

## Muslims in Hindu Nationalist India

A Conversation with Asghar Ali Engineer and Paul R. Brass

*At a seminar held at the Ethics and Public Policy Center on January 20, 2004, two experts on religious conflict in South Asia discussed the possible impact of increasing religious militancy—both Hindu and Muslim—on the Indian democratic state. The speakers were the Indian scholar and activist **Asghar Ali Engineer** and the American scholar of Indian politics **Paul R. Brass**. Their remarks in the edited transcript that follows lead to a lively discussion with other participants. Moderator **Timothy Samuel Shah** is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center specializing in South Asia. The seminar co-sponsor was INFEMIT, a network of Third World theologians and activists led by Vinay Samuel, and funding was generously provided by Fieldstead and Company.*

**Timothy Shah:** India, being a great and diverse country, is one of those places where no matter what the question, almost every answer is correct. Is India a country of terrible poverty? Yes. Is India a country of enormous wealth and amazing economic growth and dynamism? Yes.

Is India the world's largest democracy, with an astonishing record of political freedom and stability amidst great challenges? Yes. Is India a country in which serious and disabling political and social inequities effectively disenfranchise whole segments of the population? Yes.

Does India have an impressive record of maintaining an essentially secular politics in a highly religious society? Yes. Has it seen the growth of powerful and extremist forms of religious nationalism? Yes.

As these paradoxes characterize India as a whole, so they characterize Indian Islam in particular. Do India's Muslims—numbering 122.6 million according to one estimate—constitute the second largest Muslim population in the world? Yes. Are they a large and distinguished presence in Indian history, culture, and politics? Yes. Do Muslims enjoy more civil and political freedoms in India than in many Muslim-majority countries? Yes.

But there are other questions that may demand other

answers. In the face of the growing political power of Hindu nationalism over the last twenty-five years, are Muslims an increasingly hard-pressed minority? What are their political options, given the increasingly limited choice between a dominant Hindu nationalist BJP, which swept three of four major state elections in December and seems poised to win national elections this spring, and a Congress Party in disarray?

The Gujarat violence of 2002 is but the starkest indicator of a precarious situation. And recent terrorist bombings in Mumbai may suggest how a few Indian Muslims are responding to this precarious situation. Some reports suggest that the bombings were carried out by something called the Gujarat Muslim Revenge Force. Yet while all this has been going on, Muslim-majority Kashmir has seen great progress towards peace and stability.

As we attempt to find the elusive truth about the political situation of India's 130 million Muslims and what it might mean for India's secular democratic future, we have outstanding help from our two speakers. The first is Asghar Ali Engineer, who in over forty years of exhaustive field work has investigated and documented nearly every communal riot in post-independence India. He has written about Indian Muslims and Indian communalism in countless articles and in forty-five books. Dr. Engineer is currently the director of two organizations in Mumbai: the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism, and the Institute of Islamic Studies.

### ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

Although communal violence has assumed a lot of significance in the last few years, the subject is nothing new to post-independence India. We have been experiencing major communal riots since the first major riot in Jamshedpur in 1961. (Pre-independence India also saw a lot of communal violence, but my own investiga-

tions started with 1961.) In the 1960s we used to see around one communal riot a day, so more than 300 riots every year.

The rioting increased in intensity in the 1980s; major communal riots occurred in Moradabad (1980), Biharsharif (1981), Baroda and Meerut (1982), Nelli, Assam, where 4,000 people were killed (1983), Bombay and Bhiwandi (1984), anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and other places (1984), Ahmedabad (1985), Meerut again (1987), Bhagalpur (1989). In 1990 there were 300 riots when L. K. Advani, then home minister and currently the deputy prime minister, rode his *rath yatra* (his travel chariot) across the country inciting Hindu activism. Riots occurred in Bombay in 1992 and 1993. Then came Gujarat 2002—not a communal riot but communal carnage, in which more than 2,000 people were most brutally killed.

So communal violence has been with us for a long time, thanks in part to right-wing parties like the Jana

Sangh, which renamed itself the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in the 1980s. The BJP officially adopted secularism as its policy but then became more violent. In the early 1980s the BJP put a question mark on

Indian secularism by calling it “pseudo-secularism,” meaning that Indian secularism is Western in origin and is based on the “appeasement” of Muslims. So it is not real secularism but pseudo-secularism. The BJP also adopted a slogan that only Hindus can be truly secular; no other religious group can be truly secular.

