



The Body as Symbol

History, Memory and Communal Violence

○ Paul R. Brass

... As the House is fully aware, the country has had to face ... a very critical situation resulting from Partition. A living entity had a part severed from it and this unnatural operation resulted in all manner of distempers which have naturally affected the political, social and economic structure of the country (From Jawaharlal Nehru's speech in the Constituent Assembly, 27 November 1947, cited in Robert D. King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997], p. 102).

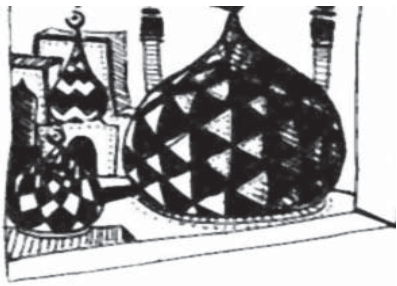
There exists in India a discourse of Hindu-Muslim communalism that has corrupted history, penetrated memory and contributes in the present to the production and perpetuation of communal violence. Despite the contrary attempts of secular nationalist leaders and historians, a divisive history of India has acquired a hegemonic place in the national mythology of the country. The millennium that saw the establishment of Islam and Muslim rulership is seen as one coherent period in Indian history, the period of the Muslim conquest that followed upon the classical Hindu period. Both periods are defined in communal-religious terms.¹ The first, the "Hindu period" is described as the glorious era of imperial Hindu achievement in politics and culture; the second, the

"Muslim period" – despite its own glories of art and architecture, which are acknowledged – is an age of conquest, destruction and the consequent decay of Hindu civilisation. To revivify India and build a great, new, modern nation-state, it is necessary to "revive the true ideals of the past."²

This process of historical rectification has also been accompanied by a demonisation of the Muslims as a

Despite the contrary attempts of secular nationalist leaders and historians, a divisive history of India has acquired a hegemonic place in the national mythology of the country.

separate people, a foreign body implanted in the heart of Hindu India, perpetually "warlike," who "believe it is their religious duty to kill infidels."³ Muslims are also held responsible for the Partition – commonly described by militant Hindus as a "vivisection" – because so many of their leaders remained aloof from the nationalist movement and ultimately fought for the creation of the separate independent state of Pakistan. This vivisection was perpetrated upon a country that, in the Hindutva ideology articulated by its founder, Veer Savarkar, had been woven "into a Being" in prehistoric times, who had "drunk the milk of life" at the breast of the Sindhu River.⁴ The "vital spinal cord" of this Being was Hindutva, which had run for millennia "through our whole body politic and made the Nayars of Malabar weep over the sufferings of the Brahmins of Kashmir."⁵



This Hindutva lived on through the centuries of Muslim “rapine and devastation” of the land of the Hindus, Hindustan,⁶ and has survived the vivisection, which continues to live on in the historical memory of its people. The memory of the Partition and the violence associated with it is ingrained in the minds of most Hindus⁷ and is kept alive by the constant tension in the relations between India and Pakistan. During the last two decades, the “memory” of Muslim violence in Indian history has also been kept vivid by the militant Hindu demand to recapture and restore temples allegedly destroyed by Muslim conquerors and replaced by mosques, a movement that led to the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya on 6 December 1992.

Sites of Memory

Those Muslims of India who refuse to accept the historicist conception of Hindu nationalism⁸ came to be seen, particularly by Hindu nationalists, as an obstruction, along with Pakistan whose very existence has, in the minds of such Hindu nationalists, been the principal post-Independence obstacle to India’s achievement of its rightful place in a world dominated by great nation-states. This historical consciousness and teleology of Hindu nationalism has framed the modern discourse of Hindu-Muslim communalism and violence. The demographic distribution of the peoples of India and the landscape of the country have become populated with *lieux de mémoire*⁹ that signify the violence done by Muslims to the Hindu body, the dangers of the Muslim populations that reside in the midst of Hindus

in India’s cities and towns, and Muslim institutions that teach Muslims to become traitors – all of which must be reformed, replaced or extirpated before India can become whole, united and powerful.

In the first category, signifiers of the violence done by Muslims to the Hindu body, are the mosques, said to number three thousand,¹⁰ that are alleged to have been built upon the ruins of Hindu temples destroyed by Muslim conquerors. In the second, signifying the dangers to the Hindu body in the present, are the concentrations of Muslim populations in cities and towns, described by militant Hindus as “mini-Pakistans.”

The leading example in the third category, signifying the traitors in the midst of the country, is the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) located in the town of Aligarh in western Uttar Pradesh, ninety miles south-south-east of Delhi. The AMU was in fact one of the principal sites from which the ideology of Muslim separatism, and then the Pakistan movement, developed and spread in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹¹ It stands today in Aligarh on the outskirts of the city as a symbolic presence that signifies to militant Hindus the persistence into the present of Muslim separatist, communalist and anti-Hindu designs, and justifies, along with the existence of the “mini-Pakistans” in the centre of the old city, violence against Muslims that is enacted in periodic outbursts of large-scale rioting. In fact, Aligarh has become one of the principal sites of Hindu-Muslim violence in all of India since Independence up to the very recent past.

