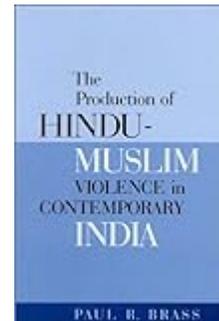




Paul R. Brass. *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. xix + 476 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98258-8.



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The political scientist Paul Brass has remained a keen student of politics in India –especially of north India (Uttar Pradesh in particular) and over the last four decades has produced an interesting corpus of work. The book under review represents a consolidation of his recent work on collective violence, following up on his *Riots and Pogroms* (1996) and *Theft of an Idol* (1997), but is singularly marked by its meticulous documentation of one riot-prone town, namely, Aligarh. The book usefully develops the idea of an “institutionalized riot system” as the central factor in the production of Hindu-Muslim violence to a new level of generality. I shall return to the axis of this thematisation later on in the review; let us look at what the book has to say about the violence in question.

As the work explicitly states at the very outset, the research is structured around four questions. (i) Why do Hindu-Muslim communal riots persist in India? (ii) Why do they wax and wane, bursting out here and there at various places differentially and at different times? (iii) How does it happen that massive episodes of violence—in which particular religious groups are targeted—get classified in the public domain as riots rather than pogroms? (iv) What interests are served and what power relations are maintained as a consequence of communal antagonisms and violence? To be sure, these are big

questions—questions really (as Brass himself elucidates) of persistence, differential incidence/timing, classification/meaning and power respectively and requiring as much causal and/or functional analysis as attention to discourse and the ordering of relations between Hindus and Muslims. In perspective is the fact of both the dispersion of rioting in India in time and space and its concentration in particular sites (which, partly, goes to explain the focus of the book, at once a detailed analysis of riot production in a single location, namely, Aligarh, and an attempt to put together an explanatory framework that will encompass India as a whole). The attempt is to arrive at a fuller picture of “the mechanisms that lead to the production of riots in India and the dynamic processes that precede them, produce them, and explain them after their occurrence.”

The focus, clearly, is on the dynamics of riot production in post-Independence India, and along this axis Brass proffers his conclusions. According to him, neither single causal explanations of Hindu-Muslim riots and anti-Muslim pogroms nor multi-causal ones are sufficient to explain such instances of violence in India. As he avers: “It is the combination of ‘objective’, underlying factors of demography, economics, and electoral competition with intentionality and direct human agency that makes causal explanation of riots in general so difficult.”

All the same, Brass ventures an explanation, bolstered by the fieldwork in Aligarh: that where riots are endemic, what he calls “institutionalized riot systems” exist in which “known persons and groups occupy specific roles in the rehearsal for and the production of communal riots.” Extensive portions of the book are devoted to showing contextually how and when institutionalized riot systems come into operation—the repertoires of action specific to this theatre—and incorporates a focus on “tensions,” “rumours” and “provocations” as the ground for riots. Focusing on the issue of the persistence of riots (as separate from “causes,” the latter as diverting from the critical issue of how riots are produced) Brass stresses that there are elements both of spontaneity and planning that contribute to the creation and persistence of Hindu-Muslim violence. Even more explicitly, he states that the production of communal riots is very often a political one, being associated with intense inter-party competition and mass mobilization. He constantly presses home the functional utility of riots for a variety of agents in the political process, as indeed the role of the state in routinising communal antagonism and violence.

Bolstering these arguments, of course, is an analytical perspective and a contemporary historical standpoint with a strong documentary emphasis. Drawing on theories of collective action and social movements (developed notably in the works of Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, Doug McAdam and others) Brass conceives of riots as a form of collective action, “one among a number of repertoires of collective action that developed in India primarily in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” Even as he concedes, with this analytical and historical orientation, that in every historical period of widespread protest activity new forms of collective action appear that are considered illegitimate but which later become integrated into a new repertoire of accepted forms, Brass is emphatic that “no society, even Nazi Germany or fascist Italy, however much it has practiced violence—including in the form of pogroms—has integrated violent riots into a repertoire of accepted and legitimate forms of collective action.” I am afraid I do not possess the competence to gain a measure of this pronouncement, but surely the model here presented invites a new understanding of the climate of (in the context of contemporary India) Hindu-Muslim communal violence. In fact, it is Brass’s brief “to demonstrate that neither the prior history of communalism nor the immediate circumstances surrounding the so-called precipitating incident nor the two alleged causes combined, provide a satisfactory explanation for the outbreak of large scale Hindu-Muslim riots or anti-

Muslim pogroms.”

To be sure, Brass’s “selective” approach to the problem—note that the work in question is a detailed sketch of a single site, tracking more than half a century’s riots in the north Indian city of Aligarh and covering the last three decades of British rule and the post-Independence history of the city—lets the reader think of other instances to which his conclusions could be applied. Especially his idea of an “institutionalized riot system” as a central factor in the production of Hindu-Muslim violence is bound to strike a chord, although the macro-inferences made about India on the basis of the Aligarh study could be seen to be raising larger methodological questions as well. Given the constraints of space, I shall let the latter point pass; but I need to reiterate that I am even willing to consider his choice of Aligarh as exemplary rather than strictly (or only) emblematic. In fact, given Aligarh’s status in the imaginary of “being Hindu” or “becoming Muslim”—and, to be sure, Brass’s meticulous documentation attests to this, although it is also elusive on this score—the choice of this site is neither forced nor misleading.

The issue I want to pose however, in light of the Brass study, is the implications of the book’s singular focus on the production of Hindu-Muslim violence: what does the perspective yield us? Is Brass sufficiently attentive to what the perspective is yielding? To what could one attribute the insufficiency (if any) of both theoretical articulation and empirical description? I am afraid I will have to be brief. Brass, as my summations above would have disclosed, is sensitive to what the perspective is yielding, and the comments that he makes on (and off) causal and/or functional analysis both in political science and social science more generally are pretty pointed and particular. But they also demonstrate the enormous difficulties and complexity faced by empirical and theoretical descriptions of violence and Hindu-Muslim violence in particular. While the focus on the production of Hindu-Muslim violence definitely yields a perspective on the phenomena, in the light of Brass’s detailed documentation, there is also a perspective (I am inclined to argue) to be had on “secularization”: why are the contexts, both Hindu and Muslim, so difficult to secularize? Also, what is one to make of the difference in secularization between these two religious contexts? These, incidentally, are questions that I had in the context of another review asked of Ashustosh Varshney’s *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (2002); but they could be posed to Brass’s study as well (although I must hasten to add there is a difference of framework and orientation implicating these two works,

one which Brass frequently reiterates).

I suppose these questions about framework and elucidation prefigure a form of political agency that Brass is not out to capture, but the different normative and affective orders of obligation experienced by both Hindus

and Muslims alike (shades of which Brass's documentation give evidence of) need attending to. Much hangs on sharpening the historical and sociological tools of investigation; I am not so certain mainstream political science is prepared for this challenge of description and argument.

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