And so a new debate started in Indian politics in the early 1980s about minority appeasement. The BJP, through its propaganda, popularized this myth, and middle-class educated Hindus started repeating the charge that Muslims are being appeased in India. And what was the example given? That Muslims are allowed to marry four wives. It is a great privilege given to Muslims—as if Muslim women were not part of the Muslim community. It is a privilege for Muslim men only.

The BJP kept on saying that Muslims are being appeased, even though the condition of Muslims is miserable economically and educationally; they are on a par with what we call “Dalits,” the low-caste Hindus. Many indices even show that Muslims are falling below the scheduled castes, because scheduled castes have reservations through which their members can get jobs, and Muslims don’t have reservations. Nonetheless, the BJP went on emphasizing that Muslims were being appeased, creating more and more anger in the minds of middle-class Hindus.

Then came the case of Shah Bano, a Muslim woman who went to court to demand financial support from her ex-husband. The Muslim leadership adopted a very wrong stance on that issue. Although Islamic *shari’a* is by no means rigid on this issue, these leaders made the case that to give maintenance for more than three months is a sin, a violation of divine law. The Qu’ran nowhere prescribes three months of *iddat*, the “waiting period” between pronouncement and finalization of divorce, as the period of maintenance. It only says to make provision for Muslim divorcees, and that is obligatory for pious Muslims. But to advance its own political agenda, the Muslim leadership used the slogan “Islam in danger” and brought Muslim masses into the streets. This of course created more anger in the minds of Hindus.

Rajiv Gandhi, who was prime minister at that time, was very wrongly advised to change the law, overturning the Supreme Court judgment so that Muslim women would be governed by newly enacted legislation specific to the Muslim community. This action had a very adverse impact on the Hindu mind and gave the BJP proof of appeasement.

And then the BJP unearthed a new issue: Ram-janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid. As I said, when Mr. Advani took his “chariot journey,” traveling in a *rath* mounted on a modern Toyota, 300 riots took place. He went around India and incited Hindus to rebuild the Ram-janmabhoomi (“Ram’s birthplace”) temple on the site of the Babri mosque. In all the riots from the 1980s onwards, one of the powerful causes was Ram-janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid.

The BJP rode to power on this Ram-janmabhoomi *rath*. The party had never received more than 11 percent of the votes in parliamentary elections, but it got 29 percent in 1999. Yet it could not come to power on its own, a sign of the strength of Indian secularism. The Hindu masses are by and large peaceful and secular. They want to live in peace and harmony, but occasionally they can be incited, and communal violence takes place. So the Babri Masjid was demolished, and the BJP came to power in an alliance with secular parties known as the Indian National Democratic Alliance.

Most of the states were ruled by Congress Party governments and remained somewhat peaceful. Gujarat was the only state where the BJP was in power by itself, without an alliance. And because the BJP came to power there

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by itself, the kind of carnage seen in 2002 became possible. In a coalition government, they are constrained by their secular partners. But in Gujarat, where they are in power by themselves, they can easily kill 2,000 Muslims. BJP leaders themselves described Gujarat as a laboratory for right-wing Hindu forces.

Before and after the violence in Gujarat, the militant Hindu leaders K. S. Sudarshan of the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] and Bal Thackeray of Shiv Sena publicly said that Hitler was their model, and that only a person like Hitler can solve the problems of India; otherwise these minorities will always remain too aggressive and will prevent the Hindu *rashtra* [nation] from coming into existence. Gujarat showed how such an approach can work.

Feelings were so intensely provoked that highly educated Hindus, if you talked to them, were justifying that violence. At the same time, many Hindus in Gujarat maintained their sanity and opposed the carnage, but they were helpless to stop the actions of those well-armed and fanatical mobs. Low-caste Hindus and tribals were used to kill Muslims in Gujarat. Many people told us during our investigations that Dalits were given 500 rupees (around \$12) and a bottle of liquor to kill one Muslim. And tribals were told, "If you don't kill Muslims, we will kill you." So they went and killed Muslims. Generally communal violence takes place in urban areas, but in Gujarat, more violence took place in rural areas because that is where the tribals were.

Why incite tribals? The BJP wanted to get tribal votes. In the Gujarat election, tribal votes that had always gone to Congress went to the BJP for the first time. The same thing has occurred in subsequent elections; for example, in three state elections in December 2003 (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh), tribals mainly voted for the BJP.