Disproportionate Ratios

Official figures compiled from several sources, including the Home Ministry, calculate the total number of incidents of communal violence between 1954 and 1982 as 6,933, but provide no other details between 1954 and 1967, and after 1980.

Between 1968 and 1980, the Home Ministry reported that there had been 3,949 communal incidents in which 530 Hindus, 1,598 Muslims and 159 “other” persons and police personnel were killed.¹² The latter figures confirm, at least in the period for which such a breakdown by community is available, the often-stated fact that a disproportionate number of Muslims have been killed in communal riots. In some riots, the ratio of Muslims to Hindus killed has been very much higher. For example, during the riots of September 1969 in the city of Ahmadabad, 512 persons were killed of whom 24 were Hindus, 430 Muslims, 58 “others” and unidentified;¹³ the latter category is a rather grisly one since it suggests either burning or mutilation of the murdered person’s body beyond recognition.

Deaths in Hindu-Muslim riots have three sources: “mob action,” police killings and “isolated incidents.” “Mob action” may take the form of confrontations between gangs or crowds from different communities or segments of them, armed with sticks, knives, swords, spears, occasionally bombs and small weapons, kerosene and, lately, gas containers used as fire bombs. It often also involves armed gangs from one community seeking out defenceless persons or whole families in their homes, slashing and cutting up the men of a household, and sometimes the women as well, raping the latter and burning all alive – the preferred term in



the Indian English-language press for the latter type of killing, by the way, is “roasting alive.” Police killings account for a large percentage of deaths in several major riots, for which figures have been provided in inquiry commission reports and which cannot be justified in terms of “crowd control.” These killings are disproportionately of Muslims. Third, a good part of the killing takes the form of the cold-blooded murder of individuals in “isolated incidents” rather than in killings arising from “mob frenzy.” Such murders are often the precipitant or perhaps the starting signal for organising a riot.

The official figures that are available, as well as media and other reports concerning police treatment of Muslims during riots, also demonstrate clearly that police arrest, fire upon and kill disproportionately more Muslims than Hindus.¹⁴ Moreover, concerning several major riots, commissions of inquiry have established that the police arrest innocent Muslims, kill them inside their homes and enter mosques to shoot and kill Muslims as well.

Among the fifteen largest states in the Indian Union, five have ranked

especially high in the incidence of Hindu-Muslim clashes involving fatalities; in rank order, by number of such clashes, they are Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.¹⁵ In Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), which is the focus here, Wilkinson identified 203 riots in the period between 1950 and 1993, in which 1,336 deaths occurred.¹⁶

The violence in U.P. has also been spread widely among a number of large and small cities and towns. Between 1960 and 1993, Wilkinson identified twenty-four cities and towns in India that he characterised as “riot-prone.” Of the twenty-four, six (25 percent) were located in U.P. Within U.P., the town of Aligarh, the subject of my study, ranks second to Meerut in the numbers of riots and riot-deaths and, proportionate to population, is along with Meerut close to the top in the country as a whole. Between 1946 and 1995, there were twenty riots and riotous periods in Aligarh, twelve with deaths totalling 188.

Suspect Statistics

Both riot counting and the counting of deaths in riots are precarious exercises. They also carry an odour

of callousness about them that must be avoided as far as possible, for they resemble nothing so much as body counts in contemporary insurrectionary warfare. Like such body counts, the numbers of riot deaths are suspect and contested by opposing sides.

Members of the community targeted in riots always say that the number of deaths was higher than that officially noted, while persons from the other community say the figures were accurate. The local administration obviously has an interest in minimising its failure to maintain law and order by undercounting. Rival parties in and out of office exaggerate or minimise the death counts to blame and embarrass each other or to decrease responsibility.

But how can the counts be so disputable? There are grisly as well as some less grisly reasons for overcounting or undercounting. Bodies are burnt to ashes, thrown in canals, dumped in wells and sewers. Men may disappear during riots so that their families can make a claim for death payments from the government. For all these and other reasons, both the counting of riots and the numbers killed and injured must be treated cautiously.

Although Aligarh ranks very high in the country in riot-proneness proportionate to population, and in the number of deaths over the fifty years from 1946 to 1995, there has been, even here, considerable variation in the number of riots and the number of deaths that have occurred during them. Of the twenty riots classifiable as Hindu-Muslim, twelve led to deaths, distributed as follows: 1946-50, two riots with nine deaths; 1951-55, no riots with deaths; 1956-60, no riots with deaths; 1961-65, one riot with fifteen deaths; 1966-70, no riots with deaths; 1971-75, two riots with eighteen deaths; 1976-80, three riots (including one long riotous period) with forty-four deaths; 1981-85, no riots with

