, the other forms of political violence); characteristically, they are ‘spontaneous’ and ‘unorganized’, with ‘substantial popular participation’.

I have also proposed that in India, perpetrating civil violence through public displays of bravado can help to secure access to community resources, as a response to physical and asset vulnerability. In a similar vein, while the spark for violence in Sri Lanka in 1977, 1981 and 1983 were the killing – or rumors regarding the killing, in the case of 1977 – of Sinhalese police or military personnel,<sup>94</sup> there was a longer-term context. The correlation between a lack of economic growth and ethnic conflict between 1956 and 1977 is well set out. Ultimately, with the living standards of the poorest urban and semi-urban populations falling further between 1977 and 1984, Sinhalese workers participated in the destruction of their own places of work during the riots of 1983. In a context of uneven economic development, the Sinhalese urban poor provided recruits for politicians seeking to raise client retinues.<sup>95</sup> In these circumstances, it is important to question how victims could experience violence at the hands of those who had been neighbors, perhaps even friends, rather than strangers or outsiders. Equally important is to question what motivates some to offer assistance and protection, or at least stay neutral and uninvolved.<sup>96</sup>

In Burkina Faso, where public anger is most commonly linked to ‘local labor disputes’, then ‘local student unrest’, and ‘violence, insecurity’, even in episodes of civil violence that were a response to police or military brutality, it is noted that private merchants joined or initiated protest movements as a response to market struggles, with small-scale merchants being most militant in response to efforts to formalize the informal sector. In addition, the dispute over Rood Woko, Ouagadougou’s large central marketplace, following failure to rebuild it after a fire, represented a response to fears of displacement. Another factor is residential insecurity, with threats to neighborhoods, arising from the allocation of title deeds to urban plots, prompting unrest. Also, there was dissatisfaction with the provision of basic services at municipal level such as road maintenance, basic sanitation and refuse removal, and in relation to health, schooling and even traffic.<sup>97</sup> Yet for Wiseman, levels of economic development are not a substantial factor in explaining incidences of rioting. While students – not only more politically aware but also better able to organize themselves – were found to be the most common rioters, groups of workers in different occupations were the next most common participants.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Kearney 1985, 906-9.

<sup>95</sup> Tambiah 1986, 23, 34-8, 47-57.

<sup>96</sup> Tambiah 1997a, 1177.

<sup>97</sup> Harsch 2009, 278.

<sup>98</sup> Wiseman 1986, 512-3.

#### (d) Gender and age

It has been argued in this study is that the synergies and parallels between experiences of men and women across communities, rather than within them, are the strongest, and that women can be just as likely to perpetrate violence as men. In that sense, communal or ethnic descriptors are found to be inadequate in describing the intimate experience of intergroup violence and its gender dimensions. The issues of rape as a conflict tool, as well as rape avoidance, feature in a number of studies. During the Tutsi-Hutu conflict, the sex of the body dictated the focal points for the infliction of violence when the target was not a larger group. More generally, refugees tend to be depicted in a markedly gendered fashion; women (and children) tend to be seen as embodying powerlessness, and epitomize the condition of displacement.<sup>99</sup>

As well as gender, age must be considered as a significant factor in analyzing violence. For example, youth clashes constituted the single most important trigger of group violence in Indonesia.<sup>100</sup> Another example are the 1996 riots in south-eastern Nigeria, which were manifestations of popular uprising against the interrelated problems of child kidnapping, ritual murder and the attainment of illegitimate 'fast' wealth among the country's youth (the wealthy were known as '419 men', after the number in the penal code for laws relating to fraud).<sup>101</sup> Many rioters believed that the young elite of Owerri had acquired their riches through satanic rituals and in league with politicians, police and religious figures (also circumventing the structures of kin-based patron-clientism), demonstrating the link between inequality and popular imagination. In the aftermath of the Owerri riots, rumors about 419 men and ritual killing circulated throughout the country, with such 'public secrets' revealing much about political consciousness in Nigeria and discontent with rising individualism. 419 men also notably harassed women, who were seen as property and sparked jealousy among men due to issues of unequal access.

## V. Conclusion

In the light of frequent attempts to explain the 'causes' behind particular outbreaks of intergroup violence, I have argued that there is no single anatomy of an episode of civil violence. It is clear that the occurrence of civil violence provides an opportunity for a number of vested interests – often with very different aims but all in some way characterized by

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<sup>99</sup> Malkki 1995, 11, 92.

<sup>100</sup> Varshney, Panggabean and Tadjoeeddin 2004, 8.