Hindu nationalists call tribals *vanavasi*, that is, "forest dwellers." They are systematically working among them, establishing *vanavasi* ashrams, apparently for

the tribals' welfare but really intended to "Hinduize" tribals and give them Hindu identity. Unfortunately, these groups receive a lot of funds from NRIs (non-resident Indians) living in the United States.

In Gujarat we felt fascism knocking on the door for the first time. We had faith in Indian secularism. We continue to have faith in Indian secularism. India is a great country, a country of bewildering diversity. But after the carnage in Gujarat, BJP leaders started saying

publicly on TV that they will repeat the Gujarat "experiment" in other states. And what was this experiment? Kill 2,000 Muslims and then win the election with a two-thirds majority. Shockingly, when Prime Minister Vajpayee was asked, "Will you repeat the Gujarat model?" instead of saying "No" he asked, "Would you repeat Godhra?" [referring to the place where a train carrying Hindu pilgrims was set afire by a Muslim mob; this precipitated the Gujarat carnage]. In other words, if you repeat Godhra, we will repeat Gujarat. So, as I said, we feel that fascism is knocking on the door. If we don't really work to strengthen secularism, it will be difficult to stop the tide of fascism.

Now the BJP is cleverly combining various policies. After talking of the "Gujarat model" in Himachal Pradesh last year, the BJP lost badly. Congress won with a two-thirds majority even though 98 percent of the population in Himachal Pradesh is Hindu. This shows the extent of diversity, and how different the situations are in different states in India. So now the BJP strategy is to talk of development on one hand and to use Hindutva ["Hindu-ness"] propaganda on the other, in order to carry both the Hindu middle classes and the Hindu masses. In the December 2003 state elections, while they declared, "Now we will talk only of developmental issues," they simultaneously used Hindu nationalist organizations in their campaigning. They set up new organizations such as the Hindu Jagran Manch—the "Hindu Awakening Front"—to carry out systematic Hindutva propaganda, not from the official BJP platform but in a parallel campaign. These other organizations delivered inciting speeches and distributed leaflets full of hatred for Muslims and Christians along with the election card (showing the voting-booth location) in Hindi.

In Chhattisgarh, a tribal-majority state, the main issue was conversion to Christianity. Former Chhattisgarh chief minister Ajit Jogi, who was caught on camera accepting a bribe for a mining license, was mainly responsible for the anti-Christian movement there. He claimed that Christians are converting tribals to Christianity. This line proved very effective: tribals voted for the BJP, and the BJP won the election.

So in every state the BJP studies the situation and chooses a strategy very cleverly. To say that they have stopped talking about Hindutva is a sheer illusion. The hate propaganda will go on.

Let me finish by responding to two or three questions raised in the invitation to this meeting. On the future of minorities, particularly Muslims: I would not say that their future is in peril, for two reasons. One, India is immensely diverse, and this diversity works against any communal propaganda. Two, the mood of the masses changes. At one time they may vote for the BJP, but at

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another time they may vote *against* the BJP. I'm sure democracy will survive in India, because it is not possible to homogenize Hindus, let alone the whole of India. Class differences are very sharp. The caste hierarchy is very rigid, and this consciousness is increasing day by day among low-caste Hindus. That works against BJP propaganda. For example, their alliance with Dalits in Uttar Pradesh has broken down.

Because of India's social structure, diversity, and changing political needs, I don't think the BJP can hope to get reelected again and again. As long as secularism is maintained, there is a measure of safety for Muslims and other minorities.

Also, the whole outlook of Muslims has changed. There was a time during the 1980s when they adopted an aggressive posture, but since the demolition of Babri Masjid and the ensuing riots they have realized how disastrous this aggressive posture is. They have become very sober and sane and have realized that what they need is more education and better economic opportunities. You will not find Muslim leaders making inflammatory statements anymore. Even the Hindu middle classes have started saying that extremism is now among Hindus and no more among Muslims.

So the demolition of Babri Masjid was, in a way, a watershed for Muslims. It transformed their thinking. Sometimes something good comes out of evil. Of course, the Gujarat carnage disturbed Muslims very seriously, and Muslims do live under a sense of acute insecurity, aware that anything can happen at any time. But the way the National Commission of Human Rights in India took up the Muslim cause, and the Supreme Court's role in the few judgments it delivered and in reprimanding the Gujarat chief minister—these were signs of hope for the Muslim minority in India.