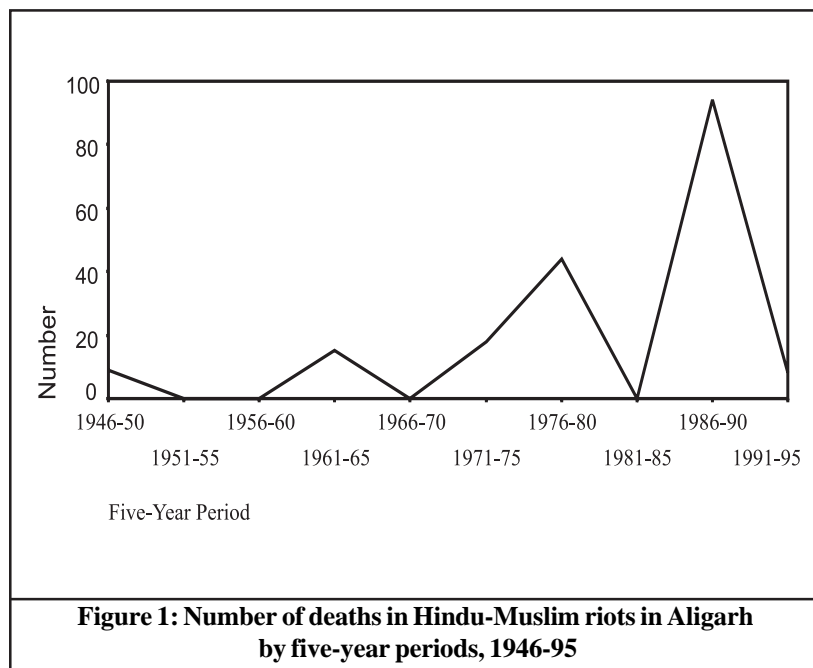


Figure 1: Number of deaths in Hindu-Muslim riots in Aligarh by five-year periods, 1946-95

deaths; 1986-90 (terminating in January 1991), two riots with ninety-four deaths; 1991-95, two riots with more than eight deaths. Since the number of communal riots in three of these periods cannot be counted accurately, extending as they did over several months in 1978, 1980 and 1990-91, they cannot be presented graphically. Therefore, the number of deaths in each period will have to stand – and reasonably so for that matter – for variation in the intensity of riot activity in Aligarh (see figure 1).

There are three aspects of riot variation to note from these numbers and the

accompanying chart. First, there was an initial decline in riot activity in Aligarh after the rioting that occurred before and after Partition, as elsewhere in the country. Second, there are four periods in which there were no riots in which deaths occurred. Third, however, over the entire period there has been a marked increase in the peaks of violence, with the number of deaths increasing sharply with each successive time of intense and murderous riot activity.

If we count all riots in the post-Independence period, then it would appear to be the case that Aligarh is a site of persistence, as well as of variation, of recurring riotous activities. That fact would be further confirmed by visits to particular riot-prone *mohallas* where, as a Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development study has noted,¹⁷ and I have personally experienced many times, there is a palpable sense of tension “in the air,” evidenced by the existence of simmering local issues involving Hindus and Muslims on opposite sides, and by the reactions to my very presence in such *mohallas*,



Figure 2: Map of Upar Kot

especially when I have attempted to make inquiries on these local issues. Suffice it to say that I and my companions were always eager to leave such places without pursuing questions very far, as crowds, almost always Hindu crowds, began to form and persons began to appear wanting to know my business and eager to set me straight in no uncertain terms about my questions. It is also confirmed by the continuous presence, for decades, of Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) and Rapid Action Force (RAF) personnel at critical sites of riotous activity.

Blood for Blood

From among the many riots in Aligarh, I have chosen as my principal subject for this essay the long series of riots that occurred between October and December 1978 in Aligarh, because of the centrality in this riot of the dead body, that of a Hindu, carried in procession, that precipitated the first violence. (Some reference will also be made below to the Great Aligarh Riots of 1990-91). The 1978 series of riots¹⁸ began with a scuffle between the supporters of two wrestling *akharas*

(one Hindu, the other Muslim) in Aligarh town. Attacks, including stabbing incidents between the two groups, then occurred over succeeding weeks.¹⁹ One of the Hindu wrestlers, called Bhure (or Bhura) Lal, who had been assaulted and wounded in a fight, finally died in the Civil Hospital on 5 October, after which a large crowd snatched his body from the hospital and carried it through the Muslim localities demanding revenge. Rioting broke out “independently but simultaneously” both in Chauraha Abdul Karim (an important four-way crossing) when the procession

arrived at that crossing and in the nearby Hindu-majority *mohalla* of Manik Chauk (see Figure 2),²⁰ both in the old city. Altercations occurred between processionists and shopkeepers when the former demanded that the latter close their shops. It was reported that twelve persons were killed in this first phase of rioting.²¹

A multiplicity of explanations for the outbreak of rioting at this time was provided from various sources, all of them seeking to displace blame away from themselves onto other targets. The explanations are too various and elaborate to present in full here. Only a few examples can be provided.