<sup>101</sup> Smith 2001.



desperation – to come to the fore. The typical formulations that focus solely on the ethnic and communal dimensions of rioting are therefore inadequate. And yet, these constructs are not without use in analyzing violence. The point this paper has aimed to highlight is that civil violence is not a function of timeless social and cultural differences, notwithstanding the multiple perceptions of perpetrators and victims. Rather, ethnicity or community can be (1) used as an instrument of mobilization or (2) perceived as a critical source of vulnerability. In fact, the two often go together. In other words, civil violence might arise from the exploitation of ethnic or communal demography, with ethnicity being the excuse for rather than the root cause of conflict. Perhaps in turn, individuals might choose to act violently on the one hand, due to political or economic inequalities, and claims of disempowerment, which in some way correlate with ethnicity or community, and on the other, due to the demands of everyday physical interactions with ones surroundings, which are themselves a function of a variety of socio-demographic factors, or even a series of psychopathological traits.

Ethnicity and community are indeed complex and multifaceted formulations in their own right. However, they are unable to fully capture other the nuances of individual level characteristics of civil violence that to a large extent determine how, where and by whom the violence is perpetrated and experienced. This paper has argued that replacing communal or ethnic understandings of intergroup violence with the framework of civil violence captures such nuances more accurately. This reformulation speaks to more than epistemological clarity – there also are clear implications on how states and society respond to civil violence. In India, this implies a shift in focus away from mitigation efforts designed to reduce intergroup violence by intervening solely at the community level. For example, most police forces in Indian cities that are prone to civil violence have traditionally focused mitigation efforts on building peace and reconciliation committees – these are groups aimed at fostering inter-community ties, known locally as *mohalla* (neighborhood) committees.<sup>102</sup> Such initiatives have largely failed to deliver sustained prevention, with host cities continuing to be beset by civil violence. On the basis of the arguments made in this paper, the failure of these neighborhood committees can be traced to their intentions of re-building *communities*, while the motivations and compulsions driving *individuals* to perpetrate violence are left largely unattended.

More recent policy engagement in India has shown an indication to move closer to an understanding of intergroup violence as suggested in this paper. The Communal Violence Bill (the Prevention of Communal and Targeted Violence (Access to Justice and Reparations) Bill, 2011) is currently being deliberated by the National Integration Council for consideration to be introduced to the Houses of Parliament. The Bill expressly recognizes that acts of “Organized

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<sup>102</sup> Thakkar 2004, Nilesh 2011.

Communal and Targeted Violence” can be perpetrated by “an individual, singly or jointly with others or being a part of an association or on behalf of an association or acting under the influence of an association, engages in continuing unlawful activity of a widespread or systematic nature knowingly directed against a group or part thereof, by virtue of their membership of that group” (PCTV 2011: 2/9(1)). It also importantly recognizes that the offence can be perpetrated by the dereliction of duty (PCTV 2011: 2/13) and by breach of command responsibility (PCTV 2011: 2/14 and 15), thereby placing the state within the realms of mitigation as well as perpetration of civil violence. However, the primary shortcoming of the Bill is that it continues to understand the perpetration as an offence against a group – either directly, or by the targeting of a group’s members. This potentially leaves a large loophole that precludes individual acts of violence from being understood as key elements of the larger episode of civil violence during which they were perpetrated. Therefore, where the Bill stops short, and where possibilities for future research engagement lie, are in extending the framework further to fully incorporate the multiplicity of factors detailed in this paper that have an effect on the perpetration and victimization of civil violence, most of which are not ‘communal’ or ‘ethnic’ in nature.

The arguments presented here also resonate with civil violence in a wide array of contexts beyond India. It is apparent that while ethnic formulations are no doubt appropriate in understanding certain aspects of intergroup violence, they tend to hide the motivations and compulsions of individuals perpetrating that violence. They also tend to be historically imprecise, particularly when ethnicities are understood as being static and linearly linked to some distinct set of ancient hatreds and cleavages. The active participation of the state is also hidden, as are the commonalities of shared experience across groups involved in the violence. These omissions obfuscate how political scientists understand the phenomenon, and are also significant in terms of how policy response is formulated. For one, the categories of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ become vastly more complex, and often overlapping categories. Thus, ex-post punitive, correctional and reconciliation efforts that are not sensitive to this have diluted impact. More crucially, these omissions hinder ex-ante efforts to mitigate civil violence in the long run – vulnerabilities faced by women or men, either individually, in age cohorts or in particular employment sectors for example, can get left unattended if policies focus solely on fostering inter-ethnic or inter-community harmony.

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