A second question posed for this seminar was whether fascism would prevail in India. I think it's very unlikely. The conditions are very different from Germany. I don't think it would be possible for any authoritarian, totalitarian, or fascist party to establish fascism in India. The BJP has realized, particularly since the violence between Assamese and Bihari Hindus last fall [in November 2003, Assamese students attacked Bihari settlers whom they saw as competition for prized railway jobs], that Hindus are a diverse community. This violence was highly embarrassing for the BJP; it shattered their dream of homogeneity among Hindus. They have realized that homogeneity is impossible in a country as diverse as India.

And the Muslim community in India is as diverse as the Hindu community. There are not only Shiites and Sunnis but also many other sects and different religious communities among Muslims. And in addition to this religious diversity among Muslims, there is linguistic and

cultural diversity as well. This diversity, among Hindus and among Muslims, will ensure that India does not become a fascist state.

**Timothy Shah:** Thank you, Dr. Engineer. Next it's my pleasure to introduce Paul Brass, emeritus professor of political science and international studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. Dr. Brass is among the most outstanding scholars of Indian politics in the last generation. He has published fourteen books—most recently *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*—and numerous articles on comparative and South Asian politics, ethnic politics, and collective violence. His work has been based on extensive field research in India during numerous visits since 1961.

### PAUL R. BRASS

I want to give a brief condensation of some of the main themes in my latest book, which as Tim mentioned is called *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*. I used the term "production" with considerable deliberation, because, as you will see, that summarizes in a word my argument about Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India.

There are very severe obstacles to the understanding of a subject like this. One is what I call blame displacement, a process by which attention is directed away from the perpetrators of violence and other anti-social actions onto generalized objects. Blame, instead of falling on specific groups, organizations, and individuals that are responsible, is displaced onto categories such as the general public, the mass of the people, politicians in general, or the police in general.

Deeply implicated in this process of blame displacement, of diverting attention away from the obvious, are social scientists themselves. In their search for causes of the obvious, through various forms of misplaced causal analysis and reasoning they may ignore the role of well-known leaders and groups whose purpose is to precipitate violent occasions.

I must reluctantly mention a book that I see as an egregious example of this: *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* by Ashutosh Varshney. It's a book that completely frees organizations in the Hindutva family from responsibility for the perpetration of riots, especially in the last ten or fifteen years. Among these organizations are the BJP, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and the Bajrang Dal, an organization devoted to the cult of violence. The Sangh Parivar, or the Hindutva family, is not the only set of organizations that has produced riots in post-independence India. Riots have been produced by Congress politicians, by politicians from many other parties, by various other organizations. But make no mistake about it: in the last

ten or fifteen years, the main perpetrators of Hindu-Muslim violence are the members of the BJP, the RSS, and other organizations in the Hindutva family.

The production of violence is a process, not an event. It's a process that takes place in specific localities, specific cities and towns, but has also a much broader compass. It cannot be entirely explained by the particular demographic, social, or other characteristics of these places. Although it is a process that takes place in specific localities, it occurs within a general frame. That frame is what I call the "communal discourse," a term I prefer to "communal ideology." By communal discourse I mean a hegemonic discourse that pervades contemporary Indian society, especially amongst Hindus. This discourse has three central elements that claim to define Hindu-Muslim relations both past and present, elements that I call historicization, memorialization, and demonization.

The *historicization* in this communal discourse defines Indian history as a history of the relations between Hindus and Muslims going back for a thousand years or more. In this historical or pseudo-historical account, the Muslims are seen as invaders who came into India, conquered the indigenous Hindu population, and wreaked havoc on Hindu institutions and temples. The history of India in this particular discourse is defined as a history of antagonism between two great communities, Hindus and Muslims. Another element in the historicization is separatism, the idea

that throughout their history, Hindus and Muslims have been separate. This is especially true of the Muslims, who have acted separately and ultimately chose to separate from India itself at the time of independence. Their

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separatism, it is asserted, led to the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the ensuing violence.

The second aspect of this communal discourse is what I call *memorialization*: calling attention throughout the subcontinent to signs of this maleficent Muslim presence. Among the figures, institutions, and objects that the memorializers point to are the many mosques, of which the Babri Masjid was only one. I have sometimes thought, all right, let the Hindu militants have the spot on which the Babri Masjid was located to erect a temple to Ram. This might lead to a temporary resolution and get the BJP off the hook temporarily. They can say, "Here, this is settled."