An editorial in *The Times of India* remarked that, although there were some disputed issues concerning specific actions that preceded the Aligarh riots, they had to be considered in conjunction with riots elsewhere in the country around the same time in Hyderabad (in Andhra Pradesh) and in other towns in U.P. Taken together, these riots were “a

cruel reminder that the communal virus persists in the country's body politic."²²

The Minorities Commission of the Government of India emphasised the deliberate provocation of anti-Muslim feelings by Hindu crowds, who insisted upon carrying the body of Bhure Lal in procession through Muslim localities, and the anti-Muslim activities of the PAC, whose forces fired indiscriminately upon Muslim crowds as well as upon persons inside houses and mosques.

A Peoples' Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) report argued that the actual buildup to the riot of 5 October was an agitation that had been led, for several months previous to the killing of Bhure Lal, by known Hindu communal persons on the issue of the AMU Bill concerning the status of the university (a subject I cannot go into here). The PUCL asserted that the killing of Bhure Lal was, in effect, nothing but a pretext on the part of these Hindu communal persons in the town to instigate a riot for political reasons. Several, if not all, of these persons were also involved, according to the PUCL report, in the incident that precipitated the riot, namely, the "snatching" of the dead body of Bhure Lal. The body was then taken out in a procession through the predominantly Muslim areas of the old city accompanied by shouts from the processionists demanding "blood for blood" and "ten for one," that is, ten Muslims for one Hindu killed.²³

The Role of the Wrestlers

It is worth digressing a bit here also to note that wrestlers have been known to play prominent roles in riots in various parts of India. They also combine in themselves

Wrestlers have been known to play prominent roles in riots in various parts of India. They combine in themselves images of the pure, Hindu body and represent to militant Hindus the potential strength, purity and identity of the Hindu social body.

images of the pure Hindu body, and represent to militant Hindus the potential strength, purity and identity of the Hindu social body. Many of the Hindu *akharas* are, in fact, patronised by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The *akhara* to which Bhure Lal belonged is located at the site of a Shiva temple, where, at the time of my visit, three worshippers were performing *puja*. I encountered a group of wrestlers in an adjacent building; to me, the slant of their bodies, as well as the expressions on their faces, suggested a combination of self-

Militant Hindu respondents characterised the 1978 riots as a form of Muslim *jihad* ... These militant Hindu explanations may be described as a kind of essentialism applied to Muslims and Islam. They smack of nothing so much as the blood libel charges against Jews in European history.

assurance, smugness and slightly contemptuous amusement. Close by was the wrestling pen itself, a mud pit kept in a state of purity for the wrestlers who live "in a world of strict rules of body purity."²⁴

Militant Hindu respondents characterised the 1978 riots – the pretext for which, as just noted, was the killing of Bhure Lal – as well as all other Hindu-Muslim riots in India as a form of Muslim *jihad*. Such explanations include generalisations about the nature of Islam, and the so-called Semitic religions in general, in comparison with Hinduism, as well as specific statements concerning the organisation of riots by Muslims in the local context of Aligarh and other places in India. These militant Hindu explanations may be described as a kind of essentialism applied to Muslims and Islam. They smack of nothing so much as the blood libel charges against Jews in European history.

Ironic Alliances

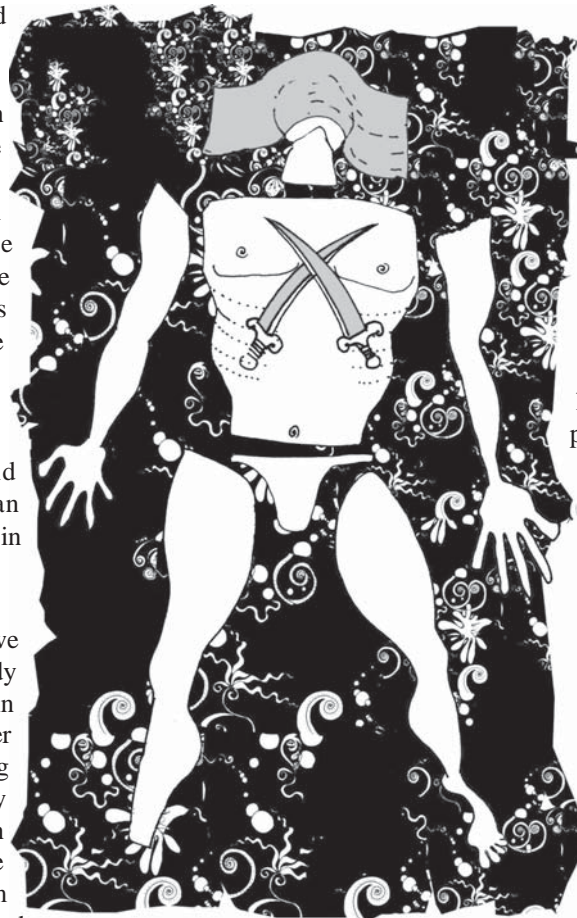
Ironically, however, some of these militant Hindus see Jews as potential allies in the struggle against Muslims. A most vivid and unforgettable example of the lust for this imaginary alliance (which, however, no longer seems so imaginary with the till-recently developing relationship between the BJP-led government in India and the Sharon government in Israel) occurred during my fieldwork on a hot summer's night in Aligarh in July 1983. On that night, I was moving in a rickshaw, with my informant, through a densely crowded *mohalla* when I was suddenly accosted by a gentleman whom I had interviewed on 20 July 1983, one M, lecturer at that time in the Srivarshney College, General Secretary of the rump Bharatiya Jan Sangh and one of three men on the District Magistrate's list of riot-