But there are similar mosques in every city and town in northern and western India. There are sites through-

out the subcontinent where Hindus and Muslims live in juxtaposition and where conflicts of this type happen all the time. This ongoing situation will not be resolved simply by a settling of the Babri Masjid issue.

A second aspect of this process of memorialization is the naming of localities or enclaves in cities and towns where there are large Muslim populations "mini-Pakistans." Anybody who talks to militant Hindus can be directed to such areas. The visitor will be told, "Here is the boundary between India and mini-Pakistan."

Third, there are Muslim institutions throughout India that exist as memorials, in the Hindu mind, of the atrocities and mischief that Muslims have perpetrated in India. One is the Aligarh Muslim University, probably the most famous Muslim institution in India. This great university was founded in the late nineteenth century by the Muslim leader Syed Ahmed Khan. Today it is memorialized in the Hindu mind for one thing: as the so-called arsenal for Pakistan, because there were people at the Aligarh Muslim University who were advocates of the creation of the state of Pakistan. Hindus continue to view it as a place where ideas of partition and disloyalty to the Indian state persist.

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Another institution that has become similarly memorialized (and for this the United States deserves a share of the responsibility) is the Deobandi Institution. This institution is quite different from the Aligarh Muslim University; it is a center for Muslim education and propagation of the Muslim faith. It has been characterized by politicians in both the United States and India as an Islamist breeding-ground, responsible for the spread of madrassahs throughout the subcontinent and into Afghanistan and responsible for the creation of the Taliban.

The third element of this discourse is what I call *demonization*: the portrayal of the Muslim population as prone to violence, as prolific, as Pakistan sympathizers, and as "cross-border terrorists," a term used by militant Hindus and other Indian nationalists in reference to the actions of militant Muslims, allegedly supported by Pakistan, in the longstanding dispute over Kashmir between the two countries. The blanket use of the latter term by Indian leaders has increased since September 11, allowing the Indian government to include its efforts to destroy the Muslim insurrectionary movements in Kashmir as a legitimate part of the global war against terrorism led by the United States.

A fourth aspect of the communal discourse is not a separable element but pervades it all: *body symbolism*. The conflict between Hindus and Muslims is pungently pictured as involving dismemberment and vivisection of the Hindu body by Muslims. The partition of India is considered a vivisection. Even Nehru, who did not have an ounce of communalism in his body, used terms such as this in his speech to the constituent assembly in 1947. These terms continue to be used. The Muslim body, by contrast, is said to be “pampered.” But there’s another term that militant Hindus use for what should be done to Muslims, and this has been said to me personally by RSS people: they should be butchered. This is what has been done in Gujarat and other places. Hindus are described in bodily terms as having been lethargic. They need to wake up, and they need to learn how to kill, and they need to retaliate against Muslim bodies for all the injuries that have been inflicted upon the Hindu body.

So this is my first point about the production of Hindu-Muslim violence in India: it is justified and partly instigated by a communal discourse that is pervasive in Indian society.

The second general point I want to make concerns an underlying set of assumptions about collective violence that affects the understanding of Hindu-Muslim violence. These assumptions are based on myths and falsehoods about how violence of this type originates and is carried out.

The myths and falsehoods can be summarized under three headings. First is the idea that collective violence is a spontaneous occurrence, that Hindu-Muslim violence flows from the Hindu-Muslim discourse that I’ve just talked about. Prejudices and hatreds exist in societies, and all you need is a spark to light them for people to come out in the streets and kill one another spontaneously. Second, there is the related notion that riots are created by mob fury, rather than by deliberate, planned actions. Third is the view that these riots arise from mass hatreds. The latest perpetration of this kind of myth again comes from Ashutosh Varshney, who has invented a new term for collective violence: “ethnic earthquakes.” But these things are not earthquakes; nor do they start like conflagrations from a spark. What is happening is entirely mischaracterized by such metaphors.

I too use a metaphor, but it’s a metaphor of a theatrical drama with three phases. When I say a drama, I’m not trying to trivialize what happens in Hindu-Muslim violence. My intention is to indicate elements that are like a rather grizzly theatrical drama that can be identified as part of the process by which Hindu-Muslim violence is produced.

Like the production of a drama, riot production in-

volves three phases. The first is preparation and rehearsal. In cities and towns in India where there are large Muslim populations living side by side with Hindu populations, there is an ongoing process intended to keep tensions alive. Riots do not just happen from a spark. They are not earthquakes. They are prepared. Now this doesn’t mean that a particular riot is planned from beginning to end, although sometimes it

*“The myths can be summarized under three headings: that collective violence is a spontaneous occurrence . . . that riots are created by mob fury . . . and that they arise from mass hatreds.”*

is. The perpetrators of collective violence are working all the time to maintain communal animosities—drawing attention to the elopement of a Muslim boy with a Hindu girl and calling it a kidnapping, or seeing a cow dead on the side of the street and then spreading the word that a cow has been poisoned, which implies that a Muslim has poisoned the cow. News of this sort spreads throughout the riot network of the Sangh Parivar.

The second stage is activation and enactment, just as in the production of a play. There are specific circumstances under which activation occurs. Those circumstances, as I’ll point out in a minute, are political. When the time comes for a riot, the instigators will go and recruit in specific localities and pay people to carry out acts of violence. When it is time to produce the violence, the signal is given, certain actions take place, and a riot is produced.

The third phase, one I have particularly emphasized, is the critical phase: explanation and interpretation. You explain how the violence happened. You interpret it as a communal conflagration—for example, as a virus that arose in some place and spread to other areas, or as an earthquake. All sorts of explanations can be given to draw attention away from what actually occurred. This third stage is thoroughly infused with blame displacement, to such an extent that the actual circumstances, the actual participants, the actual producers of riots, are forgotten. Virtually nothing happens to them, and they rarely go to jail. If they do go to jail, they’re soon released. The best evidence of this is what has been going on in Gujarat recently, where the perpetrators have been let off the hook.

There are many cities and towns in India where riots occur from time to time, perhaps every five years. And in these places where riots appear to be endemic there are institutionalized riot systems. This system constitutes a veritable division of labor. There are scouts and informants who report incidents such as a “poisoned cow” or a “kidnapping”; rumor mongers who magnify or

manufacture rumors; propagandists who create messages to be conveyed to the press and the public; vernacular journalists who publish these messages in the form of news; poster plasterers; recruiters who bring out crowds—often of students from local colleges and of criminals from the slums—to burn, loot, and kill.

But it's not just hoodlums who are doing this. Politicians too are part of the riot system; they either pacify the crowds or enflame them, depending upon whether the time is right for a riot or not. Politicians and lawyers protect the rioters and get them out of jail if they're arrested, and lawyers defend the criminals who have committed acts of violence. A Hindu lawyer may defend a Muslim criminal who has been paid to go out and kill a Hindu.

Also implicated are the media, which publicize false reports and rumors that incite violence, and assign blame to the victims or to mob fury. And finally, manufacturers of weapons continue to produce bombs and small arms

in the neighborhoods of these cities and towns, even though the police know well where they are located.

So when do riots happen? The political contexts for large-scale riots are mass mobilizations and elections, especially when both occur at the same time, and the attitudes and actions of the state and local administration.

The second general context for riot production is the presence of a Muslim population of a substantial size.

Third, there has to be a political space for large-scale riots to occur—for example, the change in the political configuration that in the last ten or fifteen years has been provided by the decline of Congress and other secular parties. But how do you explain the occurrence of riots at one particular site and not another? It has to do with the political configuration at the local level: the balance between political parties, and a calculation as to whether a riot will produce Hindu consolidation that will give a clear majority to parties like the BJP in the next election.

## DISCUSSION

**Timothy Shah:** Thank you, Dr. Brass. Now we'd like to hear questions and comments from others. [All participants will be identified at the end.]

**Jonah Blank:** I'd like to make a brief comment on Ashutosh Varshney's book for those in the audience who may not have read it. In my opinion, Professor Varshney does not argue for civic engagement as being an all-determinative factor, and he certainly doesn't argue for a Samuel Huntington essentialist argument, that Hindus and Muslims are fated to fight against each other; nor does he try to downplay the importance of political involvement and manipulation in these things. So one can accept or reject Professor Varshney's argument, but I think it's important at least to recognize that he is not arguing a Sam Huntington line.

I think that as scholars both Professor Engineer and Professor Brass take serious issue, as I do, with the Huntington view of the clash of civilizations. It's very important to make

that criticism here in Washington, because Varshney's view, frankly, is not really determinative in policy-making circles, while Huntington's view is. We really need scholars to be challenging this thesis if in fact they disagree with it.

On a policy-making level also, it pains me greatly that the United States government, of which I'm a part, has been utterly silent about one of the great tragedies of India in recent years, the Gujarat killings. I think that as citizens we should be directing criticism at our own government officials to urge them to speak out more, and as scholars we should be challenging the intellectual basis that sees Hindus and Muslims as being inherently at war with each other.