mongers. I stopped the rickshaw to exchange greetings with this gentleman, who soon asked me if I was a Christian – a question sometimes, but not usually, asked of me in India. I said, “No.” He then wanted to know what I was. I replied that I was Jewish. He clasped my hands and exclaimed happily, with a big smile on his face, “Together we can butcher the Muslims.” My informant and I were, of course, disgusted by this remark, but kept silent and went on our way. Let it be re-emphasised here that this event took place twenty years ago and that the gentleman was then an academic at the RSS-dominated local degree college, from which militant Hindu students have been drawn out in riot after riot. Let it be noted also that such words have not been idle metaphors or dark jokes, but have expressed the conscious wishes and desires of a fraction of the Hindu population of the country, which have been enacted in fact in open butchering, quartering and dismemberment of human beings, most notably recently in Gujarat in February 2002.

A Separate Hell

On one side, therefore, we have the martyred Hindu body carried in procession not only in Aligarh, but also in several other instances on record, including one of my own previously published case studies.²⁵ On the other side, we have the persisting assaults on Muslim bodies that have occurred and continue to occur in the many thousands of communal riots since Independence and, most recently and most viciously, in Gujarat. I do not mean to suggest that only Muslims suffer in such riots, but there are some kinds of sufferings that are especially reserved for Muslims. That is to say that Hindu-Muslim riots in Aligarh, as elsewhere

in so many places in India since Independence, have been marked not only by mutual killings, but by police beatings mostly of Muslims, often – according to published reports and my own interviews and personal observations after riots – gratuitously without reason or provocation from the Muslim side. What is happening here, I believe, in both the mob killings and in the police beatings are deliberate assaults on Muslim bodies, always characterised or justified as a long-overdue retaliation against



Muslims who have overtaxed Hindu patience and finally received their due. The due they are receiving, in effect, is retaliation for that original sin of the vivisection of the Hindu body. I want now to present one example of how these assaults on Hindu bodies takes place, of which I have many more. The interview took place with a Muslim lock

manufacturer in an almost entirely Muslim locality known as Sarai Sultani. I summarise below, in paraphrase, parts of that very lengthy conversation:

“Only Muslims live in this *mohalla* of Sarai Sultani. There are no Hindus living in the *mohalla*. However, there are Hindus living on all sides of Sarai Sultani and Hindu organisations as well, as the tongue is between all the teeth.”

Pointing in different directions, the respondent said, “That is the side of the Bajrang Dal, that is the side of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, that is the side of the Hindu Mahasabha office, that is the side of the RSS, that is the main circuit of the riots.”

The conversation concerning riots in the area began in response to a general question that I put to him concerning whether or not there had been riots in this *mohalla*. He began quite emphatically, by referring to his personal experiences in 1979²⁶ when he himself was beaten by the police, as a consequence of which parts of his body had swelled and never returned to normal, including a knee injury and a knob on his head.

Further, his father, his brothers, his uncle, the whole family were beaten and jailed by the police. For two days, on the 19th and 20th in the month of June (invariably a month of hellish heat and humidity), they were held without being given water to drink. When they asked for water, they were told to drink their own urine.

I questioned him repeatedly concerning whether or not they had done anything, provoked the police in any way, given them any ground whatsoever for beating and jailing them.

As per his account: that night they were just sleeping and the police came and surrounded the whole area. They called him up, called up his neighbours

also and they took them away to the police station. There were five police stations in the area and they took them to one only fifty metres away from his house.

At one point, I said, "But, you know, if I talk to the police, they will say the Muslims come out, they come out in the street and we have to shoot to protect ourselves and that the Muslims are aggressors and so forth."

The respondent denied this emphatically, claiming, "Our total population is only two thousand, and that includes women and children, so how can Muslims, being such a small population, go and attack anywhere or attack anybody? It's difficult to defend ourselves, how can we be offenders? So, we defend, we always try to defend ourselves; never are we the aggressors."

He further explained, "The police called all the young men from their houses and they collected them all. There were around fifty-five. The police gathered them near the main entrance [to the *mohalla*]. While they were gathered there, there were two

groups of police on different sides. One group was calling them [the residents] to this side and the other was calling them to that side. While they [the residents] were going to one side, the other group [of police] was saying you are going to that side, you are trying to run away, and so they started picking on these people bitterly.

At this point, the respondent once again showed me his knee, which had

been cut with a bayonet, and a big bump on his head from a *lathi* blow.