**Paul R. Brass:** Well, as for Ashutosh Varshney, I'll be glad to send you a fuller statement of my disagreements with him that has been circulating as an e-mail. But as for Samuel Huntington—what can you do about

him, for heaven's sake? It's another example of the deplorable state of the political science profession that they swarm around Sam Huntington—his hypotheses appear in every other book, if not nine out of ten books.

My preference is normally not to take on the false arguments of particular people but to produce my own independent evaluation and work. That's what I've tried to do all my life.

**K. M. Rao:** Dr. Engineer, initially you spoke about appeasement of Muslims in India, and you mentioned one example. But I see it as a fact that government policy under Congress Party rule was appeasement of Muslims—and it continues to be so.

The government of Karnataka gets 700 million rupees in tax revenue from the temples of Karnataka, and out of that they use 500 million rupees for Muslim mosques and madrasahs and 100 million for Hindu temples, and something like 120 million for churches. When you

see that kind of unfairness—taking from the temples and using it for madrassahs—you can't help feeling that Hindus are being treated unjustly.

The other issue is the two billion rupees spent by the state on the Muslim hajj [pilgrimage to Mecca], whereas Hindu pilgrims actually pay taxes. I don't see that as secularism; I see it as a total appeasement.

Regarding Gujarat: I constantly hear that the riots were a planned attack. I see this as a completely biased opinion. It's almost the same kind of theory as calling September 11 a planned event so that the United States could go after Iraq.

**Asghar Ali Engineer:** The figures you are quoting about temples and mosques are being systematically spread by the RSS, and people have neither the inclination nor the time to verify them. I have gone through all these statistics, and I collect all these documents. It's very doubtful that the figures you mentioned are authentic. Two billion rupees for hajj subsidy? Where did you get this figure? It is 150 crores in India, which would come to thirty-three million dollars. To say billions of rupees is unfair.

There is a reason why this subsidy was given. Pilgrims used to go on the hajj by ship. Then the ship was discontinued, and suddenly pilgrims had to travel to Saudi Arabia by air. But how many can afford airfare to go on the hajj? Hardly 5 percent of Muslims. Air India was asked to provide the service, but it has been shown that the Air India hajj fare is far higher than the general fare available to Saudi Arabia from India. I always tell Muslims, please, don't accept this subsidy, because hajj is to be performed when you have the means to do it. When you take a subsidy, you invite this kind of violent communal propaganda. If chartered planes were allowed, Muslims would pay much

less, and the government wouldn't have to pay a subsidy. The issue requires some thinking on the part of Muslim leaders also.

Now about Gujarat: nobody has yet been able to demonstrate who is responsible for the attack at Godhra. It has been about two years, and still the government has not been able to put anything forward in a court of law proving that these Muslims were involved.

But okay, let's accept the allegation that a group of Muslims living near the railway station set afire the train carrying Hindu pilgrims. Can you compare government involvement in carnage like that in Gujarat with the involvement of a group of citizens at Godhra? Can these two things be compared?

The RSS talks of building character but indulges in the highest degree of violence. As Professor Brass points out, violence is a production, and this production involves lies, propaganda. The RSS runs 32,000 schools today. If you examine their textbooks, you will find it hard to believe the kind of hate propaganda that is being taught. No governments are taking action, including the Congress-led state governments.

India is now polarized between Hindus and Muslims as never before. There has always been conflict, but never such polarization.

**Har Swarup Singh:** I come from a "mini-Pakistan" in western Uttar Pradesh and the Uttaranchal district. First I must congratulate these two scholars for a wonderful analysis. Now how do we proceed from here? It's a given that the number of Muslims in India is too large to find any solution to communal discord. So let's talk about the positive things. Let's talk about Akbar the Great [a tolerant sixteenth-century Mogul emperor] and not about Aurangzeb [an intolerant successor]. If somebody talks of Aurangzeb, let us talk

of more positive historical figures—great Urdu writers, for example.

**Paul R. Brass:** Well, yes, I agree that the history of India in the last one hundred years or so has moved in the opposite direction, focusing on Aurangzeb and not on Akbar, and displacing the Urdu language in the schools so Muslim students in north India finish their schooling without learning to write Urdu, in the Persian-Arabic script. I think changing the history books, trying to teach a spirit of tolerance, focusing on heroes who can be identified as secular or who played a more positive role in Hindu-Muslim relations, providing some support for the Urdu language—all these things are worthwhile.

But this business of idealizing heroes from the past is in itself a dangerous exercise, and that's part of the problem. It's an aspect of nationalism everywhere, including the United States. It would be good to have a more balanced history, but you know, history is what we make of it. Aurangzeb may not have been that bad and Akbar may not have been that good, and it will take historians many years to come up with revised interpretations. Moreover, in the United States a spirit of tolerance is imbibed in the schools, but it certainly doesn't solve all our problems.

**Wajahat Habibullah:** I have a question for each of the speakers. For Dr. Engineer: As Muslims in India, I think we are all very much aware that the root of the problem really lies in the very bitter legacy of partition. I'm an Indian Muslim myself, and you and I know that the Muslims in India believe that Pakistan was a massive mistake, and that there's not a lot of support for that kind of concept anymore. How do you see recent developments—for example, the SAARC [South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation] Conference earlier this month [Janu-



ary 2004] and the agreements that were made there? Do you feel that this bodes well for the future of Hindu-Muslim relations in India?

My question for Dr. Brass is this: You have presented a very graphic account of how these riots take place, how they are organized and how they burst out in different parts of the country. But there are also other areas where this does not happen, even though they have a very substantial Muslim population. Take Lucknow, for instance, a city that is part of the same state as Aligarh and Meerut; it's also the Prime Minister's constituency. It is a city where the Urdu language is a language of all the communities, although earlier it was identified with the Muslims. Why is it that riots don't happen in a city like Lucknow but do happen in a city like Aligarh?

**Asghar Ali Engineer:** I think the developments at the SAARC Conference are extremely significant and will have a great impact on Hindu-Muslim relations in India. Pakistan has been a very sore point in Hindu-Muslim relations. Muslims are seen as Pakistanis.

Improvement of relations between the two countries and people-to-people contact are very important. A number of Hindus who have gone to Pakistan have come back highly impressed. They have told me, "The people of Pakistan are so friendly, so hospitable." Similarly, when Pakistani Muslims come to India they go back highly impressed. All the time they are told one thing about Hindus, but when they come to India and experience the warm hospitality extended by Hindus they are highly impressed.

I'm of the strong view that visas between South Asian countries

should be abolished, and that there should be free movement in the sub-continent. I would certainly congratulate our Prime Minister, who has taken the initiative in improving relations with Pakistan and with Sri Lanka.

**Paul R. Brass:** I should be better prepared to answer this question about Lucknow. Though I lived in Lucknow, I never really analyzed its political configuration, and I can't give a well-supported argument about why there are no riots there. I would have to check the political configuration. I'd have to look at the electoral history and the election statistics to see whether the political configuration is such that it was unnecessary to produce riots in order to generate a Hindu consolidation.

Of course, Lucknow is not free of riots. There are Shia-Sunni riots that have displaced Muslim antagonism towards Hindus. In other words, there's so much division amongst Muslims on a Shia-Sunni basis that they're preoccupied. As for the general environment of Lucknow, its "genteel culture" is very striking and very lovely, but I would not place much emphasis on that. My argument is that political calculations, political organization, can surmount this culture of gentility.

**Timothy Shah:** We have time for one more question.

**Sameera Daniels:** Dr. Engineer, you mentioned earlier that the diversity of India was a sort of a check on communalism, but much of the evidence you presented suggests that in fact it's not. I think that's also the case here in the United States: tensions between communities, specifi-

cally between the Jewish and the Muslim communities, do provide a kind of domestic security risk. They can inflame tensions.

**Asghar Ali Engineer:** In my opinion, diversity is a greater strength for democracy. I always emphasize three *d*'s: democracy, diversity, and dialogue. Diversity sustains democracy, and dialogue sustains diversity. Situations can be inflamed by hostile propaganda or particular events. The tension between Jews and Muslims in the United States will not turn into widespread violence because the government will not permit it to do so. In India, two things are different: first, there is constant hate propaganda, and second, the government either remains indifferent to what is happening on the street or gets involved on one side.

**Timothy Shah:** I'm afraid we're now a bit past our time. I'd like to thank all of you and especially our distinguished speakers. There are clearly countervailing trends: reason for optimism in the aftermath of the SAARC Conference, but less reason for optimism given the structure of extremist Hindu nationalist ideology. It will clearly be a fascinating thing to watch in the coming years.

### DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS

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