This respondent also had much to say about the 1990-91 riots in Sarai Sultani, the greatest riot in the history of Aligarh.²⁷ Several secondary sources and my informants in 1991 had referred to the incidents that occurred in this *mohalla*, precipitated by a bomb thrown at a mosque. The mosque is actually not in Sarai Sultani, but in the adjacent, mostly Hindu *mohalla* of Barai. Here is what my informant had to say about it.

"1990 was the biggest riot. Here the nearby *masjid* [mosque] was burned. The *imam* [prayer leader] was in the mosque at the time and was burned alive. One M.M. Jain had a furnace nearby. Twenty-two Muslims were taken there and all of them were thrown in the furnace and burned alive. This was done in the presence of the Station

Once again I asked, "And that time also there was no provocation on the part of the Muslims here? There was curfew. Muslims stayed in their houses, or the Muslims had come out and the police came?"

"No, there was no provocation on the part of the Muslims. They didn't provoke anybody. On this side, in Barai, there are only five houses of Muslims and there are five thousand Hindus, so how can anybody imagine that people from these five houses could go and provoke and challenge those five thousand?"

He also had his own personal story to tell about the 1990 riots. At that time, his factory was being constructed. There were five Hindu labourers working in this factory, so, when the riots began, he called the police and handed over all the five workers to the police.



But at that time, his own cousin-brother [that is, mother's sister's son], a ten-year-old boy at the time, was shot in his hands and a bomb was thrown at him and exploded on his stomach, as a consequence of which that part of his body was burned. At the

same time, two Muslim men, one of them a prominent district Congress officer, were also shot and injured.

Officer, one Sharma, from Sasni Gate police station. He is a very infamous person because of this incident. "One person [whom I soon met] survived this incident, but all his family members were killed. Since that time, he has become mad and a drunkard.

"One of the survivors of this incident also had a sister, who had just been married when the riots broke out, and she was raped by the police for seven days, after which she was killed."

The Retaliation Argument

In the course of my interviews over many years, I have heard of other uses of the body to precipitate riots, namely, the deliberate killing of victims and the cutting off of parts of their bodies, which are then thrown into the gutter of a riot-prone locality to instigate rioting. Here is an example from one of

my interviews in response to a general question concerning the causes of Hindu-Muslim riots, which also brings in once again the retaliation argument, the argument that pacific Hindus retaliate only in extreme circumstances to outrages against the Hindu body.

“Hindus only retaliate: a riot starts, for example, in this way: a poor Hindu man is killed inside a lane, his hand or leg or some other part of the body is cut off and thrown in the gutter; administration will come forward and say it is nothing, only someone died and he was a Muslim, not a Hindu, then Hindus will be satisfied; then this will be repeated day after day for six days and, then, only after six cases, Hindus will retaliate and attack a number of Muslim areas.”²⁸

In these comments, the respondent was actually using a distorted view of the causes of the 1978 riots as an example to illustrate his general argument. His main point is that riots begin with attacks upon Hindus and that Hindus retaliate – and then in large mobs – only when their patience is exhausted. However, he also went on to blame the Hindu communal leaders, M. and others, for preparing the people for retaliation. Thus are Hindus in general relieved of all blame or responsibility for Hindu-Muslim riots in India. They are so patient that they do not act until all else has failed and then only in large numbers – presumably because their rage has exploded against their own better judgement. Further, I have been told, Hindus could hardly be brought to violent



action even in retaliation were they not being prepared for it by Hindu communal leaders. Otherwise, in all probability, they would go on silently and patiently bearing Muslim provocations till the end of time.

Relation to the Past

I want to return now to my opening remarks concerning the uses of history to perpetuate communal animosities in India and to justify Hindu retaliation against Muslims. I believe that there are considerable differences between Hindu and Muslim approaches to the past, not just in their understanding of past periods, events and rulers, but in their degree of absorption in the past. Whatever the differences between Hindu and Muslim approaches to their past, it is evident that Hindus are far more absorbed in theirs than are Muslims. They live their imagined past in the present and

perceive every imagined wrong, especially those imagined to have been done by Muslim conquerors, as if it happened only yesterday, not five hundred years before by people differently defined and aligned in relation to each other. They blame Muslims for the loss both of their past and of the monumental evidence of their former greatness in north India, which they believe was destroyed by Muslim generals and rulers.

These conflicting historical consciousnesses and identifications culminated in a terrifyingly precise moment in modern Indian history – the Partition, which stands, in the eyes of most educated Hindus (and, in northern

India, of most Hindus in general), as a historical scar that not only divided the subcontinent but defied the truth they had fought for as their rightful heritage: the unity of India. Muslims, for their part, fought for another truth invented out of their past in India, namely, that they constituted a separate civilisation distinct from that of the Hindus, that they had always been separate and would have to remain so in the future. Leaving aside the question of the causes of Partition, on which much ink has been spilt, it stands as modern South Asia's first catastrophe of the historical consciousness. Partition certainly arose out of political struggles, but one of those struggles was over the past, combined with a fear of a future in which two cultures, perceived as historically distinct, would not be able to live together in peace. Sir

Sayyid Ahmad Khan, in Aligarh, laid the Muslim foundation for separatism that Muhammad Ali Jinnah turned into a political weapon. And in Aligarh itself stands the very institution that Hindus deem to have constructed the ideology and the leadership that produced this moment of violence and chaos, the Aligarh Muslim University. Further, the militant Hindus claim to believe that the AMU and all the distinctive institutions of the Muslims in India, even their very religious beliefs, threaten Hindu India with further partition, violence and chaos.

For these Hindus, living in an imagined past, the path to the glorious future – that rightfully belongs to India because of the greatness of its ancient civilisations before the arrival of the Muslims and the British – is blocked. It is blocked, on the one hand, by the remnants of that more recent past of Muslim conquests, empires, monuments and mosques built upon the ruins, real and imagined, of Hindu monuments and temples. That past has to be rectified before Hindus can be released from its bonds to achieve the future greatness that belongs to them. A major step in this direction was the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya, which, to countless Hindus, signified the beginnings of their release from “slavery.”²⁹ For some, the destruction of at least two more mosques – those in Mathura and Varanasi – and perhaps many others, may be necessary before the past can be finally rectified and Hindus achieve full freedom at last.

On the other hand, all militant Hindus and many who are not



associated with the organisations of militant Hinduism also suffer from an obsessive concentration on that moment when Independence was achieved and sullied by Partition. They suffer from the presence in the very present of the evidences of Partition and the imagined threat of future partitions. In Aligarh, the AMU stands for that presence. Elsewhere, in every major city and town in north India, there are further symbols of that presence wherever there are large concentrations of Muslim populations. These “mini-Pakistans”, in turn, are seen as the centres of riot-production, designed to intimidate Hindus, and generate more and more partitions, more and more violence on the Hindu body.

The author is Professor (Emeritus) of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. He has published fourteen books and numerous articles on comparative and South Asian politics, ethnic politics, and collective violence. □

Footnotes

I have drawn freely in this essay from various parts of Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, and Delhi: Oxford University Press (2003). I am grateful to Staffan Lindberg for his most helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper at the conference on Religious Mobilisation and Organised Violence in Contemporary South Asia, held at the Institute for International Development Studies, Roskilde University, Denmark, 3-4 April 2003, and also to Steven Wilkinson. The paper is scheduled for publication in Ravinder Kaur (ed.), *Religious Mobilisation and Organised Violence in Contemporary South Asia*, New Delhi: Sage (forthcoming).

1 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press (1993), pp. 95–97.

2 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 98.

3 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 99.

4 Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* 5th ed., Bombay (1969 [1923]), pp. 5 and 14. See also Chetan Bhatt and Mukta Parita, “Hindutva in the West: Mapping the Antinomies of Diaspora Nationalism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23 (3), May 2000, p. 413, giving further examples of Savarkar’s body symbolism.

5 Savarkar, p. 46.

6 Savarkar, p. 44.

7 However, it has been said that the use of the image of the vivisectioned body as a metaphor for Partition is not common in Bengal, as in the Punjab: “If stories from Punjab foreground the body as a metaphor of the divided land, in Bengali literature, Partition is often seen in metaphysical terms, as a cosmological occurrence”; from a review by Papiya Ghose of a book edited by Debganj Sengupta, *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals*, in *Biblio*, Nov.-Dec. 2003, p. 34.

8 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 113. Historicism, as defined by its arch-enemy, Leo Strauss, “demands that each generation reinterpret the past on the basis of its own experience and with a view to its own future. It is ... activist [and] attaches to that study of the past which is guided by the anticipated future ... a crucial philosophic significance: it expects from it

the ultimate guidance for political life"; *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, p. 59. Strauss was here condemning historicism in philosophy. It is a feature of the twentieth century that this kind of historicism has become popularised as a guide for action for politicians and their followers.

9 Pierre Nora, "From Lieux de Mémoire to Realms of Memory," in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. I: *Conflicts and Divisions*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, New York: Columbia University Press (1992), p. xvii: "A lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community."

10 Such a number is obviously a mere estimated enumeration of the countless local conflicts for space, for religious shrines and temples, that are endemic in the crowded, communally mixed *mohallas* of cities and towns all over India. These conflicts are ubiquitous and inherently local, but have become nationalised through the very process of construction and objectification of the existence of two separate, distinct and hostile Hindu and Muslim communities on the subcontinent. In effect, the process is one of contextualisation that includes local conflicts in a national schemata, such as I described in my case studies in: Paul R. Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.

11 On which, see especially Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India*, London: Cambridge University Press (1974), Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860-1923*, London: Cambridge University Press (1974), and Mushirul Hasan, "Negotiating with Its Past and Present: The Changing Profile of the Aligarh Muslim University," in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics, and the Partition of India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press (2000), pp. 135-56.

12 Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1994), p. 240. The percentage-wise distribution of deaths in this period by religion, for Hindus and Muslims only, is 75 percent Muslim, 25 percent Hindu. Wilkinson has calculated the percentage of Muslims killed in four periods, including one pre-Independence period, as follows: 1924-27, 46 percent; 1961-70, 75 percent; 1971-80, 65 percent; 1985-87, 60 percent. For some reason, the percentage of Muslims injured is lower than for Hindus in all these periods, markedly so in all the post-

Independence riots. The explanation for this discrepancy that comes to mind is that more Hindus than Muslims are injured in intercommunal crowd violence, but that more Muslims are killed in police firing. Figures from Steven I. Wilkinson, "The Electoral Origins of Ethnic Violence: Hindu-Muslim Riots in India," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, ch. 2, p. 24, citing various sources. 13 Anonymous, "Communal Riots and Minorities," confidential mimeographed memorandum, undated [1983?].

14 For example, in the Bhiwandi riots of May 1970, seventeen Hindus, fifty-nine Muslims and two unidentified persons died. None of the Hindus, but nine Muslims, were killed in police firing. Muslims were fired upon on twenty-six occasions compared to only four occasions for Hindus. The evidence, therefore, indicates clearly that Muslims were killed in disproportionate numbers, both by Hindu rioters and by the police. Figures from Anonymous, "Communal Riots and Minorities"; this report and the official commission reports from which the data were drawn provide ample further evidence, from most other riots in the period between 1968 and 1980, of the disproportion in police assaults and killings of Muslims. Nor has the situation changed in the years since, as will be discussed further below.

15 Ashutosh Varshney and Steven I. Wilkinson, *Hindu-Muslim Riots 1960-93: New Findings, Possible Remedies*, New Delhi: Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies (1996), p. 19.

16 Steven I. Wilkinson, *Electoral Competition and Ethnic Conflict: Hindu-Muslim Riots in India*. It must be noted, however, that there are huge differences in the number of riots counted depending upon the sources and the methods used. For example, the Inspector-General (IG) of Police, U.P., released state government figures in 1971 that showed 924 communal riots in the twenty-three years from 1948 to 1971, many times more than the number shown by Wilkinson for the entire period from 1950 to 1993; *Times of India*, January 21, 1971. The Wilkinson/Varshney figures are based on reporting in *The Times of India*, which is incomplete and which often collapses many discreet incidents into one extensive "riot." The Wilkinson/Varshney figures, in effect, do the same.

17 "Communal Violence and its Impact on Development and National Integration", Chandigarh, unpublished, undated (provided to me by Rashpal Mehrotra in 1983).

18 Varshney lists this sequence as three riots with their reported causes: 1) October: "clash between a Hindu and a Muslim wrestlers"; 2) November: "retribution for previous violence," 3) December: "retribution for previous violence"; Ashutosh Varshney, "Civic

Life and Ethnic Conflict," *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, New Haven: Yale University Press (2002), p. 185159. Such simplistic categorisation and the use of the term "cause" are both utterly misleading.

19 *Hindustan Times*, 17 October 1978; *Times of India*, 7 October 1978.

20 Bhure Lal's house was located in the communally sensitive locality of Delhi Darwaza. *The Times of India*, 19 October 1978, report and that of *Radiance* (a Muslim paper owned by the Jamiat-i-Islami), 22 October 1978, both allege that the processionists chose deliberately to pass through the extremely communally-sensitive crossing of Chauraha Abdul Karim, even though it was not on the direct route to Bhure Lal's house. The 29 October 1978 issue of *Radiance* also referred to the simultaneous breaking out of violence at Manik Chauk and Chauraha Abdul Karim. It is possible, even probable, that these newspapers are feeding off each other's reports, rather than obtaining information independently, or that they are all feeding from the same pool of informants. In addition to Manik Chauk, three other areas were reported to have been "the worst-affected: Upar Kot, Rafatganj (not on map) and Phul Chauraha; *Times of India*, 11 October 1978.

21 *Times of India*, 17 October 1978.

22 *Times of India*, 10 October 1978.

23 Mukundan C. Menon and Sumanta Banerjee, *Report to the People's Union for Civil Liberties & Democratic Rights (Delhi State) on Aligarh Riot (October 5, 1978)*, p. 5. For a similar incident of "body snatching" by BJP/RSS politicians of a Hindu killed in Kanpur city, who had previously been implicated in many murders of Muslims in the riots in that city in December 1992, see Brass, *Theft of an Idol*, pp. 240ff.

24 Joseph S. Alter, *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1992), p. 196.

25 Of Kala Bachcha, in Kanpur, in *Theft of an Idol*, ch. vii.

26 This was the time of the so-called Chandra Talkies riot that began outside the cinema, located in Mamubhanja, about a half kilometer from Sarai Sultani.

27 On which, see ch. iv of my *Hindu-Muslim Violence*.

28 Interview with B, lecturer, Psychology Department, AMU, on 30 July 1983.

29 In my first visit to India after the destruction of the mosque, I asked many people the same question over and over concerning that event: "Where were you when you first heard the news, what did you feel in your heart and what did you do?" Several militant Hindus replied in words to the effect that they felt that they had at last been released from slavery. □